

# Always been by Faith, not Works

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today, I don't know if you know this, but today at 3 o'clock here at Holy Trinity, we're starting a Christianity Explored course. It's a short course for people to explore the basics of the Christian faith.

We sit around tables, we watch a video, and then we have a discussion about the first principles of following Jesus. If you're not already coming, I'd love to invite you if you think that would be good for you or someone in your family.

But for most of us, I think this course might be too basic. Too basic. Until I read this passage here this week. This passage seems to be Paul's Christianity Explored course for seasoned believers, just like us.

And so what I want to do is start the course with you right here and now. And so here is my first question. Please chat to the person next to you. What is the difference between Christianity and every other religion? Over to you.

Lots of murmuring there. Good stuff. Good stuff. Let me sharpen the question slightly.

[ 1 : 07 ] What is the difference or how does Christianity differ from not just religions but every other worldview? I put that question at the top of your handout there.

I wonder what you would say to that. How is Christianity different from every other worldview? And there might be a few answers here and there. But supremely, supremely the answer is this.

We are justified by faith and not works. That is, Christians have a right standing before God. We have an entry to heaven not by any religious or moral performance that we do, but by what Jesus does on the cross.

His death for our sins. The Jew, the Muslim, the Hindu are all trusting in their own religious work to get to God and ultimate reality. Actually, even the secularist, that is, the average Melbourne atheist, which is most of them out there, are all doing the same thing.

They're all working out their best life now. All trying to achieve their ultimate here and now.

Christianity is not just slightly different.

[ 2 : 17 ] It is totally opposite from every other worldview. We trust in Jesus' work and not our own. Now, if the people starting the Christianity Explored course today, if they could grasp just that, they will have explored 90% of Christianity, I think.

But in Galatians, Galatians is also a church of seasoned believers, just like we are. They passed Christianity Explored ages ago.

But now Paul has to write them, as Joy said, a really harsh letter. Because they had begun to desert the cross of Christ. They were fooled into thinking they must be circumcised to be right with God. Now, that sounds really strange on the surface, doesn't it? But underneath, it's the same as every other worldview. The path to God depends on our religious performance, our good works, religious efforts.

Paul says, verse 1, You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

[ 3 : 26 ] How can you switch from the message preached and taught and portrayed to you, you dear stupid Christians? Now, that's Paul speaking to them.

That's not me speaking to you. They were confused about circumcision. We are not. They were Galatians. We are Holy Trinity Doncaster. But if this were HTG, if this were Holy Trinity Galatia, we might have some of the same confusions.

Let me show you. So the group over there, the group over there would have cancelled all their holidays as long as they live. Why? Because they think they must go to church every Sunday to be right with God.

The group at the back, they must be members of a small group because that makes them feel more Christian. The group who sit at the front, that's basically Andre and Guy, basically pointing to you guys.

Andre and Guy, I see you every week. They must sit at the front every single week. You know why? Because they want to be the first to take the communion wine. You know when it doesn't have all those floaty bits that the people at the back get to enjoy?

[ 4 : 42 ] You see, Andre and Guy think the purer the wine, the purer the communion with God. The group on that side, they don't get along with the group on that side. Because these people here think you must be baptized as an adult to be saved.

But the group over here think, no, no, you must be baptized as a baby. And the group over there, they always pester Andrew Price for Bible study notes. You see, they think you must do a quiet time in the morning.

Otherwise, by five o'clock, how will you know if you're still getting to heaven? See, HTG might easily be full of the same sorts of confusions that the church in Galatia was.

A church full of must-dos. Now, perhaps you say, well, look, I'm not any of those people. I only ever trust in the cross. I passed Christianity Explored.

I would never be like them. Perhaps you say that. Remember, even confident swimmers drown. This letter is a warning. That's why it's so strong.

[ 5 : 47 ] In chapter one, it was a real enough possibility, Paul said, if even he or an angel from heaven preached a different path. In chapter two, this lie, it came from the first and great church in Jerusalem of all places.

