

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Why do you Catholics stress good works when the Bible says salvation is by faith *alone* (Eph 2:8-9)?

Long before the Protestant Reformation, the Church was trying to correct the abuses taking place with indulgences.¹ Despite her effort, many abuses continued to attack the Church's teaching regarding the role of faith and works. Through the selling of indulgences, many Christians failed to keep in balance the important functions of faith and works. Not only was the selling of indulgences a direct offense against the Scriptural command that spiritual goods not be sold,² but it also placed an overemphasis on the role of "works" in salvation. What was needed was a balance that gave focus to Christ. We are still challenged today to maintain this balance.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, was known for his stance on salvation through faith alone. Rather than bringing balance to the abuses suffered by the Church, this brought about an overemphasis on faith, which is just as problematic as an overemphasis on works. There are several passages in the New Testament that explain the important role of faith in our salvation. However, there are also important passages in the bible that connect the roles of faith and works. One of these important passages is found in the Letter of James.

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

-James 2:14-17

In other words, our "good deeds" in no way earn us justification and salvation—which has been won for us through the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ—but they do testify to our faith. This is what the Council of Trent stressed when it declared, "[N]one of those things which precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification; for if it is by grace, it is not now by works; otherwise, as the Apostle [Paul] says, grace is no more grace" (*Decree on Justification* 8, citing Rom. 11:6). Or, in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from him, our Creator" (CCC 2007).

In this regard, Catholics and non-Catholics can find a lot of common ground. Putting misunderstandings aside, we can all agree on the fact that Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation, but that our response to the gift of salvation should lead us to show His love and forgiveness to the world in both word and action. In this way, the "King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me'" (Matthew 25:34-36).

¹ An indulgence is the remission of the temporal/purgatorial consequences of sin by the grace of God, requested—through their acts of charity—by sinners (already reconciled by God).

² Acts 8:14-24