

Good people go to Heaven and bad people go to...the other place, right? Imagine a dear old lady. All her life she's faithfully attended a little Baptist Church in her small town in the Bible belt. She's served in the nursery, worked in the kitchen during socials, and served in the women's missionary society. Everyone who knows her says she's one of the sweetest people they know. **But** she's married to a mean old cuss who has no time for God or religion. He says the church is full of hypocrites. Why would he hang out with people like that? He prefers his buddies at the local bar, where he can tell dirty jokes, place a friendly bet on a football game, and swap lies about their fishing adventures. He'd rather his wife not go to church, but realized that it gave him the freedom to go fishing on Sundays. So he jokes that he's going to baptize a few worms while she gets her religious fix.

If you asked her though, "On what basis do you hope to get into heaven?" the question would shock her. Why would you even ask? If she could find words to reply, she'd say something like, "Good people go to heaven. I've always tried my best to be nice. I've served at church and usually been able to ignore the mean comments my husband hurls at me. God knows I've done the best I could. I feel I'll go to heaven because I'm a good person."

Lately, though, her husband hasn't been feeling well. Like most tough old geezers, he avoids the doctor. Finally, he gets worried so he schedules an appointment. The doctor runs some tests and then gently gives him the bad news: "You've got advanced cancer. If you'd come sooner, we might have gotten it. There's not much we can do now. You have a few months to live."

He goes downhill fast, so they arrange for hospice. One day a hospice worker whom he likes shares the gospel with him. She tells him that God offers forgiveness for all his sins as a free gift if he'll repent of his sins and trust in what Christ did for him on the cross. She leaves him with a Gospel of John. Since he knows his time is short, he devours it. As he reads, God opens his eyes to see his sin and his need for the Savior. He sees that Jesus is God's Son who died for his sins and the Savior of all who trust in Him. He commits his life to Christ, dies a few weeks later, and goes to heaven.

While his wife would never say it, she's relieved he's dead. He was so difficult to live with. She continues with all of her religious activities. A few years later she dies. Because she was trusting in her own goodness, this sweet old lady goes to hell. She'd never trusted Christ as her Savior, as the necessary perfect righteousness God gives to all who believe.

That story, while fictional, describes the most common misconception about the most important subject imaginable: *How does a person get eternal life and go to heaven?* **Good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell, Right?** It's a topic where you don't want to be wrong! There is no second chance. Most people believe **Good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell.**

It's very rare for us to talk about other faiths or religions here at Grace. There was something though which happened in the religious world a few years ago that powerfully illustrates my point. Pope Francis rocked the religious world when he declared that everyone was redeemed through Jesus, including atheists. And if an atheist was a good person, he/she would go to heaven. In other words, it doesn't matter what you believe or if you believe at all...if you're a "good" person, you're going to heaven.

That's not what the Bible says. It's why at Grace we hold to *Sola Scriptura*, literally, "by Scripture alone" – the Bible, not man, even if he's the Pope or the pastor – the Bible is the only authority for faith and practice.

The Bible clearly says that we die and then face judgment (Heb. 9:27). There are no makeup exams! Contrary to popular opinion, God doesn't grade on the curve. It's pass or fail. To pass you must score 100% perfect righteousness. One sin in thought, word, or deed and you face God's eternal judgment! It's what happened to Adam and Eve. One sin cost them Paradise and life. The Bible resoundingly repeats this truth, Romans 10:1-4 (p. 946).

Paul explains why some very religious people missed salvation. The Jews were as religious as you could be. They were fanatics! They were OCD about keeping the Law. To interpret that Law correctly, so nobody missed it, they came up with hundreds of extra laws. Keeping the Sabbath wasn't specific enough for them so they had rules about how far you could walk and what constituted work on the Sabbath. When Jesus on the Sabbath made clay with His spit to anoint a blind man's eyes to heal him, the Jews accused Him of working on the Sabbath. They had lists of rules for what made someone a good person, but they totally missed salvation.

The Apostle Paul writes that these Jews who were doomed had no basis to blame God. Their spiritual pride made them think their good works qualified them for heaven, but they were wrong. People who think that they're good enough for heaven, quickly get offended if you tell them they're sinners and need a Savior. The Bible clearly teaches that there are no good people, just a great God. Let's look at what the Bible says. **Here are the facts...**

While Heaven is possible for everyone, not everyone will go there. Ten of the eleven major religions teach salvation through good works. It's the belief that if you're good or moral, you'll go to heaven. Christianity stands alone with its emphasis on grace and grace alone to get one to heaven.

Even here we have a difficulty because there are many churches who call themselves "Christian," but believe "being good" is the ticket to heaven. It's not. As we consider the possibility of going to Heaven, we're faced with *two options: Being Good and Moral will get us into Heaven or Being Good and Moral will not get us into Heaven.*

First Option: Being good can get us into Heaven. On a human level, we want to believe man is basically good. None of us want to think someone might go to hell. Even the worst cynic wants to believe the best of people.

