

The Roman Catholic Economy of Grace

In as we begin our study of the Roman Catholic economy of grace, we need to review two claims of Roman Catholic Church. The first is that the church "never changes anything, it never diminishes anything, never adds anything" to the "truth" is that she has been given. The second is that the "truths" that she teaches are accordance with "the unanimous consent of the fathers". As we found when we were discussing apostolic succession, these claims are simply untrue. As we discuss grace, we will compare the RCC dogma with scripture. This will show these claims to be untrue and contrary to the Bible. Also, we will note examples where failure to follow proper rules of interpretation would allow the RCC position to be accepted. When proper methods are used, the RCC position evaporates.

If there were only one lesson to study, this one would be it. The forgiveness of Christ is far greater than anything we can imagine. The Catholic Church acts in a manner to make God be less than He truly is. They teach a different gospel than the apostles taught and that we should understand. Without further ado, allow us to explore the good news.

The first issue which must be addressed is a very simple one. As Paul says in Romans, all of us have sinned. This means that all of us are subject to the penalty for sin, which his death. In order for the penalty for sin to be removed from us there must be the death of another. Hebrews states that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins". The writer of Hebrews then goes on to point out that Christ was the one sacrifice which removes the sins of everyone. Verse 28 of chapter 9 states that Jesus bore our sins at the Cross and will return without bearing any sins. This is a reflection of the Levitical sanctuary service wherein the sins of a penitent sinner were transferred to the sacrificial animal which then died as payment for the sins. Jesus was the sacrifice for all of the world, and bore all our sins. When He returns in glory, there will no longer be any sin for Him to bear.

Colossians 2:13-14 points out that Jesus took to the Cross our death penalty. The Greek expression which is translated "The handwriting of ordinances that were against us" makes specific reference to judicial pronouncements of guilt. When Jesus nailed our death sentence to the cross, He brought life back to a world dead in sin. This language is very powerful and specific. We must avoid allowing false interpretations to remove the glory of the gospel from Paul's statement.

The RCC attempts to apply the gospel's forgiveness through its own institutions, rather than through Christ. It has established the "Sacrament of Penance", which is supposed to be a "channel" through which the grace of forgiveness is applied to the sinner. In this sacrament, the penitent confesses his sin to a human priest, in the "Auricular Confession". The priest "absolves", or sets the sinner loose from his sins. But the RCC has determined that there must be punishments after the sin is forgiven. This is alleged to be required by God. In order to "satisfy" these requirement, the sinner is assigned a penance. When the penance has been completed, an "indulgence" is created which then acts as a receipt for payment of the penance. When all this is completed, the sinner, who "fell from grace" by sinning is "restored" to a state of grace.

The first consequence of this schema is that anyone who sins is immediately removed from friendship with God (grace). He cannot return to grace until everything has been paid. This raises the question: "Is God ever not our friend (Q4)?" Paul makes it very clear (Rom 5:8) that "while we were yet sinners" Christ died for us, and that nothing can remove us from His love (Rom 8:38-39). This is a far cry from the RCC dogma. Peter (2 Peter 3:9) emphasizes that God is not willing for anyone to perish. He wants ALL of us in the kingdom. Even after punishments (Psalm 106:40-46), God returns to assist His people in their time of distress. God, because of His great love for us will not allow us to rest in sin, but corrects us in order to bring us back into the path of righteousness (Jer 46:28, Rev 3:19). He is always our friend. We can remove ourselves from grace by acts of willful rejection, but even if we sin, our confession (1 John 1:9) and repentance keeps us in His grace.

The Lord makes an exclusive claim to the authority to forgive sin (Ex 34:6-7, Is 43:25). He rejects the idea that any other party has this authority (Acts 4:12). The RCC insists that this is not true, since the apostles were granted the authority to forgive sin (John 20:22-23). Since this is a distinctive RCC belief, we should look at it in detail.

