

40 If people do right to get to heaven surely non-believing people who do right are better people?

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I immediately think of my atheist friend, Clive. Such a good guy, very principled but with absolutely no help from above because he disbelieves totally. His goodness is all his own. My frail goodness in contrast gets supplemented by help from above.

If you could get to heaven on your own merits Clive would beat me. Doing right for him though is all his own work, with a bit of help from his friends. Doing right for me is helped by belief – *there but for the grace of God go I!*

Both Clive and I have ultimate responsibility for the way we live our lives but mine is shared with the Lord. How effectively only God can judge - which he will one day!

In the Christian understanding you don't get to heaven by doing right but by right relationship to Christ who alone makes humanity acceptable to God.

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to (Jesus) the Lamb we read in Revelation Chapter 7 (verse 10b). For by grace you have been saved through faith we read in Ephesians 2 (verse 8). This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast (verse 9).

A great 17th century hymn puts the same truth:

*My God I love thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love thee not are lost eternally.*

*Thou, O my Jesus, thou didst me upon the Cross embrace;
For me didst bear the nails and spear, and manifold disgrace.*

*Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love thee well?
Not for the sake of winning heaven, nor of escaping hell.*

*Not from the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward;
But as thyself hast lov-ed me, O ever-loving Lord.*

If we love Jesus it's not because he rewards us so much as that we know he loves us so much.

Non-believing can be blameworthy or not – God will judge. He's free to welcome into heaven those he wants to join him there. People sometimes get put off Jesus by his followers and Jesus would surely sympathise with them. He'd particularly harsh words for religious people who were so full of themselves they missed the point. He had a heart for all outsiders – maybe that would extend to unbelievers?

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Better in the sight of God has been described as being either the top or bottom side of a carpet in a room where God's the ceiling! God's so different to us, so majestic and holy.

Goodness is admirable whatever its source. Christian faith always wants the very best, the holiness of life that will populate heaven, and it knows this can't be achieved by human effort unaccompanied by God. This is why active faith is so important.

C.S.Lewis wrote about people getting deceived by outward appearances of goodness. He contrasted a rather sour old lady in church every day with a young man who never went to church but was very popular in the local pub. Lewis speculated that the lady was heading for heaven and the youth to hell. Why? The old lady had been given little but was open to God's transforming help day by day through prayer and the sacraments. The youth had been given a lot but was using it to his own benefit and nobody else's.

When it comes to heaven or hell you can't drift into either. They're the consequences of decided lifestyles, life lived for God's kingdom or for your own.

As the author of the medieval classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes *it's not what you are or have been that God looks upon with his merciful eyes but what you would be.*

Heaven's a reward to be sought not earned, sought from the One who's revealed it by his glorious resurrection. We seek God as Christians because we love him. If we love people proportionately to what we owe them we owe God most of all. He's the be all and end all!

Doing right gets you to heaven not because you can earn a place but in this sense - it makes you more like Jesus and better fitted to live with him for ever.

Believers have all the advantages but no one, not even an unbeliever, is beyond the mercy of God unless they actually choose to put themselves there.