

Biblical Apologetics

7. Won't a good moral life get me into heaven?

This has been and is the basic assumption of by far the majority of the human population – that if I do enough good things in life, living a decent moral life God will let me into his heaven. And because the majority western understanding of human nature at the moment is that we are essentially good basically there is no problem we will all get there in the end. Well, that is apart from mass murderers, child molesters and so on.

But that introduces the issue. What exactly then is the pass mark? Let's imagine everyone in the whole world lived in the empire state building with its 100 floors or so. As you live your life you will go up and down floors depending on how good or bad you have been. Offer to be social activities co-ordinator at work – brownie points, no-one really wants to do it and so up a few floors for that. But, say, cheat on your tax return and it's down a few floors.

But which floors in and which out of going to heaven?

Well, God is absolutely and just and so the pass mark is 100% but who lives a perfect life? Find no-one on the roof because all do things wrong. Okay what, God is a God of love so surely the pass mark is 0% and all get in, But where is justice? Where is

justice for the millions who were murdered by ruthless dictators and so on?

So this issue of getting into heaven is a bit more complex now that we stop and think about it. Does God have anything to say on the matter?

Well, this is the very essence of the topic of conversation between this rich young ruler and Jesus in Marks gospel – chapter 10.

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

There is an earnestness here isn't there?

Put yourself in the shoes of this young man. Imagine it is you speaking with Jesus asking this question. You've been going to church, you lead a moral life but there are some questions in your mind something recently has made you wonder if that is really enough.

Without realising it you are on your knees. Look/hear at how Jesus replies with a two parts

Vs 18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.

and

Vs 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.'

You are in a position to say

Vs 20 "Teacher all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looks at you with love vs 21 and says
21 "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."

Now what is the issue here? Is it that you have a lot of money? No. What is it then? Think/look back at what he has just said, how many of the commandments has he mentioned? Notice that he only mentioned the latter six commandments which are all about we need to do in relation to our fellow man. Why did he not mention the first four, what are they all about?

Quick look at Ex 20 – no other gods, no idols, no misusing his name and keep the Sabbath holy. They are all in one way or another how we relate to and love God. Love God. We barely know him! None of us love God as much as we ought, do we? In addition, we all have idols that we place as more

important than God – money, youthfulness, popularity, success, long years, family, sin and so on.

But let's depart from this because I think there are two modern twists to the tale?

The first is that in that context people did not really question the idea of sin evoking the displeasure of God. But if this were to happen on the newly paved streets of Port St today. Think it might look very different. This rich young ruler might object and say – why all this pettiness about sin anyway, I mean hasn't God got better things to do than that?

Modern Objections

Why is God so concerned about wrong doing/ sin?

Now that might seem impertinent but it is a valid question. But think on this:

1. Imagine a universe with out God? What is the implication of that?
 - a. There is no reason to have any moral good at all.
 - i. Ah but surely if the community decide what is morally good then that is what is good and we do it because it is in all our best interests.

- b. Yes, but surely we all just choose what is best for us. As Dostoyevsky rightly said: *"If there is no immortality, then all things are permitted."* Can I back that up with empirically? Yes I can. Let's stay with the former Eastern Bloc. It was an Atheistic context – No God, no objective good, only what the community or leaders decide. Richard Wurmbrand was a Christian pastor imprisoned for 14 years for his Christian faith. He said this:

"The cruelty of atheism is hard to believe when man has no faith in the reward of good or the punishment of evil. There is no reason to be human. There is no restraint from the depths of evil which is in man. The Communist torturers often said, 'There is no God, no hereafter, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish.' I have heard one torturer even say, 'I thank God, in whom I don't believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart.' He expressed it in unbelievable brutality and torture inflicted on prisoners."

Somebody might say that it is in our best self-interest to adopt a moral life-style. But clearly, that is not always true: we all know situations in which self-interest runs smack in the face of morality. Moreover, if one is sufficiently powerful, like a Ferdinand Marcos or even a Donald Trump, then one can pretty much ignore the dictates of conscience and safely

live in self-indulgence. Historian Stewart C. Easton sums it up well when he writes, "There is no objective reason why man should be moral, unless morality 'pays off' in his social life or makes him 'feel good.' There is no objective reason why man should do anything save for the pleasure it affords him."