John 20 gives us the scene of Jesus' appearance in the upper room after the resurrection. Jesus commands the disciples to go to preach (v 21), receive the Holy Spirit (v 22), and then delegates the power to forgive sins (v 23). We may understand this delegation of authority as being a result of the apostles being individually chosen by God incarnate. There can be no question of their authority, which is

God's authority exercised at His pleasure. The RCC insists that this authority has been passed down in an "unbroken chain of succession" to the present-day church. As we studied in apostolic succession (#4), there is no evidence to support this claim, and much to contradict it. But the RCC points to 2 Cor 5:18-20 for support.

¹⁸ Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

This is just one passage where we must be very careful in our exegesis. The RCC claims that since God reconciled us to Him by the sacrifice of the cross (v 18), the ministry of reconciliation is the same ministry that Christ had, with all the same authority. We cannot argue here that this ministry was not passed on, since the "us" in this passage refers to all Christians. Even so, we cannot accept the conclusion of the RCC. The "ministry of reconciliation" (v 18) is repeated as the "word of reconciliation" (v19). Paul concludes in v 20 that the ministry is to be "ambassadors for Christ". This gives a very different understanding than the RCC would like. Rather than granting special powers, the ministry of reconciliation extends responsibility, calling us to ministry, not authority. There is no power to forgive sins in this text.

The claim to be empowered to forgive sin, whether couched as a personal authority or as acting under the Holy Spirit, is nothing less than claiming to have the power of God. As the RCC rightly states, "to pardon a single sin requires all the omnipotence of God." Alphonsus de Liguori, "Dignity and Duties of the Priest", 1927 (bearing the Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur of the Catholic Church)

"Bishops and priests being, as they are, God's interpreters and ambassadors, empowered in His name to teach mankind the divine law and the rules of conduct, and holding, as they do, His place on earth, it is evident that no nobler function than theirs can be imagined. Justly, therefore, are they called not only Angels, but even gods, because of the fact that they exercise in our midst the power and prerogatives of the immortal God.

In all ages, priests have been held in the highest honor; yet the priests of the New Testament far exceed all others. For the power of consecrating and offering the body and blood of our Lord and of forgiving sins, which has been conferred on them, not only has nothing equal or like it on earth, but even surpasses human reason and understanding." (Catechism of the Council of Trent)

The RCC claim is therefore blasphemy (Q6, Matt 9:2-3, John 10:33). This reminds us of Paul's exhortation in 2 Thess 2:3-4 to be aware of the "man of lawlessness" who in the end times will "exalt himself" and "display himself as being God".

The RCC makes a great point of dividing sins into two classes: mortal and venial. In essence, mortal sins, if unforgiven, prevent the sinner from having any hope of heaven. Venial sins, on the other hand, can be purged, even after death, by passing through the wash and rinse cycles of "Purgatory". After that, the sinner is clean and can enter heaven. If one is not firmly anchored in scripture, this sort of doctrine might seem reasonable. After all, certain legal offenses are more detestable than others. No one spends much effort chastising the person who broke the speed limit, while the drunk driver who kills another motorist has much to fear. Since we regard offenses differently, it is logical to apply the analogy to sins. But God does not make such a division.

John tells us (1 John 3:4) that "sin is transgression of the law". Since the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), it does not matter what your sin is, unless it is forgiven, you will die! The fact that Judas had a "greater sin" (John 19:11), and that those who rejected Christ after seeing His miracles would have a fate worse than Tyre and Sidon or Sodom in the judgment day (Matt 11:20-24, cf Is 23) does not change the fact that the end of those sinners would be death. It does indicate that the punishment prior to death might be greater (see Luke 12:48), but the ultimate outcome is not in doubt. James (James 2:10) emphasizes this by pointing out that breaking any part of the law is the same as breaking all of it.

