

(2) Why good people don't get to heaven

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[0 : 00] Thank you. Once again, a very warm welcome indeed to this Gross Church event, the second of three talks, Who Gets to Heaven?

And as we did on Sunday, I'm keen to answer this question from the lips of Jesus Christ himself. And so what we are doing last Sunday, tonight, and this coming Sunday is looking at three of the parables that Jesus told.

And we're going to do that tonight as we tackle this question, why good people don't get to heaven. I've asked HJ if she will read it for us.

The reading is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 18 and verses 14. Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up into the temple to pray. One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus.

[1 : 04] God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Hey, H.J., thanks so much. Well, imagine the scene, will you? Two men walk into a church in Dulwich one Sunday evening. One is well turned out.

He is well regarded by the establishment. He's recently given a large amount of money to the local scout group so they can rebuild their scout hut.

[2 : 05] He runs the local boys' football team, and he is also a church warden. He is devoted to his church. In fact, he and his wife single-handedly finance the local church, it seems.

He is always there at all the services. In fact, the church really couldn't do without him. And that Sunday evening, as he stands in church, he prays, Oh, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. Muggers, football hooligans, pimps, or even that drug dealer over there. Because out of the corner of his eye, he has spotted the second person to walk into church that Sunday evening.

He's a dishevelled young man who's just come in from the cold. He's been on drugs since he was ten, and he is now a dealer on one of the estates in Peckham.

He has a history of violence with women, and a good number of the children on the estate where he lives would call him dad if only they really knew he was.

[3 : 12] But that evening, there are tears in his eyes as he kneels in one of the pews at the back. And sobbing, almost uncontrollably, he utters these words in his heart.

Oh, God, what a wretch I am. I've mucked up my life totally. Please have mercy on me, this pathetic sinner. Well, who was it who went home forgiven?

Who was it who went home welcome into heaven? Well, that's a retelling of the parable that Jesus told. Was it the respectable religious establishment figure or the washed-up drug dealer?

Well, the sting in the tail that Jesus told is that the one who went home right with God was the dishevelled drug dealer and not the establishment upright churchgoer.

Have a look at the very last paragraph there in that reading. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

[4 : 22] For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Now, I don't misunderstand Jesus.

He isn't condoning a life of drugs. Nor is he saying that God only loves the dropouts of society. Now, the point of the parable as Jesus told it is that both men need forgiving.

But only one of them recognises it. And only he goes home forgiven. If you notice why Jesus tells the parable, it's there in that first paragraph.

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. He tells it to warn us against the danger of pride and self-righteousness before God.

Notice, Willie, he tells us two things. I put them both there on the bottom of the handout. He tells us, first of all, that good people don't get to heaven. And secondly, that bad people who trust in God's mercy do get to heaven.

[5 : 31] I just want to spend a few minutes looking at each of those. First of all, good people don't get to heaven. Have a look at that second paragraph with me.

Two men went up into the temple to pray. One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now, I think the problem with us looking at this story is that we are programmed to miss this thing in the tale.

Because we've been brought up, I guess those of us who have had any connection with church in the past, we've been brought up, haven't we, to think that Pharisees are nasty people. And even in society more widely, we speak that way of people being Pharisees.

So as soon as we hear the word Pharisee, it's like when the baddie comes on stage at the Christmas pantomime, everyone boozes, and immediately we think very negatively.

But in the first century, the Pharisees were the sort of men who you'd have loved your daughter to marry. They were upright. They were respectable. They were scrupulously honest.

[6 : 38] They were generous with their money. And they were very religious. But I wonder if you noticed, as he prays to God, his heart reveals where he stands with God.

I wonder if you noticed the basis of his confidence as he prays is himself. He's not really praying to God at all. He's simply talking to himself. First of all, do you notice that his confidence is in all the bad things he doesn't do?

So have a look at the middle of that second paragraph. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus. God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Do you see how he makes himself feel good by sounding off against other people? Now, I take it that's a game that anyone can play. We can always find people, can't we, who we slightly kind of look down on.

