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DON'T ALL GOOD PEOPLE GO TO HEAVEN?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009



Those who argue that all good people go to heaven then make the case that a loving God would not turn away good and sincere individuals. Instead, they reason, it's obvious that He would allow them into heaven.

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In John 6:38, Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (NIV). Six times in John 6 it is stressed that Jesus came down from heaven, underscoring not only his divine origin, but also that his purpose is to do God's will. The Greek word translated as "heaven" is *ouranos* and in context refers to the dwelling place of God. In Christian theology it is also where the redeemed will dwell.

There is a common perception that so long as one leads a generally good life, they will get into heaven. But the question, "Don't all good people go to heaven?" presupposes a number of points. First, there is usually the assumption that God exists and that He is all loving. Second, there is an assumption that although some "bad" people may need punishment, most people are generally "good" and, as such, are entitled to heaven. Third, there is the view that entrance into heaven is on the basis of merit (our works) rather than God's grace. Fourth, related to the question about heaven is the implicit suggestion that hell, if it exists at all, is really only for a marginal few who are responsible for particularly evil acts. Let's briefly look at these points.

God Exists and is All Loving

That God exists is an obvious component of the Christian worldview. He not only exists, but is also creator, designer and sustainer of the universe and everything in it. Not only is He ever present, all knowing, and all powerful, God is also all loving. He is a personal being active in His creation, but distinct from it. Those who argue that all good people go to heaven then make the case that a loving God would not turn away good and sincere individuals. Instead, they reason, it's obvious that He would allow them into heaven.

This position, however, fails to consider the broad spectrum of the nature of God. While we may glean general principles about Him from what He has made (Romans 1:20) such as His existence, power and moral nature, we learn specifics about Him from the Bible—His special revelation. It is here that we learn that God is indeed merciful (Deuteronomy 4:31; Daniel 9:9), but also just (Job 34:12; Psalm 45:6; Isaiah 30:18). He is also completely holy. These aspects of His nature, particularly his justice and holiness, mean that anything even remotely sinful cannot dwell in God's presence.

Are Most People Good?

The next assumption is that although some "bad" people may need punishment, most are generally "good" and entitled to heaven. The position that views people as generally good and entitled to heaven tends to make the error of viewing human nature as basically good. Biblical evidence as well as experiential evidence show this view to be false. As the Bible explains, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV). Psalm 51:5 comes across even stronger: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."

Biblically speaking, most people are not "good." In fact, when compared to God's standards of holiness, no one is "good." To one degree or another, we all "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). This does not mean that we are always actively engaged in doing evil or participating in depraved acts all the time. But it does mean that in our very nature we are "fallen," in rebellion against God and incapable of saving ourselves.

Works and Grace

The view that entrance into heaven is on the basis of merit (our works) rather than God's grace is also common. But a works based system of salvation is foreign to the message of Christ. Whether or not one

enters heaven is not dependent on a continuum of good and evil, wherein we hope our good acts outweigh our bad ones. While this perspective may be common, it is biblically incorrect. As Ephesians 2:8-9 reads, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast" (NIV). Grace is God's unmerited favor, demonstrated most fully in the sacrifice of Christ. In short, the only way to heaven is through Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Those who argue that all good people go to heaven often suggest that if hell exists, it is reserved for a minority of particularly evil people. But since most people are not so evil, they argue, it makes sense to claim that all good people will get to heaven regardless of any minor lapses in moral behavior. Does this reasoning hold up? It does so only if it fails to take into account the nature of God, the nature of sin, and what the Bible has to say on the subject. As we've noted, God is holy, but He is also just. God's justice requires the reality of hell for the unredeemed. The nature of sin extends, biblically speaking, to everyone. Salvation is not by works, but by God's grace through Christ.

What if you're sincere?

What about sincere and good people who are not Christian? See the articles in this series, "Is Christ the Only Way?" and "What about those who have never heard?" for related information. Won't God welcome them into heaven? This assumes that sincerity is enough to correspond to truth, when in reality it is not. As Proverbs 16:25 reads, "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, then it must face reality. No matter how sincere someone may be about being able to fly by frantically flapping their arms, their sincerity will not keep them in the air. Besides, if someone is actively believing something that is not true and, as a result, is implicitly if not explicitly rejecting God, it seems odd for God to welcome such a person into heaven. Sincerity, then, is not enough. One also has to believe what is true.

"No one is good – except God alone"

Like the man who approached Jesus and used the word "good," perhaps without giving it much thought, we too need to be careful how we use and define our terms. As Jesus answered, "No one is good – except God alone" (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Do all "good" people go to heaven? Since no one is good as defined by God, the answer is, "No." Those who enter heaven do so not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of God's grace as bestowed by Jesus Christ. We can't work our way to heaven or claim to be without sin (1 John 1:8). Instead, we must humbly submit to God, turn from our wrong behavior, and turn to Christ for salvation.

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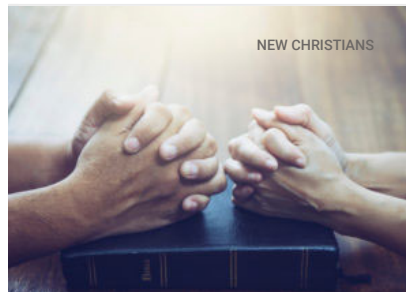
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