

DO YOU GET TO HEAVEN...

...by
being
good?



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Do you get to heaven by being good?

*“People are basically good”, wrote one poet,
“it is only their behaviour that lets them down”*

Introduction

Most people in the world believe this – it’s certainly the prevailing world opinion

According to a recent news poll from a major news organisation, 85% of people who believe in heaven but are not necessarily Christian believe that they will go to heaven. Even *more* surprising is the fact that 77% of people who claim no religious affiliation feel that they are good enough to go to heaven because they feel they are a ‘good person.’

But then, maybe this is to be expected. Ten out of the eleven major world religions teach that admission to a pleasurable afterlife comes through good deeds. Pope Francis has recently decreed that even atheists can achieve heavenly bliss, provided they are moral folk.

In all of this, there is little or no interest in the fact that the ‘good people go to heaven’ philosophy actually makes no logical sense when you start to think about it (what would such a place be like if they all did?). And there’s even *less* interest in the fact that this form of thinking directly contradicts what the Bible says – in Matthew 7:13 for example:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.”

The Bible teaches that Christians can be sure that they are going to heaven, *not* because they are good, but because they have received forgiveness. Can that *really* be true? Does it make sense? And would you want to *follow* such a philosophy if it did?

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The Christian dilemma

Despite the clearcut reality of this issue from a Christian perspective, Christians themselves hesitate to address the 'going to heaven' issue with those who believe that human goodness is all that's necessary to deal with it. You can understand why. Were they to stand in front of their friends and claim that they knew they were going to go to heaven and those friends were headed for hell, they would likely be regarded as being conceited, boastful and arrogant.

So what is the right response when someone asks 'Why can't I just live a good life?'

Isn't it unfair of God to say that you can't get into heaven unless you believe in Him, even though you have been a good person? Who does He think he is!

In answer, it's necessary to think about what the statement 'You get to heaven by being good' really means. For most people, it boils down to one of these two things

1. You get to heaven by doing 'good works' – ie. morally admirable things that help others
- or
2. You get to heaven by being 'religious' – ie. attending church, having some sort of religious following, being baptized etc

In both cases, these beliefs amount to the same thing. People's desire to satisfy heaven's admissions policy **on their own terms**.

A difference in perspective

To begin with, we need to define what we mean by 'heaven' – and that'll be different for different people.

Most people's idea of 'heaven' is like an extended luxury holiday on earth. No work, no money worries, no hassles, every comfort for eternity – but otherwise, life exactly as they know it in the world. They certainly wouldn't want a 'heaven' in which there was a need to submit to a higher being, praise Him or serve Him.

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Essentially then, what lies behind this 'get to heaven by being good' belief is the natural human fear of dying. The holder of this belief wants a pleasurable, eternal extension of their life on earth and believes if they can tick enough 'good' boxes in their initial human life, they can earn a never-ending one.

So:

- Is this idea of heaven right?
- Would you actually really want it if it was?

and...

- Once we have a *right* perspective of 'Heaven', does the 'being good to get there' argument make any *sense*?

Defining the problem

Defining 'Heaven'

Whatever their view of what 'heaven' might be like, most people would agree on two things:

1. It's a place where 'God is' rather than a place where 'God isn't'
2. As God is perfect, it's a place of perfection

Unfortunately, the idea of heaven being an 'extended earth-like luxury holiday' makes no sense based on those two criteria. After all, the majority of people in this world think they're 'good', to a greater or lesser extent. So based on that philosophy, 'heaven' is nothing more than earth on a cloud, full of virtually all the same people who lived on earth and therefore including all the imperfections of earth. Such a place would have all the same problems we experience in our world – except worse, since these issues would be exacerbated for all eternity. It certainly wouldn't be 'perfect'. It couldn't possibly be a place where 'God is'.

