

Session Four

Justification

Abide

The Eucharist, Grace, and Staying in Christ

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group hears Romans 3 and 4 at full strength, discovers Romans 2 sitting directly in front of it, and learns to state the Catholic position in a way that concedes everything Scripture actually says about grace.

Catholic Touchstone. Catholics believe in salvation by grace alone. Nothing we do before grace earns anything, nothing we do apart from grace merits anything, and the Church condemned the contrary view at a council in 529, a thousand years before anyone nailed anything to a door.

This is the hardest session in either book, and the temptation is to rush past the objection to the answer. Do the opposite. If your group does not feel the force of Romans 3 tonight, they will be defenceless the first time someone reads it to them with conviction.

What You Need to Know

Start by conceding, because the concessions are enormous

A Catholic can say all of the following without qualification, and should say them first. We are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. No one is justified by works of the law. By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast. If it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works.

Every one of those is Scripture and every one is Catholic teaching. If your people cannot say them warmly and without hedging, they have not understood their own faith, and they will sound evasive in every conversation they have.

The Second Council of Orange in 529 condemned the view that anyone can take the first step toward God by natural powers, and taught that even the beginning of faith is the work of grace. The Church settled this question against works-righteousness long before the Reformation raised it.

What is actually in dispute

Not grace against works. The real question is narrower and more interesting: when God justifies a sinner, does anything happen inside him, and does that inward reality count for anything afterward. The Catholic answer is yes to both, and the reason is Session Three. Adoption is real, so what grace produces in the adopted is real.

Two exegetical notes to hold carefully

First, the phrase works of the law. In the immediate argument of Romans 3, Paul moves from no one being justified by works of the law directly to asking whether God is the God of Jews only, and answering

that he is God of Gentiles also. Many scholars, Catholic and Protestant, have argued from this that the phrase concerns the Mosaic law and especially its boundary markers rather than good deeds in general. Others contest that reading vigorously. Present it as a serious line of interpretation, not as settled, and do not build the session on it.

Second, and much safer: read Ephesians 2:10. The famous not because of works in verse 9 is followed immediately by the statement that we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. The passage that excludes works as a cause names them as the purpose in the very next breath.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” **Genesis 15:6**

This is the verse Paul builds Romans 4 on, and it is the right verse to build on. Abraham has done nothing to earn the promise. He believes, and it is reckoned. Hold this carefully tonight; Session Five returns to Abraham and finds that the story of that reckoning does not end in Genesis 15.

Note also Ezekiel 36:26-27, where God promises a new heart and a new spirit, and says he will cause his people to walk in his statutes. The promise is not only pardon but an interior change that produces obedience. That is the Old Testament shape of what the Church calls justification.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Clement of Rome

Letter to the Corinthians, chs. 32-33 (summary)

Writing around the year 96, Clement says that we are not justified through ourselves, nor through our own wisdom or piety or works, but through faith, by which God has justified all men from the beginning.

And then, without pausing, he asks whether we should therefore abandon good works, and answers emphatically that we must not, urging his readers to be eager for every good work. One writer, one paragraph, both halves held together. He evidently did not experience them as a contradiction.

Summary of his argument across those chapters; presented without a verse-level locus.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

On Grace and Free Will (summary)

Augustine teaches that grace precedes every good movement of the will, that God works in us both to will and to do, and that our freedom is not destroyed by grace but healed and enabled by it.

He is the reason the Church has never been able to be Pelagian. Any Catholic accused of works-righteousness should be able to name him within ten seconds.

Summary of the argument of that work; no chapter number printed.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Homilies on Romans (summary)

Preaching through Romans, Chrysostom insists that the sinner is justified by faith apart from anything he brought, and that this is precisely why the justified must now live differently, since so great a gift

makes indifference monstrous.

His rhetorical move is worth stealing. He does not use grace to lower the stakes of the moral life; he uses it to raise them.

Summary of the homily series; no homily number printed.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1987-1995 on justification, with 1989 stating that it is not only remission of sins but sanctification and renewal of the interior man.
- CCC 1996 and 2001: grace is the free and undeserved help of God, and the initiative belongs to God always.
- CCC 2007-2011 on merit. CCC 2007: with regard to God there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man, because between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality and we have received everything from him. Read 2008 aloud: our merit before God arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate us with the work of his grace.
- CCC 2010 states that no one can merit the initial grace of conversion. Nobody.

