

Such was the advertisement I saw recently, typical of those designed to entice shoppers into a local supermarket prior to Thanksgiving Day. While I did not inquire as to the procedure for earning the free turkey, many customers probably accepted the terms required to obtain their turkey ignoring the glaring contradiction in the advertisement.

Is it not the case, however, that if something is “earned” it cannot be equally regarded as “free”? If one has to do something that constitutes “earning” the turkey, then in what sense is it actually free?

The contradiction here is of no serious detriment since the offer is only a marketing strategy. Besides, most people would already expect there to be some purchase or series of purchases necessary in order to qualify for the free turkey. But while the contradictory statement above is of no major consequence when dealing with turkeys, ignoring such a contradiction has dire consequences within the context of theology. Sadly, the way many people would have no difficulty ignoring the contradiction here is akin to the way in which billions of souls trust the similarly contradictory claims of a certain religious institution, assuming its advertising about how to get right with God and spend eternity in heaven is trustworthy.

If we were to substitute the word “salvation” for the word “turkey”, we would have in a concise statement what millions of people have accepted as the way in which man is reconciled to God. Such an advertisement—“*free salvation, earn yours today*”—is, however, an invitation to spend eternity in hell, and a heretical distortion of the gospel of grace.

Heresy is defined as “an erroneous belief...taught by false teachers, which are destructive to the Christian faith.”[1] So, “free salvation, earn yours today” is not only contradictory but heretical in that it turns the free, unmerited gift of God into something which must be earned.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that *penance*—“a **laborious** kind of baptism...is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after [infant] Baptism....”[2] Official Roman Catholic Church teaching on penance is that “...**faith without penance effects no remission of sins.**”[3] So while the Roman Catholic Church claims that God’s grace is necessary for salvation[4], it also teaches that good works, self-mortification, confession or contrition (penance) play a vital role in restoring one’s relationship with God.[5] Just like the supposedly “free” turkey which in truth must be “earned”, this sort of “grace” is no longer grace (it is no longer free, unmerited favor).[6]

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that salvation is by grace, but not by grace *alone*. In so doing, Rome has redefined grace as something compatible with works. God's grace and man's effort synergistically cooperate toward the salvation of souls. But the Scriptures are clear:

*"...if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).*

*"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' **Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.** But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:3-5).*

In direct contrast to God's Holy Word, The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that it has a treasury—a "**store of merits**"[7]—which includes the "...**good works** of all the saints [whom have] **attained their own salvation** and at the same time **cooperated** in saving their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body."[8]

In a Vatican document detailing the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church we read the following:

*"From the most ancient times in the Church **good works were also offered to God for the salvation of sinners....** Indeed, the prayers and good works of holy people were regarded as of such great value that it could be asserted that the **penitent** was washed, cleansed and redeemed with the help of the entire Christian people."[9]*

Based on the official Roman Catholic sources quoted above, no one can honestly deny the fact that Rome teaches a doctrine of salvation by works!

It is an error of eternal proportions to believe that one can by his own efforts restore his relationship with God by way of "penance" or by any other man-centered method. There is nothing an unrighteous sinner can do to earn eternal life. Even the self-righteous Jews and Judaizers who sought to keep the Mosaic Law thinking that by it they might obtain

justification before God were said to be “severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; **you have fallen from grace**” (Galatians 5:4). All a sinful person can offer God is “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6)—sin heaped upon sin! So if you want what you’ve earned by your own efforts, you are entitled to death: “The *wages* [earnings] of sin is death” (Romans 6:23a).

But, in contrast, “**the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**” (Romans 6:23b). Unlike the allegedly “free” turkey, eternal life is truly free and cannot be earned by offering so-called “good works” to God.

