

But I'm a good person

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 April 2025

Preacher: Johan DeJong

[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. Do you have your Bible open? Preferably at Acts 26. We thank you, Lord, that despite all that is wrong in our world, in our hearts, by your grace, you have told us that we may come.

So, Lord, we come particularly this morning before you as you speak through your word. Please, will you tell us what we need to hear? Please, will you speak through your Holy Spirit?

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'm a good person. I'm a good person. How dare you tell me that I need Jesus to save me from my sins?

Do you know what? You Christians, you're part of the problem. I don't know how many of you have heard that. Or maybe secretly you suspect that the person that you are talking to is thinking that. I'm a good person. And we kind of inwardly cringe a bit when we hear that and we think, well, yeah, okay. Well, who am I to judge after all? Maybe we don't say anything more.

[1 : 38] Of course, we need to know, probably need to say, that it's not our opinion that everybody in this world needs saving by Jesus.

And that's actually God's message, isn't it? Through the lips of Jesus. But even knowing that, saying that, doesn't always change very much. Well, maybe you get this variation of it.

I'm not that bad, though. And I can see how really bad people, criminals, addicts, murderers, I can see they need saving. But why would I need saving?

And, of course, as Christians, we don't think everybody is as bad as they possibly could be. And, of course, we recognise that some people's behaviour is worse than others.

Don't we? Don't we?

[2 : 53] Don't we? Don't we? Don't we? Don't we? But our passage today gets right to the heart of that question. What about, I'm a good person? And Paul gives a very long speech, doesn't he?

Kim read it very well. But it doesn't disguise the fact that it's quite long. It's a very long speech in front of a very important group of people. How did we get here? Because last week, you might remember, we were in chapter 17.

Now we're in chapter 26. Well, in between, Paul has done the rounds of Europe telling everybody this message about how Jesus was born, lived, died, and was raised.

And now the Jews are so fed up of this whole business that they want to shut him up. They just want him to be quiet. And so they accuse him of being divisive and disturbing public order.

And they accuse him of dissension. They want to say, oh, you're disloyal to Rome. And to the Jewish people. Which is, of course, the same excuses that are used in every age to silence Christians.

[3 : 54] If you're divisive and you're disturbing public order. Anyway, here he is. But now a new imperial governor, Festus, has been appointed. He doesn't really know anything about Paul or the Jews.

And Paul himself has appealed to Caesar. He's been put in prison, but he hasn't been given fair shakes. So he has appealed to Caesar, which he can do as a Roman citizen. And now Festus, as the governor, has to write a report.

He has to write a report to send with Paul to Rome. But he's got a problem. He has no clue what to write. Because he doesn't know Paul and he doesn't know the Jewish customs.

He's an outsider. So his bright idea is to get Herod Agrippa to hear Paul's case. And then Herod Agrippa can help him write the report to Rome.

And Herod Agrippa knows all about the Jews and the Jewish customs. And about the Jesus problem. Because his family have been kings in this area for generations.

[4 : 51] In fact, his great-grandfather, Herod the Great, was alive when Jesus was born. He's the one who tried to have Jesus killed. So they know something about what's going on here. And there you are.

The stage is set. As we look at this passage, I want us to see three things, really. First of all, that Paul, interestingly, when he makes his very long speech, he's not really interested in proving his innocence or gaining his freedom.

He's concerned with something much more urgent. And that's telling people the good news about Jesus. And that, secondly, he starts with this whole problem about good people.

And that, thirdly, to address that question, he tells the story of how he met Jesus Christ himself. And as he does that, I think we'll see that God shines a light on our goodness.

And he introduces us again to Jesus. And Jesus' message of light. And he shows us what we should be aiming to do. So here's the first thing that Paul says in his speech.

[5 : 54] I am a good person. And that's why I was against Jesus. Here's what's underneath that kind of stuff. I believe good people will get their reward, right? If there is a God in heaven and he's fair, then he knows that I'm good.

And I should get my reward at the end of my life. That's how he should do it. That's the thinking, isn't it? And we think that way because then we think, I'll be all right. Because I'm a good person. And that's kind of really how Paul starts off with that whole idea, I'm a good person. You notice, verses 1 to 3, that he's very polite. Christians aren't interested in haranguing people or being aggressive or rude.

But he defends himself boldly. And this is what he says, verses 4 and 5. Everyone here can tell you that I keep the rules.

That's what Paul was saying, right? And not just the rules, but the strictest version of the rules. I keep them. I'm a good person, even if you judge me by the toughest standards.

[7 : 07] But then Paul says something very unexpected. He says, yes, I believed in living the good life.

And I've lived that. And actually following through on that, that's how I've ended up where I am today. Confused?

Verse 7. Paul says, Paul says that the hope of the world that God promised to the Jewish people way back when has actually come.

He says, that's why I'm here. He's talking about Jesus, of course. And if you know about the life of Jesus, you will know that Jesus fulfills all our expectations of what it is to be a good person.

