

How to Get Into Heaven

A man dies and meets St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. Peter says to the man, "Here's how it works. You need to have one hundred points to get into heaven. You tell me about all the good things you've done. They are all worth a certain number of points. If your total is one hundred or more, you can come in."

"Well," says the man. "I was happily married to the same woman for 52 years. I never looked at another woman. I was attentive and loved her dearly."

"That's great," says St. Peter. "That'll be two points."

"Hmmm," says the man. "This is going to be harder than I thought. Well, I attended church regularly, volunteered my time and tithed faithfully."

"Wonderful," says St. Peter, "That's worth another point."

"One point!" says the man. "Okay, okay. I was involved with a prison ministry for twenty-five years. I went into the prison, at least monthly, and shared Jesus with them."

"Wow!" says St. Peter. "That's another two points!"

"Only two points!" says the man. "At this rate, it'll be only by the grace of God that'll I'll ever get into this place."

"Bingo!" says St. Peter. "That's one hundred points! Come on in."

How wouldn't you like to edit the Gospels? What a cosy, comfortable church we could have! We might keep the stories about Christ's birth and infancy, his temptation in the desert and his healing miracles. We would include our favourite parables, like the Prodigal son, the Pharisee and the Publican, and of course, the Good Samaritan. But would we leave out the bits about talents and labourers and hard choices, and that reading today, that hard teaching about renouncing self, taking up the cross, losing our lives for the sake of Jesus? And even if we have not removed those words from our Gospels, do we remain deaf to them in practise, in our lives?

What exactly does the Lord want from us? What does he mean by "renounce yourself," "lose your life for my sake," "carry your cross," or (in the epistle) "present your bodies as a holy sacrifice?" Surely these words don't refer to anything suicidal, to devaluing of this present life, its joys and its achievements? And yet, are these not something more than a pious way of saying: Put up with what cannot be changed?

Remember Jeremiah?

The prophet, in his laments, gave voice to unbearable pain, anger, and misery at unspeakable horrors and uncontrollable events that surround him in his life as a prophet of God's Word. His relationship with God has ceased to be a joy and delight, and had become an unceasing pain and incurable wound. He was full of rage at his fellow human beings who tormented him, and asked God to "*bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.*" He was hostile towards God: "*... you are like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.*"

Jeremiah was bearing something unbearable, and all he wanted was for the misery to stop. But even the Word of God that came to him, in response to his outburst of rage, was disquieting: the misery would not be going to stop or go away—there was to be no respite from his torments and horrors. God simply assured Jeremiah of his presence, to strengthen him to withstand more misery. Jeremiah remained faithful to conversation with God because he knew that conversation with God was central to his very being.

Many people interpret "**cross**" as some burden they must carry in their lives: a strained relationship, a thankless job, a physical illness. With self-pitying pride, they say, "That's my cross I have to carry." Such an interpretation is not what Jesus meant when He said, "Take up your cross and follow Me."

When Jesus carried His cross up Golgotha to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as symbolic of a burden to carry. To a person in the first-century, the cross meant one thing and one thing only: death by the most painful and humiliating means human beings could develop.

Two thousand years later, Christians view the cross as a cherished symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love. But in Jesus' day, the cross represented nothing but torturous death. Because the Romans forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant carrying their own execution device while facing ridicule along the way to death.

Therefore, “**Take up your cross and follow Me**” means being willing to die in order to follow Jesus. This is called “dying to self.” It’s a call to absolute surrender. After each time Jesus commanded cross bearing, He said, “*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?*” Although the call is tough, the reward is matchless.

Following Jesus is easy when life runs smoothly; our true commitment to Him is revealed during trials. Jesus assured us that trials will come to His followers. Discipleship demands sacrifice, and Jesus never hid that cost, however slow his disciples were to grasp “*the mind of Christ*”, as St Paul was eager to promote. They had to change completely their ideas about what the Messiah is, if they are ever to walk with Jesus

When we have the mind of Christ then we can only see our lives in terms of loving and serving others and not in the pursuit of purely self-centred or even family-centred ambition. When we have the mind of Christ, the whole direction of our life changes. Our whole concept of happiness changes. Jesus is calling us not to a life of sacrifice and suffering but rather to a life of total love and freedom. “Renouncing oneself” is not a suppression of one’s personality. It is rather to let go of oneself so that one can really find oneself.

Attachment is the main culprit in our sufferings. It's the reason we refuse to let go of something or someone. But we must, if we resolve to be happy. Past pain, anger, stress, and resentment only grants unwanted things in our lives to block from coming in that which we do really want. It will block our happiness.

Eckhardt Tolle in his book *The Power of Now* describes our obsession with ourselves as compulsive conversation with “IT” (whatever “IT” is for you at any moment). Like a parrot sitting on our shoulders bending our ears over and over – we want to knock it off, but we can’t, and we keep feeding it – of course it’s not going away. And yet he says, “until we get rid of “IT” we will not be available for loving relationships. And love is our purpose, is it not!?”

Even an atheist would agree that if there really is a God, then to know Him would be the ultimate pleasure.

In the great medieval classic entitled *Duties of the Heart*, the author Rabbi Bachya Ibn Paquda discussed four steps to falling in love with God:

- Appreciate how great it is to be alive
- Mastering the Gratitude-attitude
- The power of "letting go."
- The art of Service

Underlying his writing is a fundamental principle of Judaism: *if you want to grow spiritually, you must grow emotionally and psychologically. Indeed, it's impossible to become spiritually mature without becoming emotionally mature at the same time.*

To begin, says Ibn Paquda, you cannot fall in love with God until you fall in love with life first. It is impossible to love God if you do not deeply and passionately appreciate all that is good about being alive. Unfortunately, to become a master of appreciation is not easy to achieve.

There is a crucial difference between an "intellectual appreciation" and an "emotional appreciation". When we emotionally appreciate something, we experience a "pleasure burst." We've all had pleasure bursts. When something good happens, or we see a gorgeous sunset, we appreciate the beauty and goodness of the moment. But most of the time we are not experiencing pleasure bursts at all, which means we are not actively appreciating how great it is to be alive.

A major reason why we are not in love with life is that we use much of our time and energy fighting and obsessing about what's not right with ourselves and others. We simply cannot tolerate the apparent imperfections. It's not that we're all perfectionists, rather it's that we have acquired a destructive way of seeing the world, which results in making us miserable, frustrated, angry or resentful.

But, embracing both the good and the bad is our ultimate challenge and the key to emotional well-being and true happiness. No one enjoys only

Matthew 16. 21-end
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accomplishing half of a goal. Not only do we want to get to the finish line, we want to win the gold as well.

Before we can change what we don't like, we must make friends with it first. This is what the rabbis meant when they said regarding the evil inclination, "*Draw it close with the right hand and push it away with the left.*" We must accept it, not totally reject it. Pushing away with both hands only gives it more power over us.

Only when we genuinely embrace the bad parts of our life, can we begin to appreciate and enjoy the good parts of our life. Learning to accept what's bad is a challenging task, but we can master it, by the grace of God!