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### Good Guys and White Hats

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# Good guys and white hats

*You're supposed to be able to tell the good guys by their white hats. How does one receive the white hat of God's approval?*

by William G. Johnsson

"YOU CAN TELL they're good guys—they all wear white hats." So goes the well-known ad. But who *are* the good guys? Who are the bad guys as God sees it? Watch out—the answer may shock you!

Feelings of guilt tortured the young man. For years he had tried to find peace of mind in the certainty that God had accepted him. How he longed to be counted among Heaven's "good guys"!

Against his father's wishes, he had forsaken a career in law for a life of religious devotion. He had tortured his body, fasted for days on end, prayed through the night, and denied his body the elementary comforts. He had even traveled abroad as a pilgrim to gain the merits of the saints.

But he found no peace. Forever he felt condemned to wear the black hat of divine disapproval. The holiness and justice of God loomed over his head like an angry cloud, allowing him no assurance.

In vain did his friend Staupitz try to ease his mental anguish. At last he advised him, "You are too hard on yourself! Only *love* Christ!"

"*Love* Him!" retorted the young man. "I cannot love Him—I hate Him!"

It was the ultimate sin—blasphemy. The white hat of the good guy would never be his.

Or so it seemed. But a change gradually took place. He was assigned the work of teaching Scripture, and set himself to a close study of the text. He taught first the Psalms. There he came upon the amazing cry uttered from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

What was this—this outburst of anguish? No holy Christ, severe in His justice here, but a Christ entering into the depths of human despair. The young man's heart was stirred.

Then his studies led him through Paul's epistles to Galatians and Romans. As he wrestled with the thought of the apostle, the clouds that had surrounded him for years began to lift. The turning point came as he struggled to understand Paul's concept of God's righteousness. At last came the moment of truth—that God's righteousness, which he had all along viewed as his condemnation, in fact was his hope!

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the justice of God,' because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. . . .

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven" (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 65).

So was born the Reformation. Martin Luther had found the white hat!

This Biblical answer rediscovered by Luther is a shocker—and on three counts.

*First count:* It is ego-deflating. It tells

us that there is nothing, yes, *nothing*, that man can do to get God's white hat. It says that no matter how hard we try, it is all useless.

It isn't a matter of being a good citizen. Contributions to UGF or the Red Cross won't help. Even being a scoutmaster doesn't work. Nor going to church regularly. Not even praying all night. You may fast for days (if you could), but you might as well forget it. It isn't what your friends say about you. Nor your own view of yourself. The preacher's recommendation doesn't help. No—even the good things we do are unacceptable. "Filthy rags," Isaiah calls them (see Isaiah 64:6).

If our good deeds won't earn us merit points in the white-hat race, what will? It looks as though we have nothing left to argue before God.

That is pretty hard for any of us to admit. Granted, none of us are perfect, but surely we aren't quite as bad as the next man? Surely God isn't so unjust as to neglect all those generous acts we have done?

But what's that He says? "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:22, 23, RSV).

God seems just too tough, doesn't He? Who has a chance of getting the white hat when He rules out all our best efforts at a stroke? But there is a second shock in store.

*Second count:* God gives the white hat to those who don't deserve it! Strange as it may seem, it isn't the apparently good guys who get God's white hat but those

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whom we are ready to write off.

That is just what Jesus Christ said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Paul is even more blunt: God reckons as righteous the *ungodly*—not the godly (see Romans 4:5).

What a strange turning of the tables it is! But that is just the sort of turnabout that we see all through the Bible. Take the story of the prodigal son, for instance. Here is the tale of two brothers, Mr. Straight and Black Sheep. The older boy always does what is right—surely he's the good guy! His brother, Black Sheep, leaves home, squanders his fortune, disgraces the family name, and at last staggers home, a derelict. But how does the story end? The father throws a big party to celebrate the return of the long-lost son. But Mr. Straight stays outside the feast, estranged from his father, while Black Sheep is inside, the center of rejoicing. Now it is the good guy who gets the black hat and the bad guy who comes out with the white hat!

Or that story of the workers in the vineyard. Here is a group of men who toil all day in the blazing sun, while others work only half the day—and some get in on the act for only the last hour. But when pay time arrives, what does each receive? The very same! Yes, those who worked for only an hour get just as much as those who worked for the full day!

But listen, there's an even greater story of reversal of roles than those. This is the event that lies at the heart of the New Testament—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He dies on Friday afternoon, a lonely and rejected man. *He is executed!* He dies forsaken of man and God—note that piercing cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Yet this same Jesus, who wears the black hat on Good Friday, is given the white hat on Easter Sunday. He comes out of the tomb, victor over death, risen from

**S**trange as it may seem, it isn't the apparently good guys who get God's white hat but those whom we are ready to write off."

the dead; he is exalted to the right hand of the Majesty on high.

It is a paradox. The Christian religion has at its fulcrum an absurdity—God's Man dying on a cross.

But God delights in paradox. He turns the tables, reverses the roles. All of man's reasoning, all his planning, suddenly goes awry. He is left speechless.

And there is still a final shock waiting!

*Third count:* The white hat goes to those who simply take God at His word.

No, they don't *deserve* it, as we saw already; from our viewpoint they may deserve it far less than others. But, while they don't merit the white hat themselves, they get it simply because they are prepared to let God *give* it to them.

That's the strange thing about this white hat. It is precious, infinitely precious. All over the world people are striving to get it; they're ready to give their very lives for it, just as Luther was. But it can't be *won* by man. It can't be *earned*. It can't be *bought*. Anything and all that a man can set forth as his right for it is spurned by God—as far too puny!

*It can only be given away!*

That's the only way anyone gets it—as

a free gift. Only when man gives up the battle to win it does it become his. Only when he lays aside all his own glory, falls flat in the dust, is he ready to receive it. And then he may *receive* it—as a free gift.

While on one hand man is struggling to obtain the white hat, on the other, God is there, holding it out for him to take.

But who can believe *that*? Who is ready to bite on a deal like that? Surely there's a mistake somewhere! Surely the fine print will show that the whole thing is bogus! No one *ever* does business like that! No one ever gives away something for nothing! And the white hat—it's of surpassing value!

No, the whole thing just *has* to be a colossal gimmick, a cosmic trick played by a humorous deity.

A trick—except that some people are naïve enough to swallow it. They are unsophisticated enough to actually *believe* that God means what He has said. They are simple enough to take Him at His word.

Can it be—can it be possible—that they are right after all?

Can it be possible that my efforts, no matter how great, can never be good enough for me to get the white hat?

Can it be possible that my neighbor, who as you know isn't nearly such a good guy as I, will be given the white hat and I'll be left with the black one?

Can it be possible that all I have to do is take God at His word?

What did Isaiah mean when he wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8, 9)? And what about those words of Paul: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25)?