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HOW? The Grace Question:

How Will You Believe? 3:1-21

Based on a message by Andy Stanley

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John 3:1 - 21

John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again or born from above."

4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 **I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?** 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. And these good, religious people were a bit freaked out by Jesus. They tried every way they knew based on God's revelation to live a good life. And here comes this Jesus, with this radical message. And Jesus asks Nicodemus these 2 questions: "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics?" Jesus also challenged him. In the Message, Jesus says "There is nothing second-hand here. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and

you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"
Jesus was such a master.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions. He could have been inquiring of Jesus today. He's very much in the same mold as people today. Many people today are asking great questions: looking, searching, looking at a lot of different religions. Some say they don't have anything against Christianity. Their problem is this: Surely there is more than one way. There's nothing wrong with the system, but it seems there have to be other ways to get to heaven. Surely the God who created the stars didn't make it so narrow that you could only know him by walking through one door. It's just logical. It makes sense. He wouldn't limit access to only one door. Many people here might say "I'm a Christian, but I don't believe Christianity is the only way." But most people who believe there are multiple paths to heaven also believe something else. There is another premise. The question of why is there only one way to heaven is supported by this:

Andy Stanley points out the idea that supports the notion is this: "**Good people go to heaven.**" Not only good Christians go to heaven, but good Catholics, Methodists, Buddhists, and more, including people who aren't associated with *any* system. It's not any one group who goes to heaven, it's the good people from all these different ways. The common denominator is *not* a belief system, *nor* an identity of who their god is, nor how they pray or worship. The common denominator between Buddhists and Hindus and Jews and Muslims and Catholics and Protestants is that they're good people. God isn't limited to one specific avenue of one specific religion. He's just going to gather up all the good qualified people from all the religions and they're all going to make it. Christianity is a good avenue, and so are several others.

Nicodemus would have said his system, enabled him to be good, to be pure in God's sight. Many of us who here this morning believe that. You would call you yourself a Christ-follower, and if someone were to ask "Why would God let you into heaven?" you would say "I believe in God and Jesus and I do my best, and I'm a good dad, and I try to help people... I'm not perfect." (We always say that...*like we need to say that!*). Just assume everybody knows that. ☺ But we SAY that, I'm not perfect, and then we add I made this promise, and all this other stuff, and you'd tell me all these things you've done. In your heart of hearts, you believe God is going to gather up all the good people...from all the different beliefs. Here are some reasons we think this way:

- **It's a fair system.** Generally speaking, good things happen to the good people...bad things happen to the bad people. It just goes that way. You reap what you sow.
- Another advantage is **You'll make the cut.** You're a good person!
- **It motivates you to be good.** If good people make it, and bad people don't, it motivates you to be good, especially the older you get!
- **It's very consistent with the idea of a good God.** If there is a good God, with a good heaven, it only makes sense that it be filled with good people. That good people go to be with a good God, in a good heaven.
- **It just makes common sense.**

It's logical, and respectful, and practical. It makes so much common sense that very few people explore the concept. Let's just think about this fact: There are more problems thinking good people go to heaven than thinking Christians go to heaven.

First, the major problem: **There is no clear standard of good and bad** by which we can check our progress. If good people go to heaven, then we need to know what it means to be good, and we need to know how good is good enough. If my eternity hinges on that, then surely a good God who's going to gather the good people would be good enough to give me some kind of clear indication of

what I needed to do. The truth is, we don't have that information. In America, people want to get their Bibles out. 'I can tell you how good you have to be. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love the Lord your God...be kind...serve others." Powerful stuff. I'm trying to be good. I'm trying to live my life by the Good Book.

Listen carefully: If Scripture is your goal, you'll never be this good. Nicodemus was trying this. Jesus explained to Nicodemus "*You must be born again, born from above.*" If just the people doing all of this go to heaven, ain't none of us going to heaven. But I'm doing a good job to try to keep the law and the 10 commandments.

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. There is not *one* righteous, no not one. Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight, by observing the Law. We've never thought about it, raised in America. It's a good book about a good God and a good heaven. And you think you've got at least a 51% chance of good credit, and so you're in.

If you're here, and somewhere in the back of your mind you've believed good people make it and bad people don't, I'm saying whatever part of this book you've factored in, your belief system, take it out. It's too high. Not only are you not perfect, you're not this good. It just doesn't fit.