You only have to read the Gospels to see that, don't you? And at the same time, his message absolutely denies that our goodness is good enough. Jesus is both what we wanted and not really what we wanted at all.

[8 : 25] And that's why Paul says he's on trial. That's intriguing, isn't it? And then he drops the bomb. It's about the resurrection.

Look at verse 8. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? A dead man coming to life. And at this point, you can see Festus rolling his eyes, can't you?

Oh, Paul. Don't be ridiculous. There's lots of people today think that, too. Dead people don't come to life. But if there is a God, then why should resurrection be beyond him?

And if Jesus did rise, there's some implications there, aren't there? But Paul goes on. He says, you know, I used to hate this Jesus thing. I opposed it with everything I had.

I thought these people, these Jesus people, they're part of the problem. Maybe you're a bit like Paul. You think, people who want to convert me, they are the problem.

[9 : 27] Religion is part of the problem. It's divisive. It's judgy. People should just leave me alone. They should leave everybody alone, really. And if they don't, then they should feel the full force of the law. I tell you what, the old Paul would have been cheering you on.

And if you think that kind of opposition isn't really happening today, then just consider the injunction that the council next door is considering, which would prevent us from approaching anybody to discuss religion or belief in Aldershot or Farnborough town centres.

I think Paul would have heartily agreed, wouldn't he? No, we don't want any of those Jesus people talking about Jesus. The old Paul. All that's changed between then and now is what people think is right. Then, Judaism.

Now, the religion of just leave me alone to live my own truth. That's the only acceptable religion. On the other hand, maybe you're thinking, do you know, I've never really been against Jesus as such, the way that Paul seems to have been.

I'm not really against him. Well, then I need to remind you of the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 11, verse 23, where he says, anybody who is not for me is against me.

[10:50] Think about it in terms of the war that we were just praying about. An enemy soldier might be a good father. A good husband. A good citizen. They're certainly better than a criminal from that enemy country, aren't they?

But in the final analysis, they are still an enemy. And that's how it is between us and God, unless Jesus intervenes.

Now, Paul was even further along the road to thinking, I'm a good person. And even further along the road to being God's enemy until he meets Jesus.

And this is the next thing that he says in his speech. I thought I was a good person. I was opposing Jesus. Then I met Jesus. He really changes people. Let's look at verses 12 and 13.

On one of these journeys, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions.

[11:56] Paul's life is lit up by God's glory and holiness on that road to Damascus. It's like one of those UV lights up there that just shows up all the bits of dirt that we've tried to clean away.

All the bacteria that we've missed. In that light, Paul realises that no matter how good he thinks he is, it is not enough. And it is not okay.

He realises that living a good life is not going to get him home. And that happens when he meets Jesus for himself. And Jesus shows him what he is really doing with his life.

Let's look at these amazing words in 14 and 15. We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goats. What we need to know is that goats are sharp sticks that were used, especially by shepherds or cattle herders, to prod the cattle.

[12:59] Paul, and I really want to point out just two things here. I used to think that Jesus was just showing Paul his foolishness. Now, aren't you silly, Paul, for persecuting me?

And maybe he's defending his own glory. Jesus saying, I am who I said I am, Paul. And I think there is some of that here. But that's not the main thing.

You see, I think what Jesus is saying most of all is that by not obeying him, Paul is hurting himself. And friend, when Jesus speaks to you, as he is doing right now, it isn't because he is hurt and upset that you are not listening to him.

It is that you are hurting yourself by not listening to him. It's like when, you're one of those stranded astronauts that we've been reading about in the last couple of weeks.

And God sees you and all he sees is you trying to cut your own oxygen supply. You're kicking against the goat and God hates that. Because if you're not listening to your maker, you're fighting against him.

[14:15] You're breaking your head against the rock of ages. And if I'm fighting against the source of life and hurting myself in the process, how can I claim to be good?

You see, when I come face to face with the person of Jesus in the Bible, my narrative, my story about my own goodness just falls apart. It just looks grubby when his light hits my life.

And so Paul ends up saying later on in Romans 3 verse 10, there is no one righteous, not even one. who is this man who is speaking?

Well, that's the question, isn't it, that Paul asks. Then I asked, verse 15, who are you, Lord? Well, that's the right question to ask. And the answer comes, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

It is Jesus. And if Jesus is speaking, that must mean that he is alive, even though he was crucified. And if he's alive again, that means that all that he claimed is true, and especially the message that he claimed to be bringing from God is true.

[15:29] And what is that message? Verse 18, he's sending Paul to proclaim it, to open our eyes and turn us from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, so that we may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified, made fit for glory by faith in me.

He gave up his place in heaven so that we would have a place there forever. Verse 23 gives us more. The Messiah would suffer and as the first to rise from the dead would bring the message of

light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

See, Jesus suffers for our sins, rises from the dead and brings light to the world. That's what Paul learns when he meets Jesus.

And so here are two things that we can say from the Lord to those who think they should be acceptable based on their own goodness. You can say, I just would love to challenge you to read about the life of Jesus.

