

Faith Alone? I Believe Not!

By Graham Osborne

The Church has always taught that we are saved by the grace of God, through faith *and* good works, or, as St. Paul phrases it in Galatians 5:6, by “faith working through love.” “We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus”, writes St Luke in Acts 15:11. Our salvation was bought for us by Jesus – he redeemed us by dying on the cross for our sins. This gift is given to us solely through God’s mercy and grace. Grace alone. Catholics understand that both our faith and good works in this context come from God’s grace. We cannot “work our way into heaven” solely on our own merits, and the Church has never taught that we could.

However, God does ask us to respond to His gifts of grace and salvation with our free will. With His help – His grace – and in the “state of grace” (validly baptized, with no mortal sin on our souls), we must freely choose to believe in God, to love Him, and to do the grace-inspired good works of charity that He has prepared for us to walk in (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10). In doing this, we literally become sharers or co-workers in God’s work (cf 1 Corinthians 3:7-9).

In the 1500’s, Martin Luther advanced a novel concept of salvation that would eventually become one of the primary pillars of the Protestant Reformation. He taught that a person is saved or justified (made “right with God”) by faith alone, apart from any good works. He was so convinced of this doctrine, that he made the astounding decision to add a word to Sacred Scripture! He rewrote Romans 3:28 so that it read, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith [alone], apart from works of the law” (Luther added the word “alone”, or “sola” in Latin, here).

We have his own written defense of this decision preserved still today. It is stunning, disturbing and revealing: *“If your Papist makes much unnecessary fuss about the word (Sola, alone), say straight out to him, Doctor Martinus Luther will have it so, and says, Papists and donkeys are one and the same thing...thus I will have it, thus I order it, my will is reason enough. For we will not be the... disciples of the Papists, but their masters and judges. We must once in a way act a little haughtily and noisily with these jack asses.”*

“This is my answer to your first question; and as to their unnecessary noise about the word Sola, I beg of you not to give these donkeys any other or further answer, but simply this much: D. Luther will have it so, and says he is a Doctor above all Doctors in the whole of Popery... I knew very well that here, Romans III, the word (Sola) is not in the Latin and Greek text, and it was not necessary for the Papists to teach me that. It is true, these four letters, S O L A, are not in it, which letter the jack asses look at as a cow looks at a new gate...”

Ouch! Evidently, he must not have understood St. Paul’s teaching on charity either, because that is exactly what Luther’s new doctrine had left out: charity... love!

In 1 Corinthians 13:2, St. Paul tells us that “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

You see, we are not saved by our own faith or belief in God “alone”. St. James tells us that “even the demons believe” (James 2:19). Does the devil believe? Absolutely! Probably more than you and I do. He has been in God’s presence. He knows exactly who Jesus is. But obviously he is not saved by this “faith”. Then what is the difference between the belief of the devil and the belief of a Christian? One hates God and one loves God!

Saving faith is “not faith alone”, but faith perfected by love of God. And Scripture tells us clearly what love of God is: “this is love of God, that we *keep His commandments*” (1 John 5:3). Similarly, Jesus says, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me” (John 14:21, also Matthew 22:36-40). So the Christian must have faith *and* love: he must both believe and keep the Commandments.

Drawing on this teaching, Jesus definitively answers our question of how we are saved in Matthew 19:16-17. “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” the man asks. Seeing the man’s faith, Jesus answers plainly, “if you would enter eternal life, keep the commandments.” We are saved by keeping the Commandments –our active response to God’s grace. And virtually every good work we could possibly do falls under one of the Commandments, and involves either love of God or love of neighbour: “The commandments... are summed up in this saying, [namely] “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Romans 13:8-10].

St. James also settles this question of whether we are saved by faith alone with undisputable clarity. There is only one place in all of Scripture where the two words “faith” and “alone” are used together, and it is *not* Romans 3:28, as Luther erroneously insisted. It is James 2:24: “you see that a man is *justified by works* and **not** by faith alone.” Case closed. It just doesn’t get any clearer than this. Not surprisingly, Luther hated the book of James, writing: “I would just as soon throw Jimmy in the fire”.

St. James goes on in his letter to further confirm the need of good works for salvation. In James 2:14 & 17 he writes, “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? ... So faith by itself if it has no works is dead.” And again, in James 2:26, he adds: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.”

Interestingly enough, even the book of Romans, which Luther tried to rewrite to teach “faith alone”, also spells out the need for good works – right off the bat in the second chapter – referring to these works collectively as “the obedience of faith” (cf. Romans 1:5). In Romans 2:6-8, St. Paul writes, God “will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek...*immortality through perseverance in good works*, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.” In Romans 2:13, he summarizes this teaching, saying “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

In addition to Romans 2 above, the Bible makes it very clear in several other places that our final judgment will be based on what we have done. For example, in John 5:29, Jesus says, “and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.” In Revelation 22:12, He also says, “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing My recompense, to repay everyone for what he has done.”

Similarly, in Jesus' great parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25), He teaches that those who have done good to even "one of the least of these, my brethren", did it to Him. These "righteous" will go "into eternal life." But to those that did not do the good to others, Jesus says, "Depart from me, you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... and they will go away into eternal punishment".

These are some of Jesus' toughest words in all of Scripture. But the sobering part is that both the "righteous" and the "unrighteous" are believers! Both of them will answer, "Lord, when did we see you in need?" Both had faith, but only one had good works...

So how did Martin Luther go so far afield? Unfortunately he misinterpreted St. Paul's teaching on works. St. Paul had devoted considerable writing to refuting the influences of the Judaizers. Composed of Jewish converts to Christianity, this group was stirring up considerable unrest in the first century of the Church by teaching that all Christians, both Jew and Gentile, must also observe the Jewish "works of the law" to be saved (for example, Acts 15). These "works of the law" included circumcision and the roughly 613 commands of the Mosaic Covenant. Very early on, the Church made it clear that these "works of the law" were not necessary for salvation. Sadly, Luther confused these "works of the law" with the grace-inspired charity or "good works" that were clearly taught as necessary for salvation by both Sacred Scripture and the Church.

St. Paul gives us a clear sense of the Catholic understanding of good works in 1 Corinthians 15:10 when he writes, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me." Similarly, in Philippians 2:12-13, he writes, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.". Summarizing this teaching, St. Paul says, "we are God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9). Our "good works" ultimately come from God – our free will being aided and united to His will by grace.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father" (Matt 7:21). As a Christian, you never work "alone."