Thread Watch

Leader only.

- THREAD A, the Abiding Question. Tonight it comes near the surface but must not break it. What does it take to stay is the wrong question if nothing real has been given. Session Three established that something real was given; tonight establishes that receiving it was pure gift.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. One session to go. Some participants will realise tonight that they wrote something they now dislike. Do not let anyone open an envelope early.
- THREAD C, Received and Delivered. Everything tonight is received. Say the word when it fits.

Session Goals

1. Every participant can state the Catholic affirmation of salvation by grace warmly and without hedging.
2. Every participant can name the Second Council of Orange and say what it condemned.
3. The group discovers Romans 2:6-13 and Ephesians 2:10, both of which sit beside the famous verses and are rarely read with them.
4. Every participant can state what is actually in dispute, in one sentence, without caricature.
5. Nobody leaves able to be accused fairly of believing we earn heaven.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 10 minutes.
- The concessions, question 3: 15 minutes. Do not shorten this.
- The steelman and question 4: 30 minutes.
- The Romans 2 and Ephesians 2:10 discoveries, questions 5 and 6: 22 minutes.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

If you are running short: cut the works of the law material entirely; it is contested and the session is stronger without it. Never cut the concessions.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a

shorter version in the participant's own words.

"Catholics teach you earn your way to heaven."

Deny it flatly and then quote your own side. CCC 2010 says no one can merit the initial grace of conversion. CCC 2007 says that with regard to God there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man, and CCC 2008 says that whatever merit we have arises from God's free choice to associate us with the work of his grace.

Then hand them the Council of Orange. The Church condemned the position they are attributing to her in 529.

"Then why do Catholics talk about merit at all?"

Because Scripture does. Our Lord promises reward repeatedly and Paul speaks of a crown. The Church's account of merit is an attempt to hold that language without making God a debtor.

Use St. Augustine's formulation from Session Three: when God crowns our merits he crowns his own gifts.

"Romans 4 says Abraham was justified apart from works. Full stop."

Agree with the verse. Then say that Session Five takes up what James does with the same Abraham, and that you would rather do it properly next week than badly now.

Resisting the urge to answer immediately is itself a teaching moment for the room.

"Trent anathematized justification by faith."

Be precise or do not engage. Trent condemned specific formulations, in context, and its canons are aimed at positions as the council understood them.

The honest and useful fact is that in 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation jointly declared a shared understanding of justification by grace through faith, and stated that the sixteenth-century condemnations do not apply to the teaching set out in that document. Note also, in the same breath, that the declaration did not resolve every difference. Both halves.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, everything we have is a gift, including the desire to be here. Keep us from defending ourselves tonight when we should be thanking you. Amen.

Win

1. Have you ever been given something so large that you felt uncomfortable? What did you want to do about it?
2. Have you ever been accused of believing something you do not believe?

Build

THE FLOOR If a participant remembers one thing tonight, it is this: we are saved by grace, as a gift, and no Catholic should ever hedge that sentence.

Read aloud: Romans 3:21-28, then Ephesians 2:8-9.

3. How much of that can a Catholic say without qualification?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

All of it. Justified by his grace as a gift. Not by works of the law. By grace you have been saved through faith, not your own doing, the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast.

Have someone say those sentences out loud as their own. Some people in the room will find that surprisingly difficult, and noticing that is part of the session.

Then give them the Council of Orange, 529: the Church condemned the idea that a person can make the first move toward God under his own power, and taught that even the beginning of faith is grace.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read in full, slowly, and do not rush to the next question. Let there be silence afterward.

The strongest form of the objection.

Paul builds the argument with enormous care and then closes every door. All have sinned. No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law. They are justified by his grace as a gift. And then he asks the question himself: what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? Not on the principle of works, but on the principle of faith.

