

The ‘Gospel’ According to Rome



The new pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio (pronounced Ber-GOAL-io), will be called Francis, the 266th pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church. He is also the first non-European pope in more than 1,200 years and the first member of the Jesuit order to lead the church. With a new pope elected, the eyes of the world are on the Roman Catholic Church. No doubt many evangelicals find themselves confused as to the *critical differences* between the biblical gospel and the gospel according to Rome.

In [Romans 11:6](#), Paul says of salvation, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”

By contrast, Roman Catholicism finds itself in the impossible position of advocating a gospel in which salvation is offered by *grace plus works*. The Catholic Church promotes a synergistic sacramental soteriology in which human good works, along with God’s grace, contribute to the sinner’s justification.



This is in distinct contrast to the evangelical understanding of the gospel, in which salvation is received *by grace through faith alone*.

Despite the eccumenical efforts of some, the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Evangelicalism is one of *substance* not merely *semantics*.

This Commentary is intended as a summary of Roman Catholic teaching with regard to the essence of the gospel (in order to demonstrate how Roman Catholic teaching strays from the biblical message of salvation). Catholic sources are included under each of the following points.

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I. According to Rome, salvation is *not* by grace alone through faith alone; it does not come through the sole imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner.

Council of Trent, Canons on Justification, Canon 9: "If anyone says, that by faith alone the impious is justified . . . let him be anathema."

Council of Trent, Canon 11: "If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, excluding grace and charity which is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and inheres in them, or also that the grace which justifies us is only the favor of God, let him be anathema."

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II. According to Rome, good works *are necessary* for salvation. They are not merely the fruits of justification (as evangelicals assert), they are actually the root of it. They are *meritorious* and will be rewarded with eternal life.

Council of Trent, Canon 24: "If anyone says that the justice [or justification] received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase, let him be anathema."

The Catholic Encyclopedia, in an article entitled *Sanctifying Grace*, states that the sinner "is formally justified and made holy by his own personal justice and holiness" such that "over and above faith other acts are necessary for justification" including acts of charity, penance with contrition, and almsgiving.

Catholic Answers: "Even though only God's grace enables us to love others, these acts of love please him, and he promises to reward them with eternal life ([Rom. 2:6-7](#), [Gal. 6:6-10](#)). *Thus good works are meritorious.* When we first come to God in faith, we have nothing in our hands to offer him. Then he gives us grace to obey his commandments in love, and he rewards us with salvation when we offer these acts of love back to him ([Rom. 2:6-11](#), [Gal. 6:6-10](#), [Matt. 25:34-40](#)). . . . We do not 'earn' our salvation through good works ([Eph. 2:8-9](#), [Rom. 9:16](#)), but *our faith in Christ puts us in a special grace-filled relationship with God so that our obedience and love, combined with our faith, will be rewarded with eternal life* ([Rom. 2:7](#), [Gal. 6:8-9](#))."

Notice the confusion Catholic theology portrays in trying to maintain a gospel of both grace and works. On the one hand, Catholic apologists assert that believers do not earn their salvation through good works. On the other hand, they contend that God rewards good works with eternal life. Those two concepts are contradictory. Is eternal life a *free gift* (received by grace) or is it a *reward* (received on the basis of good works)? It cannot be both.

But Catholics do not seem to be aware of that critical contradiction. Hence, the Catholic Catechism asserts that heaven is "God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ" (P 1821). In other words, heaven is offered on the basis of *grace plus works*.

Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott reiterates the confusing concept that eternal life is both a gift of God's grace and a reward for human good works.

Catholic theologian, Ludwig Ott: "The Council of Trent teaches that for the justified *eternal life is both a gift or grace promised by God and a reward for his own good works and merits. . . .* According to Holy Writ, eternal blessedness in heaven is the reward . . . for good works performed on this earth, and rewards and merit are correlative concepts" (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* [Rockford: Tan, 1974], 264).

Ludwig Ott: "As God's grace is the presupposition and foundation of (supernatural) good works, by which man merits eternal life, so *salutary works are, at the same time gifts of God and meritorious acts of man.* (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 264, 267).

In particular, Catholic theology asserts that the sacraments are necessary for salvation — including baptism and the keeping of the Ten Commandments.

Catholic author, John Hardon: "Are the sacraments necessary for salvation? According to the way God has willed that we be saved the sacraments are necessary for salvation" (John Hardon, Question # 1119).

