

## **Q: Does Ephesians 2:8-9 really contradict Catholic teaching on good works and how we get to Heaven?**

In the 1500's, Martin Luther originally brought up the novel concept that we are saved by our faith alone, and that good works were not necessary for salvation and could even hinder it in some cases. This idea of salvation would eventually become one of the two major pillars of the Protestant Reformation, and **Ephesians 2:8-9** would become one of its most important supporting verses.

This is a common verse brought up to Catholics, and many don't know what to make of it. At first glance, **Ephesians 2:8-9** might appear to contradict Catholic teaching on how we are saved (by the grace of God, through faith **and** good works). But a careful look reveals that in fact it absolutely proves it!

Generally, what gets quoted to a Catholic are verses 8 and 9, but this is only the first part of St Paul's point here: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God- not because of works, lest any man should boast."*

*"You see, Catholics", the argument goes, "we aren't saved by our own doings –our good works –we're saved by our Faith in God, faith alone, and everything is God's doing. There is nothing we can do ourselves to merit salvation, it is a pure gift of God. No one can earn it or boast of earning it."*

How does a Catholic answer? To some extent, there is no disagreement with much of this. It has been constant Church teaching, right from the time of the Apostles, that we are saved by the Grace of God, Grace alone. A freely given gift that we do not deserve and that we could not earn or "merit", even through our own good works. In **Acts 15:11**, St Peter clearly teaches this, and every Catholic can say a hearty, "Amen!" to it. We are saved by the grace of God. Period. So how do faith and good works fit into this?

Well, as an adult, we must have faith of course (see my earlier article on infant baptism to see how God applies this gift to babies via the faith of their parents, just as He did in the Old Covenant), because *"without faith it is impossible to please" God (Hebrews 11:6)*. So God applies this grace to our lives by first giving us the unmerited gift of faith, a gift that we are always free to accept or reject.

But while grace alone is sufficient for each person's salvation, "faith alone" is not, and this is where Catholics and most Protestants disagree. Catholic teaching insists on the necessity of grace-inspired good works of love to complete this gift of faith, and that faith by itself is not enough. St James confirms this, writing that *"even the demons believe" in God (James 2:19)*, but they are not saved by this faith. HAVING faith is very different from being SAVED by that faith "ALONE" -and **Ephesians 2:8-9** absolutely does not teach or say this. To try to imply that it does is unquestionably adding an interpretation to Scripture that just isn't there. So let us now examine the roll of good works in all this.

Just as faith is an unmerited gift of God, so are the grace-inspired good works of love that God asks us to do on His behalf. In **James 2:24-26**, St. James clearly teaches that without these grace-inspired good works, our faith is dead! Faith alone CANNOT save us: *"You see that a man is justified (made right with God and able to enter Heaven) by works and not by faith alone... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith*

**apart from works is dead.**” Wow! There isn’t clearer teaching on this anywhere in all of Scripture -and this is absolutely rock solid Catholic teaching too!

St John summarizes this beautiful interrelation of faith, love and good works further in **1 John 3:23-24**, writing: *“And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ (faith) and love one another (good works), just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them.”* And St Paul echoes this teaching in **1 Corinthians 13:2,13**, confirming that *“if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing... so faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

And again, it is God’s grace that prompts us to do these grace-inspired “good works” of love, and in faith with our free will, we either respond to the promptings of this grace or we don’t. But either way, these good works, just like faith, first come from God, and all credit is first given to Him -so no one can boast.

So clearly, Catholic teaching is in complete agreement with **Ephesians 2:8-9**. Now we can move on to **Ephesians 2:10** and properly understand what all these verses mean together, in context: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

Stunning! We are created by God precisely for doing these good works! In fact He has prepared them for us in advance, and then He gives us the grace to “walk in them”. This is God’s grace at work –but working through us. We literally become “fellow workers” with God, as St Paul says in **1 Corinthians 3:9**. He echoes this in **Philippians 2:12-13**: *“for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”*. And in **1 Cor 15:10**, he summarizes this again perfectly, saying, *“But by the grace of God I am what I am... I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.”*

In other places in Scripture where it seems good works are dismissed as unnecessary for salvation, close inspection reveals that the “works” being referred to are not in fact the good, grace inspired works we have been talking about here, but instead are “works of the law”. Hmmm, sounds like splitting hairs maybe? Absolutely not!

“Works of the law” refer to the Jewish ceremonial laws that include some 600 plus ordinances that Jews believed they had to observe faithfully to please God, and get to Heaven, and included things like circumcision and the multitude of Jewish dietary restrictions practiced at the time of Jesus. They were very much a part of the Old Covenant, but were now passing away with the New.

Many of the new Jewish converts to Christianity clung to these Old Covenant ways, and one group in particular was very problematic. Known collectively as Judaizers, they were confusing new Christian converts, especially Gentiles, teaching that they must still maintain circumcision (which baptism had now replaced as the entrance into the New Covenant) and the other ceremonial laws to be saved. This of course was wrong (St Peter himself clarifies this in **Acts 15**), and it was this group that St Paul so often addressed, especially in Romans and Galatians, writing repeatedly that the “works of the law” were NOT necessary for salvation, and in fact were a stumbling block to it.

For example, in **Gal 2:16**, St Paul writes: “*know that a man is not justified by **works of the law** but through faith in Jesus Christ... and not by works of the law, because by **works of the law** shall no one be justified*”. Similarly, in Romans 3:28, he writes “*For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from **works of law***”. But in **Romans 2:6-10**, St Paul turns right around and distinguishes these “*works of the law*” from the need for good works, confirming that Jesus “*will render to every man according to his **works**: to those who by... **well-doing** seek for... immortality, he will give eternal life*”.

So we must be very careful not to dismiss these grace-inspired good works as unnecessary for salvation, or confuse them with the completely unrelated Old Covenant “works of the law” that St Paul speaks of in Romans and Galatians.

But ultimately, it is Jesus Himself that makes this all abundantly clear. In **Matthew 19:16-17**, where the rich man asks Jesus, “*Teacher, **what good deed must I do to have eternal life...***”, Jesus answers him, “*keep the commandments*” – i.e. love God and love/do good to your neighbour! Or again in **Matthew 7:21** where Jesus says, “*Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ (FAITH ALONE) shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who **does the will of my Father** (GOOD WORKS)*”. Or similarly, in **Matthew 25**, where Jesus contrasts the saving good works of the sheep (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and more) with the “faith alone” of the goats. Recall that the “goats” call him “lord” –they are believers, but without good works!

And perhaps equally striking, Jesus also clearly tells us in Scripture, that not only are our good works necessary for salvation, but the reward for them is eternal life –Heaven! “*Come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment*”, Jesus confirms in **John 5:29**.

St Paul says exactly the same thing in the very first chapters of Romans, interestingly, the book so often used to try to refute the necessity of good works by quoting it out of context **Romans 2:6-10 reads: will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury...**. Similarly, the Book of **Revelation confirms this teaching in multiple places as well. For example, Revelation 22:12 is crystal clear: “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done”** (see **Rev 20:12-13** as well).

So in the end, it isn’t faith OR good works that justify and save us, it’s both! “*Faith working through love*”, as St Paul puts it in **Galatians 5:6**, but all through God’s grace - because apart from Him, “*we can do nothing*” (**John 15:5**).

“*What good deed must I do to have eternal life...*”