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WON'T A GOOD MORAL LIFE GET ME TO HEAVEN?

The seventh question reflects a very prevalent attitude of our age. “Isn’t living a good moral life all I need to do to get to heaven?” Or as a student at Duke University said after a discussion, “If God grades on the curve, I’ll make it.” His words are an apt summary of the confusion today about religion in general.

Most people will accept this philosophy that all we need to do is our best, and then everything will be all right, or at least we’ll be able to squeak by. In this wistful dream hope we see an incredible optimism about man’s righteousness and an appalling ignorance of God’s infinite holiness. God doesn’t grade on the curve. He has an absolute standard, Jesus Christ.

Light, when it is turned on, destroys darkness. Likewise, the character of God so blazes in its purity that it consumes all evil. As we are, we could not abide in His presence, but would be consumed because of the corruption in our lives. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is the only basis on which we can come into fellowship with the living God.

An illustration helps people to see their misunderstanding here. Suppose the entire human race lined up on the West Coast with one objective, to get to Hawaii. We’ll equate their goal with God’s standard of righteousness. The gun is fired and all the swimmers jump in. As we look down over the ocean we see the most moral of all. He’s been a wonderful professor and a good man, always doing his best and following high moral standards; yet he would be the first to admit his imperfection and sinfulness. But he’s out there in the water seventy-five miles from shore. Next we pick out the Joe College fellow who’s not quite ready for Sing-Sing or Cook County Jail. He does cheat on exams a little and goes on a binge now and then; he gets into a few scrapes and does things that are wrong. But he’s not really too bad. He’s gotten about ten miles out. A derelict from Skid Row is practically drowning one hundred and fifty yards offshore. Scattered about in the water between the two extremes of the spectrum we see the rest of the human race. As we look from the bum on Skid Row to the Joe College type to the tremendously moral man who’s gone seventy-five miles, we see the difference. It’s an enormous difference. But what’s the difference in terms of Hawaii? Everyone will drown.

A set of swimming instructions won’t help at this point. We need somebody who will take us to Hawaii. This is where Jesus Christ comes in. If you can make it to Hawaii by yourself, if you can live a life that is absolutely perfect in thought, word, and deed, you can make it to heaven on your own steam. But no man ever has or ever will succeed. All the other religions of the world are essentially sets of swimming instructions, suggested codes of ethics for a wonderful pattern of life. But man’s basic problem is not knowing how he ought to live; it is lacking the power to live as he ought. The good news of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, who invaded human history, does for us what we couldn’t possibly do for ourselves. Through Him we may be reconciled to God, given His righteousness, and enabled to have fellowship with Him in His very presence.