

How Good Must You Be?

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How good must you be to be acceptable to God?

Look at the answer given by Moses:

Deuteronomy 10

12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you? The Lord wants you to respect him and to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the Lord's commands and his teachings which I am commanding you today for your good."

Notice how many times the word "all" is used in these verses. God requires your *complete* love and obedience. Everything you do and say should flow out of a wholehearted devotion to the Lord. In short, God requires *perfection* from you, perfection in love and perfection in obedience.

Why? I can think of three reasons: First, God *deserves* this from you. He is your Creator, Sustainer, Owner, Master, and Source of all meaning and significance. He has the right to receive your love and obedience. Second, He *loves* you deeply, and everything that He commands you is "for your good," as it says in the passage above. Third, God *is Himself* perfectly holy, righteous, and good, and the only way that He can enter into the kind of relational union He desires to have with you is if you are likewise perfectly holy, righteous, and good.

But surely this is asking too much to expect perfection. After all, "nobody's perfect." Perhaps Jesus relaxed the requirements in the New Testament. Jesus is so loving and kind -- surely he would recognize our frailties and let us slide on these sort of things.

No, actually not. Jesus, in fact, reaffirmed the Mosaic teaching. When asked what is the most important of God's commands, Jesus replied:

Matthew 22

37 "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.'"

Perfect love toward God and perfect love toward others. This was what Jesus required. Jesus was not soft on God's commands, as many people today seem to assume. Consider what He told one wealthy young man who came to Him:

Matthew 19

16 And behold, one came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" 17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

Yes, that's right: "if you wish to enter into [eternal] life, keep the commandments." This is not what you would hear in your average Bible-teaching church on Sunday morning. Jesus seems to here be advocating what is usually called "works salvation," or the idea that one can get to heaven by being *good enough*, by keeping enough of God's commandments.

The apostle Paul said something very similar in one of his letters:

Romans 2

6 God will reward or punish every person for what that person has done. 7 Some people, by always continuing to do good, live for God's glory, for honor, and for life that has no end. God will give them life forever. 8 But other people are selfish. They refuse to follow truth and, instead, follow evil. God will give them his punishment and anger. 9 He will give trouble and suffering to everyone who does evil . . . 10 But he will give glory, honor, and peace to everyone who does good . . ."

Again, this sure does sound like "works salvation." If you are good, God will give you eternal life. If you are bad, God will punish you.

But take a closer look. Notice that Paul says God will only give eternal life to those who are "*always continuing* to do good." That sounds a lot like the requirement to "walk in *all* His [God's] ways" mentioned in Deuteronomy 10 above, and the various "all" statements used by Jesus in the passage from Matthew 19 above. Paul was really saying the same thing that Moses and Jesus said: If you want to *earn* eternal life, you must be *perfectly good*. You must consistently, "always continue" to do good, obeying *all* of God's commands.

Paul again says the same thing in chapter five of his letter to the Galatians, where he gives a warning to certain Christians who thought they needed to be circumcised (i.e., follow the law of Moses) in order to be *real* Christians. In Galatians 5:3, Paul warns these people: "If you allow yourselves to be circumcised, you must follow *all* the law." In other words, if you are hoping to gain God's acceptance by being good, this will work only if you can be *perfectly* good and keep *the whole* law at every point. If you break God's law at even just one point, then Paul says you "are under a curse, because the Scriptures say, 'Anyone will be cursed who does not *always obey* what is written in the Book of the Law'" (Galatians 3:10).

So then, Moses, Jesus, and Paul all agree: if you *perfectly* obey God's law, God promises to give you eternal life. This is indeed works salvation, and it was God's own idea.

Is this good news or bad news? If you are perfect, it is very good news for you. If you are not perfect, it is obviously not what you had hoped to hear.

"But nobody's perfect!", you may be saying. "This isn't fair!"

"Yes," and "No." Yes, it's true that no one is perfect, as Paul himself confirmed in the chapter that follows the passage we read above:

Romans 3

9 We have already said that Jews and those who are not Jews are all guilty of sin. 10 As the Scriptures say: "There is no one who always does what is right, not even one. . . 23 All have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory. . ."

Though God would gladly give eternal life to anyone who would consistently do good, there is in fact no one who ever meets this standard. Everyone falls short of it, including you and me.

It's not true, however, that God is being unfair. Remember the three reasons I gave earlier for why God can rightly demand perfection from you. God is fully within His rights to ask you to consistently choose the good. But neither you nor I have done so. This puts us quite at odds with our Creator, with only an expectation of God's "punishment and anger" awaiting us.

Though this may sound like a hopeless situation, it is actually necessary to pass through this dark realization before one can understand the alternative that God offers. What we have discussed above is variously known as "works salvation" or simply the Law. But there is another way. God didn't have to offer this other way, but He has done so because of His love for us. The apostle Paul contrasts this alternative way with the way of Law described above:

Romans 3

20 . . . no one can be made right with God by following the law. The law only shows us our sin. 21 But God has a way to make people right with him without the law, and he has now shown us that way which the law and the prophets told us about. 22 God makes people right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith in Jesus. This is the alternative, the way of faith. God offers it to each of us who will listen. To learn more about it, read the separate devotional "Why Did Christ Have to Die?"

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