

Is Confessing Jesus' Name Enough for Salvation?

By Graham Osborne

A reader asked me: I have a friend who insists, "you are only saved [i.e. going to Heaven when you die] if you profess the name of Jesus"! As far as they are concerned, there are a lot of people who aren't "saved". How do we respond?

This belief stems from, among other places, Romans 10:9: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Many interpret this verse to mean that someone is saved and going to heaven simply by confessing their faith in Jesus alone, and that grace-inspired good works, baptism, and the Eucharist, among other things, are not necessary for eternal life. Additionally, some contend that once you are "saved", you can never lose this salvation [this is commonly referred to as once saved always saved]. Let's look at each of these individually.

The main problem here is that Rom 10:9 has been taken out of context, and its proper meaning misunderstood. Romans was written in part to a particular group of Jewish converts to Christianity known as Judaizers. They still held that salvation came primarily through keeping the Old Covenant "works of the law" –the strict observance of the approximately 613 Jewish ceremonial laws delivered by Moses centuries ago. They included things like circumcision, ceremonial washings, dietary restrictions and more.

In Romans, St Paul was emphasizing that these Judaizers, and all Christians for that matter, must rely primarily on their belief and trust in Jesus to be saved –confessing with your lips, believing in your heart –rather than a righteousness achieved through their own efforts of keeping the ancient Mosaic works of the law. If you read the verses just prior to Romans 10:9, you can see this clearly: "they [the Judaizers] have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened... seeking to establish their own [righteousness], they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law" [Rom 10:2-4].

But an important distinction also needs to be made here. These "works of the law" that St Paul is referring to are *not* to be confused with the grace-inspired good works we are called to do in other places in Scripture. Scripture clearly confirms that good works are also necessary for eternal life, in addition to faith! A proper Catholic understanding of all of this is that we are saved by the grace of God [Acts 15:11], through both faith *and* good works –"faith working in love", as Gal 5:6 puts it.

St James writes powerfully on exactly this point: "What good is it... if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead... a man is justified [made right with God and able to

enter into Heaven] by works and not by faith alone... faith apart from works is dead" [Jas 2:14-26].

And in Mt 19:16-17, Jesus himself unequivocally confirms the necessity of good deeds/works for eternal life with unquestionable clarity. When specifically asked, "what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" Jesus replies, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments."

To "keep the commandments" essentially means to do good works. Every good work we could possibly do falls under one of the Ten Commandments –either love of God or love of neighbor. "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments" [1 John 5:3]. Faith must have an element of this love to make it a saving faith. We must both believe in God and love him to be saved, because "even the demons believe..." [Jas 2:19]. Love is an action, not an emotion. It is a decision to do the good. So we certainly can't be saved by our faith alone, but must also love God and keep his commandments.

Romans itself also confirms the very same thing –that good works are also necessary for salvation. St Paul insists that God "will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness" (Rom 2:6-10). So St Paul is not writing against the necessity of good works for salvation in Romans 10:9, he is simply emphasizing the necessity of faith in this portion of his letter to correct misunderstandings amongst some of the Jewish converts in the early Church.

Additionally, Scripture lists other things necessary for eternal life, in particular, Baptism and the Eucharist. Jesus himself would say, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. Similarly, St Peter wrote that "the building of the ark... prefigured baptism, which saves you now" [1 Peter 3:20-21]. And again, speaking of the Eucharist, Jesus would testify that "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" [John 6:54].

But despite the above explanations, many still insist that if we simply "confess... Jesus as Lord", we are saved. But Scripture is very clear that confessing Jesus as Lord, while certainly good, is not, of itself, sufficient for salvation. In Mt 7:21, Jesus addresses this directly saying, "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father". He is emphasizing not just the need to believe, but again, the need for us to act as well –to *do* the will of his Father.

Similarly, in Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of the final judgment –separating the sheep from the goats. Note again that both groups call him, "Lord". Both groups have faith,

but in the end, only the sheep are saved: the ones who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick. The ones who do the good works –who do the will of the Father. But some of the harshest words in all of Scripture are reserved for the goats: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Another element that often accompanies the idea of salvation solely through confessing Jesus as Lord is the idea that once you are saved, you cannot lose your salvation. Such a concept involves a degree of judgment on the part of the believer that St Paul rightly claims is reserved solely for God: “I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will... disclose the purposes of the heart.” Similarly, in Mat 25 above, the goats are clearly believers, but in the end are not saved.

Jesus’ parable of the sower also clearly contradicts this “once saved, always saved” doctrine as well: “the ones on the rock... hear the word, receive it with joy... they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” [Lk 8:13]. But perhaps the clearest refutation of this novel teaching comes in 2 Peter 2:20-21. Echoing the ominous end promised for the goats of Mt 25, St. Peter writes: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them”. St Peter writes that it would be better to have never believed than to believe and turn away. Can you lose your salvation? Unquestionably yes!

St John summarizes the needed balance between a confession of faith and the necessity of good works beautifully in 1 John 3:18-24, writing, “let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth... His commandment is this: we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as He commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in Him.” Loving one another and keeping the commandments are all actions –the grace-inspired good works of Catholic theology that unite to form a truly grace-filled, saving faith.