

## **Letter to a Catholic** A Biblical Response to a Works-Based Gospel

A Catholic friend of my dad's sent him two Catholic apologetic writings with a letter expressing his belief in faith plus works, as requirements for all to be eternally saved. My dad asked me to respond to these documents with the truth from God's Word. Below are six of the key points I sent my dad, which he sent with his own cover letter in response. The name of my dad's Catholic friend has been changed to protect him and his privacy. This letter is provided as I'm frequently asked to clarify the meaning of **James 2** and other passages that sound works-based and contrary to Scriptures' faith-based Gospel. I hope these six key points assist you to better understand and reply to all false, man-made, and works-based religions or cults.

Dad,

I'm so proud of you for lovingly contending for the faith. It sounds like Sam knows that about you and believes both of you and he are saved. Nice in one way, horrible in another. Sam says he trusts in Jesus, plus his works (trusting in the Catholic Church, his infant baptism, his sacrament of confirmation, etc.). He has provided three of the greatest attempts by Catholics and all other religions and cults that try to earn by works favor with a perfect God, to take away sins that they (we all) have done. Unfortunately, Sam is Scripturally wrong. I'll summarize the points the Catholics make in three of their writings to follow.

Ron

===== 1. Misunderstanding Scripture, Misunderstands the Gospel =====  
Let's start with the first paragraph of the Catholic writing "**Faith Alone?**" It starts well with part of a verse that states the Biblical position on justification (*Gr:dikaioo- render (show or regard) just or innocent, free, justify, be righteous*). However, it only quotes part of it and leaves out the first part (in red) that clearly refutes the position it wants to dispute. The whole verse is as follows. **Gal. 2:16**--"**Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.**" First, this verse clearly says that a person is NOT justified (legally regarded righteous) by keeping the WORKS of the law, but by the FAITH of Jesus Christ. They left that part of the verse off. The verse and their partial quote goes on to say that even the Apostles (including Paul) BELIEVED in Jesus Christ, for the purpose (*Gr:hina-"that;" denotes the purpose or result*) the Disciples (including Paul) would be legally regarded righteous by FAITH in Christ, and NOT by WORKS of the law;

(*Gr:hoti*-*"because"*) by the WORKS of the law no flesh or human being will be justified (legally regarded righteous). It is shocking that any intellectually honest person could read this verse alone (out of the hundreds that say eternal life is by grace through faith, not of any works), and believe that someone needs to do any WORKS to be eternally saved. I must throw in one more verse which is also crystal clear.

**Rom. 11:6**--"**And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise, grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise, work is no more work.**" God could NOT say it any clearer. It is either by grace (giving us something we do not deserve, merit or work for), or by us working (to gain something we do not have by our own effort). God repeats that otherwise, grace is not grace. But if we are eternally saved by works, then we are not saved by grace, otherwise, work is not work. However, grace is grace, and works are works. Eternal salvation is either by grace (through faith), or by works (through measuring up to God's perfection or revealed law). It is one paradigm or the other (works or grace). Grace is contrary to works. It is either works or grace, it cannot be both. Since none of us can measure up to a perfect holy God, God gifts us eternal life when we receive His Son Jesus.

But this Catholic article then quotes part of **James 2:26**--"**faith without works is dead.**" They then make a classic hermeneutical (method of interpretation) mistake. They do it, trying to do something good, to reconcile what they think are two contradictory Biblical statements. The problem with that is that God is truth, Jesus is truth, God's Word is truth (**John 3:33; 14:6; 17:17**). God and His Word does NOT, will NOT, and can NOT lie. It NEVER contradicts itself. It never has and never will. It clearly does NOT say the opposite of any other Scripture verse. So, it does NOT do that here. Eternal salvation is "**NOT by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us...**" (**Titus 3:5**). God could not be any clearer. "**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved**" (**Acts 16:31**). "**Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life**" (**John 6:47**). There are no caveats. There are no commas. They all end with periods. God does NOT stutter, "**believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved.**" Nothing additional, no works, no law, only grace received by faith in what Jesus' work finished.