Frequently, Roman Catholic clergy and literature will reference Philippians 2:12 (“work out your own salvation”) to defend the false doctrine of grace *plus* works.[10] But in light of the rest of Scripture which clearly declares that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, this verse is more accurately referring to the *outworking of our salvation*, not a command to work *for* or *toward* our own salvation. Thankfully, God’s Word gives us a picture of salvation uncorrupted by the false “traditions of men” which Jesus Christ condemned[11]:

“For by **grace** you have been saved **through faith**; and that **not of yourselves**, it is the **gift of God**; **not as a result of works** so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Here and many other passages of Scripture[12] testify that there is nothing we can do to “get right with God”. We cannot “earn” the salvation that is truly free through Christ alone (“it is the *gift of God*”). But the Apostle Paul goes on: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**” (v. 10). Sinful man can perform no “good works” that can contribute to his salvation. Good works accompany the regenerated heart and are accomplished by God through His children, having been justified freely by the one and only sacrifice of Christ at Calvary.

As stated earlier, the Roman Catholic doctrine of *grace plus works* is not only a contradiction in terms but a deadly distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Roman Catholicism has effectively redefined “grace” to mean that God merely assists mankind’s efforts to attain his or her own salvation.

Again, God's Word declares "...**if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace**" (Romans 11:6). Be wary of any "priest" or other self-proclaimed religious authority devoted to twisting the clear teaching of Scripture:

*"He saved us, **not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness**, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being **justified by His grace** we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7).*

This is the good news offered to those who recognize their own depravity and inability to compensate for their own sinfulness by way of "penance" or any other currency:

God Himself supplied the one offering for sin through His Son Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:11-12). Sinners are saved by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in Christ *alone*. Salvation is not a complex of sacramentalism or some self-contradictory works/grace amalgamation. There is no "purgatory" where one may "expiate" his own sins. Nor is there any treasury of good works from which the Roman Catholic institution may dispense spiritual benefits.

Salvation is purely by the grace of God received through faith in the finished work of Christ. "For Christ also suffered once for sins [not repeatedly, as in the "sacrifice of the Mass"], the just for the unjust [substitutionary atonement], that He might bring us to God [not purgatory]" (1 Peter 3:18).

*"And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after **He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever**, sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:11-12).*

So, when you are enjoying your turkey (be it free or otherwise) this Thanksgiving Day, if you have been born from above and saved by His grace, give thanks to the One who gave His only Son so that you might receive that which *you could not earn*—**salvation accomplished and applied through the perfect sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

*"Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful*

*to Him, and bless His name" (Psalm 100:4).*

[1] J. Walker et al., *The Concise Guide to Today's Religions and Spirituality*, Harvest house, Eugene, OR, 2007, p. 172.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, San Francisco, CA, Ignatius Press, 1994, para. 980.

[3] *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H.J. Schroeder, Tan Books, 1978, p. 95.

[4] *Catechism*, para 1489.

[5] *Catechism*, para 1446.

[6] The very concept of "doing penance" arose from a mistranslation of the Greek word *metanoeo* in passages like Matthew 3:1-2; Mark 6:12; Acts 17:30 and others. The word is properly translated "repent" ("to change one's mind or purpose" [Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 1996]) and has no connotation of humankind actively participating in "good works" or "self-mortification" to make up for "lost grace". Even modern Catholic Bibles have reverted to the correct translation ("repent") as do all major translations (NASB, KJV, NKJV, ESV, HCSB, RSV).

[7] J. O'Connell, ed., *Holy Bible*, Chicago, IL, The Catholic Press, 1950, "Catholic dictionary" p. 238.

[8] *Catechism*, para. 1477

[9] A. Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Costello Publishing, 1988, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Apostolic Constitution on the Revision of Indulgences, chap. 3, 6, pp. 78,79

[10] For example: J. Dowling, "Have you been saved? A Catholic Perspective", Liguori Publications, 1994, p. 15; Dowling's "ten stages" of salvation are enough to pervert and

distort the simple gospel and therefore constitute a “different [false] gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4).

[11] Mark 7:8-9

[12] Galatians 2:21-26; Acts 15:11; Titus 2:11, 3:5.

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