Then he goes to Abraham, and picks the moment before the covenant of circumcision and before the sacrifice of Isaac, a moment when Abraham had nothing whatever to present as a claim on the promise. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And Paul draws out the accounting: to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due, while to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Note who is justified in that sentence. The ungodly. Not the improved, not the cooperating, not the sacramentally maintained. And note what happens if anything of ours is added: if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace. The moment you make

room for our contribution, however small and however carefully described, you have made the gift into a wage and Paul has already told you what that costs.

4. What in that must a Catholic simply grant? And where exactly is the disagreement?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant all of it. Every sentence in that steelman is either Scripture or a fair restatement of Scripture, and there is no Catholic answer that begins by softening it. Say so plainly to the room before you go further.

The disagreement is not about whether grace is unearned. It is about what grace does in the act of justifying. Both sides agree God gives freely, and both sides agree God really changes the people he saves. The classic Protestant account holds that the righteousness by which we are justified is Christ's own, credited to us, with genuine and necessary renewal following as its fruit. The Catholic account holds that what God gives actually makes the person a son, so that the righteousness is truly his by gift and the renewal belongs to the justifying act itself rather than only to its aftermath.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 is the Old Testament shape of the Catholic answer: a new heart, a new spirit, and God causing his people to walk in his statutes. The change is God's work and it is a real change.

And notice what the objection's own logic requires. If any real inward transformation turns grace into wages, then sanctification itself becomes a threat to the gospel, which nobody believes. Everyone holds that God changes people. The dispute is about whether that change is part of justification or only its consequence.

Land honestly: this is a genuine disagreement, it is old, and serious Christians hold both. We are not going to dissolve it tonight, and a Catholic who claims it dissolves easily is not paying attention.

Live discovery. Most of the room has read Romans 3 many times. Ask them to turn back one page and read Romans 2:6-13 aloud, which almost nobody reads alongside it.

5. What does Paul say there, and how do you hold it together with chapter 3?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

That God will render to every man according to his works, eternal life to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honour, and that it is not the hearers of the law but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Do not resolve this too quickly and do not let anyone explain it away. The same author, twenty verses apart, says both things. Any reading that has to silence one of them is doing something wrong.

The Catholic reading holds them by saying that the works in chapter 2 are the fruit of grace already given, not a way of earning it. Whether that satisfies is exactly what the two traditions dispute.

6. Now read Ephesians 2:10, the verse immediately after the one everyone quotes.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The passage that excludes works as a cause names them as the purpose one sentence later, and even the works are prepared by God. That is the Catholic position on grace and works in a single verse, and it belongs to everyone. It does not by itself settle tonight's narrower question about what justification does inside a person; the wider scriptural and doctrinal case carries that.

DIG DEEPER: What the Joint Declaration did and did not do

In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a common statement on justification, affirming a shared understanding that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ, and declaring that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching presented there.

It did not resolve every difference and it did not end the conversation. Represent it in both directions or do not raise it at all.

Send

7. Is there any part of you that wants to have contributed something? Be honest.
8. What would change this week if you took Ephesians 2:8 completely at face value?

Live It This Week

- Read Romans 2, 3, and 4 in one sitting, in order, without commentary.
- Say Ephesians 2:8-9 out loud once a day as a statement about yourself.
- Learn what the Second Council of Orange condemned.
- Keep praying for your person by name.

Closing Prayer

Father, we did not start this and we cannot finish it. Thank you for a gift we could not have earned and would not have thought to ask for. Keep us from ever taking credit. Amen.

Memory Verse

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." **Ephesians 2:8**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Genesis 15:6, Abraham believed and it was reckoned
- Ezekiel 36:26-27, a new heart and a new spirit
- Romans 3:21-28, justified by grace as a gift (core text and steelman)
- Romans 4:1-8, to one who does not work but trusts
- Romans 2:6-13, the doers of the law will be justified (live discovery)
- Ephesians 2:8-9, memory verse at v. 8
- Ephesians 2:10, created for good works
- Romans 11:6, if by grace, no longer on the basis of works
- Galatians 2:16, not justified by works of the law
- Titus 3:5, not because of deeds done in righteousness

Catechism: CCC 1987-1995, 1996, 2001, 2007-2011.

Patristic and conciliar: St. Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians chs. 32-33. St. Augustine, On Grace and Free Will. St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans. Second Council of Orange, 529.