

There are some Christians who believe that we are saved by faith alone and they question our Catholic approach in which we give more emphasis to good works. This is a case where we agree with each other more than people might think. Some think that Catholics believe they can get into heaven just by doing good things. Some Catholics, because of poor catechesis, might think that, but the Church does not believe it. We do not believe that we can “earn” our way to heaven, but we also do not believe that faith is the *only* thing that will get us into heaven. What we believe is that we have faith in Jesus Christ and because of that faith we must perform acts of mercy and love.

In the letter to the Romans we read “*For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Does God belong to the Jews alone? Does he not belong to the gentiles too?*” (Rom 3:28-29) St. Paul is here saying that just because a person is a Jew and follows Jewish customs (particularly circumcision) does not make a person right with God, but faith does. So faith is absolutely necessary in order to be made right with God. To reinforce this we can look at what Paul says to the Galatians: “*We... know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” (Gal 2:15-16). So once again we see the vital importance of faith in Christ.

But at the same time, unless there are good works, our faith is dead. As St. James says in his letter: “*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works: Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith, if it does not have works, is dead.*” (Jam 2:14-17) So we cannot simply say, “I believe in Jesus” and consider that good enough. Faith requires us to act and to do.

Over and over again we see this pointed out. St. Paul, for instance, writes: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil*”. (2 Cor 5:10) Here he points out clearly that one’s reward has something to do with what one has “done” in life – which is to say their “works”.

Likewise, Jesus says the very same thing again and again. Just consider Matthew Chapter 25, where he calls the blessed to heaven and sends the wicked to damnation - he does so based on whether or not “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink.... When? When you did so to the least of my brethren”. So faith alone is not sufficient, but faith enlivened by deeds of love for our neighbor.