



What is the relationship of good works¹ to salvation?

Today, there is large disagreement as to what the relationship of good works is to salvation. In other words, are such works necessary or optional to spending eternity in heaven? This brief study will answer this question by comparing/critiquing the views most common western views according to the Biblical witness².

1. Roman Catholic = Works are a necessary condition (after faith) to merit salvation.

1.1. A person receives eternal salvation either by earning/adding enough merit (i.e. good works) to their life without ever sinning (i.e. they must achieve perfection) or by earning/adding enough merit (i.e. good works) to their faith in Christ.³

1.2. Faith in Christ functions as the first step on the path of salvation. It secures initial justification by removing original sin⁴. Though itself not meritorious, this faith is what opens the door for God to accept our good works as meritorious⁵. In other words, until we receive initial justification through faith, no merit unto final justification (or salvation) can be credited to our account⁶. This first step of faith is exercised through the act of Catholic baptism⁷.

1.3. Good works are therefore necessary as a condition to salvation. They are also (again) meritorious unto salvation.

1.4. The soteriology of the Roman Catholic church is heretical. The Bible does not teach a works-based or meritorious-works system of salvation.

2. Protestant View #1 (Evangelical-Reformed/Lordship) = Works are a necessary condition (after faith) to merit salvation.

2.1. A person receives eternal salvation either by earning/adding enough merit (i.e. good works) to their life without ever sinning (i.e. they must achieve perfection) or through faith in Christ Who perfectly earned/merited it for us. The Protestant view of original sin makes the first option impossible for anyone other than Christ⁸.

2.2. Faith in Christ functions as the first and final step on the path of salvation. It secures permanent justification by removing original sin and replacing it w/both Christ's active and passive obedience (i.e. double imputation)⁹. Faith is therefore all that is needed to secure enough merit to enter heaven. Faith in Christ is exercised through the personal act of confession/trust.

¹ By using the term "good works", what is being referred to are any righteous deeds, godly behavior or holy acts which a person demonstrates in obedience to God's will or commands.

² The Eastern Orthodox position will not be considered though in many respects, it mirrors the Roman Catholic view.

³ Because of their view regarding original sin (tbd), Catholics do believe it is possible for persons (other than Christ) to be perfect in this life. The Immaculate Conception of Mary doctrine is a perfect example of this. For others, the path is through initial justification and good works. "We must believe that nothing further is wanting to those justified to prevent them from being considered to have, by those very works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life and to have truly merited eternal life, to be obtained in its [due] time." – (Paul III, Council of Trent)

⁴ According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), the doctrine of Original Sin teaches that, "By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all humans. Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants, human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called 'original sin'. As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin." Catholicism refers to this inclination as "concupiscence". Original sin is therefore called "sin" only in an analogical sense: it is a sin "contracted" and not "committed"—a state and not an act. In other words, Catholics do not believe humanity also shares the guilt of their first parents. This view is exclusive to Protestants only ("human beings do not bear any 'original guilt' from Adam and Eve's particular sin" – CCC). In summary, *we are sinners b/c we sin*.

⁵ "But when the Apostle says that man is justified by faith and freely, these words are to be understood in that sense in which the uninterrupted unanimity of the Catholic Church has held and expressed them, namely, that we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and to come to the fellowship of His sons; and we are therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification. For, if by grace, it is not now by works, otherwise, as the Apostle says, grace is no more grace." – (Paul III, Council of Trent)

⁶ "Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and domestics of God, advancing from virtue to virtue, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, 'day by day', that is, mortifying the members of their flesh, and presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified, as it is written: 'He that is just, let him be justified still'; and, 'Be not afraid to be justified even to death'; and again, 'Do you see that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only?' This increase of justice the holy Church asks for when she prays: 'Give unto us, O Lord, an increase of faith, hope and charity.'...For since Christ Jesus Himself, as the head into the members and the vine into the branches, continually infuses strength into those justified, which strength always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works, and without which they could not in any manner be pleasing and meritorious before God, – (Paul III, Council of Trent)

