

Who is Good Enough for God?

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of July 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Who is Good Enough for God? And is from Romans chapter 3 verses 1 to 20.

They're not easy words, so let's pray and ask us for God's help as we understand them better.

God, we thank you that you have entrusted to us your oracle, your words, your words of scripture, both Old and New Testament. We pray that tonight you may give us great insight and understanding.

We pray that this may lead us to you and to lives that are worthy of you. I bring you glory. Amen.

[1 : 06] A lawyer asks his client, do you want the good news first or the bad news?

Tell me the bad news, Christian. Your DNA was found all over the crime scene. What's the good news? The good news is that your cholesterol is down to fair petitions.

Sometimes the fact that news is good is only seen when we realise it in contact to bad news.

For example, a person may be given a two-year prison sentence, and that could be good news if they expected and deserve to get luck. Or somebody passes an exam, they get 51%.

Straight through. That might be good news if they expected to and deserve to fail. Or somebody loses their leg. That might be good news if the reason for losing the leg was to stop the spread of gangrene or some other illness that might have in fact take their whole life.

[2 : 20] Now to shift tomorrow with the Christian faith. That is Christian faith. That is often termed the good news. That is bad news. So we fail to appreciate why the news is good news.

Unless we appreciate the bad news first. The bad news simply is that everybody faces the judgment zone of God and when they do, they will fail.

That's simply easy. There are no excuses, there are no exemptions and there are no exceptions for that. Ignorance is no excuse as we've seen in recent weeks.

There is enough evidence for God in creation as well as some sort of moral consequences in each one of us to mean that ignorance is no excuse. Self-righteousness is no excuse.

That is because the people who are self-righteous who think that they're better off than the really bad people are in fact in the end no better off. Religious privilege is no excuse.

[3 : 24] So the people who are very religious or the people for whom God has revealed things of himself given them his law and his word and his promises they in fact all choice are no better off because what God requires for people who are doers of the Lord and not only hearing but believe.

Now that's been Paul's argument to this point in Romans 1-3. He anticipates a number of objections and these come in verses 1-8 of the reading that is read for us tonight in Romans 3-1.

Firstly, if as he was arguing in chapter 2 for a Jewish person who has received God's law and been circumcised as the law requires that is no guarantee of eternal safety that was what he argued as we saw last night then what's the advantage of having the law?

What's the advantage of being circumcised? That's the objection that Paul raises in verse 1. Then what advantage has the Jews or what is the value of circumcision?

And we may well expect Paul to say well there's no advantage at all given what he said in chapter 2 but in fact he surprises us because he says much in every way. There is an advantage in having the law from God if you're a Jewish person and there is an advantage in being circumcised if you're a Jewish male.

[4 : 51] And then Paul's reason is that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. Having God's word, that is his oracles, that is what we call the Old Testament, the first and the bulk part of the Bible is a great advantage for a Jewish person or for any person, for that reason, for that one.

Because God has revealed himself in the words of the Old Testament. They are a revelation about God and what he's on about in this world. And it is a privilege and an advantage for people to have received that.

But before Paul goes on to explain why that is an advantage, he comes to a couple of other objections that people might make. They might be legitimate ones that people have made with him over the years of ministry.

But I think he's anticipating what some of his critics might say when they read this letter. So he's trying to second-guess him and try to answer their objections in this letter itself.

So then the next objection in verse 3. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

[6 : 03] Now literally what's said there is that in verse 2 the Jewish people were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were untrustworthy?

The word to relate. Will their untrustworthiness nullify the trustworthiness of God? That is, God has entrusted his oracles to people.

What if they're not trustworthy? What if they don't keep what his law requires? What if they don't believe the promises that God has made? Will somehow their wrongdoing somehow thwart or nullify or prevent God from being faithful and keeping his promises to people who don't obey what he says?

Now that's an important question to get right. I realise it's a slightly tricky question, but it is actually an important one because many Christians think that somehow our failure ties God's hand.

that somehow our sin thwarts God's purposes in the world. And so you may hear it said to you by sometimes Christian leaders, I've heard it said by Christian counsellors, that unless you get this area of your life right and overcome this area of sin or failure, then God is not able to use your work for you.

[7 : 19] And they're wrong in saying it. Because our sin and our failure does not thwart God. It may be that he chooses not to work for you, but it doesn't stop him or prevent him from working for you.

