

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

Written by Bill Dunn - Published by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Harwinton, Conn.

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How Do You Get to Heaven?

The most important question in the world is a very simple question: “How do you get to Heaven?” No matter how many years a person may live, no matter how successful he or she might be, it is nothing compared to eternity. The primary reason Jesus came to earth, and the primary reason the Church exists, is to make sure we know how to get to Heaven.

Different words often are used to describe this common goal, including salvation, sanctification, and justification. Whichever word is used, the meaning is the same: spending eternity with God in Heaven.

It is sometimes claimed that the answer is as simple as the question: believe in Jesus. A number of Bible verses are then cited: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16); “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you...will be saved” (Acts 16:31); “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).

A one-time declaration of faith in Jesus, it is taught, will guarantee a person a trip to Heaven. Good works, though strongly encouraged, are not part of the salvation process.

However, there are other Bible verses that seem to contradict this view: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father” (a direct quote from Jesus, in Matthew 7:21); “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12); “A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone...Faith without works is dead” (James 2:24,26).

So what is the answer to the important question of how to get to Heaven? When asked the question, “Are we saved by faith or by works?” the Catholic Church answers, “Yes!”

This is not an evasive answer. Let’s explain. First, to dispel an occasional misunderstanding, the Catholic Church does NOT teach that people must earn their way into Heaven by virtue of their own good deeds. It is impossible for a person to do so. (If it were possible for a person to earn his way into Heaven by his own efforts, then Jesus’ death on the cross was unnecessary.)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Salvation comes from God alone” (section 169); “Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ” (sec-

tion 1992); “Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us” (section 1996).

The Catholic Church teaches that our salvation, our justification, is a gift from God. It is not something we can earn by our own efforts. But the *Catechism* also notes: “God’s free initiative demands man’s free response” (section 2002). God created us with free will, and we have the freedom either to embrace God or to reject Him. To receive the gift of salvation we must embrace God. We must put our faith in Christ, be filled with His grace, and let that grace inspire us to live righteous lives.

Jesus stated that there are two great commandments: 1) love God with all our heart, soul, and mind; and 2) love our neighbor as ourselves. The first of these commandments describes our faith; the second describes our good works.

Occasionally it is taught that faith and good works are completely separate. Faith alone in Jesus gets a person to Heaven, and good works, although desirable, have nothing to do with it. The Catholic Church does not separate the two, and instead teaches that faith and good works are like two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other.

That is why when asked the question, “Are we saved by faith or by works?” the Catholic Church’s answer, “Yes!” makes perfect sense.

St. Paul explained this idea beautifully in his letter to the Galatians: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). If we have true faith in Christ, then we can’t HELP but do works of mercy and charity for other people.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “Those who die in God’s grace and friendship...live forever with Christ” (section 1023). As Catholics, we have many ways to receive God’s grace and friendship: the sacraments, prayer, Bible studies, and countless volunteer opportunities.

Sometimes very important questions have rather simple answers. In this case, the most important question of all—How do you get to Heaven?—has a very simple answer: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. When our faith in Jesus motivates us to live righteous lives, then the gates of Heaven surely will swing open.

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