⁷ As such faith is understood more in terms of church sacrament (i.e. the sacrament of Faith or Baptism) than personal action. "The causes of this justification are: the final cause is the glory of God and of Christ and life everlasting: the efficient cause is the merciful God who washes and sanctifies gratuitously...the meritorious cause is His most beloved only begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when we were enemies, for the exceeding charity wherewith he loved us, merited for us justification by His most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father, the instrumental cause is the sacrament of baptism which is the sacrament of faith" – (Paul III, Council of Trent); "Always, Baptism is seen as connected with faith: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household,' St. Paul declared to his jailer in Philippi. And the narrative continues, the jailer 'was baptized at once, with all his family. The baptized have 'put on Christ.' Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that...justifies, and sanctifies." – (CCC)

⁸ According to the Protestant doctrine, Adam's original sin did more than simply communicate a sinful nature to His progeny. The guilt of his sin was also to be shared. According to the Protestant interpretation of Rom 5:12, the consequences associated w/Adam's role as mankind's federal head included not only the passing on of a sinful nature, but also the imputation of his guilty state/standing before God. In summary, *we are sinners b/c we sin, AND we sin b/c we are sinners*.

⁹ Teaching on the doctrine of Double Imputation as part of Ligonier Ministries Statement On Christology, Stephen J. Nichols writes, "Double imputation is taught in texts such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, where Paul says plainly, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Here we read that our sin is imputed to Christ. We are the offending party. He is guiltless. He perfectly kept the law. Yet, on the cross, God poured out His wrath on Christ. Why? Because our sin was imputed to Christ. Christ took upon Himself our sin. Our great debit was put on His account. Christ paid the horrific penalty as the cup of God's wrath was poured out upon Him. There is also a second imputation. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. He not only takes our debit, but we also get His credit. Christ paid the penalty we could never satisfy, but He also kept the law perfectly, which we can't do either. Consequently, God credits to us His righteousness. We stand before God clothed in Christ's righteousness. We can actually say that we are saved by works—not at all by our works, but instead by Christ's works, His perfect obedience, on our behalf."

2.3. That being said, faith is only considered saving where there is the practice of good works¹⁰. However, Scripture makes us responsible (at least in part) for producing such works.¹¹ As such, they (too) must be viewed as a necessary condition and meritorious unto salvation since:

2.3.1. Anything you are responsible for producing (i.e. works) is not a result, but a condition¹²

2.3.2. Any condition requiring work within a meritorious system is not charity, but merit (Rom 4:4)¹³.

2.4. The soteriology of Evangelical-Reformed/Lordship Protestant view is therefore the same as heretical Roman Catholic. It also teaches a works-based/meritorious works system of salvation w/our works as both a necessary condition and meritorious.

3. Protestant #2 (Evangelical-Free Grace/Anti-Lordship) = Works are not a necessary condition (after faith) to merit salvation.

3.1. A person receives eternal salvation either by earning/adding enough merit (i.e. good works) to their life without ever sinning (i.e. they must achieve perfection) or through faith in Christ Who perfectly earned/merited it for us. The Protestant view of original sin makes the first option impossible for anyone other than Christ.

3.2. Faith in Christ functions as the first and final step on the path of salvation. It secures permanent justification by removing original sin and replacing it w/both Christ's active and passive obedience (i.e. double imputation). Faith is therefore all that is needed to secure enough merit to enter heaven. Faith in Christ is exercised through the personal act of confession/trust.

3.3. Good works in no way affect or evidence a person's faith/salvation. They are therefore completely optional. They serve only to gain the possibility of additional temporal or eternal blessings¹⁴.

3.4. The soteriology of the Evangelical-Free Grace/Anti-Lordship Protestant view is similar to the heretical Roman Catholics. Though it does not see our works as necessary or meritorious, it nonetheless still teaches a works-based/meritorious works system of salvation. In addition, it also teaches the heresy of Antinomianism.

4. Protestant #3 (Biblical-Reformed/Lord-Before-Savior) = Works are a necessary condition (after faith) to maintain the salvation already gained.

