

QUESTION: I'm a good person so I'm going to heaven, right?

ANSWER: You voice a very popular ASSUMPTION about good people going to heaven. It's so popular you can find this theory on heaven around the world. Almost all of the major world religions are some version of this theory. It goes like this:

- There is a Good God who lives in a Good place reserved for Good people.
- This God goes by many names (Jehovah, or Allah, or Manitou, or Brahman) as does his Good place (heaven or nirvana or paradise or happy hunting grounds), and this God is behind all the world religions.
- The theory is not that any religion holds the key to heaven itself, it's that the GOOD people in the religion, the good Muslims, the good Buddhists, the good Catholics, go to the Good place.

Now it's an attractive way to think for three reasons:

- A. Because it's fair. Good is rewarded, Bad is Punished.
- B. Because it motivates us to BE good.
- C. Because it's consistent with the goodness of God. If God is good, only good people can join him.

So the theory makes some sense and it's reassuring to people, but it has some fatal flaws.

1. IT'S NOT CONSISTENT

Since nobody is perfect, who gets to answer the question, how good is good enough? What if you are good for a little while, and then are bad for a season or two? What if you're bad for the whole life and then good for the last year? What if you do lots of bad, but your intentions were always good? We can't answer those questions can we? It's too subjective. But still, despite that, some think heaven is a guarantee based on a subjective idea of how much good is good enough.

Isn't it true that some people do some things that they thought were good, that others that were very bad? So how do you know that your belief that you're a good person is REALLY good. Didn't some well meaning southerners, respectable people beat and rape their slaves? Where they good people? There were some sincere Nazis, who thought they were doing good. Saddam Hussein died thinking himself a hero – we have his final thoughts on the subject on video tape.

Who's to say your definition of good enough is the same as God's. Would anyone reasonably expect God – assuming God exists – to morph his ideas of good around YOUR ideas? Does God let Hitler into heaven because he thought he was doing good by ridding the world of a race that he felt sincerely did great evil? Maybe God makes a new heaven for every person, a Jewless heaven for Adolf? Perhaps you're thinking that God would accept a standard of simply living up to my own conscience. But even if that's the bar, can you say you've crossed never violated your own conscience?

So if "good enough" is the standard, it's not at all clear what that standard is.

2. IT'S NOT ENDORSED BY JESUS

Some people think Jesus, being an icon of fairness, would be all over the "good enough" standard. But they usually haven't READ Jesus. In the most famous sermon in history Jesus said, Matthew 5:4 "be Perfect therefore, as my Father in Heaven is Perfect."

And in case there was any doubt as to what he meant by “perfect”, he explains in detail in other parts of the sermon:

- you’ve heard that staying morally pure means having sex with only the spouse you made promises to. But adultery from God’s point of view occurs even when you gaze at another person as a object of lust.
- And murder? According to Jesus, “do not murder” includes keeping from uncontrolled outbursts of anger. Like - for example - when you see the guy driving like an idiot on the freeway. Let me just quote him: “Anyone who says, ‘you fool’ will be in danger of the fire of hell”.

So if you accept Jesus teaching at all, you’ll be forced to conclude that NOBODY’S going to heaven based on being good enough. In fact the Bible says, in Romans 3:23, “everybody has sinned and fallen short of God’s glorious standard.”

And if you’re trusting in the lofty moral code of the Bible to be your ticket to heaven, you should know that’s not why God gave the moral code. Here’s why he gave it:

Ro 3:20 no one will be declared righteous [good enough] in God’s sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. NIV

So in a real way, all having a high moral code does is INCREASES our understanding/awareness of our own BADNESS! So the final problem with the “good enough” theory is that

3. IT’S NOT CHRISTIANITY

Christianity parts with all other religious systems at this critical juncture. It does not promise ultimate reward/heaven/paradise only to the people who do enough good deeds. Here’s the center of the Christian faith:

