

St. Mark Study Guide

March 22, 2017: What is salvation, justification and merit?

In a nutshell, salvation is God making us like himself through the saving work of Jesus Christ. We need help. The modern secular world has asserted our human capacity to solve our own problems. The myth of moral progress is the idea that we can perfect ourselves through information, knowledge and technology. Human experience says that we need something more. The loss of a proper relationship to God leads to a disintegration of our self, our soul, body and psychology are falling apart, inside and out. Only God can restore us.

The Protestant Reformation ushered in new ideas about salvation. Some reformers argued in the 15th Century that human beings were totally depraved and could only be freed through the grace of God freely accepted in faith. 'Total depravity' is not the Catholic understanding. Catholics believe that our freedom is wounded by sin, not totally depraved. Recently Catholics and Lutherans have overcome much of what has separated us in the past.¹

The Church teaches that original sin, our wound inherited from past ages, is passed on by propagation not by imitation. Sin affects us like a genetic disease and works its way into our biology, brains and the structures of society. Sin is more than bad habits. We are one big dysfunctional family. If we are addicted to heroin, we don't will ourselves out of it. We need a higher power. We need an intervention. Sin is a disease that has affected the whole human family.

An awareness of the social dimension of human life is an important principle in understanding Christian morality, especially in light of the great emphasis on individualism in our society. The social aspect of what it means to be human is revealed in the natural inclination we have to seek social interaction and establish community. This awareness serves as a moral foundation for an attitude of solidarity with each other and leads to a dedication to social justice for everyone. Our Gospel commitment to Christ's Kingdom of love, justice, and mercy always includes advocating and supporting fairness for all. God calls us to form community and to correct both the symptoms and causes of injustice that rip apart the solidarity of a community. CCC

¹ Common Declaration on Justification by Catholics and Lutherans "Much progress has been made on healing the wounds of the Reformation. 500 hundred years later, Catholics and Lutherans have issued a common understanding of justification in a Joint Declaration. "The present Joint Declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations." Follow this link for more:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html

The difference between the Catholic and the non-catholic Christian world in this area can be summarized as follows. When asked about the meaning of salvation, a Catholic will say, “The Church teaches...”. When asked about salvation and non-catholic Christian will say, “I think...” Here is what the Church teaches in comparison to other ideas.

Salvation, Justification, Natural Law and Merit

There are no such things as saving excuses before God.

‘The other problem with our usual confessions is that they aren’t confessions at all, but elaborate **justifications**. “You didn’t hear how he talked to me”— meaning, “You’d have slapped that kid, too.” “She just pushes my buttons”— meaning, “You’d have cursed that woman, too.” Melissa; Keating, Anna (2016-02-23). *The Catholic Catalogue: A Field Guide to the Daily Acts That Make Up a Catholic Life* (p. 178). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Justification is not an excuse for or sins. Instead, justification refers in a theological sense to how we enter into a right relationship with God. For the Catholic, justification is through a faithful response to God’s invitation delivered through his Son. We respond by approaching Christ in faith through his Word, the sacraments and a moral life. We are called to lives of sanctity. Because of the fractured nature of the non-catholic or orthodox Christian world, it is only possible to speak in generalizations.

The Divide in Christianity over Justification

One of the major flashpoints in the 15th Century Reformation was the Lutheran and Calvinist understandings of justification. How are we made right before God. All Christians agree that we cannot justify ourselves.

- The Lutherans argued that Christ’s justification, through his meritorious sacrifice and fidelity to God, are imputed to us, freeing us to be sons and daughters of God. In effect, though we remain sinners we are justified before God through the merits of Christ. Justification or righteousness does not belong to us, but to Christ. Faith in God, *sola fide*, was the path to justification for Luther because Christ’s righteousness covered our sins. Luther was anxious to separate justification and righteousness before God from any human merit.
- John Calvin and his followers were as anxious as the Lutherans to separate salvation from any understanding of justification through human works or merits. Believers are counted righteous because of the righteousness of Christ who stands in their place and fulfills the righteousness and obedience required by God of human beings. Since individuals remain sinful after they are counted righteous through faith, Calvin argued for a ‘double justification’—
 - first of the sinner and then of the
 - works of the justified sinner, which now are counted righteous insofar as they are offered to God in and through the grace of Christ.
- Catholics have maintained, as Bishop Barron noted, that we are saved through faith that works. Faith isn’t an intellectual exercise, it requires that we do something. Faith and salvation are realized because through faith we respond to the person of Christ. Where Lutherans and Calvinists and their intellectual progeny would argue, more or less, for the total depravity of the human persons. Catholic would go back to Genesis and note that human beings were called “very

good” by God, but that our capacity for good has been seriously wounded by sin. As we respond to God in faith, God’s grace heals the wound of sin in us. For that reason, we look at our great saints as examples of human beings who through faithful response to God were redeemed, justified and transformed by faith. For Catholics justification is not only imputation of righteousness, but a transformation through the grace of God. We must change to enter heaven.

Salvation and Natural Law

“It is God who brings creation into being; thus the physical world acts according to his plan found in the physical laws of nature. He also made man and woman in his own image and likeness. Human beings, then, are also directed according to God’s created plan, written in their hearts and implanted in their human nature. “Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good. The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie” (CCC, no. 1954). We come to know it through our human reason and through its confirmation in Divine Revelation. *Both Divine revelation and natural law have their origins in God the Father.* “Through our human reason, we can come to understand the true purpose of the created order. The natural law is thus our rational apprehension of the divine plan. It expresses our human dignity and is the foundation of our basic human rights and duties. This law within us leads us to choose the good that it reveals. Its most pronounced expression is found in the Ten Commandments, described as “the privileged expression of the natural law” (CCC, no. 2070). Because the natural law is rooted in God’s plan found in human nature, it applies to all people in all places and at all times. While situations may vary greatly, the natural law is unchangeable. It abides at the core of what makes us human and thus is not affected by the flow and currents from cultural ideas and customs. While a given person, region, culture, or era of time may attempt to suppress it, the fundamental principles of the natural law never die and soon reappear, even where they were once rejected.