That's hauntingly illustrated in the words of Anne Frank (**picture**). While hiding with her family from the Nazis, she penned this in her diary: *"It's really a wonder I haven't dropped all my ideals because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."* That young Jewish girl wanted to believe that, even while she hid in terror from the Nazis who ultimately discovered them, sending them to the Death Camps.

What we see, even within the stained glass sphere of religion, isn't new. It goes all the way back to the beginning. Cain attempted to gain God's favor through his own efforts. Through the ages people have sought to appease God by their own good deeds.

All of us realize that we can't achieve perfection, so we developed various systems that call for degrees of goodness. Humanity attempting *"to pull himself by his own bootstraps"* to God by performing good deeds. On close scrutiny we discover **Four Major Flaws** with depending on good deeds to gain entry into heaven.

* **Good deeds are arbitrary.** Who determines the standard of good? Me, you, the Dali Llama, the Pope? Is it the 10 Commandments, the Golden Rule, or the Five Pillars of Islam? What's good enough to get us into heaven?

Then, how many really keep them? In one religious discussion group, someone asked, *"What's good enough to get someone into heaven?"* Some responded, *"You have to keep the Ten Commandments and obey the Golden Rule."* That was followed up by another question, *"So how many keep those two things (the 10 Commandments and the Golden Rule)?"*

"Even though we don't keep them perfectly, we should all do our best." A third question followed: *"Do any of you do your best all the time?"* No one could respond with anything near a resounding "Yes," so the group lowered the standard again. They felt if you just tried to do your best most of the time, you'd make it. But what does most of the time mean? Does it mean 51% or 75% or 90%? In the end, they admitted they were unable to determine the level of commitment necessary for salvation.

Good deeds are arbitrary. We don't know how God grades our performance. Does God grade with on the curve? Does He compare us against ourselves or others? If He compares us with others, does He compare us with Hitler and Osama Bin Laden, or with "Honest" Abe Lincoln and Mother Theresa?

* **Good deeds offer no assurance of salvation.** Good deeds can only offer a "I hope so." When you talk to someone trusting in their own goodness to get them to heaven, and if you ask them, "Are you going to go to heaven?" They nearly always say, "I hope so." It's like they put all of humanity on a ladder. The more good deeds a person does, the higher on the rungs he goes, with the lowest scoundrel on the bottom and the most saintly on the top.

If you ask someone to select the rung where God draws the line for salvation, they nearly always respond the cut is somewhere below them and their rung. Even if they think they've made it, they're not sure and won't know for sure until they stand before God. But then it's too late.

* **A standard of good deeds ultimately asks God to approve of evil.** Any system which demands anything less than perfection, must allow some evil, and then must also ask God to approve of this evil. But if God allowed imperfect people into heaven, heaven would no longer be perfect.

Heaven is a place without any suffering or sin, not just one with minimal suffering and sin (Rev. 21-22). If you had a pitcher of 100% pure water and added just a little bit of poison, would you still want to drink it?

Some suggest heaven would be all right if God let basically "good people" in. Even if it wouldn't be perfect, it'd still be enjoyable. But God once wiped out all evil except some *basically* good people, Noah and his family. As soon as Noah got off the boat, the sin cleansed world didn't stay good. The last recorded act of "good but not quite perfect" Noah, was that he got drunk and passed out. We can't escape evil. We carry it inside us, in our hearts.

It's why God must eradicate evil. It's a cancer. Heaven would quickly be as bad as earth if God allowed imperfect people in. God, because He's holy, can't approve of any evil. His flawless character demands that He judge all evil. The Bible says anyone less than perfect must be separated from God.

* **A standard of good deeds contradicts the Bible.** Most think you go to heaven because you do enough good deeds. Jesus referred to this as *"the wide and easy way that leads to destruction"* (Mt. 7:13). Heaven is God's Home. God sets the standard for who can enter into His Home.

Even we, at our limited human level, know that the Marines are looking for a "few good men." You can't get into the Marines if you're under or over a certain age. You must have certain physical capabilities. The Marines have a set standard for who can and can't get in. God has set a standard for His Home too. The Bible teaches the only way to overcome the gap between man and God is through faith in God, not good works.

A good works system is rooted in pride. It's pride that keeps us away from God's solution. By following a works system, we can give credit to ourselves, "I'm going to heaven because I earned it." Do we really think God will allow folk in heaven bragging how they did it and got in on their own?

There are many reasons that God chose to save man by grace. The one the Apostle Paul mentions is directly connected to our pride, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9).

2) Second Option: Being good can't get us into Heaven. Goodness isn't determined by statistics. The Bible points out that the "normal person" is a "sinful person." The standard of goodness is found in the holiness of God. God gave us a divine mandate: "*Be holy, because I am holy*" (1 Pet. 1:16).

