



## 4. What about Good People?

**General question:** How is it fair for good people not to get to Heaven?

**Also asked or stated as:**

Won't good non-Christian people get into Heaven based on their goodness?  
How could God be fair in condemning good people to Hell?

**Similar questions answered separately:**

Is Jesus the only way?

What about people who have never heard about Jesus?

What happens to Jewish people who do not believe that Jesus is their Messiah?

What happens to mentally handicapped children ... or to those who die young?

**A caution:** This question often comes from a wishful misconception of the goodness of man. However, some ask this question from a deeply personal perspective based on concern for a deceased family member or friend. The goal in this answer is not to judge or condemn someone deceased who may have been good compared to other people. The goal is to present truth and offer an understanding of God's standard.

**The Short Answer:** Good works are important to God. *"We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,"* Ephesians 2:10. It is important to be good. However, we cannot be good enough to get to Heaven on our own. God's standard is perfection, Matthew 5:48. Just one sin infects us ... making us imperfect and guilty, James 2:10. That imperfection separates us from God. *"Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,"* Isaiah 59:2. Improving our behavior through increased good works, and decreased bad deeds, does not erase our record of sins. It just makes our record get worse more slowly. Our record of past sins and the consequential guilt of those sins need to be taken away. We have all sinned and fall short of God's standard of perfection, Romans 3:23. Therefore, we need the forgiveness that comes from Christ's death paying for our sins ... but that only comes to someone when he or she personally believes in Jesus. *"Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins,"* Acts 10:43. That forgiveness cannot be achieved by our

own by good works. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,”* Ephesians 2:8-9. In addition, attempting to be good enough to get into Heaven by doing good for mankind, while ignoring God, is illogical. Moreover, not honoring Jesus is dishonoring to the Father, John 5:23. At the gates of Heaven, should anyone expect God to overlook a lifetime of ignoring Him?

## **The Long Answer:**

**Graded on a curve?** Many people struggle with the idea that good people, who are not believers in Jesus, are judged unfairly by God. Something in us desires that God grade people leniently ... letting those who are relatively good, or good enough, into Heaven. Some of my university examinations were graded on a curve. Lower grades, that normally would have indicated failure, were arbitrarily declared to be passing. One of my final examinations was an example of this. It was the most difficult exam that I ever took. Everyone did poorly. My grade was a 40 out of 100 ... declared to be passing. Everyone who had studied for the examination also did poorly ... but passed because the professor graded on a curve. I had not learned the course. I made up answers, made wild guesses, and left several questions unanswered. I did not know the material and should have failed the course. My passing grade on the examination indicated the failure of the professor. He gave me a passing grade when I had not learned the course. In the same way, if God gave passing grades to people who did not deserve them, it would indicate a failure on His part. However, God does not grade on a curve.

**Do good people get into Heaven?** The Bible states, *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* Romans 3:23 and *“There is none righteous, not even one,”* Romans 3:9. You may think that such statements are overly judgmental or exaggerated. You may be thinking of some specific people who do not seem to fit this and thinking that they deserve a more lenient judgment. Let us consider whether anyone deserves a passing grade on their own. Please do not think that you and I are judging or condemning any one person. We are simply seeking wisdom ... seeking to know how God judges all people. Is man good? Or are the words of Jeremiah 17:9 correct, *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick,”* We must look at both the horizontal and vertical goodness of man to answer that question.

