

Roman Catholicism, Grace, and Salvation

What does Roman Catholicism (RC) teach about how a person can be saved eternally? The RC view of salvation is derived from their beliefs about grace, justification, and the atonement, but are they biblical? The RC doctrines outlined below can be verified by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), which is considered a compendium of all Catholic doctrine. It draws from the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Though the RC teachings about grace and salvation are complicated and sometimes confusing, we will attempt to state them simply and compare them to the Bible's teaching.

Roman Catholicism and grace

Roman Catholicism views grace as a sanctifying, supernatural disposition or quality of the soul. God bestows this sanctifying grace on infants through the rite of baptism, which regenerates them and infuses them with the Holy Spirit. Adults obtain sanctifying grace when they respond to God's temporary grace that helps them increase in faith and good works. Then, by observing the seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, Matrimony), God infuses more grace through these channels. This infusion of grace is the power to do good things that bring more grace, therefore grace is conditioned on merit. Grace is never an absolutely free and undeserved gift, but always obtained by various acts of obedience.

Contrary to RC teaching, the Bible clearly presents grace as a free gift. It is unconditional and cannot be earned by merit, obedience, or good works. The grace of salvation originates in God's wisdom according to His good pleasure and sovereign purpose (Eph. 1:7-9). Believers are saved by grace as a free gift, not by works (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8-9). Good works are a consequence of grace, not a condition for grace (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:11-12). Romans 11:6 makes it clear that grace excludes works, and vice versa: *"And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work."*

Salvation by grace is appropriated only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:12; 3:16; 6:47; Rom. 3:28; 4:3-5; 5:1-2; Gal. 2:16). Infants cannot be saved and regenerated by the rite of baptism because it is done to merit grace and they are incapable of exercising faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. Only those who can and do believe in Christ receive the regenerating Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39; Acts 10:44-49; 11:15-17; Gal. 3:2).

Roman Catholicism and justification

According to Roman Catholicism, justification removes original sin and transforms the soul to infuse more sanctifying grace. It is, therefore, a process that is never completed in this life. Justification begins at baptism and can be furthered by keeping the sacraments and doing other good works. Justification can be lost through mortal sin (serious sins like murder or adultery and others not clearly defined by the RC church), in which case the sinner must be justified again through the sacrament of confession to a priest and works of penance (doing deeds of contrition such as prayer, fasting, giving alms, or works of mercy).

The Bible affirms that justification is an act of God whereby He declares a sinner righteous in His sight, having forgiven his sins and imputed to him His own perfect righteousness (Rom. 3:21-4:8; 5:9; 2 Cor. 5:21).

By this declaration of righteousness, the sinner is complete in Christ (Col. 2:10). No one can be more justified in God's sight than when he first believes. God's justification is final and cannot be lost (Rom. 8:31-35), so there is no subsequent need for further justification. Once justified, the believer is guaranteed final glorification (Rom. 8:30). The Bible has no category called mortal sin but teaches that all sin brings death.



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(Eze. 18:4; Rom. 6:23; James 1:15), and only a single act of sin makes one guilty of breaking all of God's law (James 2:10).

Roman Catholicism and atonement for sins

The work of Christ on the cross atones (expiates, makes satisfaction to God) for sins, which is applied to RC infants through infant baptism. With RC adults the benefits of Christ's atonement must be maintained through confession of sins to a priest who absolves the sinner conditioned on works of penance. In addition, it is essential to regularly observe the Mass, which is a continuing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Since such rituals will not pay for all sins, suffering after death in purgatory is necessary to make additional atonement for sin and cleanse the soul.

According to the Bible, Jesus was the perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for all the sins of all people (1 John 2:1-2). Jesus' simple statement from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), means His work satisfied God's wrath towards all sinners and there is nothing that can be added to that work (Col. 2:10-14). Believers are completely washed from their sins by His blood sacrifice (Rev. 1:5). Since Jesus Christ is our High Priest who alone forgives sin, there is no need for a human mediator (Matt. 9:6; Mark 2:7-11). We have direct access to God based on the merits of Jesus Christ as our Savior, therefore we need no other mediator such as a priest or Jesus' mother, Mary (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:23-25; 9:15; Rom. 8:34). The Mass contradicts Hebrews 10:14-18, which says that the one offering of Jesus Christ under the New Covenant "perfects forever" and where there is remission of sin, "there is no longer an offering for sin." The idea of purgatory comes from misinterpretations of passages like 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and a faulty theology that assumes the sacrifice of Christ was insufficient and must be completed by our obedience and suffering. Not only is purgatory an unbiblical doctrine, but it is also unnecessary given that Jesus purged our sins once and for all by His death on the cross (Heb. 1:3; 7:25-27). Believers who die go directly into the presence of Jesus, not into purgatory (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil 1:23).

Roman Catholicism and assurance of salvation

Since, according to RC, eternal life is a merited reward for doing good, and since it can be lost by neglecting the sacraments or committing a mortal sin, no one can know for certain if they have eternal life, even if they confess their sins and do works of penance. No one can know if they will persist in the necessary good works until the end of life, therefore full assurance of salvation is impossible.

Full assurance of salvation is a comforting teaching of the Bible (John 5:24; 6:37; 10:28-30). Those who have believed in Jesus Christ as Savior can know with certainty that they have eternal life (1 John 5:11-13).

Conclusion

In the Roman Catholic system, grace must be earned, salvation is by works, justification must be completed by our obedience, the work of Christ on the cross is insufficient to atone for sins, and full assurance of salvation is impossible. What the Apostle Paul declared about the Jews in Romans 10:3 is also true of the Roman Catholic church: *"For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God."* Ultimately, RC departs from biblical truth because the Scriptures are not their only authority. Their beliefs are determined by their creeds, councils, papal pronouncements, and church traditions. But the Bible speaks clearly and authoritatively: Eternal salvation is a free gift of grace appropriated through faith in Jesus Christ alone and it never can be lost. There is salvation in no other person than the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is our Savior, Mediator, and Priest with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5). Any Roman Catholic who believes in Christ's work and His promise of eternal life instead of his or her own effort will be saved: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved..." (Acts 16:31a).

