

How do I get to Heaven?
Jesus' answer versus the World's answer
John 6:28 - 40
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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How do I get to heaven?

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Philadelphian native Will Smith is best known today as an actor. He began his career as a rap artist. Many years ago, at a Grammy Award Ceremony, Will Smith told the following story. His son at the time was in first grade. Mom and dad had come in for a periodic parent/teacher conference. The teacher told them that their son was having problems with his *rhyming* skills. Said Will Smith, “*I am a hip hop artist, there is definite parental failure here.*” 😊

In the Atkinson family, we talk theology around the dinner table. Years ago, when the children were younger, we were talking about the subject of heaven at the dinner table. Lois Ann asked our youngest son, Aaron, ‘*Why should God let you into heaven?*’ Aaron smiled charmingly and said, ‘*Because I’m nice.*’ Definite parental failure there. Where did that idea come from? Aaron has two unrepentant Calvinists for parents. When we shoot photographs we don’t say ‘*cheese,*’ we say ‘*predestination.*’ Our idea of relaxing with a good book is to read Calvin’s *Institutes of Theology*.

“Nice!” – Where did that answer come from?

Then it struck me. It really was not our fault. It is in the genes. Right there in the genetic code, woven into our human DNA, is the idea that what God requires of us is to be ‘*nice.*’ Being ‘*nice*’ gets you in. Being ‘*not nice*’ locks you out. Being nice, doing good, acting kindly, these are the things that ultimately matter.

Everybody thinks about theology. People often think that theology is a boring subject reserved only for those folk who are specially constituted emotionally to endure its tedious content. But that is a grave mistake. Any time we think or talk about God, what he is like, or what he expects of us, we are talking theology. Any time we ponder the question of how one gets to heaven, or what heaven is like, or why bad things happen, we are asking theological questions. Anytime we entertain questions of ultimacy we are walking in the terrain of theology.

Probably the most common question asked in theology is this: *How do I get to heaven?* Or, put somewhat differently, “*What do I have to do to please Almighty God?*” This is the question the people in our passage asked Jesus”
²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”

Popular theology teaches that there are three types of people in our world. First there are those who are *nice*. They are the people who deserve heaven. Why? Because they are *nice*. How do you get into heaven? You get into heaven by dying. On the other side of the doorway of death, according to popular belief today, is heaven – for those who are nice. The second type of person, according to popular theology today, are those who are *bad*. They deserve hell. In popular thinking we place in this category the well-known bad-guys of history: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and others like them. The third type of person, according to popular theology, is in-between. They know that they are not all that God expects of them. They know that they could be *nicer*. But they do not see themselves as *bad*. Rather, they know that they need to be *better*. They need an element of improvement. They need some evidence of worthiness. They need to do a little bit more.

My sense is that most people, when they think about these ideas of popular theology, put themselves in the last category. They think and believe that they are good enough already. They believe God will let them into his heaven, but in honesty, they must admit that they could be better people. They should do more. Such modern folk are exactly like the people who approached Jesus that day. “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” They want to know, “What is a passing grade?” How much is needed to earn God’s approval?

Heaven, in this frame of thinking, is a goal. It is something earned, by our effort, sacrifice, talent and achievement. We think in terms of calculations. In order to get to heaven, how often do I have to go to church? How many of the Ten Commandments am I allowed to break and still get in? Will God grade on a curve? And if so, how good do I have to be?

The Problem with Popular Theology

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The country singer, Trace Adkins, sings a song about meeting a man on an airplane flight. When the man learns that Adkins is a country western singer, he asks why he sings that “hillbilly” music. Adkins replies that he sings, “Songs about me and who I am / Songs about loving and living / And goodhearted women, family, and God.” We like songs about me. The problem with Popular Theology is that it begins at the wrong starting point: it starts with us, not God. “*How good do I have to be?*” we ask. Frankly, that’s why it’s so *popular*. It is about *us*. We like theology that starts with *us*.

But what happens if we begin our theology with God? Among the attributes of God is his *holiness*. The only attribute of God that is expressed in its greatest degree in the Bible is God’s holiness. The Bible says that God is *holy, holy, holy*. He is thrice holy. He is intensely holy. When we begin with God’s nature, and not our efforts, the picture that is painted is quite different.