You might say "Here's my standard: **God has put in an innate sense of right and wrong**, good and bad. We just *know* it. That's what God is going to look at." Did you do what you knew was right in your heart? The problem is, major wars have been fought because they have different ideas of right and wrong. You go to one side and they say "We're right! We have God on our side." You go to the other side and they say "We're right! We have God on our side." You say "Poor God! He's schizophrenic." It wasn't that long ago white church people had major confused thinking of black people. Those church people thought they were right. We can't believe it. But in the moment, at that time, they were quoting Scripture, they thought they were right. They were sincerely going by that internal clock "This is right, this is wrong." (I think they were wrong). Fascism, etc. What about the Native Americans? "We want your land. We're here for religious freedom."

Here's the problem: this internal clock changes as you get older. Even if you go by that internal gauge, there is no consensus. Not even consensus in this room, much less nations. Many of the atrocities such as ethnic cleansing in the world today are in the name of religion, and they are ready to die for their ideas. They are convinced they are right. We're convinced they are wrong.

One of the problems with Christianity is you think not everybody gets to hear. Well I want you to know: if you believe good people go to heaven, you have the same problem. It gets worse than that: We don't know how the grade works. What percentage of our actions have to be good? Is it 50%? 70%? Maybe that's where the school grading system came from. Do some things weigh in more than others? "Well, Ah never killed anybody." Well how do you know if that's the big one? You say "Well, the Bible says..." Ah,ah,ah, I'm not talking about the Bible. That's a whole different system. It doesn't fit.

And when does it start? When you're 6? 7? (Some are hoping it's *after* their teen years!) You say "That is silly." But I just want you to think. If you're honest. If you're really honest. If you believe good people go to heaven, you have no earthly idea where you stand with God. You've made up a system in your mind: what's important to God. I create reality in my mind, and I apply it to God. If it works for me, it works for you."

As much as people think *Christianity* is unfair, the "good people go to heaven" system is really like

this: like a teacher at the beginning of the semester says “Class, there’s going to be one test at the end of the semester. It’s pass/fail. You’re dismissed. Yes, you in the back...Do we get notes? No. Anything we can read? No. Anybody before us we can talk to? No. Class dismissed. It’s like getting hired to do a job without a job description. Like signing up for a race, and it’s clear, and you have no idea how far you’re going to run. Is the track marked out? No. Where’s the finish line? “We’ll tell you when you cross it.” And the gun fires and everybody just runs around! Scatters! Just want you to think. Come on. That’s the situation if good people go to heaven. You have no idea what is good. How to run the race. Where the goal is. You have some idea made up, but you made it up! You are hinging your entire eternity on something you made up! To believe good people go to heaven is so unjust, so unfair, that it breaks down with the least bit of analysis.

The third problem with “good people go to heaven.” is **it makes Jesus a liar**. No other religious leader taught what Jesus taught. Jesus taught “Bad people go to heaven, good people don’t.”

Nicodemus’ job was “Be good.” The Pharisees had to be good. Jewish Law taught that the Messiah was going to come one day. Their job was to identify the Messiah. They had to stay very much in sync with God to do this. The common person didn’t have the time to be that good. He taught the best of the best weren’t making it. The worst of the worst were forgiven. **Jesus didn’t teach that good people go to heaven. Jesus taught that forgiven people go to heaven.** There’s a huge difference.

Jesus told Nicodemus late that night that “*Whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.*” (John 3:16) What does it mean to believe? To put your belief in action? It is trust. It is putting your whole trust in Jesus Christ.

STOOL ILLUSTRATION: (Leaning against it): Am I trusting in that stool? If the stool falls over, will I fall over? No. (Putting one leg on it): Here’s where some of you are this morning: Am I trusting in the stool? A little bit. I believe in Jesus! But let me tell you about what I’m going to do. What I’ve done. (Sitting on it, feet and all): As the stool goes, so go I. All my trust goes here. That’s what we’re talking about. Placing all my weight upon Him, all my trust. Christianity is trust. It’s about putting all of our trust in Christ and his life, death, and resurrection. Christianity doesn’t teach that good people go to heaven. Forgiven people do. And that is found in putting our trust in Christ. The only perfect one to live is who I put my trust in. The only one worthy of paying the price for our sins, of knowing how it’s supposed to be. No more Yeah Jesus/yeah me! From now on, it’s just Jesus. I need a Savior, so I can be born from above, born again. All my faith, all my hope is in what Christ has done for me. Amen.