And last week or two weeks ago for you, chapter two, even the apostle Peter, Jesus' best friend, who was actually there at the cross, even he had to be rebuked for switching back to Jewish customs and religious laws.

If it can happen to these champions, it can happen to us. If it can happen to mature church in Galatia, it can happen to mature churches such as Holy Trinity Doncaster.

And I think there must be something inherent to our sinful nature that is always tempted to pull us away from the cross of Christ.

Maybe it's something in our culture. You know, we believe in our culture of being self-made and self-reliant of earning our way. Maybe there is something in every Christian that wants to trust in these must-dos, these good things that are attached to Christianity for our salvation.

[ 7 : 05 ] So last week, the key verse, if you look over in your Bibles, was chapter two, verse 16. Please look at it. Chapter two, verse 16. The end of that verse says, Because by works of the law, that is by good religious performance, no one will be justified.

This week, four reasons why that's the case. Four reasons why that's the case. Four reasons why the Muslim, who's trying to keep the five pillars, hoping that Allah will weigh them favorably, is wrong.

Four reasons why the Hindu, constantly working for a better karma, is wrong. Four reasons why the Catholic Church and even some Anglicans are wrong, as they supplement Jesus' work with some of the rights of the priest and good deeds.

Four reasons why even the secularists, trying to achieve their best life now, is wrong. Four reasons. We won't have time to get to the fourth reason.

I've put it still on your handout. Please ask me about it later. But what we'll do is the three reasons. Three reasons why Christianity stands alone. So this is reason number one.

[ 8 : 21 ] Verse two. Verse two. Chapter three, verse two. I would like to learn just one thing from you. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by believing what you heard?

How did you start your Christian life? How did the Holy Spirit come into your life? Was your church attendance or speaking in tongues so good that God said, well done you. Here's the Holy Spirit. Is that how you started? You see, the Spirit isn't some prize for a higher stage of Christianity. He's the gift from God that we get when we first hear and believe the good news.

The Spirit is the guarantee of a spiritual life. This is Christianity explored level one, says Paul. You all remember how you became Christians.

Verse three. Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? What makes you think you can perfect your Christianity by switching paths and getting circumcised?

[ 9 : 26 ] In verse four, Paul warns that will make all your past Christianity in vain. You see, what we're talking about today is salvation level consequences.

It's no wonder that Paul calls them fools twice. Verse five. I ask again, does God give you his spirit and work miracles among you by works of the law or by believing what you heard?

The answer is so obvious, says Paul. Why change paths? Now, for us here today, let me ask the same question.

How did we become Christians? Was it, well, I got to a point, my church attendance was really great. My Bible understanding, my Bible reading was so good. And I realized I was better than everyone else around me.

I thought, hey, I must be a Christian. Is that how we started? Or was it I heard and believed the message of Jesus' death for me? Paul says, if that beginning is how you received the spirit, then that is the right path.

[ 10 : 32 ] Stay on that path. To switch to another path will make all of this in vain. It will sell short Jesus' death. How foolish. You see, the problem is, I think, there are so many good things attached to Jesus.

There's the church, the Anglican denomination, the Baptist, baptism, the Lord's Supper, Bible reading, prayer, serving at church, good deeds in our community. All of these good things.

But the warning of this passage is that after a while, maybe after years and maybe after decades, we start to trust in these good things instead.

We elevate them to the ultimate things. Maybe we feel that Jesus' death and the Good Friday story, maybe we feel that's the basics, that belongs to Christianity Explored.

Maybe we think we're past the ABCs. That attitude, says Paul, undermines the cross of Christ. I don't know about you, but I love confession in church.

[ 11 : 38 ] And the reason I love confession in church is because I used to feel that I arrived at church only 50% a Christian. Do you ever feel that? Until I made my confession.

See, I used to think that during the week I would lose Christian points. So laziness at work, minus a point. I didn't do a quiet time this morning, minus a point. Argument with someone at home, minus some points.

Over the speed limit, minus a few points. I used to turn up to church with my Christianity looking like my driver's license, full of demerit points. Actually, I've got all my points.

