

Is Heaven For Me?

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Heaven seems like such an unachievable goal to many people that they do not even work for it. No matter how beautiful heaven is described, the attitude persists: "There is no way that someone like me can actually make it." Some even go so far as to conclude that God would not want them there anyway. There is a misconception that Heaven is like some kind of well-manicured country club for perfect people, poets and philosophers, and that the "riff raff" is quietly kept out of sight. How many of us have accepted the notion that there is very little chance of ever making it to the glorious side of the afterlife? Or that it will take a perfect confluence of spiritual, physical, and doctrinal conditions to be found worthy?

Christianity Is For The Imperfect

Nowhere is it stated in the Bible that self-produced perfection is a prerequisite of admission into heaven. In fact, the most able candidates for Christ's religion were the rejects of society – souls who were so hopelessly stained with sin that they had long been caricatured and rejected by those who should have had the greatest spiritual advantages! *"And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?' But when He heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners'"* (Matthew 9:10-13). Not that folks like the Pharisees had no need for forgiveness (which they did [Matthew 23]). What Jesus means is that the mission of the Gospel is to bring salvation to those who know they need it (the sick) and educate those who think they do not (the healthy).

There is nobody who is too far gone, or who is not qualified to lead the Christian life. Forgiveness is an integral part of it, available to all people (Acts 10:34-35). Ironically, it is not necessarily those who "sin more" who will not inherit eternal life, but those who have an arrogant attitude toward their spiritual condition. To be certain, the tax collector from Luke 18:9-14 probably had a longer list of sins than the Pharisee, but the self-congratulatory nature of the latter clouded his judgment while the humility of the former redeemed him. Jesus similarly explains the concept in Luke 10:12-15 and Matthew 11:20-24 as He compares towns like Bethsaida and Capernaum (typically Law-abiding Jewish communities, but who stubbornly refused the Gospel) to a city like Sodom (which is so famous for sin that there is even a category of sexually deviant practices named after it).

Notice Paul's explanation in Romans 2:1-8. He states, particularly, *"To those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, [God will render] eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, [God will render] wrath and indignation."* It is not the fact that a person is perfect that makes him or her worthy of eternal life, but that they are

pursuing the right things. Conversely, selfish ambition can derail the spiritual journey of a person who might otherwise be living according to all the rules.

Who Else Is Going To Be In Heaven?

When I start thinking that heaven is an inaccessible goal for “someone like me”, it is helpful to turn to Hebrews 11 and consider the various ups and downs experienced by these faithful (but flawed) humans. One of the fundamental truths of this chapter reveals a startling fact: *“Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (Hebrews 11:6). Notice that it does not say that God is a rewarder of those who are perfect! And it is a good thing, too, or else this list would suddenly get much shorter. Abraham and Sarah both had their failures (Genesis 18:12-15, 22:10ff), just as David did. Samson was an immoral man (Nazarite covenant-breaker, husband of a Philistine woman, committed fornication multiple times). And do not forget Jephthah and his rash vow, Moses and his doubts, Rahab and her life of harlotry. In spite of all the failures, they *“gained approval through their faith”* (Hebrews 11:39).