

Isn't doing good works a better path to salvation than simple belief?

Many religious perspectives emphasize good works of one form or another in order to get right with God. Muslims call for adherence to *sharia* law. Buddhists look to the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, and Mormons believe it imperative to follow the ways of the Mormon church. Therefore, it is not surprising that people are struck by the Christian claim that a person does not gain good standing with God by good works, devotion, or religious practice, but by simple faith in the grace and mercy of God and the sacrificial death of Christ. Maybe, you are struck by this as well. Maybe it even makes you uncomfortable, especially since it opens the possibility that a rather vile person could be made right with God by faith, while a rather upstanding (yet unbelieving) person could find themselves on the outside looking in. I understand this discomfort with Christianity's claim, but before we go further let's consider some shortcomings of a good works approach to getting right with God.

- The definition of good works varies from one religious system to another. For some, killing another for religious reasons is not good, for others the same act is an automatic ticket to heaven. If we say good works get us in, we first must decide on what counts for good. Could we even arrive at such a list? Perhaps some of us would be willing to omit jihadist killings, but what would we say of the white lies that we tell to save a friend from hurt or help us get a job. Do those lies get included on the list of good deeds?
- One of the difficulties of creating a list of good deeds is that we aren't sure if we should judge a work by its outcome or by its intention. If by outcome, do we say a man who abandons his family for personal gain in the field of medicine did a good deed in leaving his family because in the process he discovered a life-saving cure for cancer? And if by intention, do we say that speeding to the store for your child's medicine is a good deed even if by breaking the speed limit you cause an accident that injures another?
- Next, it seems we lack a clear scoring system for good works. I mean, how good is good enough? Must people have a simple majority of good deeds over bad deeds to make it to heaven? Or does one need a score of 90% or higher? And are some deeds, good or bad, weighted more heavily?
- Then there is the problem of tracking all our deeds. What if we get to the gates of heaven and find ourselves one good deed short because of an accounting error on our part? Or what if we arrive at heaven and find out we did far more good deeds than we needed and could have been a bit more self-indulgent in this life?
- One might also wonder why God doesn't make the scoring system for works clearer if the standard for getting into heaven is good works. In fact, it's not too harsh to say that keeping us in the dark paints God as far less than good. Imagine a teacher starting a class with this announcement: "I wish you all well this year. I don't intend to make clear what the grading system is. You will just have to find out when it's all over whether you did the things I was looking for." It's doubtful you would think that teacher to be very good.

I must agree that gaining entrance into heaven by good works sounds fair on the surface. But given these shortcomings, I hope you will agree with me that it is not as good a standard as it is cracked up to be.

But back to the concern about the believing person with a vile past getting in, while the upstanding, faithless person is excluded. Yes, Christianity does indicate this is a very real possibility. One only has to consider the thief who died next to Jesus declaring his faith in his dying hours or the hellish fate Jesus promised to the do-gooder, religious elites of his time to see that good behavior is not what is key to

getting in with God. Perhaps one way to explain this rather disconcerting stance is to recognize that God sees all people falling immeasurably short of his standard of perfection. Think, for example of the Grand Canyon. If you are a great long jumper, you might get 25 feet or more towards the other side with a running start. I might only be able to make it 10 feet! But in the end, both of us would meet our demise. The only way we can get to the other side is through intervention. This is our case relative to God as well. All of us fall short of God's standard. If the measure is good works, we all fall short.

When you think about it, Jesus' declaration (that the way to heaven is not through good works but through a desperate look to Christ for mercy) really is good news. It is good news because it doesn't matter how much you have stacked against you, there is still a path forward. You are not good enough. Never will be. But you are not without hope, because God is good enough. He has shown his goodness through the extravagant and loving sacrifice of his Son, Jesus. Cry out to him for mercy, and regardless of your score on the good works scale, a spot with him in heaven is reserved for you.

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