But anyway, but when I finally, finally got to confess, you know, and the priest does their thing in my old church. He used to do this and, you know, absolve us of our sins. Oh, finally, 100% a Christian again.

I can now switch off during the sermon, minus a point. I can, when I drove home, sharing the road with a cyclist, minus lots of points. You see, there's nothing wrong with confession in church.

[ 12 : 38 ] It's a good thing to do. But when I trust in that, when I live my life from confession to confession, I am trusting in that and not in Jesus' blood, once given for all time.

I have switched paths from faith to works. Paul says, verse 3, After beginning by means of the Spirit, why are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

How foolish, he would say to me. Look at your beginnings, says Paul. You received the Spirit by faith, not by works.

That's reason one. Reason two, look at Abraham's beginnings. Here is a tip. If ever you're in a religious argument, just start quoting Abraham. Abraham is the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

He is like the top trump. Just start quoting Abraham and you'll probably win. Verse 6. So also Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[ 13 : 48 ] That was a quote from Genesis 16. It was our Old Testament reading that Lucille gave us. It says that Abraham was counted as right with God.

Was it because of his good moral performance? No. Because a chapter or two earlier, he sold his wife to slavery just to protect himself. Was it because of his unshakable faith?

No. In the reading, he couldn't even trust God to give him a son. Was it because Abraham was diligently searching for God in the ancient world?

No. God found Abraham. He took him outside. He showed him all the stars in the sky and said, Abraham, you will be the beginning of a new era of people. A whole new creation of blessings through you and your descendants.

Not by his good works or moral performance, but by God's initiative. God's doing. God's grace. You see, maybe the lie, maybe the lie going around this church in Galatia was if you really want to inherit Abraham's blessings, you need to be circumcised just like all the men in his household.

[14:58] Paul says, you dear, stupid der brains. Verse seven. Understand then. Understand then that those who have faith are the children of Abraham.

Faith in God's promises, however shaky, is the mark of Abraham's family, not outward circumcision. Understand then. Some people think that God dealt with the Jews differently to the way he deals with Christians.

Yeah, there are some differences to be sure. But verse eight and nine tell us it has always been the same way. The way God deals with the world has always been through faith.

Abraham's blessings have always been through faith. Yeah, sure. Abraham never knew Jesus, his seed. Sure.

And sure, we can see much more of God's plans this side of history. But just as we believe in God's promises, so Abraham also believed the same gospel.

[16:01] The path of faith means that anyone, not just ethnically Jewish people, but anyone, even us Gentiles, can be saved.

Whether you're Australian, whether you're from the bush or a townie, whether you're Indian or Chinese or Persian or South African, whether you're a half and a half like me, we can all share in God's blessings through Abraham, through his seed, Jesus, by faith.

By works of the law, no one will be justified. Reason one, look at the way you began. Reason number two, look at the way Abraham began.

And reason three, by works of the law, we will only be cursed. This is point number three. I think it's still okay to say that we're in election season.

Can I still say that a week after? And sort of in keeping with that theme of politics, did you know that many of the US presidents were hounded by claims of nepotism? Do you know what that is?

[17:06] That's, you know, where you give your family member a job just because they're your family member and not because they're the most qualified people. So President Trump gave his daughter a position somewhere in the cabinet because probably she's his daughter, not because she's the most qualified.

And that was quite shocking at the time. But no one comes as close as President Ulysses S. Grant, who lived a long time ago. He hired over 40 of his relatives to top positions in the cabinet.

Some of those family members were criminals. And so what he did was give them a presidential pardon and then gave them a job anyway. And I'm sure there were more people more qualified, harder working people than his family.

But those people had no chance getting into the White House while one of the family members was the president hiring up his family.

Clearly, it's not what you know. It's who you know. That's probably where that saying comes from.

And Paul agrees. He says the path of working hard, of good performance will not result in God saying, well done, good and faithful servant.

[18:19] It won't. It will result in God saying, you are cursed. Now, it's not that our works are bad or our works are evil.

It's because we won't reach God's standard. Verse 10. Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything, everything written in the book of the law.