And, of course, when we're looking down on other people, the one thing we don't do is look up to God. So we compare ourselves with others rather than comparing ourselves with God.

[7 : 49] Rather like the Sunday school teacher who I was hearing was teaching this very parable to his Sunday school class. And at the end of the Sunday school lesson, he led the class in a prayer.

Thank you, God, that we are not like the Pharisee. Easy to make that mistake. But then, secondly, notice that his confidence is in the good things he does do.

How does Jesus go on? What does he say? I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. Now, the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible, said that you should fast once a year.

He fasts twice a week. So, presumably, he thinks he's 104 times better than he needs to be. Notice, too, he says that he gives a tenth of everything he has.

Whereas, again, in the Old Testament, you have to give a tenth of a prescribed limited number of things. You see, this prayer is really no prayer at all. It would be rather like someone going to a doctor and saying, Doctor, I've got some great news for you.

[8 : 57] I'm in perfect health. My heart is functioning brilliantly. My blood pressure is exactly where it should be. I have no stress, no strains, no illness whatsoever.

I just thought you might like to know. And so, it's as if he says to God, God, you should be proud of me. In fact, you could really do with me on your team.

What is Jesus doing? He's deliberately exposing that kind of self-righteousness. What is his verdict? What is Jesus' verdict on the Pharisee? He went home unforgiven.

He was not right with God. Because, of course, for all his good deeds, and for all his comparing himself with other people, he was not a good person. No one is a good person.

None of us are. His confidence was totally misplaced. You see, Jesus is saying that in the world in which we live, there are only really two types of people.

[9 : 58] Not the two types that we tend to think of. We tend to think, don't we, that there are good people and bad people. And I guess we'd all kind of cut the cake slightly differently. But however we cut it, we would all, I imagine, put ourselves in the good category, even if only just.

But the two types of people that God sees are very different. Because as God looks at the world, the two types of people he sees are the bad people who know they're bad, and the bad people who think they're good.

And that's a very different way, isn't it, of looking at the world. The bad people who know they're bad, and the bad people who think they are good.

The problem with those who think they're good is that their very respectability blinds them to what God sees in them. I was hearing recently something about the history of the tobacco advertising industry.

The heyday of cigarette tobacco, I'm told, was between the 1930s and the 1950s, when in the States in particular, cigarettes were sold for all the wonderful benefits which they gave those who smoked them, and even their health benefits.

[11 : 21] So glamour, success, fulfilment, and health. One particular American brand claimed, I quote, to keep your head clear and protect you against colds.

Now, I'm sure a GP wouldn't dish out that advice today. Chris Bithell, our resident medic, is looking rather appalled. Now, of course, we snigger because we know the damage that nicotine and tobacco does.

But of course, the tragedy is that many people have been taken in by those adverts. And the very thing which they thought was doing them a power of good was actually doing the most terrible damage.

Well, Jesus tells this parable to warn us against thinking we are good, respectable people. Because the very thing which we think is getting us into our good book, into God's good books, can in fact be doing the most terrible damage.

You see, we can begin to think we are good enough for God. But none of us are. Jesus makes it clear time and time again that no one is good enough for heaven.

[12 : 38] Good people, in other words, those who think they are good, don't get to heaven. But then, secondly, the second heading there on the outline, bad people who trust in God's mercy do.

And have a look at the next paragraph and the way in which Jesus describes his tax collector. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

Now, we tend to think of tax collectors as being fairly inoffensive creatures, but in the first century they were completely the opposite to that. They were the tools of the oppressive Roman Empire.

They were often wealthy, wealthy through ill-gotten gains, they were traitors, and they colluded with the oppressive Roman forces.

In other words, they were regarded as the lowest of the low. So, you see, if the Pharisees' way is the wrong way, what is the right way? Well, says Jesus, it is to be like this tax collector and to humble yourself before God.

[13 : 54] Notice, will you, that he has a right view of himself. Whereas the Pharisee stands up for everyone to see, while the tax collector doesn't do that, does he? He doesn't say how great he is, he understands just how bad he is.