**The horizontal goodness of man.** This is the goodness of man as expressed to other people. The terms morality and ethics often refer to this. Many kind and generous people do good things for others. You can probably think of many

such people from history, from today, or possibly from your own family and friends. You may even see such a person as you look into the mirror each morning. However, upon a closer look, some imperfections may come into focus. Jesus said, *“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”* Matthew 5:48. That is a tough standard. Actually it is an impossible one. The Bible states that, *“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all,”* James 2:10. The Bible’s standard is perfection. Just one mistake makes us imperfect. A few years ago, a small stone propelled by a gas-powered piece of lawn equipment hit my living room window. It shattered it into small pieces from corner to corner ... from top to bottom ... and from side to side. On a different occasion, a very small projectile hit another window in my home. It did not shatter it into small pieces. It only made a small hole in the glass surrounded by short spider-web cracks ... easily covered by the palm of one hand. Which window was broken? Obviously, both were broken. We might be tempted to say that one is more broken than the other ... but that is an illogical statement. Broken is broken. Both were broken. Both needed repair. Both cost the same to replace. In the same way, one sin breaks us. One sin makes us imperfect. We may claim that some people are less broken than others are. However, all are broken. Broken is broken.

**Horizontally speaking, how broken are we?** One evening, a woman told me that we would never agree on a definition of sin. She said that she really did not sin. I suggested that we might agree that she had done some wrong things. She not only agreed, but over my protests, started telling me about all the wrong things that she had done that day. If we are honest, we will all admit to doing wrong things. Those things are called sin in the Bible. If I commit just three sins per day, that would be over one thousand per year. Over a lifetime, that number becomes very large. The Bible lists many horizontal sins (those directed toward ourselves or other people) such as lying, stealing, partiality, gossip, dishonoring parents, evil thoughts, slander, coveting, deceit, sensuality, envy, pride, foolishness, idolatry, love of money, drunkenness, immorality, impurity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, factions, dissensions, lust, adultery, laziness, greed, filthy talk, coarse jesting, malice, vengeance, boasting, arrogance, ingratitude, hypocrisy, cowardice ... and the list goes on and on including murder, rape, incest, and more. Jesus equated the seriousness of sins of the mind with those of sins of action. Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart,”* Matthew 5:27-28. In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus equated the seriousness of angered name-calling to that of murder. *“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ ... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty ... and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty... and whoever says, ‘you fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go*

*into the fiery Hell.*” There are also sins of omission. Haven’t we sinned when having much more than we need, we ignore the starving poor throughout the world or throw a crumb in their direction? In the aftermath of a remote natural disaster, why does a modest donation to a relief agency appease our conscience? If we grade ourselves honestly, by the sins listed above, we all fail miserably. Moreover, the number of three sins per day is much too low. A more accurate daily number could be 25 or 30 ... adding up to ten thousand per year. If we die at age 65, we each take a record of over six hundred thousand horizontal sins to the gates of Heaven. Should we expect God to overlook such a record ... to grade on a curve and let us in?

**The vertical goodness of man.** By this, I mean spiritual goodness ... goodness directed toward God. When people ask about God letting a good person into Heaven, most often they are asking about those who, while being relatively good horizontally, have ignored God throughout their lives. They have been good toward themselves and others but have ignored God. The Bible commands, *“Worship the Lord with reverence and rejoice with trembling,”* Psalm 2:11. Ignoring God is not the act of a spiritually good person. Moreover, if someone ignores or dishonors Jesus, that is also unacceptable. *“He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him,”* John 5:23. Imagine that your own child was humanly successful, generous, and compassionate to his or her fellowman. However, that same child ignores you throughout life ... never speaks to you ... never honors you ... never acknowledges your existence, love, or parenthood ... just completely ignores you throughout life. Would you describe that child as a good son or daughter? Of course not! Likewise, would you expect God to approve of a person who ignored Him throughout life? When someone ignores God, he is essentially putting himself in God’s position as ruler of his life. He could be called a self-made man in love with his creator. This is similar to those described in Romans 1:25, *“For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”* Vertical sin toward God is difficult to quantify. What number could be assigned to life-long rejection of God? Should it be measured over sixty-five years as twenty-four thousand days of rejection ... five hundred seventy-thousand hours of rejection ... or thirty-four million minutes of rejection? If I bring that record of vertical sin (life-long rejection of God) to the gates of Heaven, should I expect God to overlook it and let me in?

