

**A Parent's Love**  
**Answering Emily's Question**  
**Romans 5:6-11; 11:22b-36**  
**John 3:14-21**  
**August 6, 2017**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

Today's question to stump the Pastor comes from Emily Eloff. As I recall, one of the most difficult questions we had last year came from Mara Eloff, so Heather and Andy are clearly doing something right, or I've clearly done something to offend them terribly.

Emily's question: If there is a very kind person, devoted to helping people, but is not religious, will they go to heaven? I thought we would start with an easy one. Congratulations Emily, you've chosen a topic people of faith have been fighting over for at least 2000 years. Who goes to heaven and why?

Let's set aside for the moment the fact that heaven is not exactly a widely discussed topic in the Bible, which tends to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God as states of being, not places we go, though Jesus did tell the criminal hanging next to him on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." So this is a conversation definitely worth having.

Let's also leave for another day the question of Hell because you didn't specifically mention that in your question and I think it's actually a separate issue. I'm assuming you mean will this person be eternally with God in whatever it is we consider being with God in eternal life is — whatever that ends up being. And, to be honest, the premise of your question, Emily, seems to be a logical one: God is good; God wants us to be good, so shouldn't being good be enough?

But what does it mean to be good? Is caring for others enough if you do it one day a week for a couple of hours? Or does it need to be 10 hours? Are we good enough if we have good intentions but never get around to actually doing anything about our desire to do good? Is posting on Facebook about a justice issue half as good as protesting to change the law to bring that issue to fruition? Is being Bill-Clinton-good good enough or do I have to be Jimmy-Carter-good? Is being Tammy-Fay-Bakker-good good enough? Or do I have to be Mother-Theresa-good?

It was in response to those kinds of questions that our Reformed Tradition wrestled. And while we may today think they were a bit too harsh, there is wisdom in what their initial response to Emily's question would be. Our Reformed Tradition would respond to the question rather straightforwardly. No, they would say, being good enough is not enough because we can't ever have any confidence that we are actually good enough. We are a sinful people and cannot be good enough to punch our own golden ticket into heaven. Only Jesus is good enough and, as demonstrated in his death and resurrection, he has defeated sin and death. So he gets the tickets and gives them out to us through faith. Salvation is by grace, through faith.

At its heart, that fairly cold formula, which comes to us from interpreting the Apostle Paul, not Jesus, seeks to solve both the “what does it mean to be good enough” question and another dilemma that actually was the source of the great schism in the church 500 years ago this year. It was a schism over the question “how do we get holy enough or good enough to get into heaven.”

Using a theology that was based largely in 12th century ideas, the church back then preached salvation, by grace. But they said that grace could only be received inside the church. Only the church could dispense grace, like food or water. It was a substance and if you wanted to get it, you had to engage in certain practices or seek indulgences, which were essentially grace that could be purchased for cash.

Martin Luther was a pastor in Germany who saw the best and the worst of humankind. And he saw the best and the worst within himself. He saw hypocrisy; he saw self-righteousness; he saw greed and self-justification. And he became convinced that if the formula was all of our badness on one side and all of the grace we could accumulate through the church on the other, then the scales would never be even. And the church selling indulgences and encouraging people to pay to have masses said to generate more grace on the good side was ridiculous and dishonest and manipulative. The church was a hell-avoidance mechanism and it exploited that to gain power and wealth. For Luther, the goodness scale never worked if grace wasn't free.

And that's one of the key elements of our tradition, that there is nothing we can do to get grace. It comes from God in Jesus Christ. It is not our goodness that saves us, but his. Our tradition says there is nothing we do that can balance the scales. Only Jesus can do that and he does so freely by giving us the gift of faith.

The problem with that equation for many in the church was that it seemed like grace was cheap; that we didn't need to do anything to be “saved” and if Jesus' death and resurrection saved everyone then why worry about it? Why be religious at all? Why be concerned about what our response to God's grace should be if it was freely given?

That's where election comes in in our tradition. The elect, so John Calvin, interpreting St. Augustine, says, goes something like this: God chooses who will receive faith; the Holy Spirit grows that faith within us; and our good works are the gratitude that automatically (and certainly always) comes from faith growing within us. Goodness is a sign of faith within. The goodness we show is evidence of our election.

The good thing about that theory is that it means I'm not more powerful than God. It means me saying this prayer or deciding to follow Jesus is not what saves us. I'm not the author of my own salvation. God is. But then, doesn't that mean God is also choosing people NOT to give faith to? And there we have the great failing of Calvin's theology — double predestination. If some are destined to be in, some are destined to be out. And it makes God seem capricious and mysterious, but also cruel.