That is, our sin and failure does not nullify God's faithfulness. He is still faithful even if we fail. Indeed, Paul goes on to hypothesise in the next verse.

By no means, he says, even if everyone was a liar. God is still true. He's going to check what he's saying there. Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true.

That is, our sin does not force God to be unfaithful to the promises he makes in Scripture. The second bit of verse 4, which is an inverted commas in our Bible to show that it's a quote from somewhere, gives an example.

Paul is quoting from one of the Psalms, Psalm 51. And Psalm 51 is a Psalm of David. David was a great king of Israel, but a flawed king. He committed adultery with a beautiful woman who lived somewhere down the hill from his palace in Jerusalem.

[8 : 30] And she was sunbaking. He lusted after he got her. He had adultery with her. She had a baby. The baby eventually died. But in the court of the dead, he put to death her husband as well. David knew that he deserved punishment for his sin of adultery and his complicity in murder.

But even then, David said in this Psalm, when God punishes him for his sin, God remains faithful. David's sin did not nullify or thwart God's faithfulness to him.

So the reason why God punished David, who deserved to be punished, was so that God may be righteous in your words and prevail in your judgment. That is, God's righteousness and faithfulness is not compromised by his punishing a sinner.

His righteousness and his faithfulness are not thwarted by David's faithlessness. God has made great promises to David and they still stood, despite the fact that he is a gross woman and adulterer and a murderer.

That ought to give us confidence in God. It ought to give us confidence when we fail. But even though we fail, small sins or large sins, God is still faithful.

[9 : 48] He will still keep the promises that he has made for us. Sometimes Christians have a lack of such confidence. They feel, oh, I failed, God rejected me, he's turned away from me, his promises to me won't stand, on a complete failure, God's deserted me and so on.

But our sin never leads God into failing to keep his word to us. Our faithlessness never nullifies the faithfulness of God.

Now, of course, that sort of question and answer provokes another question. If our faithlessness and sin never somehow thwarts God's purposes and forces him to be faithful, then I might as well keep on trimming.

I might as well do what I like. God's always going to be faithful regardless of me. It doesn't seem to matter what I do. Why not just live an immoral sort of life and go on keeping on committing adultery with the woman down the street or murdering her husband as David did?

And that's the third objection that comes in verse 5 onwards. It's phrased this way, that if our injustice or wickedness serves to confirm the justice or the righteousness of God, what should we say?

[11 : 13] In David's case, his wickedness led to God's righteousness being displayed in punishing David, but nonetheless keeping his promises to David. Is it therefore right to say that God is unjust to inflict wrath on him?

I speak in a human way, Paul's saying, because he recognises in one sense the stupidity of this objection, but he's trying to guess at people's objections to what he's been saying this far. That is, is it unfair of God to judge us when we fail because in our failure God's own righteousness is seen and that's a good thing for God's righteousness to be seen.

And indeed, is it right of God to judge us even when we can't even help fail him? Maybe that's a bit unfair. Well, if that were the case, God would never judge anyone.

So that's what Paul said in verse 6, by no means, but then how could God judge the world? That is, if everybody's sin was condoned because somehow it led to God being righteous and judging us, then, well, God could never judge the world at all.

All our sins are condoned. Now, he then reshakes the question in verse 7, but if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

[12 : 30] And why not say, if some people slander us by saying that we say, let us do evil so that good may come? Their condemnation is deserved. That is, if good comes out of wrong, that is, our sin speaks to the good being God's righteousness being displayed and even in judging sin as it happened for David, then does that mean our sin is okay?

That our wrongdoing is okay. Some seem to be accusing Paul of saying, well, let's just keep on doing evil because good will come out of it in the end. Now, again, this is an important question to get right.

Whilst it seems that on the way Paul phrased the question, we might be a little bit confused by what he's driving at, simply put, he's saying, he's objecting into the view that the end justifies the means.

That is, if the end result is the glory of God and his righteousness being displayed, then surely that justifies the means of getting there. That is, it doesn't matter how you get there, so long as you get to a good goal or end, that's what matters.

And there are many people in our world who think like that. There are many people who do bad things because they think good will come out of it.

[13 : 46] People who steal because they think it's better to be able to give money to the poor like Robin Hood or to look after people who don't have quite enough to balance up the rich or poor balance.