Salvation and Merit

The Church teaches that before God, the human person has no merit of his own. When Catholics speak of merit, we mean the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man in the work of man’s redemption through his grace.* CCC 2006-2011. We are adopted as sons of God and our merit arises through the love of God. No one can merit the initial grace that brings us to God. The charity of Christ is the source of our merits. God became man to make us like himself. It is God’s holiness present in the saint, not the saint’s holiness arising from their own wounded nature. God’s grace perfects our nature and raises it up. This is what Catholic mean by merits.

Grace and Justification

God directly assists us in living our moral life through the divine gift of grace and justification, first bestowed upon us in Baptism when we become members of the Church. We are justified—cleansed from our sins and reconciled to God—through the power of the Holy Spirit. Justification is both the Spirit’s work in bringing us forgiveness of sins and our acceptance or reception of the holiness of God, which we call sanctification through participation in divine life. Christ’s Passion merited justification for us. We receive justification in Baptism and become friends of God. We are thus conformed to the righteousness of God who justifies us. Justification’s goal is God’s glory and the glory of Christ and the gift of eternal life. It is a work of God’s mercy (cf. CCC, no. 2020).

Grace is the free and undeserved assistance God offers us so that we might respond to his call to share in his divine life and attain eternal life.

God's grace, as divinely offered gift, does not take away or restrict our freedom; rather, it perfects our freedom by helping us overcome the restricting power of sin, the true obstacle to our freedom. It is the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons. It introduces us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life.

Sanctifying grace: The divine initiative in the work of grace precedes, prepares, and elicits the free response of man. Grace responds to the deepest yearnings of human freedom, calls freedom to cooperate with it, and perfects freedom. Sanctifying grace is the gratuitous gift of his life that God makes to us; it is infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. (CCC, nos. 2021-2023)

Actual graces: In addition to speaking about sanctifying grace, we also speak of actual graces. These refer to the particular interventions God offers us to aid us in the course of the work of sanctification. We recognize that many times and in many ways God's special love is such that he offers us help to live in a way that leads to sharing his life.

Sacramental graces: Finally, there are sacramental graces, which are proper to the celebration of the Seven Sacraments, and special graces or charisms, which, while given to individuals, are meant for the common good of the Church (cf. CCC, no. 2003). All Christians generally agree that we do not save ourselves. Catholics and the Orthodox maintain the ancient tradition that sacraments are necessary to salvation. Through the sacraments, Christ operates in our world. Through the sacraments God uses the Church to cooperate in Christ's work of salvation of the human soul.

Salvation is not within our human power

The Church teaches that we are indeed blessed and gifted, but much of what we fight to achieve—while written in our hearts—still needs God's grace because of the presence of sin and our inherent human weakness. The New Law is truly Good News, for not only does God give us the moral law that leads us to salvation, but through grace we receive divine assistance to follow it. We should always take heart from the words Our Lord spoke to St. Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

THE PRECEPTS OF THE CHURCH (SEE CCC, NOS. 2041-2043)

In addition to presenting the foundations for Christian morality, the Catechism of the Catholic Church includes a section on the Precepts of the Church. These are rules set in the context of a moral life, bound to and nourished by liturgical life. The obligatory character of these positive laws, that means disciplinary laws that come from the Church as our common discipline, not divine law, are decreed by the pastoral authorities and are meant to encourage on the part of the faithful the indispensable foundations for their lives as Catholics. The precepts are as follows:

A. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Sunday, the day of

the Resurrection, should be treated differently from the other days of the week. We do that in making the day holy by attending Mass and refraining from doing unnecessary work. Holy Days of Obligation, when we celebrate special feasts of Jesus, the Blessed Mother, and the saints, should be marked in the same way.

- B. You shall confess your sins at least once a year. This obliges in particular those who are conscious of serious sin. Regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation helps to prepare us not only to receive the Eucharist but also to continue the process of conversion begun in Baptism.
- C. You shall receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season. In the United States, this extends from the First Sunday of Lent to Trinity Sunday. Because the Holy Eucharist is both the source and summit of life for all in the Church, the Church teaches that every member for his or her own good must receive Communion minimally at least once a year.
- D. You shall observe the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence. Fasting is refraining from food or drink to some degree. Abstinence is refraining from eating meat. The Church identifies specific days and times of fasting and abstinence to prepare the faithful for certain special feasts; such actions of sacrifice can also help us to grow in self-discipline.
- E. You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church. This means contributing to the support of the activities of the Church with time, talent, and financial resources, each according to their ability.

Questions for Discussion

1. As you review fundamental elements of Christian moral living, which ones gave you a new perspective on Christian moral life?
2. How can all of them become a regular part of the growth of your life in Christ and the Spirit?
3. Moral life based on the teaching of Scripture flows from God's loving plan for us. How does this correspond to your view of what the moral life is about?
4. You are called to faithful assent to the Church's teachings on faith and morals. What challenges do you experience? How do you handle them? What motivates you to be a morally good person?
5. Why is happiness a motivation to be moral?
6. What is social sin? (CCC, no. 1869)
7. What is the New Law? (CCC, no. 1965, citing Heb 8:8, 10)