

Persevering to the End

The Biblical Reality of Mortal Sin

ISSUE: Is the distinction between mortal and venial sin biblical? Can we “lose” our salvation by committing a mortal sin?

DISCUSSION: The Bible describes sins that are mortal (or “unto death”), and those that are not mortal, which we commonly call venial (cf. 1 Jn. 5:16-17; Catechism, nos. 1852-54).

Christians are capable of committing mortal sins, thereby rejecting the gift of eternal life, a gift that cannot be taken for granted. However, Christians who choose to persevere in faithfulness—and seek reconciliation through the Sacrament of Confession should they sin—may be confident in God’s infinite mercy and His fidelity to His promises.

There are two closely related questions here. First, is it possible for a Christian to lose sanctifying grace (i.e., his “salvation”) by committing a serious sin? Second, if it is possible for a Christian to commit such a sin, does this mean that our salvation is in jeopardy?

We must begin by realizing that at the heart of Jesus Christ’s mission was the proclamation of good news—God’s mercy to sinners. The angel announced to Saint Joseph: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21).

God’s mercy is greater than our sins. “[W]here sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). In Luke 15, in the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, we discover the utter delight Our Heavenly Father takes in showering His mercy on those who turn to Him for forgiveness. Christians are called not only to experience reconciliation with God, but to be ambassadors of reconciliation to the world (cf. Mt. 6:14; 2 Cor. 5:18-20).

The fact that Christians may, like the prodigal son, choose to sever their relationship with God through mortal sin demonstrates that in making us His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, God leaves intact our free will and thus our ability to turn away from Him.

However, He is waiting to embrace each prodigal son and daughter that turns back to Him. Further, all Christians have received the gift of the Holy Spirit to help them lead godly lives. The possibility of mortal sin, then, should not be a cause for undue anxiety or worry. Rather, it demonstrates that our choices—good and bad—matter to a God who wants us to love Him freely.

Church Teaching on Mortal Sin

The Bible makes a clear distinction between mortal and venial (“not mortal”) sin in 1 John 5:16-17:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.

Mortal sin is called “mortal” because it “kills” the life of grace in a Christian. God has freely given men His grace and will not take it back from them, but they may choose to reject this grace themselves through deliberate, grave sins. Saint James speaks of saving a brother from mortal sin (Jas. 5:19-20), and Saint Paul notes that there are sins which, if unrepented, will prevent a person from inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10). In addition, Hebrews 10:26-36 discusses deliberate or “willful” sin:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment. . . . How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? . . . For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God, and receive what is promised.

This passage clearly shows that those who have received Jesus, yet sin deliberately afterwards, thereby reject the sanctifying or justifying grace they have received, i.e., the grace by which they partook of God’s nature (2 Pet.

1:4) and became sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14-17; cf. Catechism, nos. 1987-2005). In order to be reconciled with God, they need to repent and confess their sins (1 Jn. 1:9). Christians within God's grace, or restored to God's grace, must strive to persevere in that life of grace (Heb. 10:36; Rom. 11:22; 1 Cor. 10:12).

For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present. The sin must involve grave matter and be committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent (cf. Catechism, nos. 1854-64, 1874). The Catechism (no. 1858) teaches that "grave matter" is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to Jesus' answer to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother" (Mk. 10:19).

"Full knowledge" refers to the understanding that the act is in opposition to God's law (cf. Catechism, no. 1959). "Deliberate consent" means that the act is committed as a free choice by the person (*ibid.*). If a person does not know a particular act is a serious offense, or if he acts without sufficient freedom, the sin is not mortal.

In his 1993 encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* (Splendor of Truth), Pope John Paul II masterfully summarizes the Church's teaching concerning mortal sin:

With the whole tradition of the Church, we call mortal sin the act by which man freely and consciously rejects God, his law, the covenant of love that God offers, preferring to turn in on himself or to some created and finite reality, something contrary to the divine will (*conversio ad creaturam*). This can occur in a direct and formal way, in the sins of idolatry, apostasy, and atheism; or in an equivalent way, as in every act of disobedience to God's commandments in a grave matter (no. 70).

Perseverance Is Essential

Some people teach the idea "once saved, always saved." They claim that once a person has received Jesus, he can never lose his salvation. After all, since salvation can't be earned (cf. Eph. 2:8-9), how can it be lost?

Is this position biblical? No, because the Bible clearly teaches the reality of mortal sin and the need for repentance, endurance, and perseverance—remaining in God's grace and not committing mortal sin—in the life of a Christian. "Once saved, always saved" or "assurance of [final] salvation" is not biblical.