There is a division in the law which points out a sin which cannot be forgiven. Jesus tells us that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31) is unforgivable. This is almost certainly the sin John had in mind when he referred to a sin "leading to death" (1 John 5:16). When the RCC claims its divine powers, this certainly appears to be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. When we studied apostolic succession, we

found that the Holy Spirit is Christ's "vicar" on earth, a position claimed by the RCC. While we will leave the final adjudication to God, such blasphemy certainly seems to qualify as being unforgivable.

The distinction between mortal and venial sins is different from either issues of greater punishment or unforgivability. The RCC insists that these sins are different in their punishments after forgiveness. Curiously, the more severe offense does not require any penance, while the lesser offense does. Fortunately, when God forgives a sin, unlike the RCC, it no longer requires any further punishment. That debt was paid at the cross.

To support its unscriptural schema, the RCC falls back on Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 3. In this passage, Paul refers to works built on Christ. This is crucial. These works may be of "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or stubble." He goes on to say that in the end, the works of precious materials will remain, but those of combustible materials will be burned away. The RCC declares that the burned up works are venial sins, which will lead to "loss" for the individual. We must consider the consequences of this theory.

If "wood, hay, and stubble" are sinful works built upon Christ's foundation, that means that Christ can be sinful. This is, of course, nonsense. It is impossible to build sinful works on a sinless foundation. The works must all be good in character in order to be built on the foundation of Jesus. All that can properly be said is that the works of wood, hay and stubble are of lesser value than the precious ones.

We should note that this metaphor can readily be seen to be of the "black or white" verbal style used by Jesus when he said that you can't love Him without hating your parents (Luke 14:26). The emphasis is that we should work for things of greater eternal value. At the final judgment day, Jesus will reveal every person's motives (1 Cor 4:5). Those works which were done with less than a pure devotion to Him will be exposed. Only works done out of total love for and obedience to Christ will survive. At that time we will hear praise from Him in the form of "Well done, my good and faithful servant." (Matt 25:21,23)

When Paul describes the consequences of sin (Q9), there is only one possible outcome: death. Those who come to the end while still in their sins will die. While he does not discuss death by fire as do Peter and John, it is that final end that he has in mind. There is no difference between types of sin. The ultimate penalty remains the same. James refuses to modify this understanding when he points out that any sin is a violation of the entire law (James 2:10), with the entire penalty due for that transgression.

Let us return to the RCC Sacrament of Penance. In it, a priest (not God) declares a sin forgiven. He then assigns a penance, which, when completed, "pays off" the rest of the penalty for our sin. Until this process is completed, the RCC sinner is removed from grace. If for some reason, the sinner dies without completing his penance and earning his way back into God's grace, he must still be purged of the penalty for his sins prior to becoming eligible for heaven. This place of purging is called Purgatory, and the sinner suffers by fire until he pays off his penance, or until living believers earn enough indulgences to pay it off for him. Contrast this with Paul's definition of grace.

In Romans 5:17-19 (Q10), Paul compares and contrasts the entry of sin and death by Adam's disobedience with the presentation of the gift of justification and righteousness to us through obedience of Jesus on the cross. This is a gift, in which we play no part whatever other than to accept it. The word "justification" is very important. It means that we are publicly proclaimed to be righteous, without spot or blemish. It is a legal term which declares that our debt has been paid. Justification says that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

If the debt is paid (Q11), then there is no penance to be done, no indulgences to be earned, and no Purgatory to fear. Christ is the payment (propitiation) for everything. But it is not enough to point out the error of the RCC on this. We must consider the consequences of their position. If man's works are required to help God save us, God is less than God. He is unable to do the whole task Himself. Also, if man is able to help God out in saving him, then man is as powerful as God. This eliminates in a way the need for God. If man is able to save himself ...