I know of a couple that were in the military. Over the course of their career they spent their monthly income as soon as it came in, and more so. They went on lavish vacations, paid on credit. They bought, they accumulated, they enjoyed themselves. But, they did so at a cost of accumulating greater and greater debt. As they were nearing retirement they approached an accountant for advice on how to prepare for retirement. It was obvious that they needed to get out from under the crushing debt load they carried. They knew the truth Springsteen sings in his song, Atlantic City, "*I had debts no honest man could pay.*" The accountant studied their assets and liabilities and did the math. He told them there was, in fact, no way that they could retire. The debt they had accumulated over a lifetime could not be dealt with in the time they had remaining. The habits of a lifetime had produced a problem that was insurmountable. The habits of a lifetime bore a bitter fruit.

We can understand how a couple could get themselves into such a fix financially. We understand the relationship between our day to day financial actions and the year by year financial consequences. Let us change the image from one of money and finances to that of morality. What are our moral obligations before Almighty God? God has made this world. He is holy. He is pure. He is righteous. He has created the world. He has placed you and me in his world. You and I are to reflect God's moral nature, his holy character. We are to live within the framework of the world he has established. Each time you and I sin, we add to the imperfections of this world. We mar the world a little bit further. In doing so, we increase the debt we owe to God for our sinfulness and disobedience. Our moral debt increases each day.

Imagine how well we do in obeying the Ten Commandments each day. None of us can claim that we put God first in our lives. We come first: our **Sovereign Self** rules. We lose our cool at that idiotic driver and swear, taking the Lord's name in vain. We grow angry with our spouse, or a sibling, and intentionally cultivate the anger and resentment we feel. We hear some juicy gossip about a co-worker or neighbor and we pass it on to others. We permit our thoughts to wander into territories of imagination and fantasy that are not proper. We ascribe evil intent behind the actions of another, even though we cannot peer into their heart and know their purpose. We are jealous for the possessions, the advantages, the blessings or opportunities given to someone else and we wish that they were ours instead. Our hearts are cold in ingratitude. We plan how to make someone else look bad before friends or co-workers. We tell a lie to cover an embarrassment.

I could go on. You get the point. Each day and every day, day in and day out, we are incurring further debt before God for our sins. There is not a day that goes by in which you and I do not owe more at the end of it than we did at the beginning.

This, by the way, is one reason why men and women, in their natural state, do not seek God. Nobody seeks God on his or her own initiative. Imagine, if you were incurring such debts day in and day out financially, would you be actively seeking out your creditor? Of course not! You would hide from him. You would seek to avoid him. This is what men and women do in regards to God. We know the debt we owe. We hide, just as Adam and Eve, after their disobedience, sought to hide from God in the Garden of Eden.

What Jesus actually taught about getting into heaven: It is not a matter of doing but believing.

²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

It is important to pay close attention to Jesus’ words in response to the question put to him. The question asked is “*What must we do to do the works God requires?*” Note Jesus’ answer: “**The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**” The people ask Jesus about ‘*doing*’ but Jesus responds by speaking about ‘*believing*.’ The people ask, ‘*what must we do?*’ Jesus answer is that there is nothing that can be done. The work required is beyond our capability. We cannot do enough.

For now, let us, like Sergeant Friday, simply note the facts. Ancient Greek religion and mythology emphasized what had to be done to do the work of the gods: Hercules had his Twelve Labors; Jason set out in quest of the Golden Fleece; and Odysseus followed his odyssey in his return to Ithaca. In contrast, when asked what must be done to ‘do the work of God’ Jesus does not specify religious tasks or duties. He does not say to pray, light candles, sacrifice, or give. He says ‘*believe*.’ The work of God begins with belief. It begins with theology. It begins with faith.

There is a second, essential, thing to note.

The Solution is in God’s hands, not ours.

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

The believing begins with the work of God. The people ask Jesus, ‘*what must we do?*’ Jesus answers that they must believe in him, in Jesus the Christ. But, Jesus tells us; their belief is itself a work of God. “**The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**” Note carefully what Jesus is saying. He is saying that there is a work of God in our midst. What is that work? It is to bring people to

the place of belief in the one whom God has sent. God's work is to bring us to faith in him through Jesus Christ. Jesus is saying that the very root of our faith, our belief, begins not with us, but with God's work. He makes the same point a little later in the discourse. ³⁶ **But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.** ³⁷ **All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.** The imagery is that of God the Father giving and Jesus Christ the Son receiving. Those whom the Father gives to Jesus Christ are the ones who will ultimately come to Christ. Those who come to Christ are those whom God has given to him. A person comes to Christ because God the Father, in his sovereign purpose, has given him to Christ.