Ok, that is clear, crystal clear. So, what does **James 2:26** mean when he says, "**faith without works is dead**?" I get excited to expound what the inspired half-brother of Jesus writes but will try to explain it concisely. The theme of the Book of James is true, living, faith. He begins the first chapter, verse 3, discussing "**the trying of your faith**," or testing of your faith, to

demonstrate its genuineness. He says in **1:8**, "**A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.**" In other words, do not go back and forth in your thinking or what you believe, or you will be inconsistent and unstable in everything you do (in all your works). He goes on in **1:22-27**, to not deceive yourself about the truth of your faith by just hearing God's Word. He says believers obey God's Word (if they truly believe God designed them and wants to bless their obedience on earth and will reward them when they get to heaven). He says a person's religion is meaningless and vain if he sees the truth of God's Word and deceives himself and does not obey God's Word.

In **2:10**, God says, "**For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.**" This clearly shows that no one can do enough good works to be perfect. In fact, if you try, you are only pridefully (the heart of all sin and unbelief) demonstrating you have broken the entire law; and are "**guilty of all.**" Anyone depending on their works, only proves their guilt, they do not establish their righteousness. It spits on God's grace, for a person to attempt to work for something which they claim to believe God graciously already gave them (eternal life to them by faith in Christ's finished work of His death, burial, and resurrection in their place). You can NEVER undo a sin, or be perfect enough to save yourself, or keep yourself saved, that is why Jesus lived the perfect life and took your death upon Himself.

So, the first tough verse on the surface is **2:14**--"**What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?**" James is talking to believers ("**brethren**," and then he says if a person ("**a man**") says he has faith, but does not do anything consistent with what he says he believes, can that type of "**faith save him?**" In the Greek this is a *Second-Class Condition* (which shows the answer is clearly "*contrary-to-fact*" or "*no*"). So, if a person just says he has faith, then lives completely contrary to what he says he believes, that type of faith (is not true living faith), and clearly does not save that person on earth or eternally. This is why James switches from "**brethren**" or brothers to a hypothetical person ("**a man**") who clearly does NOT have faith. That is why **James 2:18** (the key verse of the Book) says "**show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.**" You cannot show someone your faith without demonstrating that faith to be alive by what you do or the way you live your life. Your works do not eternally save you; they do demonstrate you are not a hypocrite, save you from lots of earthly problems, and probably indicate that you are eternally saved. So, that lays the groundwork showing the context of **James 2:26**, "**so, faith without works is dead.**" A faith that does not live consistent with what it says it believes, probably does not believe what it says it believes. A faith that does not live consistent with what it says it believes, is not living; it is

dead, it is useless. It NEVER says that you must do works to be eternally saved or stay eternally saved. In fact, the Bible says the opposite. "***It is not by works of righteousness...***" (***Titus 3:5***). "***For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast***" (***Eph. 2:8-9***). Should a person trust and obey God? Of course, if they want to be blessed or saved in this life. Do they have to do any works or keep any law to earn or keep eternal life? Of course not.

I believe many Catholics have good motives (like Sam does) but has grown up under or been told a false interpretation, that leads to a false gospel. This false gospel is not based on what God's states is how a person may be eternally saved but is based on what the Catholic church states. This is so dangerous as the Catholic church has changed their message over the centuries, and various Catholic priests even state different numbers of Catholic Sacraments (additional works) are necessary to be eternally saved.

===== 2. Properly Interpreting Scripture =====  
His second paragraph begins by agreeing with Scripture that we "***are saved by grace through faith***" and "***not by works***" (***Eph. 2:8-9***). But then as he does not understand the meaning of a few other Scriptures, so misinterprets them again to believe that God and His Word can contradict Himself, which can NOT and NEVER will. He says, "it is not enough ***to say***, 'I believe,' and then do nothing (which he means do no works). He also supports this position with ***Mat. 7:11***, "***Not everyone who says Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but rather he who does the will of my Father.***" We agree (as shown in ***James 2:14*** above) that anyone can lie and say they believe something and truly NOT believe, and NEVER demonstrate that faith by their works is consistent with what they say they believe. That is not "***works to be eternally saved***," but "***works consistent now that they have been eternally saved.***" Also, ***John 6:40*** clearly says what God's will is, "***And this is the will of Him that sent Me, that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on Him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.***" God's will is that all will believe Jesus and gain everlasting life. Yes, His will (after a person is eternally saved) is to live a life of trust and obedience to God, so they do NOT get spanked and receive negative earthly consequences of their sin. He wants us to live above sin. Also, God wants believers to be a good testimony to others that God is good, His gospel is good news, it works, and God has a better plan for their lives than all without Christ do.

