

Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 5

Scripture: John 5:24; Acts 16:31; Romans 3:24; Romans 4:4–6; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:1; Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 3:8–9

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ROME

The Church finally set forth its views on justification in the mid-sixteenth century at the Council of Trent. Trent was Rome's answer to the Reformation, and much of the Council's work was specifically designed to set Catholic doctrine in stark contrast to Protestant ideas. Nowhere is the divergence between Rome and the Reformers more pronounced than in the Council's handling of justification.

The Canons and Decrees of Trent are not merely the archaic opinion of some medieval Bishops. They represent the official position of the Church to this day. All subsequent Catholic councils have uniformly reaffirmed Trent's pronouncements. In fact, the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s declared these doctrines "irreformable." All faithful Catholics are commanded to receive them as infallible truth. Therefore, to understand Roman Catholic doctrine on justification, we must go back to the Council of Trent.

Trent did not overtly deny that believers are saved by divine grace. In fact, the Council specifically stated that "God justifies sinners by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." That, of course, is an echo of Romans 3:24. But Scripture goes a step further than Trent was willing to go. Romans 11:6 says, "But if it is by grace, *it is no longer on the basis of works*, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (emphasis added). Trent took a position that made works an essential part of justification. In doing so, they were left with a grace that is "no longer grace." So although Trent started with an affirmation of divine grace, the doctrine of justification they described is actually "a different gospel" that corrupts the grace of God.

A process dependent on the believer, not a judicial act of God

The Council saw justification as a process whereby the sinner is actually made righteous. In other words, Trent said justification entails the whole process of sanctification. According to the Council, justification is "not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts by which an unrighteous man becomes righteous."

Moreover, according to the Council, justification is a lifelong process. In fact, the process extends beyond this life and into the next. Purgatory is necessary to blot out the full debt of eternal punishment:

If anyone says that the guilt is remitted to every penitent sinner after the grace of justification has been received, and that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened—let him be anathema.

There is no guarantee that anyone will persevere in the process, and some may fall away and be lost forever. But "those who, by sin, have fallen from the received grace of justification may be again justified . . . through the sacrament of penance."

In other words, good works are necessary to preserve justification, and when believers sin, they must regain their justification through a religious ritual. This is an unmistakable denial of *sola fide*.

Faith plus works, not faith alone

While giving lip service to the importance of faith in justification, Trent nevertheless declared that the instrumental cause of justification (the means by which it is obtained) is not faith, but "the sacrament of baptism."

And in a similar vein, the Council ruled, "If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God by good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of its increase, let him be anathema." In other words, works are necessary to obtain, to preserve, and to increase justification. If works are not added to faith, justification stops short of its goal.

Even grace is conferred through works in the Roman Catholic system:

If anyone says that by the said sacraments . . . grace is not conferred through the work worked but [says] that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace, let him be anathema.

The Council further issued an explicit repudiation of *sola fide*:

If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification . . . let him be anathema.

In other words, Trent decreed that anyone who claims to be justified on the basis of faith alone apart from works is condemned to eternal damnation.

Grace infused, not righteousness imputed

As noted earlier, when justification is mingled with sanctification, the grounds for justification becomes the sinner's own imperfect righteousness rather than the perfect righteousness of Christ. Trent explicitly acknowledged this:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone, or by the remission of sins alone, to the exclusion of the grace and love that is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in them; or even that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God—let him be anathema.

Here the Council was expressly contradicting the Reformation teaching that Christ's perfect righteousness, imputed to the sinner's account, is the ground on which we stand acceptable before

God. Instead, the Council stated that grace is infused into the believer's heart, resulting in a righteousness that is inherent (the believer's own righteousness). That inherent righteousness—which must be perfected by sanctification and purgatory—provides the grounds for acceptance before God.

A different gospel, not the biblical message

Scripture teaches no such thing. In fact, the Catholic doctrine of justification is precisely what Paul condemned as "a different gospel." According to the Bible, God "reckons righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:4-6). Paul counted all other things as refuse and dung for the sake of a right doctrine of justification: "In order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:8-9, emphasis added).

That is a plain repudiation of the very doctrine taught by the Council of Trent!

Scripture also teaches that justification is a declarative act of God, not a process. Jesus promised immediate salvation to believers: "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). That verse clearly states that on the basis of faith alone, sinners pass out of death and into eternal life. Sanctification is a result, not a prerequisite; and purgatory is never even mentioned in Scripture. In fact, whenever the Bible speaks of believers' justification, it always speaks of a past-tense event that occurs at the moment of faith: "Therefore *having been justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1, emphasis added). "Having *now been justified* by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Romans 5:9, emphasis added). "There is therefore *now no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, emphasis added). Our justification is an accomplished fact, not an unfinished project.

Scripture also makes clear that justification is by faith alone, not by faith plus works: "By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, emphasis added).

Justification by faith alone is and always has been the only way of salvation:

For what does the [Old Testament] Scripture say?"And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness *apart from works*" (Romans 4:3-6, emphasis added).

What must we do to be saved? Scripture answers that question in the clearest possible terms: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). Works have no part in our justification. The only thing that can make any sinner acceptable to God is the imputed merit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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