I know that this facet of the Biblical message sends some folks into fits of spiritual apoplexy. If you are about to have a cardiac infarction over what I have just said then take a few deep breaths and I will try and anticipate and answer a few of the most common objections to this teaching of Jesus.

There are those who object to this teaching by our Lord, saying, *'Wait, obviously some people do seek after God. You can't deny that.'* People do seek after God. But it is important to note the sequence of their search. The Biblical teaching is that a person who is truly seeking God did not begin the initiative of their search by themselves alone. They begin to search because God places in their heart new life and that awakened new life seeks spiritual nourishment and understanding. The presence of spiritual awareness at all indicates that God has been at work implanting, giving and nurturing new life. As Jesus puts it in this passage, all whom God gives to Christ come to him.

Some object to the idea that God would give new life before a person is even aware of it. We must first ask for it, they insist. What sense does it make, they ask, to say that God *gives* new life to someone before he or she is even aware of it? But this, of course, is a very easy objection to answer. All life that God gives is a gift from him. None of us counsels with God prior to our birth. At the moment of your conception everything necessary to make you, you, was there. You lived for nine months before you made your appearance on the scene. And then, even then, were you truly aware of the reality of your life? Most of us have no real memories prior to age four or five. When we are newborns we do not know how to **ask** for anything. All we can do is cry. But God places that new life in a community, a family: mom and dad, grandparents, perhaps sisters and brothers. We learn from them. We grow through their input and presence and involvement in our lives.

It is, I would argue, the same way spiritually. God gives new life. He brings these new creations into contact with the family of faith: the church. They teach us the dynamics of spiritual life: prayer, worship, Bible Study, encouragement, wisdom, spiritual discernment, the ancient creeds, the Lord's Prayer, etc. Most of all, the church's job, is to bring us into God's presence through worship and to point us to Jesus Christ, the one true object of our faith.

We must believe in Jesus Christ, the one whom God has sent.

⁴⁰For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Our task then, in the face of our inability to earn God’s acceptance and approval, is to believe. Belief, of course, must have an object. We do not simply ‘believe.’ Belief must have an object worthy of the faith and belief entrusted to it. The natural question then is this: what is the object of our belief to which Jesus Christ points us? He tells us in this passage that we must “*believe in the one [God] has sent.*” In speaking about the *one whom God has sent* Jesus is clearly referring to himself. His listeners understood it this way, which is why they immediately ask him for a sign to prove that he is sent from God. Basically they are challenging Jesus saying, ‘*if you are claiming to be the one whom God has sent, then prove it.*’

And the People said: *Prove it.*

³⁰So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³²Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

His listeners understood that Jesus was in fact referring to himself. That is why they respond to Jesus’ words saying, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” The irony of their demand is that giving manna in the wilderness was exactly what Jesus had done only a few days earlier when he had, miraculously, fed the five thousand with only a few loaves and fishes. The problem, of course, was that they were spiritually blind. There is a proverb in English that says, ‘*seeing is believing.*’ Like most proverbs, it is true only some of the time. Jesus says to his hearers, But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. They see, but they do not believe. They see Jesus, but do not think about him rightly.

What do you think about Jesus Christ?

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This continues to be the great challenge we face, even today. People see Jesus, without seeing him. That is, like these first century folk who sought Jesus out, they may know of him, and about him, but they do not believe in him. Many in our world see Jesus without seeing him. They see Jesus as a great man, a

godly teacher, a holy prophet, or an outstanding role model. He is the best of what humanity ought to be. He is what each of us should be.

Yet, in revering, honoring, and acknowledging Jesus in this way they see him without seeing him. They do not believe. They do not see.

So let me ask you: where are you in your relationship to Jesus Christ? What do you think about him? Do you see him as a teacher? An example? A prophet? A great human? Or do you sense that there is more to him than simply these things? Is there a spiritual hunger in your soul? If there is, it is not because you are more spiritually sensitive than other folk are. If it is there, it is because God in his grace has given it to you. He has given it to you for the purpose of drawing you to the person of Jesus Christ and confessing faith in him. This is the work of God in our lives. He brings us to see the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. He brings us to him, that we might cling to him in faith. I am inviting you to Christ this day. Turn to him. Give your life to him.

John 6:28 – 40

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