===== 3. False Assumptions, Partial Truths =====

His third paragraph continues that faulty contradictory hermeneutic saying, "*it must be assumed that works are indeed a necessary component of one's faith.*" We would agree that if a person believes they will live consistently with that belief. Stated a little differently, we agree that once a person is eternally saved by faith, they have received and were sealed by the Spirit of God (**Eph. 1:13**), they have become a new creation (**2Co. 5:17**), etc. so they will live differently (do good works) because of being eternally saved. After being eternally saved, in fact, is the first time they have the Spirit and ability to do good works. However, the Catholic position teaches that a person is eternally saved by faith and works. And that is contrary to Scripture as demonstrated in many verses above. This paragraph again makes the "*lip service only, by just saying 'I believe'*" argument true and even quotes **Mat. 15:8** stating a generation of unbelievers "***honors Me with their lips, while their heart is far from Me.***" Again, this lying about what a person really believes demonstrates by contradictory actions or works that they are really unbelievers. This was also clearly shown in the **James 2:14** explanation above.

===== 4. God's Law =====

The fourth paragraph says there is "*apparently a very clear distinction between works of the law and doing good deeds as a result of your faith.*" Every Bible believing person agrees that if a person believes God's promise that by faith in what Jesus did alone on the cross, they are eternally saved by Jesus' works, and not their works, they are eternally saved. As a result of being eternally saved by faith, they will live or work differently, consistently living a life of trusting and obeying God, not to be eternally saved, but because they have been. When they were eternally saved, they were also given the power to overcome sin in their life by God's Holy Spirit.

However, the Catholic "*Faith Alone*" paper is trying to build an argument that there are different types of works, so they can try to make an unrelated argument that works of the law are not required to be eternally saved, but some other type(s) of works are required to be eternally saved. Prior to that faulty leap which is contrary to many verses in God's Word, their paper even quotes **Rom. 3:20**, "***Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.***" This verse is crystal clear. No works, justify no one, before God. In fact, God adds that His law was given to show men we all are sinners, that we need a Savior. A Savior Who is able to not sin, live righteously, then pay the death our sin deserves. This Savior is not us, it is only Jesus, the virgin-born God-man. We must realize we are sinners, that we all have broken God's law,

and that we can only believe God's promise that if we trust in Jesus, Jesus Himself provides eternal salvation from the consequences of all our sin.

Catholics would like to say that keeping the law does not eternally save, but keeping some other works of some other moral law or standard does. This other law or works is outside of Scripture. They believe this other law is what the Catholic church adds or what they call Sacraments are also required to be eternally saved. This is just blatantly contrary to so many Scriptures. No law can save, all laws only condemn. The one law in the Garden was broken. The 10 Commandments were broken. The additional 611 or 613 laws (ceremonial, sacrificial, and moral) have all been broken. All the additional rules or laws that any religion adds make our condition even worst and more dependent on a needed Savior. There is no law or works man can keep or ever has kept. This is why God's solution was to take on human flesh, to live a perfect life, to die in our place, to pay for the eternal consequences of our sin. Once we have "**received Him**" by faith we are eternally saved, "**we have eternal life,**" "**And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish,**" because of what God did for us, simply received by grace through faith (cf. **John 1:12; 3:16; 10:28**).

===== 5. God's Word Alone =====

The fifth paragraph says Martin Luther changed the understanding of the Bible and threw out books of the Bible trying to "*fit his own particular theology...rather than the way it was taught for over 1100 years.*" This deception is what all false religions and cults must do. They must use a different book and claim theirs is the only Word of God, or add, delete, edit, or deceptively question what God's Word clearly states. But their statement is not true. Martin Luther actually said that the Catholic church had perverted the interpretation of God's Word. Two of his 95 theses that he nailed to a famous Catholic church (the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany) in Latin said that **Scripture alone is God's Word and authority** ("*Sola Scriptura*"), and that men are only **saved by grace through faith alone** ("*Sola Gratia*" and "*Sola Fide*").

