

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

There once was an exasperated mother, whose son was always getting into mischief, finally asked him "How do you expect to get into Heaven?"

The boy thought it over and said, "Well, I'll run in and out and in and out and keep slamming the door until St. Peter says, 'For Heaven's sake, Dylan, come in or stay out!'"

The joke is funny, in part because we know that the boy's methods are pretty silly. However, little Dylan's idea about how to get into heaven is much like our own. We are always fighting the idea that we must do something to deserve it, to earn it, to be worthy. We are pretty sure that we need to pay our own way, and pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

Over the centuries this faulty theology has even been used in the church. In Luther's day, you could pay an indulgence and get yourself or a loved one closer to heaven. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries this heresy comes more often in questions like, "If you died tonight, would you go to heaven or hell?" Instead of giving up some money, we are apparently supposed to give Jesus our heart! (The money is probably worth more, and at least you would not have doubts about whether you had really given it! How often have you given God your heart? If you are like me, it is more than once).

The truth is that anything we can think to do is not enough. If we've got to earn God's grace, then it isn't really so amazing anymore. The hymn would be changed to "Mediocre Grace,

how ordinary the sound, that I bought by trying to live a pretty good life." It is no longer such a catchy tune!

1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Anything we do is a love response back to the truly amazing grace of this loving God. We cannot be coerced into some sort of decision out of fear of eternal peril. 1 John 4:18-19 continues, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us."

So, anything we do for God is simply a loving response back to the love and grace that we have received.

What might we do as a loving response? We might choose to give God our consistent worship and praise by attending Sunday worship regularly. We might choose to add Sunday school to our list of regular practices – our new curriculum uses the same lectionary texts that we will be hearing in worship each week, giving us more depth in our study of the scripture. We might choose to make a regular and consistent commitment of money and time to God's ministry through the church. We might choose to forgive a grudge, or to work to bridle our loose tongues.

The possibilities are endless. The motivation is a gift back to God who loved us and forgave us first. And in the act of

giving back, God just keeps on giving, and blesses us in our worship, or Bible Study, or tithing, or forgiving.

Thanks be to God!
Peace be with you all,
Pastor Chris