The RCC dogma is an explicit form of salvation by works. When we fully understand its implications, we see that it places man above God, since man can do something God is unable to do! This is in effect declaring that man is God! This blasphemous proposition is in fact the core of all RCC dogmas, since they serve to exalt man rather than God. When we truly understand our own helplessness, we can see the marvelous greatness of Christ's sacrifice. With His blood sacrifice (Q12), He cleanses us from sin. Because of the perfection of His sacrifice, it only needed to be done once, in contrast with the sacrifices in the temple. His death on the cross paid for all of the sins of all men. The Greek "*aphesis*" used in Heb 9:22 means "forgiveness or pardon, of sins (letting them go as if they had never been committed), remission of the penalty". This is emphasized by Deut 15:1-2 where the equivalent Hebrew word demonstrates that

"remission" is forgiveness of debts.

The RCC dogma reiterates the errors we have noted by declaring that "we can merit . . . graces", and that it is "universally accepted that man . . . must merit heaven". These good works get saved up in a "treasury of merit", to be paid out like a bank account to the benefit of those who need them. Isaiah debunks this (Q13) by stating that "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags". When we examine this language, it is not simply graphic, it specifically carries with it a special message that our works are worth less than nothing, since righteous people wear white robes (see Zech 3:2-4, Rev 3:18). In fact, filthy rags are not simply worthless, they demonstrate iniquity. Such evil can never become goodness, as Job notes. Even Paul, who was the Lord's apostle, declares that he would like to do good, but actually does evil.

We are unable to do anything good of ourselves (John 15:5, Q14). When Paul points out that the "works of the law" cannot justify us, he takes the idea further while using a common rabbinical thought. The Jews believed that if one violated the law, they tipped the scales toward condemnation, but, if they did more than the law required, they could then fill the balances on the side of good. If good outweighed evil, then they would be saved. While this seemed to be a just way to deal with sin, it brought sin down to the level of a commercial transaction. Put enough coins in the balance, and you could buy your way out.

This idea is obviously incorporated in the RCC ideas of penances and indulgences. Unfortunately for the Jews and the RCC, this human idea is not within God's plan. God's law is "perfect" (Psalm 19:7, James 1:25). If the law is perfect, there is no possible way of doing anything beyond its requirements. If you can't do more than the law requires, you can't put any coins in that side of the balance, and you can never "buy your way out". Therefore, it is impossible to accumulate any "treasury of merit". No human, however good, has any hope of doing anything of himself that would add to the good side of his own account. This includes the Pope, the "saints", and Mary. It is simply impossible.

This brings us to the point of identifying the key differences between the gospel of Christ and the RCC economy of grace. Where God tells us explicitly that his grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:9, Q15), and that his grace is a free gift, the RCC tells us that grace must be earned. Paul makes it very clear that if this were the case (Rom 11:5-6), grace would cease to be grace and would be wages. He defines grace (Q16, Titus 3:3-7) as being the gift of "salvation through faith", by which we receive the "merciful washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." This grace comes to us (Q17) through the blood of Christ on the cross, where Jesus nailed our death penalty, restoring us to life eternal. We must confess that Christ is our savior (Q18), believing with all our hearts, and He will wash us with His blood.

The RCC is not content to allow Jesus to be enough to save us, but requires our works as a means to complete our salvation. Paul says that we need to live by our faith (Q19), meaning that we must show our faith in our daily lives. James puts it differently, saying "faith without works is dead". By this he means that if you don't daily live by your faith, doing the works of faith, you are showing that your faith is not a living faith. If you truly believe, you will act on that belief.

Finally, while the RCC demands that we do good works to build up our treasury of merit, Peter (Q20) makes it clear that God gives us everything, and we do nothing of ourselves. Paul's metaphor "the fruit of the Spirit" emphasizes that it is the Holy Spirit which does the good works through us. We do not do them ourselves.

We should always be grateful for the marvelous gift of life we have through Jesus' death on the cross. No one should be allowed to diminish this by giving man any part in the provision of salvation. It is the gift of God to us, totally unmerited, conditioned only on our obedience to Him. Once we accept eternal life, no one can take it from us without our consent, but we can throw it away. May we all be found in the kingdom, secure in the righteousness of our God.