

HEAVEN

WHO GOES THERE?

How Good Is Good Enough? Andy Stanley

Scripture: Romans 3:10, 20; John 3:16–17

Idea: Good isn't it.

Introduction

[The story is told that a Sunday school teacher wanted to explain to first graders what someone had to do to go to heaven. To discover what the kids already knew about the subject, he asked a few questions.]

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all the money to the church, would **that** get me into heaven?”

["No!" the children answered.]

“If I cleaned the church, mowed the lawn, and kept everything neat and tidy, would **that** get me into heaven?”

["No!" the children answered. "Well then," he said...]

“If I'm kind to animals and give candy to children, would **that** get me into heaven?”

[The children again reply, "No!" "Well then," their Sunday school teacher said, "How can I get into heaven?" A boy in the back row stood up and shouted...]

“You gotta be **DEAD!**”

[Today, we're in Part 1 of our series...]

Graphic: Title slide for *Heaven: Who Goes There?*

[Most Americans believe in a heaven, and most Americans believe they are going there. There's mystery around it, but most people are confident it'll work out. They think, For now, I have to go work out, go to work or to school. Two assumptions fuel their confidence.]

Good people go to heaven.

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I'm a good person.

[Good people go. Bad people? Who knows? I'm busy and don't have time to give it much thought.]

[Some Christians reject those assumptions, and some embrace them or some version of them. So, I thought we should talk about it. There are some advantages to this way of thinking.]

Advantages

1. It's **just**.

[... or it's fair. Good people should be rewarded for being good. Everybody knows, generally, what's good. It's embedded in pretty much all religious systems with some variations. Everybody can't be wrong.]

2. **You** make the cut.

[You're a good person. Compared to some people, you're amazing!]

3. It supports the notion of a **good God**.

[A good God would reward good people and populate heaven with good people like you and me. The other advantage is:]

4. The fear of **not** going to heaven should motivate people to be **good**.

[There's a payoff in the end. It's worth an extra measure of being nice, kind, and demonstrating self-control. So, be good! You'll go to the good place.]

[But upon closer examination, when you scratch beneath the comforting veneer, the good-people-go-to-heaven theory breaks down quickly.]

The Unsettling Reality

1. There's no indisputable, agreed-upon, divinely-revealed **standard**.

[There's no multi-generational, universal list or set of rules to measure ourselves and our behavior against. The concepts of morality, justice, and goodness have been all over the place historically. As an illustration, consider our current ethics regarding the treatment of women. We consider men and women to be equal, but that wasn't always so. If our view of the dignity

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of women is good, then before the 20th century, maybe only a dozen or so men made it to heaven. Think about that. Not too long ago, it was considered self-evident that men were a better species than women. That's a bad way of thinking. So how could a good God allow those men into heaven?]

[Don't get too excited, ladies. Think about the modern, Western ethic regarding the dignity of all people and slavery. Maybe nobody got into heaven before the 16th century except slaves. In every culture around the world then, people owned slaves. So before the 16th century, who made it to heaven? My point is...]

Good is a **moving** target.

[It's a moving target culturally, generationally, nationally, and personally. What bothers you now likely didn't bother you in a previous season of life.]

[Some people want to use the Bible as the standard. I don't advise that. If the Bible is the standard...]

You **don't** make the cut.

[You may ask, "What about the Ten Commandments?" You couldn't recite them if your eternity depended on it. Here's a fun fact: In the book of Exodus, there is no mention of heaven. The Old Testament doesn't have any theology of the afterlife. There's no: "Do the following and..."]

[Unlike the Old Testament, which ignores issues of eternity, the New Testament is worse. It's full of stuff about heaven and eternal life. But it's a tease. The message is: Good luck! You're doomed! Here's what the apostle Paul wrote:]

Romans 3:10, 20

¹⁰ "There is **no one** righteous, not even **one**."

²⁰ Therefore **no one** will be declared righteous in **God's sight** by the **works** of the law.

[Many of us have heard this statement from the Bible: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The Bible does not provide a standard of conduct that guarantees heaven. It's just the opposite.]

[I'm not arguing that the Bible is correct. I'm just pointing out that the Bible doesn't offer a magic list of what to do to get to heaven. If you think it does, you haven't read the Bible. So...]

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The Unsettling Reality

1. We have no established **standard**.

[A second problem with the good people go theory is...]

2. We don't know what **percentage** of our actions have to be **good** to make the cut.

[Is 70 percent good enough? Is it 50 percent? Does God factor in our environment? At what age does our behavior start to count?]

3. We don't know if **thoughts** and **motives** count against us.

[Is it what we do or why we did what we did?]

4. We could already be **out of time**.

[You may have done so many bad things that you don't have time to make up for them. What if you're out of time? You could be doomed and not know it. Which means...]