If we're going to rely on works of the law, we better be perfect. We better keep all 10 of the commandments all of the time. That's why verse 11 says, clearly, anyone relying on works of the law will not be justified.

It won't work. There's nothing wrong with the law. Next week, Andrew will tell us the role of the law. There's nothing wrong with good works. It is good to be good. But when that law was handed down, the standard of it is there in verse 12.

Verse 12. The person who does these things will live by them. If my living with God depends on me doing these things, that path leads to curses.

[19:30] Because God's standard is too high. Verse 10. For all who rely on works of the law, on good moral performance, are under a curse. Why?

Because cursed is everyone who does not do everything, everything written in the book of the law. Religious works, good deeds, they're all part of a godly life, to be sure.

But as a path to justification, completely hopeless. They only bring a curse. The election last week, the election told us that the big problem in the world is climate change.

Now, I don't know if that's true or not. But actually, this is the problem in the world. Here it is. God cannot call us right on judgment day.

He cannot. God cannot. Because his standard is too high. And that means all of us have fallen short. But Paul's gospel, verse 13, says this.

[ 20 : 34 ] Verse 13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. How did that happen? When did that happen?

Paul says simple. When he was hung on a cross. Hung on a pole. Paul says, Even in your own Jewish scriptures, it is written, verse 13, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.

You see, one of the big problems that Jewish people have when it comes to evangelism, one of the big problems that Jewish people have with Jesus is his cross. How can he be our Messiah?

How can he be the one from whom all of Abraham's blessings flow? Our law says that anyone who dies like that is not precious to God, but cursed. The Jewish heretics that came down from Jerusalem in this letter, they scorned the cross.

It's not enough. You need to add works, they said. And actually, they are no different from every other worldview. How can Jesus' death be your victory?

[ 21 : 42 ] How can his death be the path to life? How can his weakness be God's power? It's too humiliating. It's too insignificant. Too ancient. Too local.

Level one. Level one. Christianity Explored says that Jesus wasn't cursed for his unfittedness to be God's king or for his moral failures.

But for ours, he becomes the curse. That all our religious and moral performance inevitably leads to. And so trusting in Jesus' death gives Christians a hope that no other worldview has.

For the Muslim, trying hard to keep the five pillars, hoping that Allah will weigh them favorably. He won't unless he has dodgy scales.

Unless he uses a lesser measurement than the God of Abraham. For the Hindu, trying to improve their karma. Unless they're perfect all the time, they won't achieve ultimate reality.

[ 22 : 49 ] For the Anglican and the Catholic. Hoping that going to church, saying a prayer, loving our neighbor as ourself will do the trick. You have to do it all the time. And we haven't.

For the Jew. Busy keeping God's law. God's law is good. It puts moral boundaries around our life. It's good to be good. But as a path to justification.

Paul says you are now on a path to curses. This is level one Christianity explored. The unique claim of Christianity of the gospel is verse 13.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. When? Where? How did that happen? When he was hung on a pole. At the cross.

This is a letter written to a mature church who were going well. They were fooled into thinking they could switch paths.

[ 23 : 48 ] Paul warns them, do not sell short the death of Jesus. We are mature church. We are going well. Our temptation will always be to add some of those good things attached to Christianity.

To make them ultimate things. To trust in them. To feel more Christian and secure about heaven. Here is Paul's salvation level warning.

Don't join this church of fools. Don't sell short Jesus' death by moving from faith to works.

It's the path we began with that gave us the spirit. It's the path that has always been since the time of Abraham. Every other worldview only leads to curses.

Should I pray that we would stick with the cross? Let's do that. Father God, we thank you for the death of Jesus. The only thing that counts people like us as right before you.

[ 24 : 56 ] And Father, there are so many things attached to Jesus. Good things. And we are so tempted to trust in them. For our right standing before you.

Help us to trust only in the cross. Father, especially if we've been Christians for decades and decades. Help us not move past first principles. Jesus' death for us.

Help us rely on that as the only thing that justifies us before you. In his name we ask. Amen. Amen..