In other words, let the light of Jesus shine on your life. And see if you still come away thinking that you're good. Because standing next to him, none of us looks very shiny.

[16:53] Jesus himself says it. He says, why do you call me good? There is no one good except God alone. Of course, Jesus is God. And second, we can ask, how can you claim to be good, friend, if you're not willing to listen to God who creates and defines and embodies goodness?

Everybody knows good boys and girls listen to their dad. Right? Paul does not. He realizes, I didn't listen to my heavenly father.

Maybe you've been standing in the light of God's word, Jesus' word, for a while now, but you're still on the fence because you're thinking, I'm not that bad. Friend, it seems plain to me from God's word that God says you are still in darkness and that you do not have a place at his side unless and until Jesus rescues you.

Let's go to the next thing that Paul says in his speech. Now, Jesus has asked me to share the good news with you. Let's look at verses 16 and 17. Jesus speaking, Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. You see, he says, Paul, I need you to go and tell the good news.

[18:31] And of course, that is recorded here to remind us that Jesus has commissioned us. Think back to our theme verse, Acts 1, verse 8, and you will have power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

We are his witnesses. And Agrippa sees immediately that Paul is doing that. Did you notice that? Look at verse 28. Then Agrippa said to Paul, Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?

He's more concerned about the good news than he is about proving his innocence or gaining his freedom. Isn't he? He's trying to persuade Agrippa, anybody who will listen to become a Christian. He says so. Short time or long, verse 29, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am except for these chains.

that's our job to persuade all that we can. And that means that if we are Christians it is just simply not an option to say that's not my calling or it's not for me.

[19:51] Praise God, there is grace from God to help us. You notice that in verse 22 what Paul says, God has helped me to this very day. So I stand here.

That's how I stand here and testify to small and great alike. He's told his story everywhere and God has helped him every day right up until that point.

We are to do the same and God will help us every day. Isn't it amazing? Paul, as he obeys that instruction from the Lord Jesus, he is the only man in the room in chains and he is the only man who is truly free.

He's completely unafraid of the court of public opinion. Can we say that? He is free to be truthful. Why? Because he knows that his place with Jesus is secure already and Jesus wants that for everyone.

You may think of yourself as good but are you free like that? That is what the good news does. That's why we're invited to share it with other people.

[21:05] Paul's story is amazing, isn't it? The light show, the desert road, the heavenly voice. I kind of wish I had a story like that.

Do you sometimes? Something like, you know, I'd made a mess of my life and I was living on the rubbish tip in a tent and then the heavens opened and I was bathed in an amazing white light and it cleansed me and the angel choir sang as Jesus handed me my adoption papers.

That would be a story, wouldn't it? By contrast, my story feels a little bit more like I was having real trouble with my tennis technique and then Jesus saved me. That's what it feels like by comparison to Paul's story.

Isn't it? The reality is, of course, it's more like this. I was living an untroubled life in my small self-righteous world when Jesus showed me what a hypocrite I was.

That's closer to the truth for me. I'm happy to tell you more later. But actually, when you think about it, that's not that dissimilar to what Paul says.

[22 : 15] In fact, what it boils down to when you think about what Paul says is this. I met Jesus. He spoke to me, but not in the flesh.

And when you think about it like that, suddenly it doesn't sound so different from what all Christians here today have experienced. I met Jesus. He spoke to me, but not in the flesh.

All of us Christians can say that. All of us Christians can say, Jesus spoke to me. I've seen him. at work in my life.

He did what nobody else can do. He held up the mirror to me and showed me myself as I stood in his light and then he saved me from that terrible reflection.

we can all tell that story. Here is the change that Jesus wants to affect in your heart, in my heart.

[23 : 17] Instead of insisting on our goodness and telling everybody else to get back in their boxes, we see ourselves in the light of the Lord Jesus. That's what he wants. Instead of hurting ourselves by being determined to oppose Jesus kicking the goats, we invite him to open our eyes, bring us out of darkness, forgive us.

Instead of playing brownie points, he wants us to be safe to admit what we are really like. Safe because our place in glory, our acceptability to God doesn't depend on our performance, but on the grace of God in Christ seen on the cross.

No more pretending. And so instead of being a slave to fear, worrying what other people will think of us, we're free. Even if we're standing in chains in front of the most important people that we know, Jesus does all that.

Give yourself to him. Come and stand in his light. Let's just do that for a few moments now. I just invite you to close your eyes, bring yourself to the Lord Jesus, stand in his light.

Come and stand Maybe you've seen yourself in the light of Jesus for the first time today.

[25 : 09] Please come speak to me, speak to somebody else about what you have seen, what you have heard. We would love to help you. Let me just pray. Lord God, we thank you.

We thank you for Paul, your servant. We thank you that he simply said what he saw. He simply told the story of how he met you and how you changed him.

Lord, thank you for your light, which shows us truth about ourselves, our world and you. Thank you that you care enough about us to want us not to hurt ourselves by failing to listen to you.

Help us to give ourselves to you as our saviour and the Lord of our lives. Set us free from fear, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.