

Can good people earn heaven?

Rev. John Belden

The answer is, "yes." All the good people will earn heaven. But there's a catch. You really have to be good. And you have to be good the way God defines good (according to His Word). Your motives have to be good (love for God). Your purpose has to be good (glory of God). You have to be good in all your words, thoughts, and deeds.

And you have to be perfectly good all the time. A holy God has only two categories: entire obedience or curse. As Paul said, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them" (Galatians 3:10). There is nothing in between. If you want to earn heaven, "you are a debtor to keep the whole law" (Gal. 5:3).

And you have to be good your whole life. Even if you could start now and be perfect, you still have to find some way of dealing with all your past badness. But all those who are perfectly good all the time will certainly earn heaven.

I hope you see the problem. While it is technically true that all good people will earn heaven, it is only hypothetically true. The reason is no one is perfectly good. As Jesus said to the rich young ruler: "No one is good but One, that is, God" (Mark 10:18). In our natural condition there is none righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10). Solomon said, "For there is not a just man on the earth who does good and does not sin" (Eccl. 7:20).

Some people are better than others. Certainly we understand the difference between Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler. But comparing the relative goodness of sinners is like comparing cancer patients. While some are not as sick as others, they all have the fatal disease. By God's standard both Mother Teresa and Hitler need a savior to atone for their sins.

In our sight some people seem good. This was the case with Samuel when he saw David's brother Eliab and thought he should be the next king. But God told Samuel he was not the one, "For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Even king David, who was a pretty "good" man, said to God, "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous" (Psalm 143:2).

Or consider the apostle Paul. He had reasons to be confident of his goodness. He could say, "If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so" (Phil 3:4). Concerning the "righteousness which is in the law," he was "blameless" (v.6).

But do you know what Paul called all of his goodness? Rubbish! (v.8). He finally saw all his righteousness as filthy rags. From that point, he did not want his "own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (v.9).

Only perfectly good people will go to heaven. And the only way to be perfectly good in God's sight is to do what Paul did. Throw away your own goodness and receive the righteousness of Christ by faith.

Jesus was the only perfectly good person. He kept the law perfectly (Matthew 5:17). He did the whole will of His Father moment by moment in word, thought, and deed (Hebrews 10:7). He never sinned once (4:15).

He alone earned heaven by His goodness. He entered "into heaven itself" (Hebrews 9:24). But He didn't earn it for Himself. He did it "to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24), for those who will admit they are not good and trust in Him.

But you say, "I'm not so sure my goodness isn't sufficient. I don't think I'm that bad." Of course you don't. Not one of us does by nature. But if you're willing to consider what God thinks, come back next week.

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