

**Disclaimer: Emmanuel Baptist Church (and its pastor) does not believe the theology behind "Pearly Gates" jokes. They are used here only for illustrative purposes.**

St. Peter was standing at the Pearly Gates, waiting for new souls coming to heaven. He saw Jesus walking by and caught his attention. "Jesus, could you mind the gate while I go do an errand?"

"Sure," replied Jesus. "What do I have to do?"

"Just find out about the people who arrive. Ask about their background, their family, and their lives. Then decide if they deserve entry into Heaven."

"Sounds easy enough. OK."

So Jesus manned the gates for St. Peter. The first person to approach the gates was a wrinkled old man. Jesus summoned him to sit down and sat across from him. Jesus peered at the old man and asked, "What did you do for a living?"

The old man replied, "I was a carpenter."

Jesus remembered his own earthly existence and leaned forward. "Did you have any family?" he asked.

"Yes, I had a son, but I lost him."

Jesus asked. "You lost your son? Can you tell me about him?"

"Well, he had holes in his hands and feet."

Jesus, surprised and curious, leaned forward even more and asked, "Father?"

The old man leaned forward and inquired, "Pinocchio?"

Probably you have heard a "Pearly Gates" joke before. They are based on some common theological beliefs that are taught through popular culture. They are taught in things like movies, jokes, music, comics, like the one you saw a few minutes ago, and cartoons. I grew up watching lots of cartoons. In some cartoons one of the characters would die and then you would see the character dressed in white, floating on a cloud, with a halo on his head, wings on his back, and strumming a small harp. This represents the common belief that people die and become angels in heaven. But while many people believe that, it isn't supported in the Bible. The ideas about heaven and hell in the culture are not based on the Bible.

The "Pearly Gates" jokes have the following in common:

- **Everyone shows up at the pearly gates seeking entrance into heaven.**
- **Some make it in and others are sent to hell.**
- **Heaven is deserved for living a mostly good life.**
- **More reward is earned by some than others.**

All of these jokes have their basis in the American cultural understanding of heaven. They are not based on what we find in the Bible. The Bible does not say that there is a pair of pearly gates at the entrance of heaven. Nor does the Bible say that the apostle Peter will meet you at the entrance to heaven. You can look up those ideas on the internet and see where they came from. But you won't find these ideas taught in the Bible. There are a lot of non-Biblical ideas on how to get to heaven.

On your outline is a box. Note that the box is labeled, "What It Takes to Be Declared Right with God and Get into Heaven". Entering heaven is based on righteousness.

**(righteousness = a right relationship with God)** The word righteousness is best translated as having a right relationship with God. Since heaven is to live in God's presence, you must have a right relationship with God in order to be in heaven.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>What it Takes to Be Declared Right with God (righteousness) and Get into Heaven:</u></b></p> <hr/> <hr/>
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What might you write in that box for yourself? What do you believe it takes to be declared right with God? Let me suggest some answers to what people have in that box concerning themselves. One of these may fit you.

First, some people believe all that is required for righteousness is to **be spiritual**. It is common for people in America today to say they are spiritual but not religious. This can mean anything, but often means that they believe in God and prayer but are not part of any organized religious group. They make it up as they go along.

Other people believe that righteousness consists of **being a good person**. A good person is one who obeys most of the laws, doesn't hurt anyone, is an average spouse, parent, neighbor, employee, etc. Good people go to heaven.

One of the "Pearly Gates" jokes says a man came to the pearly gates and Peter asked him if he was spiritual and the man said no. And Peter says, that's bad. He then asked him if he did religious things and the man said no. And Peter says that's really bad. And then Peter asks him if he was a kind person. And the man said he wasn't sure. What kinds of things did Peter have in mind. And Peter said, did the man help others when they needed it. And the man said, "Yes, one time I saw a motorcycle gang teasing a little old lady, tossing her purse around and making fun of her. I got mad and went up to the leader of the gang and ordered him to leave the woman alone and give her purse back." Peter says, "Wow. When did you do that?" The man answered, "About ten minutes ago."

It is common to believe that being a good person will get you into heaven. Other people believe that **you have to do religious things**. You have to believe in Jesus, go to church, pray, read the Bible, things like that. It seems like believing in Jesus and doing religious things in His name ought to be the right way to get into heaven. But at the end of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount He warns that it isn't so. He says there will be people who will point out to Him all kinds of religious deeds they did in His name. He will answer that He did not know them. And they will go to hell.