It's also arguably unbiblical. What do today's texts tell us? Paul had to deal with Christians in Rome who were wondering if God still loved the Jews. And he says that God's elect are

always God's elect and that includes the promises God made to Abraham and Sarah. God's promises and calling are irrevocable. He includes that line: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God might be merciful to all," which seems to suggest that none of us can be good enough but none of us needs to be good enough because God is merciful to, notice that word, "all."

And doesn't that make sense if we imagine God as our divine parent? This week, I've been doing some reading, thanks to a conversation with one of you, about Honor Killings in some religious and ethnic traditions — the killing of girls who are too worldly or who have been raped or who have married or threatened to marry outside of the faith, or caste, and the killing of young gay men by their brothers or fathers to preserve family honor.

It seems impossible, doesn't it? That a parent would kill or have someone else kill their own child to preserve the family honor. It's the reason I don't like the language "God sent the Son to die," which is common in some Christian communities. If we believe Jesus to be divine, then God IS the Son, and the Son offered himself and defeated death. God didn't have Jesus killed. God offered God's own self. So why, Christian Pastor John Bell recently asked, would God kill God's beloved for eternity? For isn't that what eternal separateness from God would be like?

Yes, John 3:16 says: "whosoever believes in him," which seems to say, in Emily's parlance, that you have to "be religious", or profess faith. But John 3:17, which Jessica also read, says Jesus didn't come "into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."  
So which is it? Believers only or the whole world?

First, let's remember that belief in the ancient world meant something different than it does for us in the post-enlightenment, post-scientific age. For us, there are things we know — things we understand and things we believe. We know what we experience with our own senses. We understand what we've been taught or told. And we believe those things we deduce to be true from the facts and our experiences. That's the post-enlightenment version of belief. But it's not what THEY meant when they talked about "believing in" something or someone like Jesus.

That's what the Bible is talking about: trusting in something or someone; placing your faith in them. That's what John 3:16 belief is about — putting your trust in the One who is the personification of love and grace and hospitality and justice.

If we want to have a scripture battle on the issue, I can create some lists for you — passages that insinuate that goodness alone is enough; another list that says belief is required; and another list that seems to say that God wills to "save" all. But it all comes down to this for me. I can't fathom a God who engages in honor killings. It just doesn't fit. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe in the great mystery that is God, eternal separation is something God can live with but I honestly don't see how.

My theology professor, Shirley Guthrie, was once charged with heresy in a Presbytery court trial because he said God will save who God chooses to save and any theory or systematic theology we dream up that says God must save this group and must condemn

that group robs God of the freedom that is inherent in God being God. He was found not guilty, but he said that saying what he said didn't mean he was a Universalist, because he was fairly sure when some self-righteous folks got to heaven and could see who was there, they wouldn't want to be there. He meant it as a joke but it illuminates a point that I celebrate in Emily's question. Emily isn't asking for herself, "Will I get into heaven?" Her very question seems to indicate a desire for the line not to be drawn by the church or by church membership. Shirley would agree with that assumption.

And Shirley is not alone. All the way back at the beginning of the Reformation there were voices that seemed to be asking: "Why are we in such a rush to keep people out of eternity with God? It's right there in the Second Helvetic Confession, one of the confessions of the Swiss Reformers from 1562, where Heinrich Bullinger wrote that, yes, there are references in scripture and theology that seem to say that heaven is reserved for few, but that is God's business, not ours. We are not to say one is in and one is out. We are to have — and these are his words — "good hope for all."

"Good hope for all." Does that mean that faith isn't important? Does that mean that the church and the work that we do in spreading both the Gospel and our good works are not important, not essential in the world? Not at all.

But it does mean this isn't a railroad station to heaven — do enough work and you get your golden ticket. It does mean that this is not God's country club, the place where the chosen gather to be apart from the world.

No, it means that we believe in, we trust in, a loving God that seeks to transform the world; that seeks to free us from slavery to the question "am I good enough for heaven;" and instead invites us to follow the Christ about whom Paul says today, "we will be saved by his life."

So, Emily, your question again is: "If there is a very kind person, devoted to helping people, but is not religious, will they go to heaven?"

And my answer: It's not my job or any of our jobs to know the answer to that question, but I believe that we can entrust that very kind person, and even the very unkind people, today and forever, to the reconciling love of God and the Grace of Jesus Christ, with Good Hope that the Mothering, Fathering, Parenting love of God will find a way to make us One, to make us whole; and so we can live in the joyful freedom of that love without anxiety over what is to come, and be grateful and let our gratitude be seen in how we live and love and serve and welcome and celebrate one another and every day we are given. Thanks be to God.