Or people who lie in order to try and protect somebody. That is, yes, the end, protecting somebody, is a good thing and that justifies me lying.

Now I'm sure many of us have thought like that at times. Whether it's to do with lying or stealing or some other wrongdoing, never is that the case in the Bible.

The end never justifies the means. The classic case of that, of course, is Judas Iscariot, the man, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. The greatest good ever came out of that, Jesus' death on the cross for our salvation.

But Jesus said of Judas in his harshest words of judgment, to be better if he'd never lived. That is, the end, the glory of God seen in Jesus' death on the cross, never in any way, no sin, of justifying the means of that death through the betrayal of one of his disciples.

[14 : 53] Evil and sin never promote the glory of God and evil, and the end does not justify the means. There is no excuse the wrongdoing. Paul has been trying to match the possible objections to what he's been saying thus far in this letter.

And now he comes to the verdict stated fairly boldly, really, in verse 9. What then? Are we any better off? We Jews or Jewish Christians he's talking about.

He's just said that they've got a great advantage in having received the law of God. Surely, if you've got a great advantage, you're much better off. We might expect Paul here to say yes, we are much better off. But again, he surprises us because he says no, not at all.

We may have an advantage but we're not better off. For we have already charged that all both Jews and Greeks, that is, non-Jews, so everybody, he's saying, are under the power of sin.

Not just people who occasionally might commit a sin, but are under its power. You see, even Jews who have the advantage of receiving the Old Testament, the oracles of God, are no better off.

[16 : 05] Knowledge does not always help. Now, this is a hard diagnosis to accept. I know that. There is so much that is good in the world.

There is so much that is noble and inspiring in the world. And you see stories on current affair programs and occasionally on the news of great acts of heroism and bravery and love and sacrifice and generosity in peace and in war.

That we're very tempted always to think what a wonderful person the human being is. And every year we look back at the person of the year, the person of the century, the greatest player, the greatest this, that or the other.

and we think what a noble being the human being is. What a glorious creation of God. How can this diagnosis, that we are all without exception under the power of sin, be right?

Can this bad news really be true? Shouldn't we go and find a second opinion? After all, if you were ill or something was wrong with you and you went and had one opinion, you may well want to try and get a second opinion before you take the course of action prescribed by the first.

[17 : 18] Well, the detail that follows in the next few verses is rather damning of the human being and the human condition. It's a series of quotes from the Old Testament, from Ecclesiastes, from various Psalms and finally from the prophet Isaiah.

And they make the point that Paul has just made that all people without exception, Jew and Greek, are under the power of sin. And the basic problem is described in verses 10 to 12.

There is no one who is righteous not even one. There is no one who has understanding. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside. Together they've become worthless.

There is no one who shows kindness. There is not even one. That's a pretty bleak assessment of human beings, isn't it? There's not a lot of room there to manoeuvre and say, well, yeah, there are a few good people around.

It is pretty damning of human beings. At the root is that no one seeks God. That is, it's in the relationship with God that you find the heart of this problem.

[18 : 22] Notice the emphasis on there being no exceptions. Eight times in those three verses, either no one, who's mentioned, is doing good, or all, without exception, have done bad.

Human rejection of God is universal. No one is exempt. No Mother Teresa, no Pat Rafter, no Sir William Dean, no other goodies that we can think of.

None of them is exempt from this diagnosis of the human condition, all without exception. Jew or Greek, whatever their background, whether they're ignorant of God or whether they've received the oracles of God, all of them are under the power of sin.

No one is exempt, not you and not me. You know that this year, probably, the United Kingdom has suffered serious foot and mouth disease.

We've seen pictures on television of animals and piles of animals, cattle being destroyed by fire to stop the spread of disease. The cattle, meat, and dairy industries in England are still in some turmoil from this disease and it's spread to the continent.

[19 : 33] At least one person that has been documented as having died of the related illness from this foot and mouth disease. But for all its seriousness in Britain, it is nothing compared to spiritual foot and mouth disease.

And in effect, that's what Paul describes now. The next few verses talk about the mouth. Then he goes on to the feet or foot. Notice that verses 13 and 14, their throats are opened graves, they use their tongues to deceive, the venom of vipers is under their lips, their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

Throats, tongues, lips, and mouths. This is the first part or maybe the second part of foot and mouth disease being described. Why does Paul emphasize speech?