The Ten Commandments are the example. Who hasn't lied or stolen or coveted? Anyone always honored their parents? Do we want to talk about lust or idolatry? We're a bunch of lying, lustful, stealing, jealous sinners.

To go to Heaven, we must keep the Ten Commandments perfectly. Yet, only God is perfect and righteous. No one can gain eternal life on their own. The only course of action is to commit your life to Christ to obtain eternal life. Heaven can't be gained by goodness, but by grace and grace alone!

When the Bible speaks of our sin, it sees our sin from God's viewpoint. To God, all of our sin is equally bad. When we think of our sin, we think sociologically and notice the vast differences in the sins of others. When the Bible says "*all have sinned*," it's not saying they're the most horrible people alive. God has a perfect standard. All of us have sinned and fall short of God's standard. While we compare ourselves to others, God compares us to Jesus Christ who was perfect.

Let me illustrate. It's just under 100 miles across Lake Michigan from Milwaukee to Muskegon, Michigan. Suppose one day three men are standing at the end of a pier in Milwaukee. One is a homeless person, an alcoholic, grubby, living on the street. The second is an average American, and the third an Olympic athlete. All of a sudden the homeless man leaps off the edge of the pier, five feet out into the water. The other two yell, "What are you trying to do?" The man in the water yells back, "I'm jumping to Michigan." The average man on the street, says, "Watch me. I can do better than that!" He jumps, landing ten feet out, twice as far as the alcoholic. The third, the Olympic athlete, laughs disdainfully at the two men in the water. He moves back about 50 yards, takes a running leap and lands twenty-five feet out, twice as far as Mr. Average, and four times as far as Mr. Alcoholic.

The Coast Guard fishes them out of the water and asks what they're doing. to which they all reply, "We're jumping to Michigan!" and Mr. Average boasts of beating Mr. Alcoholic, and Mr. Olympic athlete boasts about beating both of them. The Coast Guard officer shakes his head and exclaims, "You fools! You're still a 100 miles short of your mark!"

All of us consider ourselves pretty good, if not better than others. Each of us is still infinitely far from the mark God has set. God's standard is absolute holiness. None of us get even close. It's why Samuel Johnson (**picture**) said, "*Every man knows that of himself which he dare not tell his dearest friend.*"

James 2:10 says, "*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in **one** point has become accountable for all of it.*" If you're dangling by a chain from a 500 foot precipice and only one of the links breaks. At 500 feet it doesn't matter if one link breaks or if all of them break...the result is the same! When we violate God's Law, whether it's lots of sin or one, the result is the same!

God is just. Because He's just, He demands that a penalty be paid for sin. The judgment for sin is death and eternal separation from God. Isaiah tells us that our sins have separated us from God, "*your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear*" (Isa. 59:2). Paul describes the penalty in Romans 6:23 "*the wages of sin is death*" or the cost of sin is death. God can't change the penalty. If He did, He'd no longer be just. The penalty must be paid. Either man pays his own penalty, or someone else must pay it.

2. Many good people will miss heaven because they're deceived about their true spiritual condition. In Romans 10:2 Paul writes, "*For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.*" If anyone was zealous for his religion, it was Paul. It even resulted in his persecuting the church. Muslims are zealous for God as they understand Him. Their zeal can lead them to kill any "infidel" who veers from Islam.

Ours is a day that disparages absolute truth. Many believe that each of us should determine our own truth. What's true for you may not be true for me, so we should "*Co-exist*," as the bumper sticker says.

If that means we should be civil towards one another, that's true. If it means though that it doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or atheist, it's fatally flawed! Just as it matters greatly whether you take the exact drug the doctor has prescribed in the exact amounts at the proper times, so it matters eternally whether you believe in Jesus as the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead.

If you're zealous for a different "Jesus" or way of salvation other than faith alone in Christ alone, the Bible says you're lost (Gal. 1:6-9). All roads don't lead to Heaven. Being sincere isn't enough. Good intentions aren't enough.

The bottom line is that good people can't go to heaven because they're fundamentally deceived about their true condition. Isaiah 64:6 uses a very graphic picture to describe the truth, "*all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*" or as the KJV renders it, "*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*" Have you ever seen a rag after a man used it to clean his engine? It's covered with dirt, grease and grime. Imagine dragging that rag through a puddle of human excrement. That's the picture behind the phrase "*filthy rags.*" It's what God sees as He looks down from heaven at my life and yours. Even the good things we do are polluted with sin. We say, "Look at me, God, I'm so good." And God says, "All I see is a pile of filthy rags."

3. Many "good" people will miss heaven because they think they're good enough. This is the core problem. Good people don't go to heaven because they think they don't need Jesus. They think they're good enough.