4.1. A person receives eternal salvation by maintaining through faithful obedience the marriage covenant relationship they gained by faith in Christ (Jer 31:31-32; Eph 5:22-32).

4.2. Faith in Christ therefore functions as the first step on the path of salvation. It secures justification by removing original sin through the imputation of Christ's passive obedience (active obedience is not necessary since through the cleansing away of sin we are *made* just before God). Faith in Christ is exercised through the waters of baptism in the church (1Pe 3:21 w/Mat 16:19).

4.3. Since the covenant relationship we enter into w/Christ for salvation is a marriage (and therefore not meritorious) this (too) defines the place of good works. They serve as the means by which we preserve the marriage relationship and its salvific benefits.

4.4. The soteriology of the Biblical-Reformed/Lord-Before-Savior Protestant view is unlike any of the above since it is not a works-based/meritorious works system of salvation. It solves all of the problems and avoids all of the heresy created by the other systems¹⁵.

¹⁰ According to the Evangelical-Reformed Protestant, this is what James is teaching in the second chapter of his epistle (see James 2:26). Another way of stating their position w/b that works are the evidence (or manifestation) of saving faith. In the words of John MacArthur, "Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of saving faith" (*The Gospel According To Jesus*).

¹¹ The Bible not only speaks of good works as indicative of true Christians (e.g. Joh 3:21; 1Jo 3:7-10; Tit 2:14; contra Mat 7:15-20) but also imperative. We are commanded to practice them as part of our conversion and cooperation w/the indwelling Spirit (e.g. Luk 3:8-14; Act 26:20; 1Co 15:58; Eph 2:10, 4:1, 17-5:4, 8-10; Phi 2:12-15; 1Ti 6:18; Tit 2:7, 3:1, 8, 14; Heb 10:24; Jam 3:13; 1Pe 1:14-17, 2:12). As such, we are held responsible for their production or lack thereof. Hence why the final judgment will be according to our works (Rev 20:11-15; 2Co 5:10; 1Pe 1:17; Rom 2:6-8).

¹² In this light consider the following statements: "Here we can lay down a self-evident principle: a necessary result for which we are responsible which must be present for another result to occur is no different than an additional condition for the achievement of the second result" – Joseph Dillow (*Reign Of The Servant Kings*); "There is logically no difference between a necessary result of faith for which we are responsible and a condition of eternal salvation. These words ('for which we are responsible') are the nail in the coffin of Perseverance Theology." – Jeremy D. Myers (*Good Works: A Necessary Result Of Justification? CTS Journal*).

¹³ The anticipated defense against this conclusion will undoubtedly include an appeal back to the merit of Christ (i.e. According to this view however, to possess the kind of faith that secures such merit requires that I produce good works post-possession— which is just another way of saying that the merit of Christ is conditioned upon my own merit in the future (i.e. I must "earn" the faith that secures what Christ earned so that I can be saved). The only real difference then between the Roman Catholic view and this one is the place our merit holds on the salvation spectrum (or final salvation). For the Roman Catholic, it is after the work of Christ; for the Evangelical-Reformed Protestant, it is before.

¹⁴ Free Grace thinker Ewin Wilson writes, "No wrong act or sinful deed can ever affect the believer's salvation. The sinner did nothing to merit God's grace and likewise he can do nothing to demerit grace. True, sinful conduct always lessens one's fellowship with Christ, limits his contribution to God's work and can result in serious disciplinary action by the Holy Spirit." (*There Is Therefore Now No Condemnation*). Interestingly enough, Catholic apologist Karl Keating quotes Ewin in his work stating the Free Grace position to be the only one within Protestantism that is logical. In other words, he (too) sees the contradiction (and hypocrisy) created by the Evangelical-Reformed position which claims to be different than Catholicism yet ultimately holds to the same soteriology.

¹⁵ Choosing to identify this view as "Reformed" stems from the fact that many within the Reformed Tradition shared the same or a similar view as it relates to the issue of works. For further study see Mark Jones's essay, "Good Works Are Necessary To Salvation?" or the teachings of such theologians as John Owen, William Ames, Francis Turretin, Richard Baxter, Thomas Goodwin and John Davenant.