There is another whole category, a category of groups who emphasize a certain way of doing religious things. They don't believe that it is enough to do religious things. They believe **you have to do religious things a certain way**. You have to use wine in the Lord's Supper or it doesn't count. You have to use unleavened bread for the Lord's Supper or it doesn't count. Some teach that in baptism, the preacher has to say, I

baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit or it doesn't count. Or you have to be dipped in the water three times, once for the Father, once for the Son, and once for the Holy Spirit, or it doesn't count. You have to use old instruments, like pianos and organs in worship, or it doesn't count. Some believe you can't use any instruments at all in Christian worship or it doesn't count. You have to have deacons in the church or it doesn't count. There are lots of such legalistic rules that people come up with on how to be declared right with God and get in heaven.

All of these methods of righteousness have several things in common.

- **These are all manmade.** They did not come from God. They are not in the Bible as acceptable to God.

- **These are all self-centered.** They all put faith in self, in what I can do.

- **These are all forms of an earned righteousness.**

Most people today believe in some form of earned righteousness. This means God owes them heaven.

All these different approaches to righteousness are based on earning heaven. But look what the Bible says about such approaches to righteousness. This is written about the Jews at that time, but it applies to all people who try to earn heaven.

**Romans 10:2 (NIV)** For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.

They are zealous for God, the missionary Paul writes. They are always talking about God. They are always praising God for the things He did in their past history and for the things He has promised to do in their future. They sincerely want to please God with their lives. They are actively working to keep His commands or whatever list they believe is right. They are zealous for God. They are holy rollers and Bible thumpers. Every other phrase out of their mouths is "Praise the Lord!" They are zealous for God. But their zeal is not based on knowledge.

You can believe with all your heart that the University of Maryland football team will play in the super bowl next year. You can be their biggest fan. You can show more zeal than anyone else in the country. But your zeal is not based on knowledge. The truth is, college football teams don't play in the super bowl. In that same way, none of man's attempts to earn heaven are based on truth. They are all false hopes. Look at what such attempts are.

**Romans 10:2-3 (NIV)** For I can testify about them (the Jews) that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

There are two forms of righteousness, the one you try to earn and the one that comes from God. Most people today do not know the righteousness that comes from God. Instead, they are seeking to establish their own righteousness. What they need to do is

submit to God's righteousness. Since God is the one handing out tickets to heaven, you better know what He is looking for.

Only one righteousness is acceptable for getting into heaven. This is the righteousness that comes from God. You don't get to make up your path to heaven. Heaven isn't earned. It is received. Heaven isn't wages for a good life. Heaven is a gift. It is a gift to anyone who submits to God's righteousness.

This series of sermons is about the promises of God. Today's sermon is about the promise of righteousness that God offers us. It is the righteousness that we need for entry into heaven. Look at this wonderful promise.

**Romans 1:17 (NIV)** For in the gospel (good news) a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith...

This righteousness is not an earned righteousness. This righteousness is a gift from God. Who does God give it to? He gives it to the person with the right faith. **God is looking for faith in the right person.**

Faith is trust. Faith is trust in someone. The object of faith of most people is self. Most people are depending on a righteousness they earn. Their faith is in self, not in God. They may talk about God a lot, even do things for God, but their faith is in self, not God.

Even those who are trying to obey God's commands in the Bible are often depending on their own obedience to those commands to earn heaven. Those commands of God are called the Law or the Law of Moses. Look what the Bible says about depending on your obedience as a source of righteousness.

**Romans 3:20 (NIV)** Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

All our efforts at self righteousness will fail because we just aren't good enough. None of us can live perfectly God's commands. But then that wasn't the point of the commands. The point of the commands was to teach us that we can't be righteous on our own. The point of the commands was to teach us that we need the righteousness only God can give.

So what is the answer we need this morning? The answer is found in the next verses in this passage.

**Romans 3:21-22 (NIV)** But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known,... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Today is Easter, the day Jesus rose from the dead. **The resurrection of Jesus is proof of the promise of righteousness.**

The object of our faith is Jesus. Jesus is the only person who ever lived who had an earned righteousness. He lived a perfect life. He never sinned. His enemies murdered Him.

Because of Jesus' righteousness, God accepted His death as the payment for our sins. God proved this by raising Jesus from the dead. Today we celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection because it is basis for our entering heaven. We have put our faith in Jesus, in Jesus alone, not in Jesus and our obedience to God, not in Jesus and our religious acts, not in Jesus and our goodness, not in Jesus and our being spiritual. Our faith is in Jesus alone, His death and resurrection.

So what has been in your box? What righteousness have you been trusting in? If it isn't Jesus, your faith is in the wrong person. Put your faith in Jesus today. Faith in His death and resurrection is the only kind of righteousness that will get you into heaven.

A man dies and goes to heaven. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific!" says Peter, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says.

"ONLY TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Exactly," says Peter.

The grace of God sent Jesus to die for us. The grace of God accepted Jesus' perfect life as an acceptable substitute sacrifice for our sins. The grace of God offers you heaven... free, if you will stop trusting in self and start trusting in Jesus.

Today, won't you put your faith in Jesus?