

One passage Fundamentalists often cite as a proof-text against the Catholic view of salvation is Ephesians 2:8–9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Though this passage can stymie Catholics in conversation, they need not feel threatened by it. Even if we assume that Paul is speaking of "good works" when he says we have not been saved by works, this in no way conflicts with Catholic theology.

Notice that the passage speaks of salvation in the past tense—"you *have been* saved." In Greek this is the perfect tense, which denotes a past, completed action. We know from the Bible that salvation also has present and future aspects, so the kind of salvation Paul is discussing in Ephesians 2:8–9 is *initial* salvation. It is the kind which we received when we first came to God and were justified, not the kind of salvation we are now receiving (1 Pet. 1:8–9, Phil. 2:12) or the kind we one day will receive (Rom. 13:11, 1 Cor. 3:15, 5:5).

But the Catholic Church does not teach that we receive initial justification by good works. You do not have to do good works in order to come to God and be justified. The Council of Trent states: "And we are said to be justified by grace because nothing that precedes justification, whether faith or works, merits the grace of justification. For 'if it is by grace, it is no longer by works; otherwise,' as the apostle says, 'grace is no more grace' [Rom. 11:6]" (*Decree on Justification* 8).

So even if Paul were using "works" to mean "good works" in Ephesians 2:8–9, there is no conflict with Catholic theology. However, Paul probably does not mean "good works." Normally when he says "works," he means "works of the Law"—those done out of the Law of Moses. His point is to stress that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and not by obeying the Mosaic Law. Jews may not boast of having a privileged relationship with God because they keep the Mosaic Law and its requirement of circumcision (Rom. 2:6–11, 17–21, 25–29, 3:21–22, 27–30).

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Paul discusses how Jew and Gentiles are united together in the body of Christ and mentions works in connection with boasting, before turning to the whole subject of circumcision and membership in Christ: "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision . . . remember that you were at that time separated from Christ. . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the Law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two . . . and might reconcile us both to God in one body. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:11–19).

Paul is probably using "works" and "boasting" here as he does in Romans, of Jews boasting before Gentiles of having privilege with God due to their keeping the Mosaic Law. He says we are not saved in that manner, but by faith—meaning faith in Christ—so no one, either Jew or Gentile, can boast of having a more privileged position with God. We are all saved on the same basis—through faith in Christ and union in his body, the Church.

The apostle then turns our attention away from works of the Mosaic Law and toward the kind of works a Christian *should* be interested in—good works: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The sense of what Paul is saying is: "God has raised up both of us—Jews and Gentiles—to sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, for we received initial salvation as a gift. We obtained it by faith in Christ (which itself is a gift from God), not by works of obedience to the Mosaic Law—so neither Jew or Gentile can boast over the other of having privilege with God. Instead, we Christians are the result of God's work, for he created us anew in the body of Christ so that we might do *good* works—the kind of works we *should be* concerned about—for God intended ahead of time for us to do them" (paraphrase of Eph. 2:6–10).

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