So this place, this so-called 'heaven' being imagined, can therefore, only be a place where 'God isn't': a place where God can't be found. So what might that be like? Can we ever know? Well yes, in part. Looking back through history, it's easy to identify times and places where we could all agree that 'God wasn't' - times where the grace and love of God wasn't there to hold back the evil of humanity: the Holocaust, the purges of Stalin, the 45 million people killed in four years between 1958 and 1962 in China by Mao Zedong – the atrocities taking place in the prison camps in North Korea today. Such times give us a feel for what it's like to live in a place where 'God isn't', a place where God isn't there to hold back the failings of the human race. Such a place isn't somewhere anyone should aspire to live in for eternity.

So what about the alternative – the place *where 'God is'*? How can we reach *that*? Well, we've said that place is one of perfection, since God is perfect and He couldn't remain so co-existing with imperfection. The problem is though, that *no human being is perfect: we all fall short. To a greater or lesser extent, we've all*



done things wrong in our lives, however 'good' we've tried to be. We all fall short of the mark.

For 'perfection', we're going to need some help from a perfect God – and that means 'earning heaven' on our own terms is no longer an option.

Sidelining the need for God

'The most damnable and pernicious heresy that has ever plagued the mind of man is the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God.' Martin Luther

There are now, and have always been, basically two - and only two - methods people use for trying to 'get to Heaven'. Everyone must choose one of them. Either to reach that place on God's terms or their own.

Inevitably, the second approach is the more attractive one. Man doesn't *want* to have need of or to rely on God. He is incurably addicted to doing something for his *own* salvation. The problem is though, that belief in the 'self-help' approach eliminates the need for anything else.

If it were true that going about doing good deeds gets one into Heaven, then human beings would be perfectly capable of saving themselves. In this scenario, God is actually *compelled* to recognize that the do-gooder is, by virtue of his deeds, *entitled* to a place in Heaven. God Himself is then not strictly necessary – except by the few who recognise that true goodness can only be accomplished with God's help. And of course if we can attain salvation under our own power, Jesus Christ isn't necessary either.

Essentially, in believing that 'good people go to heaven', people are creating their own God – one they're comfortable with: one whose standards they think they can meet without shifting too far from their comfort zones. It's essentially a form of idolatry.

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Defining the solution

To begin to define a solution to the 'get to heaven by being good' issue, we have to address the two key words that stand behind it:

Let's start with 'good'...

Ask ten people to define this word and you'll probably get ten different answers. Depending on who you speak to, it might be the practice of being virtuous, morally excellent, generous, kind, skilful – or merely appropriate, competent or satisfactory. The Bible though, puts a completely different definition on the word 'good'. Mark 10:18 says that only God is 'good'. Thus, anyone trying to get into heaven by being 'good' in themselves simply will not make it. Remember, this is *God's* world. He makes the rules.

There are multitudes of people who try to live 'good' lives. They want to make others' lives better. They do good deeds. They even try to live the kind of lives that the Bible says that we ought to live. Yet, at the same time, these people reject the idea that they have to accept everything that God says. They believe that they have the power to accept or reject anything and everything that they want to. In believing that 'all good people go to heaven', they have somehow determined that they know more about what is 'good' than God does. For some reason, they

believe that God just doesn't know what is 'good' here on earth. Thus they try and force God to accept their own definition of 'good'.

You may think of yourself as being a 'good' moral upstanding person. Other people in the church and community may even consider you to be a good person. But the truth is that it doesn't really *matter* what you think about yourself, or even what other people think about you. 'Goodness' depends upon your point of comparison – and using that spirit level, there'll always be a point at which we come up short.

Take the story of a pastor who was asked to conduct the funeral service of a man who had died in his community. The man who had been a real scoundrel. He had been unethical in his business practices and had lived an immoral lifestyle. The man had a brother that was bad - if not worse - than he was and that brother approached the pastor before the funeral with what he hoped was a tempting offer. 'Pastor', he said, 'I will give you \$1,000 if you will say that my brother was a saint.' The pastor considered for a moment, then agreed. The day of the funeral came and the pastor got up to speak, addressing a congregation eager to hear what he would say. 'This man' he said, 'was a dirty, rotten sinner. He was immoral. He was unethical. He was one of the worst men that I have ever known. But next to his brother, he was a saint.'