It's what happened to the Jews. That's why they had all those rules and added more to what God had already given. They tried to "establish" their own righteousness. They didn't want God's way so they set up their own way. They didn't accept God's plan, salvation by faith, so they came up with one of their own. They didn't understand that their goodness was insufficient and that Christ is the end of the law.

Romans 10:3-4, "*For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the **end** of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*" The word "end" means *fulfillment*. Everything in the Old Testament points to Jesus. All those animal sacrifices pointed to the cross. Even the Ten Commandments point to Him. Jesus is the only one who kept them perfectly.

Many Jews thought by keeping the law they could be good enough to go to heaven. But the Law was meant to show them that no one was good enough to go to heaven. The Law was like a schoolteacher to point them to Christ (Galatians 3:24). *How?* By revealing their failure and showing their need for a Savior. But they missed it. The problem with the religiously proud Jews was, "*they did not submit to God's righteousness.*" To do so, they'd have to admit that they were sinners and their good works could never justify them.

James Montgomery Boice (**picture**) uses the analogy of a woman who's dying of a disease and refuses to go to a doctor because she insists she looks fine when she puts on her makeup. While her face may look fine with her makeup on, she needs to deal with internal disease. Religious people may look good on the outside with all their good deeds, but if they don't admit their need for God's perfect righteousness credited to their account, their good deeds are just makeup. "Good" people miss salvation because they don't understand God's righteousness and seek to establish their own.

4. The impossibility of being "good" and going to Heaven is only possible through Jesus Christ. We can't make it on our own, but God freely offers the solution! God in His justice demands payment and God in love offers the substitute. Jesus is our substitute. He paid our sin debt on His cross.

"*God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). We rejoice that Paul completed Romans 6:23 "*For the wages of sin is death*" with "*but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Jesus died and paid the price for our sin so that we could go to heaven and live for all eternity. That's what John 3:16 is all about.

Let me share a true story that demonstrates both the justice and love that God has displayed to us. During the Great Depression, the police hauled a frightened old man before the magistrate in a New York City night court. They charged the man with petty larceny. He was starving and stole a loaf of bread. By coincidence that night, the Mayor himself, Fiorello LaGuardia (**picture**), was presiding over the court. LaGuardia sometimes sat in for judges as a way of keeping close to the citizens of NYC. LaGuardia fined the old man \$10. "The law is the law, and cannot be broken," the Mayor pointed out. At the same time, he took a \$10 bill out of his own wallet and told the man he'd pay the fine for him. Then, LaGuardia turned to the others in the courtroom and "cited" each of them for living in a city that didn't help its poor and elderly, tempting them to steal. The Mayor fined everyone in the audience 50 cents each, passed around his famous fedora to collect the fines, and turned over its contents to the amazed defendant. The hat contained almost \$50. That poor old man left the courtroom with tears in his eyes.

Conclusion: God's way of salvation is not the way of the sweet little old lady. It's not the way of being a good person. You can't be good enough. One sin disqualifies you from heaven. We're all born with the terminal disease of sin that only grows worse as we age. Don't be deceived into thinking the "makeup" of good works will avert God's judgment.

God poured out all of His judgment on Jesus for us. God's way of salvation is to trust in Christ so that the righteousness of God is placed on your account. As Paul put it (Rom. 3:24), "*and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" The critical question is: Have you received that gift?

Are you a good person? I've no doubt about your character. I'm sure your friends and neighbors would vouch for you. You pay your bills, mow your lawn, go to work and take care of your obligations the best you can. You may be a model citizen. Every society needs fine people. Thank God for good, decent, law-abiding people.

So we've established that you are a good person. But that leads me to a second, far more important question: *Are you a saved person?* Maybe you don't know how to answer that. Many times good people have trouble understanding their need for salvation. They feel that to be saved is to admit some kind of failure.

That's correct. The Bible says we're all sinners. *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom. 3:23). Are you willing to admit you're a sinner in the eyes of a holy God? The Bible says sin leads to death. *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23a). Are you willing to admit that your sin leads to eternal death and separation from God? The Bible also has good news for you. Christ died on the cross to forgive you of all your sins. *"God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8). The Bible says that *"the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom. 6:23b).

If you're a good person and want to go to heaven, there's one thing you must do. You must call upon the Lord Jesus for salvation. *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10:9).

Can a good person go to heaven? Yes, if he/she is willing to turn away from their goodness and trust Christ for 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. I've got good news and better news. The good news is: 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.

That's what it means to be a Christian. It means trusting in Jesus so much you risk your eternity on what the Bible says and what He did for you on the cross. Trusting Jesus for salvation means to trust Him so completely that if He can't take you to heaven, you aren't going to go.

Are you willing to do that? Are you a Christian? First, you must admit that you're not a good person and come to Jesus, run to the cross and ask Him to be your Lord and Savior? Will you do that? Will you do that right now?