And by the way, Luther's Protestant Reformation was in 1517, and the Catholic church in response to the Reformation said Martin Luther was a heretic. At the Council of Trent (1546, 29 years after the Reformation), Catholics added the Apocryphal books to their Catholic Bible. Additionally, many prominent Catholics disagreed (Jerome, etc.) that the Apocrypha should be added to the Bible. The Jewish OT canon rejects the Apocrypha. Jews rejected the Apocryphal books as not being Scripture when they were written and still do today. The early church and Catholics rejected it until 1546 (for 1,451 years Catholics rejected them, since the Scriptural canon

had been completed). All protestants (most Christians) reject it. Neither the Apostles nor Jesus quoted from them or claimed Apocryphal books were Scripture. They contradict Scripture. Their writers did not have miraculous confirmation or Divine fingerprints like the rest of Scripture and the truly Divinely-inspired miracle-attested Prophets and Apostles. They are pretty good history books primarily of what occurred between the OT and NTs, but they are not Scripture. The Apocryphal books have errors. In fact, they do not even claim to be Scripture. One of these Apocryphal books, **II Maccabees 15:38** is an honest enough commentary to say that "*if it is poorly done and mediocre, that was the best I could do.*" Clearly this Apocryphal writer himself was not claiming his historical commentary was a Divinely inspired, inerrant, authoritative part of the Word of the Living God.

Compare that with **Gal. 1:8-9**, "**8-But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9-As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.**" God is clear about the gospel being "**by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is a gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph. 2:8-9). Rev. 22:18-19** gives such a strong warning against adding to or deleting anything from Scripture within the last four verses of the Bible. "**18-For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this Book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: 19-And if any man shall take away from the words of the Book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the Book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this Book.**" It also shocks me that they quote **Rom. 3:28**, "**Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.**" However, to cast doubt on God's truly inspired inerrant Word, they also claim in this paragraph that when Martin Luther translated **Rom. 3:28** into German he added the word "*alone*" after the word "**faith.**" You can find errors in every Christian's words, but it is interesting they chose this one, when the Catholic church adds entire books in their Bible, and even put Papal words and commentaries on par with God's Holy Scripture. Also, this verse could not be clearer where God states that a person is saved or "**justified by faith.**" The opposite of what Catholics are proposing. It also could not be clearer that it emphatically states that a person is saved apart from or "**without the deeds of the law.**" So, clearly the context means that a person is eternally saved by "*faith alone,*" and that is why Martin Luther translated it that way, especially countering the Catholic "*faith plus works*" position. Now, I do prefer a word-for-word literal translation, not like many modern translations or paraphrases today.

===== 6. God's Word Alone =====

In paragraph six, they continue this line of thinking saying, "One has to wonder about the wisdom of changing the interpretation of the divinely inspired Word of God to fit your own theology." This is unfortunately what the Catholic dogma does. It is wrong to say the Bible contradicts itself. This only means you just do not understand what at least one of the verses states. They quote **James 2:24**. "**Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.**" He says no other verse uses "**faith only**" or "**faith alone**," but this one. From a two-word quote standpoint that is true, but from the clear meaning of many phrases in many verses, that could not be farther from the truth (as just shown above). See the first paragraph explaining the context and meaning.

Suffice it to say, **James 2:24** shows how men know what you believe, and "**justify**" or declare you righteous by your righteous actions or works. In fact, **James 2:21-23** discusses Abraham being justified by God only by believing God prior as James quotes from **Gen. 15:6**; and Abraham was justified [by men: Isaac, family, friends, everyone hearing about or reading the **Gen. 22:9-12** subsequent account], where Abraham demonstrated his incredibly strong faith, by trusting God's promise that from his son Isaac would come the Savior. James reminds us that Abraham "**believed God**" so much that he was willing to put to death his only son on the same mount where God would one day put His own Son [Jesus] to death for us all. The context of James is the testing or trying of our faith, demonstrating whether it is true, living, dynamic, and life changing. In what has been called "*the Great Faith Chapter*," **Heb. 11**, God states this of Abraham's tested faith in **Heb 11:17-19**. "**17-By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18-Of whom it was said, 'That in Isaac shall thy seed be called:'** 19-**Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.**" Wow, yes, Abraham was declared a man of faith, a righteous man. God knew and declared before any of Abraham's actions or works. Everyone else clearly sees Abraham's faith, demonstrated later, when he trusted and obeyed God to even be willing to put his own son to death. Wow, what faith. Wow, what works. May our works demonstrate our faith to ourselves and others in a manner worthy of the great gift of eternal life. People are eternally justified by faith alone by God, who knows our heart. People are everyday justified or declared Christians or believers by their love, by their actions, by their deeds to all men and angels (when they see that faith lived out in action).