The Catholic Catechism: "The Council of Trent teaches that the Ten Commandments are obligatory for Christians and that the justified man is still bound to keep them [fn, Cf. DS 1569–1570]; the Second Vatican Council confirms: "The bishops, successors of the apostles, receive from the Lord . . . the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain salvation through faith, *Baptism and the observance of the Commandments*" (P 2068; ellipsis in original)

Notice that "baptism" and the "observance of the Ten Commandments" have been added to "faith" as being necessary for unbelievers to "attain salvation." This is similar to the Judaizers of Acts 15, who wanted to add circumcision and Mosaic Law-keeping to the requirements for salvation in apostolic times. In fact, in Roman Catholic theology, baptism is regarded as the equivalent of circumcision, and the Ten Commandments are the heart and summary of the Mosaic Law.

You can see how Paul responded to the synergistic gospel of the Judaizers in [Galatians 1:6–9](#).

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III. According to Rome, the act of water baptism brings forgiveness for sins. Any major sins committed after baptism must be paid for by the sinner through acts of penance.

The Catholic view on penance represents a distorted understanding of the biblical doctrine of repentance.

The Catholic Catechism: "By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin." (P 1263)

The Catholic Catechism: “Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded the ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification.” (P 1446)

The Catholic Catechism: “Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. *Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance’.*” (P 1459; emphasis mine)

John Hardon: “Penance is . . . necessary because we must expiate and make reparation for the punishment which is due our sins. . . . We make satisfaction for our sins by every good act we perform in the state of grace but especially by prayer, penance and the practice of charity” (Question #1320).

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IV. According to Rome, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is not sufficient to send the redeemed directly to heaven. Thus, sins that are not properly paid for in this life (through penance) will be purified after death through temporary punishment in Purgatory.

Council of Trent, Canon 30: “If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged either in this world or in purgatory before the gates of heaven can be opened, let him be anathema.”

Handbook for Today’s Catholic: “If you die in the love of God but possess any stains of sin, such stains are cleansed away in a purifying process called Purgatory. These stains of sin are primarily the temporal punishment due to venial or mortal sins already forgiven but for which sufficient penance was not done during your lifetime” (p. 47).

The Catholic Catechism says that Purgatory is for “all who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation, but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (P 1030).

Pope Paul VI: “The doctrine of purgatory clearly demonstrates that even when the guilt of sin has been taken away, punishment for it or the consequences of it may remain to be expiated and cleansed. They often are. In fact, in purgatory the souls of those ‘who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions’ are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debt.” (Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, January 1, 1967).

This, of course, is in direct contrast to biblical teaching about divine forgiveness:

Romans 8:1 – “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

[2 Corinthians 5:18–21](#) – “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

[Colossians 2:13–14](#) – “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

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V. According to Rome, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is repeated every time the Mass is celebrated.

Council of Trent: “If anyone says, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; or that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice . . . and that it ought not to be offered for the living and dead for sins, pains, satisfactions and other necessities: let him be anathema” (Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass, Canon 3).

John Hardon: “The Sacrifice of the altar . . . is no mere empty commemoration of the Passion and death of Jesus Christ, but a true and proper act of sacrifice. Christ, the eternal High Priest, in an unbloody way offers himself a most acceptable Victim to the eternal Father as He did upon the Cross. . . . In the Mass, no less than on Calvary, Jesus really offers His life to His heavenly Father. . . . The Mass, therefore, no less than the Cross, is expiatory for sins” (Questions #1265, 1269, 1277).

This is in direct contrast to the biblical teaching about Christ’s death:

[Hebrews 7:26–27](#): “For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.”

[Hebrews 10:10–14](#): “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

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The Biblical Position: In contrast to the Roman Catholic position, salvation comes through faith alone by grace alone based on the work of Christ alone. (Though good works result from our new birth, they are not the basis of it. Good works are the *fruit* of justification, not the *root* of it.)

Here are just a few verses to make the point.

[Luke 18:9-14](#) – “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

[John 20:31](#) – “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

[Acts 16:30-31](#) – “After he brought them out, he said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

[Romans 4:2-5](#) – “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited 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 credited as righteousness.”

[Romans 10:9-10](#) – “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”

[Ephesians 2:8-10](#) – “For 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, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

[Titus 3:4-8](#) – “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.”

Conclusion: Before evangelicals rush headlong to enthusiastically embrace the new pope (pretending as if the Reformation never happened), they should stop and remember the fact that

the Roman Catholic Church teaches a gospel that is utterly incompatible with the biblical gospel of grace. In the same way that Paul denounced the false teachings of the Judaizers ([Gal. 1:6-9](#)), the gospel according to Rome deserves unhesitating words of condemnation.

That means that those who promote Rome's false gospel, including the new pope, ought to be confronted for their part in the propagation of damning error.