And heaven?

Think about Heaven for a moment. The Heaven we really *want* isn't an extended luxury holiday. It's actually a place of the 'no mores' - no more tears, no more sadness, no more pain, no more sickness, no more death.

Who *controls* all of those things? God does. If they're to be done away with, it's surely logical that we would have to submit to the one who can do away with them and accept His rule over our existence. And if we're not prepared to do that while we're alive, why should God be prepared to believe that we would do so afterwards?



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What God has done to make the difference

What God has done through Christ

The writer John Ankerberg notes this:

'Did Buddha die for our sins? Did Mohammed die for our sins? Did Lao Tze, the founder of Taoism? Did Moses? Did Zoroaster, the founder of Parsism? Or Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism? None of these men ever claimed to do this. . . . Only Jesus solved the sin problem and conquered death, so logically, only Jesus is the way of salvation and the way to God and eternal life.'

The whole Christian story revolves around the fact that God sent Christ because we need him and the message that He brought - that *only* through the grace of God can we attain an undeserved salvation.

'Undeserved' sounds harsh, but the word recognises a fundamental truth. Namely that when you say that only good people should be allowed into the clubhouse, you have to be prepared to answer the perfectly reasonable question, "How *good* is good enough?" (Or of course there's the flip side of the issue, "How *bad* can I be and still get in?")

The only answer that makes any sense if the possibility of divine forgiveness is left out of the equation is, "You must be perfect." And anyone who's spent any significant amount of time in this world knows that human beings aren't. So we can't rely solely on our own merits. Some other way is needed. Christians believe that way is only through Christ. There's one door to heaven - His. No other will lead to salvation.

Why what God did through Christ was necessary

If we're honest, sin is thoroughly ingrained into our being and ultimately, on our own, there is nothing we can do to clean ourselves up. Good works, even religious works, only dust off the outside. We are like the Pharisees Jesus described in Matthew 23:27 as "white-washed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." In the end, no matter how hard we try, we still come up short. Romans 3:10-12 says it this way, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God; all have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one"

The reason God gives as to why salvation cannot be obtained by doing good deeds is so that no one can boast about it. No one can argue that they are better

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than anyone else. No one in heaven is going to be able to say that they 'saved themselves.' We must all come to Jesus the same way. No matter how educated we are or what level of world status we have, the Bible teaches us of the essential need to humble ourselves before Him, admit that we are sinners and put our faith and trust in Christ.

So, let's return to our original question. Can a 'good' person go to heaven? Yes, if he is willing to turn away from his 'goodness' and trust Jesus Christ for his eternal salvation. As long as you cling to the slightest shred of your goodness, you'll never see the gates of heaven. Once you let go of the rags of your own righteousness, you can be saved.

That means there is hope for everyone. The good news is that you can be saved - no matter how bad you've been. The better news is: You can be saved - no matter how good you've been. The Gospel can not only save sinners. It can also save 'good' people if they're willing to let go of their 'goodness'.





The Bible teaches us of the essential need to humble ourselves before Him, admit that we are sinners and put our faith and trust in Christ.



Christianity can't make sense to anyone who believes that 'good people' are rewarded with heaven and 'bad people' with hell. Those believing that are the same folk always questioning why God doesn't always punish the wicked here and reward the good: such a viewpoint is based on a fundamentally wrong idea of how the justice of God is dispensed. Conviction of our sinful heart is the starting point of a saving faith. You can't skip this and think that a life –and a death – with Christ will work for you because it won't.

Why 'good people' would hate heaven

The Bible teaches that all the 'no more's' we'd like to be rid of in this world (the pain, the suffering, the death) are caused through sin – through the way that man falls short of God's perfect mark. If these things cease to exist in heaven, it must be because there is no more sin. So Heaven will be wonderful, not only because of what is present - God - but also because of what is absent - sin.