He stands a distance away, perhaps at the back of the temple, away from watching eyes, and he simply pours out his heart in recognition of how short he falls of God's standards.

In other words, he's let God down badly, and he knows it. In fact, he won't even look up to heaven. It's as if he won't make eye contact with God.

He knows he's broken God's laws, he knows he's hurt everyone else, he knows he's totally mucked up. And that's what he says to God. He has a right view of himself as he cries out to God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And that is the first step in having a right approach to God, in admitting as he did that he was a sinner. In other words, that he falls far short of God.

[15 : 05] That he had not kept God's laws, no matter how good we think we are. I was hearing recently of a church minister who one morning got a phone call from a member of his congregation.

And this lady said to him, Minister, I just want you to know that I've become a Christian, that I've put my trust in Jesus Christ. Well, the pastor was amazed and said to her, but you've been coming along here for 20 years.

You've been hearing the Bible explained week by week by myself and my predecessor and other people on the staff team. What do you mean you've just become a Christian and put your trust in

Jesus?

Her reply, I thought you would say that, but actually until yesterday I thought when you were describing sinful people, I thought you were describing other people. and yesterday I finally realised you were describing me. I realised, she said, I needed forgiveness. [16:09] So the first step to having the right approach to God is to have a right understanding of ourselves. But then notice the second thing, he has a right view of God. He realises, doesn't he, that God is God?

And so he cries out to God for mercy. He realises that God is a God of mercy and kindness. Have a look again at that verse.

God be merciful to me, he cries, a sinner. Now wonderfully, that is a prayer that God can answer. And it is a prayer that God will answer when we pray that prayer to him.

Because the very reason Jesus Christ came to earth was to die. The very reason Jesus came to earth was to die in our place so that we may be, so that we can be forgiven.

And that is wonderful news. You see, we begin to see how kind and gracious and merciful God is to act like that. His own son became our substitute.

[17:13] He died in our place, took the punishment that we deserve so that we might stand before him forgiven. his son became a substitute so we could go free.

Now, if you have read Charles Dickens' book A Tale of Two Cities, you'll know that towards the end of the book there's a very good illustration of this principle of substitution. The book is set in the 18th century in revolutionary France.

and there are two men in the book called Charles Darnier and Sidney Carlton. They're very different. They look identical. They're very different in terms of their character but physically they look identical.

And both men love the same woman. But the woman in question only loves one of them. She loves Charles Darnier. Sidney Carlton is an absolute rogue. She doesn't love him. She loves Charles Darnier.

Well, Darnier finds himself in prison in revolutionary France because he's an aristocrat and facing the guillotine. So Sidney Carlton decides to do what Dickens tells us is the only good thing he's ever done in his life.

[18:25] He decides to he enters the prison where Darnier is in prison. He drugs him. They swap clothes. They swap papers.

And Carlton stays in prison and Darnier is taken out of prison drugged and taken back to safety in England where he can marry the woman he loves.

Darnier is now a free man. Sidney Carlton faces the guillotine. Now that is a fictional substitution that Charles Dickens describes.

But God performed a real one. when Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place. You see God has gone to the most extraordinary lengths to bring people back to himself.

To forgive us. He has done so through the very costly death of his own son. God has done so good.

[19:31] And therefore of course the key question for us is not who is good because actually no one is good. Now the key question for us is whether we have the humility to admit our needs and to come to Jesus for help and to ask God for mercy which of course is precisely why Jesus told this parable.

good people don't get to heaven but bad people who trust in God's mercy they do. Now I hope that this parable turns our ideas about the Christian faith on their head totally upside down because of course our culture assumes doesn't it that Christianity is basically about living a good life and if you're good enough if you reach the grade then you get to heaven.

Now Jesus teaching on this and authentic Christianity on this could not be further removed from the truth of that. No one is good enough none of us not even one but wonderfully God doesn't tell us that he'll only accept us once we've cleaned up our act and tried a bit harder and reached the grade and there he tells us that anyone who cries out to him for mercy will get to heaven.

Well I think I'm going to stop there before pudding arrives.