

“The Good Thief” Passages Do Not Teach Justification By Faith ALONE (“Sola Fide”)



Crucifixion (of Jesus) by Francken the Younger.¹

Let's begin this study with a prayer.

The Come, Holy Spirit Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful;
And enkindle in them the fire of Your love.
Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.

Let Us Pray . . .

O God, Who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the gift of the same Spirit that we may always be truly wise and ever rejoice
in His consolation, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

¹ [Frans Francken the Younger](#) (1581–1642) Crucifixion (of Jesus) Paint on oak wood. 1606 A.D.
Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna Austria)

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It's been said that God allowed one deathbed conversion to be in Scripture, to show that we should never despair of our salvation. But ONLY ONE deathbed conversion, so presumption of salvation does not creep in us as well.

This "deathbed" conversion is the narrative of the "Good Thief".

Being made fit for Heaven is termed "justification". Some people wrongly assert that man is justified by faith ALONE (nothing else is necessary. No hope, no works done WITH Christ, etc.). This is sometimes called "sola fide" ("faith alone"). This is taught nowhere in Scripture.

Sola fide followers often cite the Good thief passages as teaching justification by faith alone. They (wrongly) think if the Good Thief demonstrates "faith" (and he does) then the passage must be "clearly teaching justification by faith alone."

But what about with "faith alone" and the "Good Thief"? Let's go on and find out . . .

Objection: "Well The Good Thief passages clearly teach sola fide. After all, the guy is not Baptized, he is converted by Jesus on his proverbial death bed. He didn't have time for any works here, so in this instance we for sure see faith alone saving him."

Answer: But is this REALLY the case? No.

First of all, we have no idea of his Baptismal status (Jesus' Disciples were already Baptizing people into Jesus—see John 4:1-2). The Baptismal status of the Good Thief is irrelevant because God (Jesus is True God and True man) is not bound by His Sacraments (CCC 1257), but we are.

Also is this true that the Good Thief did not have any works? No. That assertion is false as well and we will see evidence of this from the texts.

Let's look at the passages concerning the Good Thief closer to see if it teaches us sola fide.

We will see even the Good Thief initially attack and deride our Lord Jesus. But later Jesus gifts this man with "a death-bed contrition". Jesus provides the grace for the Good Thief's conversion. (Remember. Even our repentance needs to be a gift or "born of the grace of God" ["prevenient grace"] that we can accept or reject—see 2nd Timothy 2:25-26 and CCC 1489)

Initially the Good Thief was attacking Jesus right along with many others.

MATTHEW 27:35-40, 44 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; 36 then they sat down and kept watch over him there. 37 And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." 38 Then **two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.** 39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." . . . 44 **And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.**

MARK 15:27-32 27 And with him **they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.** 29 And those who passed by **derided him**, wagging their heads, and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." **Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.**

Some of the sola fide people will say Luke's Gospel account of the Good Thief will show us sola fide being taught. We'll get to St. Luke's account shortly and see that far from teaching us sola fide, St. Luke's Gospel suggests otherwise.

St. Luke's Gospel certainly shows "faith" within the Good Thief – "Jesus remember me when you come into **your kingdom.**" This thief correctly believes Jesus can deliver him. He correctly believes Jesus has a "kingdom". This is all true. It certainly teaches justification by faith.

But is this **ALL** it teaches us? Does the St Luke's passage of the Good Thief teach justification by faith, ALONE? No!

LUKE 23:32-38 32 **Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.** 33 **And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left.** 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." . . . (verses 39-46 will be presented below)

So as we lead up to the verses concerning the "Good Thief" we again ask, does Luke's Gospel teach us justification by faith ALONE?

It shows faith to be sure. . . .

But it also shows the Good Thief **hopes** to go to Heaven – "**Jesus remember me**". The verses show the **hope** of the Good Thief here. He hopes to get to Heaven by the power of Jesus' remembrance. "Remember me" – I hope to go to Heaven.

But it even shows more. It shows works! The Good Thief now admonishes or rebukes the other thief for his reviling Jesus, even though before this, he himself was reviling Jesus too!

Admonishing your fellow sinners is a spiritual **work** of mercy, but a "work" it is.

How many times have you heard someone use bad language and not had the fortitude to admonish the sinner? Or how often was someone else committing a sinful act that you saw and you neglected to corrected them? Yet this Good Thief, with all of his suffering, finds the grace to rebuke a fellow sinner.

And yes there is even more. The Good Thief “**humbles himself**” (as Jesus in Luke 18:14 taught us earlier with the repentant publican - “every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but **he who humbles himself will be exalted**”).

The Good Thief **REPENTING** says in verse 41 concerning their sinful DEEDS: “And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds”. This teaches how sinful works may result in condemnation too. This suggests a repentance in the Good Thief as well.

. . . . **LUKE 23:39-46** 39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 **But the other rebuked him**, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under **the same sentence of condemnation?** 41 **And we indeed justly;** for we are receiving **the due reward of our deeds**; but **this man has done nothing wrong.**" 42 And he said, "**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." 44 It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.

We’ve ALSO seen the Good Thief “call upon the name of the Lord” (“Jesus. Remember me when you come into Your kingdom.”).

ROMANS 10:12-14 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. 13 For, “**every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.**” 14 But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?

So we’ve seen faith, hope, and a charitable work from the Good Thief. We’ve seen this man humbling himself and recalled Jesus’ words “every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted”. We’ve seen a warning about sin and the recompense for sin, - “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds” (there is no evidence the “bad” thief ever repented). We’ve also seen the repentance in the Good Thief. And we’ve seen the Good Thief “call upon Jesus”. Far from teaching sola fide, this set of verses, if anything, suggests a refutation of the tradition of sola fide.

In Summary

- Faith? Check.
- Hope? Check.
- Love (obedience and good works)? Check.
- Humbling oneself? Check?
- Repentance? Check.
- Calling on the name of the Lord? Check.

In summary: The passages concerning the Good Thief DEFINITELY DO NOT teach JUSTICIATION BY Faith ALONE. May God richly bless you.