You're being **good** for **nothing!**

5. We could **miss** heaven by **one** good deed.

[You were right on the edge. If only you had not lost your temper with that customer service agent, but you did. That one infraction bumped you out.]

[Then there's this: If good people go to heaven, but God never took the time to tell us how the system works, then...]

6. God is **not** good.

[What do you call a...]

Teacher

[... who doesn't give you any notes or reading assignments, just a final exam? And who doesn't bother to post the exam date? Is that a good teacher?]

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[What do you call a...]

Boss

[... who evaluates your performance without giving you a job description or explaining what's expected? Maybe you call that...]

Your boss

[But that's not a good boss. What do you call...]

Race Officials

[... who don't post signs marking out the course? Or who won't reveal the distance you're expected to run and establish the finish line after the race has started?]

[That's not good, fair, or just. If good people go to heaven, that's the situation. So, if good people go to heaven, then...]

The Unsettling Reality

God is **not** good.

[He's not just or fair. Or God has a very different view of what is good, just, and fair. Some people believe that's the case.]

[If you scratch beneath the surface, the whole thing breaks down and becomes absurd. We're supposed to be good, so we can go be with a good God who never defined the terms and failed to tell us how good is good enough.]

If God is **good**...

[He should show up every generation and give us the updated version of good and what's expected.]

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[The world is a different place. If there was a way to work our way into heaven, we would need an update for each generation.]

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[This is so important! How are we supposed to sleep at night? What do we say at funerals? "Joe was a really good man."]

"He was **good enough** for us."

"I hope he was **good enough** for heaven."

[Let's pray to the God who left us wondering where we stand in terms of eternity.]

[What are we supposed to tell our children? I ran across an article by psychoanalyst and author Erica Komisar. She says this:]

"I am often asked by parents, 'How do I talk to my child about **death** if I don't believe in **God** or **heaven**?'"

"My answer is always the same: '**Lie.**'"

"The idea that you simply **die** and turn to **dust** may work for some adults, but it doesn't help children."

"Belief in **heaven** helps them grapple with this tremendous and incomprehensible loss."
—Erica Komisar

[There are options to the good-people-go-to-heaven theory. There's the...]

God **decides!**

[... view. Who are you to question God? He chooses who he will and dooms the rest. Then, there's the...]

You wouldn't recognize good if it **bit** you!

[... view. We're so depraved and deprived of the ability to recognize good, much less do what's good. So, there's no point in God trying to explain it to us.]

[I like cliffhanger message conclusions. I considered closing with:]

So what do we **do**?

Don't miss part **two!**

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[Try your best not to get dead in the meantime. But that's not a very fond farewell, so I'll close with this instead.]

[According to Jesus, good people don't go to heaven, which doesn't make it true. That's just what he said and taught. At the same time, Jesus instructed his followers to...]

Be good.

[And to...]

Do good.

[... to each other and their enemies. Jesus believed we are capable of recognizing the difference between good and evil. He instructed his followers to be good like their Father in heaven, even to people who mistreated them, but not so they would go to heaven. Jesus took good to a whole new level. Yet never once did Jesus infer that if you're good enough, you'll spend eternity in heaven.]

[In the end, "good" people (Pharisees and teachers of the law) conspired with bad people (Romans) and crucified Jesus. But he had the final word. From the cross, Jesus said to a very bad man, "I'll see you on the other side."]

[If Jesus is who his first-century followers claimed he is, that's good news. You don't have to lie to your children or grandchildren. When you lose a loved one, you can grieve with hope. If Jesus was correct:]

John 3:16-17 (Paraphrased by Andy Stanley)

¹⁶ "God so **loved** the world that...

[He showed up to show and tell us the way. He said, "I am the way." Instead of giving us a list, he gave us himself.]

¹⁶ he **gave** his one and only Son, that whoever...

[Behaves like him? No. That's why you have to take Jesus out of the good-people-go-to-heaven equation.]

¹⁶ **believes** in him shall not **be lost to God** but have **eternal life**.

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[Regardless of what they've done or didn't do. John, who spent three and a half years with Jesus, wrote this. He's saying, "Here's what we learned: If Jesus was correct, God's not trying to catch us in order to condemn us."]

*17 God did not send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but to **save** the world...*

[John tells us how Jesus is going to do it. Not by updating a list for every generation, but he's going to do it...]

*17 **through** him."*

[Jesus only needed to come one time. He didn't give us a to-do list. He gave us a who and invited all of us to place our trust in him.]

[So what do we do? Don't miss Part 2 of...]

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Prayer

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What's your guess as to how the concept of "being **good enough** to earn heaven" **originated**?
2. Growing up, was heaven contingent upon:
 1. Being **good** enough?
 2. **Baptized** enough? Believing enough?
 3. A **combination**?
 4. Something else altogether?
3. Growing up, did you pray a **salvation prayer** more than once, just to be sure? What does that assume about **God**? About **you**?