“But now,” the Bible says, “a righteousness [that is, a perfect level of goodness] is available apart from the law [that is, apart from my moral or religious efforts to be good enough]. This goodness, this moral perfection from God comes through trusting Jesus Christ and is available to ANYONE who believes.” (Romans 3:21-22)

So, let me say it clear: according to Jesus, it’s not the GOOD people who go to heaven, it’s the FORGIVEN people. That is, those willing to admit their badness, confess, repent and trust God that through Christ’s work on the cross he has made a way. It’s a gift of grace to the people who simply ask for it. Rom 10:8-13

Salvation that comes from trusting Christ ...is already within easy reach. In fact, the Scriptures say, “The message is close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart.” For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. As the Scriptures tell us, ...“Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” NLT

This is heaven by grace not by good works. It separates Christianity from all other religious systems by a gapping canyon because every other one puts the burden on you to be good enough. That may seem to put you in control, until you realize Jesus said, “Be perfect.” Who can measure up to that? So even though Christianity may seem unfair because hard moral workers aren’t MORE rewarded than poor performers, it is MORE fair. Why? Because through Christ, the way to heaven is

- inclusive (everyone is invited),
- equal (everyone gets in the same way – through grace and not through earning so no one can be superior to another),
- nondiscriminatory (no one is excluded based on things they can’t control).

Being good is a good thing, it will bless your life, and God wishes for you to be good, but it's not a ticket to heaven, because human goodness simply doesn't measure up. It's not good enough. Paul the apostle who was a very devoted man would say, "whatever [goodness] was to my credit, I now consider loss for the sake of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and having a righteousness [goodness] that is not my own."

So he found an assurance of heaven in Christ that brought a deep peace and joy and that security had nothing to do with being a good person. In fact, in Christ he realized many of the things he formerly thought were good were actually bad! Christ changed everything. He stopped thinking of himself as a good man that had earned God's approval, to being a sinner separated from God, unless and until God received him, forgave him and GAVE him approval through Jesus sacrifice for him.

That's Christianity. I admit it, it's scandalous: Salvation comes as a gift and CANNOT be earned. You can't make God OWE you something. You give him a good life, but who gave you the strength and circumstance to be able to live a good life? God did. So you're just giving God back what he gave to you in the first place. You can't put him in your debt. The truth is however, WE are in HIS debt, and every sin and dark act, even heart stuff, is another draw on our account.

BUT, Jesus death on the cross was the full payment of that debt. But this is the cost to access is – FAITH. That means, full trust. NOT TRUST in yourself, not hanging onto your own sense of entitlement for heaven. You give that up when come to Christ. You humble yourself and say, "have mercy on me, a sinner." You realize that what you and I are entitled to is not heaven but separation from God. That is are our just compensation – wages as the Bible says, Rom 6:23.

To escape that situation God offers a way through Christ that is

- Totally inclusive – everyone has a chance.
- Totally equal – everyone gets in the same way, without earning so no one can boast.
- Totally nondiscriminatory – no one HAS to be left out because of things beyond their control.

I cannot give you any assurance of heaven based on you being a good person, not from the teaching of Christ. Christianity gives you a different assurance, based on something more certain than your moral performance: God's promise and grace. Which of those two things will you base your eternity on? One is moral striving, alone, anxious, unsure. The other is a promise from Christ himself that if you acknowledge him on earth, he will acknowledge you in heaven – a promise that doesn't depend on your effort, but on His love. That's good news! That's relief, if you'll just accept it.

So the question is, will you change your how to get to heaven plans? All it requires is admission of fallenness, repent from it, and confess your devotion to Christ as you receive this amazing grace. So the decision is yours, to commit in your heart to repent of your "do enough" plan and the failures on that road and take up God's "done" plan. Then be marked in your new allegiance to Jesus by water baptism to seal this decision and God's washing work in your heart.

For more conversation about this topic, always feel free to call the AC3 office.



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