Those who teach the concept of "once saved, always saved" will sometimes quote biblical verses out of context or misinterpret verses to support their belief. Nevertheless, the biblical teaching on the need for perseverance is clear and unquestionably opposed to "once saved, always saved."

Consider the words of Peter's Second Letter:

For it would have been better for them [who have knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, yet become entangled in sin] never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them (2:21).

In this passage, Saint Peter plainly teaches that it would be better never to know Jesus at all than to know Him and commit grave sin, meaning that the fallen-away Christian, having rejected Jesus, is in a worse place than he was originally. This falling away does not preclude the possibility of repentance and reconciliation, but the man's "fall from grace" makes no sense if his salvation was assured the moment he received Christ. For how could a man who turns away from Christ be "assured of salvation" if the Bible says he is in a worse position than when he never knew Christ at all? If a man were "always saved" from the moment he received Christ, committing grave sins would have no consequences worse than never receiving Christ; yet Sacred Scripture says that the consequences are worse.

Saint Paul discusses a similar situation in 1 Timothy 5:8: "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." This verse speaks of a Christian who violates Jesus' commandment to love others (1 Jn. 2:3-4; Mt. 22:37-40). To commit such a grave sin, Saint Paul says, is to renounce the faith. As with Saint Peter, so with Saint Paul: The man who turns away from Christ is worse off than if he had never believed. Again, this could not be true if a Christian's salvation were "assured." If "once saved, always saved" were true, committing grave sin as a believer could never be worse than being an unbeliever.

Confidence in God Alone

In rejecting the idea of "once saved, always saved," we must not go to the other extreme of doubting God's

mercy, goodness, and fidelity to His promises. In other words, we need the virtue of hope (cf. Catechism, nos. 1817-21).

When we were baptized, we were neither whisked away into heaven nor left to our own devices on earth. Rather, we embarked on a pilgrimage to our eternal home prepared from all eternity for us by Our Father in heaven (cf. Jn. 14:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:1-10; Phil. 3:13-14).

The Church reminds us that hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the Our Father, which summarizes the aspirations of all Christians. Prayer focuses us on our goal—God Himself—and inclines us to reject anything (i.e., sin) that would keep us from Him.

As we journey toward our eternal home, we are buoyed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is Christ's legacy to His Church. Our salvation requires our cooperation, but our confidence is not in our own efforts, but in God, who will never disappoint us (cf. Rom. 5:5). If we are with Christ, we will be saved (cf. 1 Jn. 5:12).

Once Saved, Always Saved?

- We must persevere “to the end” (Mt. 10:22; 24:13) “in the kindness of God” (Rom. 11:22) in order to reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12).
- Scripture mentions several cases of Christians who have fallen away through sin (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:8; Heb. 6:4-6; Jas. 5:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:20-21).
- Saint Paul, who had one of the most dramatic and profound conversions in 2,000 years of Christianity, writes, “I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27).
- Saint Paul further advises those who are already Christians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).
- Christians are called to cultivate the theological virtue of hope, which is the confident expectation of divine blessing and eternal life with God (Catechism, no. 2090).
- Hope is not based on our own strength or ability to resist temptations, but on the mercy and goodness of God poured out upon us by the Holy Spirit (Catechism, no. 1817; cf. Rom. 5:5).

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How do I respond to the question, “Are you saved?”
2. How does the virtue of hope strike a balance between presumption (“my salvation is assured”) and despair (“my sins are so bad God will never forgive me”)?
3. Am I aware of my own sinful tendencies? Do I confidently ask for God's grace—especially through the sacraments—to persevere in the Christian life?

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL

Catechism of the Catholic Church (Hardcover and paperback available)

Vatican II Documents

Veritatis Splendor; Encyclical Pope John Paul II

Catholicism and Fundamentalism; Karl Keating

Look for Peace? Try Confession; Mary Ann Budnik

Surprised by Truth; Patrick Madrid

**To order, call Benedictus Books toll-free: (888) 316-2640. Ask for prices.
CUF members receive 10% discount.**

Faith Facts—Free Member Service: (800) MY-FAITH (693-2484)

- It “Works” for Me: The Church’s Teaching on Justification
- I Confess: The Biblical Basis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- We Are Church
- The Truth About Birth Control
- Euthanasia
- Moral Conscience

Catholics United for the Faith
827 N. Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484