

10 Misconceptions of the Christian Faith

#9 You Can Lead a Good, Moral Life and Still Get to Heaven

If you leave the earth a better place than when you came, shouldn't that please God enough to get into Heaven? Why is it that Christians say that that is not enough?

What's Wrong with Doing Good?

Serving others is an integral part of Christianity, but not as a way to make up for the bad things we have done or to earn our way into Heaven. God's standard is perfection: that we always do the good we ought to, and there is no hiding the mistakes we have made. Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." Thus, no matter how much "good" we do, we do not live up to this standard, and we are all sinners in God's eyes. We owe a debt that has to be paid, but we cannot pay it ourselves.

The answer to this problem is reconciliation with God. God has graciously provided for us the perfection of Jesus, so that we may be justified—restored to a right relationship with God—as the apostle Paul writes that God "justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

Faith in Jesus is a Necessity

The Bible explains that we cannot be in relationship with God by simply doing good deeds. Through this faith we show that we cannot depend on our own work, and so choose to depend on the merits of Jesus' work (Romans 7:17-19). Faith itself is not meritorious; rather, it clings to and trusts in the meritorious work of Jesus—both his perfect life and his sufficient sacrifice. Because of this, faith justifies us before God and reconciles us with Him, as Paul describes in Galatians 2:16: "We have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified."

We are justified by faith (Romans 5:1) when we accept God's unmerited favor—what Christians call the gift of grace. Later in Romans 11:6, Paul explains, "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." Thus, good works cannot earn God's grace and mercy—both are unmerited and given as gifts to the one who trusts in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God. When we come to Jesus in faith we say something like, "I give up! I will not depend on myself or my own good works any longer. I know that I can never make myself righteous before God. Therefore, Jesus, I trust you and depend on you completely to give me a righteous standing before God."ⁱ

Good Works Should Flow From True Faith

Faith and good works operate together. Certainly, when we have faith, there should be a change in our lives, and every act should be prompted by our faith (2 Thessalonians 1:11). In James 2:14-17, James says that our faith should produce results: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

We are renewed in right relationship with God through faith in Jesus alone, apart from our own works; nevertheless, saving faith is never alone, but always accompanied by loving actions towards others. It is through genuine faith that we act out in love for our neighbors. As 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The goal of this command is to love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Faith and Good Works

Christianity teaches that faith precedes good works. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." The Christian life is certainly a life of good works and loving actions, but Christians obey God's moral commands for love *because* Christians have been renewed in right relationship with him through Jesus, his Son. Religious systems of the world largely teach that if mankind obeys, he is accepted, whereas the Christian is first accepted by God and therefore he or she obeys out of love for God and neighbor.

Not only can we turn to Jesus Christ as the Savior, but we also have a perfect model of what it means to love others as he cared for the lowest in society and eventually died so that our sins may be forgiven. Through Jesus we can see others the way God sees them, and it is only with his help that we can attempt to glorify God through good works (cf. Matthew 5:16).

One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is the account of the rich man (Mark 10:17-22). This man had kept all the Jewish laws, yet still approached Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied, "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." But because the man had great wealth, he was unwilling to put faith in Jesus and sadly went away. He valued his earthly, transient treasure above the heavenly treasure of an eternal relationship with Jesus. We have the same choice to make in our lives—to put our faith and trust in Jesus and to live our lives on earth for him and in relationship with him. What will you choose?

ⁱ Wayne Gruden. *Systematic Theology*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press. 1994. P. 730.