'Good people' who haven't submitted to God and accepted the saving work of Christ remain sinful – they remain short of the mark, whatever they've tried to do in themselves. They won't - they can't - go to this place of 'no mores' if all they have to offer God are their good works. If you're a parent and your child never gave you costly, unconditional love but instead simply tried to 'do things' for you in place of that, you'd quickly begin to hate - to despise - those things. God is the same.

Those who do that could never live for eternity in a place where He is, not only because they're not good enough but also because they wouldn't be happy there – they wouldn't belong. They'd soon get tired of submission to God. They'd start to wonder what all the fuss was about. They'd start to feel bored after a while.

After all, 'good people' think they *deserve* to go to heaven. Saved people know they don't deserve to be there. 'Good people' secretly believe they are good enough to be there. Saved people know they aren't. 'Good people' might like Jesus, but they don't feel like they owe him anything. Saved people know they owe him *everything*.

Good people simply wouldn't fit in in heaven. They don't belong there, they wouldn't be happy there, and they aren't going there. If you're planning on going to heaven because of your good life, forget it. You'll never make it, you aren't good enough, and if by some accident you ended up there, you'd soon put in for a transfer.

So what does happen to sincere people and 'good' people who aren't Christian?

Won't God even so welcome them into heaven? Well this assumes that sincerity alone is enough to correspond to truth. The reality is that it isn't. There's a Bible verse in Proverbs 16:25 that sums this up:

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."

Sincerity will only get someone so far - but then they must face reality. No matter how sincere someone may be about being able to fly by frantically flapping their arms, their sincerity won't keep them in the air. If someone is actively believing something that isn't true – that 'goodness' on their own terms is enough to have a relationship with God – then by definition, they're implicitly, if not explicitly, rejecting God. And on that basis, it would seem odd to expect God to welcome such a person into heaven. Sincerity, then, is not enough.

But aren't Christians also trying to 'earn' their salvation – through Christianity?

No. Grace is how God saves us. The word comes from the Greek word *charis*, which means "the undeserved favour of God." The idea is that we receive salvation as a free Gift from God, a gift that we cannot earn and do not deserve.





As mentioned at the beginning, ten out of the eleven main world religions today teach that membership of the kind of afterlife all of us want is based on a ticklist of good works we have to do. Christianity *alone* teaches that salvation to heaven is by grace: it's not about what you *do*: it's about what *God* has done for you.

This though, is a gift human beings have to accept. It's like a medicine you need if you're sick: you might believe it will help you but until you trust it enough to actually take it, it won't do anything for you. And taking that medicine, accepting that gift, means a surrendering of pride and a handing over of dominion to God. Most are not prepared to take that step. This story may help illustrate that point:

Many years ago a young boy shot and killed a man while gambling. In those days, murderers were sentenced to hang. But the townspeople were so concerned about the young lad that they signed a petition asking the judge to pardon the boy. Finally, the judge agreed but only on one condition. The judge would wear a clergyman's robe and collar and carry the pardon between the pages of the Bible.

As the judge approached the boy's cell, he could hear the young man cursing and swearing at him. "Get out of here, preacher, I don't want what you have to offer."

"But, son," the judge replied, "You don't understand."

"I understand fine," said the boy. "I don't want what you have to offer."

The dejected judge left the jail. Later the guard told the boy that it was the judge who was dressed like a minister. Between the pages of the Bible was an authorized, sealed pardon for his release.

When the day of execution arrived, just before they put a black sack over the boy's head, they asked if he had anything to say.

He replied, "I am not dying because I killed a man. I am dying because I rejected the pardon."

God doesn't send people to that place where He is absent – call it 'Hell' if you like.

He simply honours their choice. Like the judge honoured the choice of the condemned boy who rejected the pardon.

'Hell' is the ultimate expression of God's highest regard for the dignity of man. He has never forced us to choose him, even when that means we would choose hell. As the Christian writer C. S. Lewis remarked:

"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it."

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Want to find out more about the issues raised here?
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