**What about those who are trying to improve?** There are people who are sincerely trying to improve. They are seeking to do more good deeds and fewer bad deeds as the years go on. However, this usually deals only with the horizontal goodness of man’s treatment of other people ... while ignoring the vertical dimension of one’s worship of and submission to God. Improving horizontal behavior does nothing about our record of previous sins. Imagine throwing a

small rock into the middle of a field ... one for every sin that you commit. That pile of rocks would be getting bigger and bigger with every passing day. Then at some crossroads in your life, you decide to improve your behavior. Later, you decide to improve even more. You never have a sin-free day. However, on most days, you are throwing fewer rocks onto the pile than you did earlier in life. What have you accomplished by your efforts? You have only made the pile of rocks get bigger more slowly. As improved as your behavior may be, all the previous rocks are still there. Each of us needs someone to take our pile of rocks away ... to remove our record of sins. However, since God is just, those sins must be punished. They must be paid for (redeemed). That is what Jesus did on the cross ... He paid for our sins by taking our punishment. *“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross,”* 1 Peter 2:24. *“You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ,”* 1 Peter 1:18-19. Improvement of behavior neither pays for sins nor provides any forgiveness for them. The death of Jesus on the cross pays for our sin ... and our belief in Him results in forgiveness. *“Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins,”* Acts 10:43. Improved good works can never remove our record of sins ... can never bridge our separation from God. Our only hope is in God’s solution through Christ. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,”* Ephesians 2:8-9. Faith in Jesus brings us into a right relationship with God ... because when we believe in Him all of our sins (both horizontal and vertical) are removed.

**A difficult conversation.** This subject can be difficult if it deals with someone special in our lives that has died. Many years ago, I talked with an elderly woman about faith in Jesus. She understood that Jesus was God ... that He paid for her sins on the cross ... and that she needed to believe in Him. I asked if she would like to do that. The conversation became difficult. She immediately turned down my invitation because of her husband. She told me that he was a good man. They had been married for over fifty years and she loved him very much. He had died two years earlier having never believed in Jesus. She wanted to be with him in eternity even if that was not in Heaven. I told her that it was possible that he had been a silent believer who never openly expressed his faith. However, I could tell by the look on her face and by the tears in her eyes that she knew he was not in the presence of God. I told her of a similar situation described in the Bible. A rich man, not a believer, died and went to his eternal destiny away from God. He was conscious and had memories of his family. From his eternal perspective, he begged that someone warn his family. *“He said, ‘Then I beg you ... that you send him to my father’s house — for I have five brothers — in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come*

*to this place of torment,’” Luke 16:27-28. I asked what she thought her husband would want her to do. I asked what she would want him to do if their roles were reversed and he was sitting there with me. He had been a relatively good man. In reality, his record of horizontal sins was substantial even though better than most. Moreover, he had rejected God and Jesus throughout his long life on earth. His eternity would be away from the presence of God. None of his horizontal good works could save him. It had been a difficult conversation. However, she made the decision that she knew her husband would want her to make. With tears of sadness and joy, she put her faith in Jesus.*

**The right foundation.** Good works can never save us from the guilt or eternal punishment that results from our horizontal and vertical sins. Our only hope is in believing in Jesus ... in letting Him remove our record of sins. Jesus gave an interesting illustration. *“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall,”* Matthew 7:24-27. Jesus is the rock. He is the only foundation that will weather the storm of God’s eternal judgment. No house of good works built on sand can save us. That right foundation can become our own foundation by believing in Jesus. *“They said to Him, ‘What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent,’”* John 6:28-29. Are you building your house on the right foundation? No one is perfect. No one is righteous. No one meets God’s standard of perfection. That is obviously true for someone who has rejected Him from the cradle to the grave. However, forgiveness is available to anyone who calls on Him in belief. Have you believed in Him? Putting your faith in Jesus is a simple step. It is a decision to believe in Him ... to invite Him to be your Savior. If you want to be sure of your foundation ... if you want to be sure that Jesus is your foundation, then I invite you to visit [www.911GOD.org](http://www.911GOD.org).

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