See that today. My generation is a very selfish generation. We have lost the sense of duty that my parents had. Duty only comes from a strong sense of owing something to someone i.e. the very air we breathe and the life we live to our creator.

Without God in the universe, though we may have a moral code it is in essence meaningless and could change in a matter of years to something quite cruel as has been seen In Nazi Germany, Communist Eastern Bloc, Pol Pot's Cambodia and so on.

So if God exists there is right and there is wrong. It prevents societal chaos but of course it makes no sense of our choices to do wrong do not incur a penalty of some sort. That is why we have a legal system to maintain justice. But there is more - because God not only defines what is right and wrong but is actually truth itself any wrong doing is a form of rebellion against the very person, nature and being of God himself.

God reveals himself as a father over all he has made. As a parent I am greatly saddened when my

children do wrong. And there are consequences to their poor choices – punishment (naughty step or withholding privileges and so on) and looking for some sense of remorse. The feeling I have as a father only mirrors (poorly) the perfect justice of God over right and wrong.

Wrong doing has consequences we see that in the legal justice system but it has eternal consequences because wrong doing is ultimately rebellion against God our maker, sustainer and judge. Though God is slow to anger and abounding in love our rebellion against him also has a penalty. It will in the end win us nothing but his judgement and condemnation.

So God gets so hung up about sin because the very fabric of the universe is moral and ordered which reflects the creator who has made it and there cannot be any meaningful morality without choice and consequence.

The second way this might work out on the streets of Stirling is by the rich young ruler saying but actually I am a victim!

Wrong Doing is not my fault, someone else is to blame?

Part 2

In some ways I think my generation are not just selfish but also self righteous. We don't really think we are wrong and even if we are we try to blame it on someone else. You know the kind of thing – we are late with a deadline and we immediately blame something or someone else. It is a universal reaction when someone points out our shortcomings.

I remember asking one of my engineering classmates if he thought he was a sinner. His reply was absolutely not but see Euan over there – now he is a real sinner.

We do not see ourselves as anything but innocent and if we are guilty one way it is because of our parents or another way because of our schooling, genes, government and so on.

Ben Elton the well known satirist and comedian illustrates the point through the plotline of his book called Popcorn.

Bruce Delamitri is the main character and a well known oscar winning director of very violent films. Caught up in the debate about whether screen violence fuels actual violence in the streets he shoots out

“Nothing is anybody's fault. We don't do wrong, we have problems. We're victims, alcoholics, sexaholics.

Do you know we can be shopaholics? That's right. People aren't greedy anymore, oh no. They're shopaholics, victims of commercialism. Victims! People don't fail any more. They experience negative success. We are building a culture of gutless, spineless, self righteous whining cry babies who have an excuse for everything and take responsibility for nothing..."

Actually in this context talking about the perfection of God meaningless. Unless people can acknowledge they are wrong then reparation of damaged relationships and so on can't be fixed.

I know for myself if I am not presenting myself to God to confess my sin – my impatience, my short words spoken in anger, my selfishness, my self righteousness I will never really change and continue to damage myself, my relationships and my walk with God.

Not Morality but mercy

We live in a world where the thing that is needed is not so much morality but mercy because none of us live up to the mark do we? That's the point of this story and the rich young ruler. Probably at whatever point this young man tried to earn favour with God he would fail.

Luke records two stories before this one with the rich young ruler. One is about a self righteous man who considers himself blameless. Luke 18

9To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood up and prayed about[a] himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

What then does Jesus say to us about being good and moral? No-one is good and moral except God alone (Mark 10:18). We live in a moral universe – our moral framework emanating from the very person that God is. As a father he is our creator, sustainer and judge. What we need rather than blaming others is to find God's mercy – poured out in Jesus Christ through the cross. Our lives are to live trusting that that is how we obtain true life changing/ life altering mercy.

Implications for us:

1. Repent if want to find God!
2. Release from self righteousness and judgementalism – we are just one begger telling another where to find bread
3. Gratitude and praise to God – obtained mercy
4. Life given over to him – Lord I want to live for you because you are a good and gracious God

Stones - film