Why is that so important? I suspect it's because, as Jesus said, it's out of the abundance of the heart that we speak. So our speech somehow reflects what's inside of us.

The letter to James makes the same sort of point. That our speech is often what first lets us down as people of God. What comes out of our mouth is deceptive language in verse 13.

[20 : 46] Things that are not quite true. Things that mislead or deceive other people. Then comes poisonous language like the venom of vipers. That is language that's malicious and destructive trying to kill or maim or harm or destroy whether people or their reputations.

And then in verse 14 cursing and blasphemy swearing and filthy language. And in so many ways that's a description of our society, isn't it? How many leaders do we see interviewed on television whether political or business leaders or other leaders who are deceptive with their words, misleading, trying to somehow confuse us?

Sometimes the same applies to religious leaders as well. How often do people we included engage in backbiting, destructive, venomous sort of language, pulling down people's reputations behind their backs?

How often do you hear filth and cursing and blasphemy from people's lips? Years ago I played cricket for a season with the Clyde Cricket Club.

Clyde is a tiny little village or hamlet outside of Crandon in south-east Melbourne. The language that those on the cricket squads used was not the sort of language that you would hear in church very often, indeed ever.

[22 : 05] I felt quite as though my language was a second language for them. I was struggling in some senses to keep up with their language. Every third sentence or every second sentence seemed to be full of expletives, words I hope I use very rarely indeed, if ever.

A few years ago I went to a football match on Easter Sunday afternoon. I heard Jesus' name mentioned more times than I had in the morning services. I thought, gosh, I know he's alive but I didn't know he was playing.

Just this week in North Queensland a rugby union federation or something or other has decreed that foul language is acceptable now. It is not a cause for dismissal or suspension or being reported by an umpire or anything like that.

You can be as foul as you like it seems their judicial ruling was. Twenty years ago you'd never hear an F word on TV. Now it's there fairly frequently I suspect.

Fewer and fewer words in our newspapers these days are spelled star, star, star, star. More and more they are filled out explicitly for us. No longer it seems are such filthy language, cursing and blasphemy objectionable to our society.

[23 : 18] Now if you swear or use foul language to an employer they're not able to dismiss you because those sorts of cases have been thrown out of court. That sort of language is now acceptable it seems in our society.

We're not progressing. Our moral progression is not matching our technological progression at all. Indeed in many respects we're getting worse and the feet are no better than the mouths.

Verses 13 and 14 talk about speech then verses 15 onwards talk about the feet. The feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery are in their paths and the way of peace they have not known.

They're swift to shed blood. That is eager to do it. It may not mean that they actually physically kill but their desire is there. They hate even if they're not murderous. From Cain the first murderer son of Adam and Eve through to Timothy and MacVeigh but dozens and countless of other people who may never have picked up a gun or a sword or a dagger or a bomb or anything like that.

There are people all over the place who are swift to shed blood. And the cause as Paul finishes this sequence of quotes from the Old Testament in verse 18 as he said back in verse 11 there is no fear of God before their eyes.

[24 : 36] That is the problem is a problem to do with a relationship with God. That is its heart. Now this is bad news indeed. It is difficult for us to swallow.

And it may well be that we want to go and find another diagnosis of the human condition. We could go and find a political diagnosis. Then at least we could blame the politicians.

We could go and find a sociological diagnosis of our human condition. Then at least we can blame other people and society. Maybe we could find an environmental diagnosis and blame the weather or blame our parents.

We could find an economic diagnosis to explain our human condition and then we could blame the rich or maybe if we think we're rich we could blame the poor. We could find a medical diagnosis blame our genes for example.

We could find an educational diagnosis which is very common in our society and blame our ignorance and lack of knowledge on the poor educational system and bad teachers. If I had a terminal illness I would have little comfort in being given false but optimistic diagnosis.

[25 : 50] It would be cold comforting to be told you'll be okay you're fine when the reality is far from bad. What deceptive words those would be if indeed you faced the terminal illness.

You see this diagnosis is the accurate one. It is God's diagnosis of human beings. It's not even from Paul. We can't dismiss this and say well Paul is having an off day.

This is a little bit bleak even for Paul because he's quoting God. He's quoting the Psalms and Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. He's quoting God and this is God's diagnosis of the human condition and God doesn't have such bleak and bad days even if Paul does.

All without exception are under the power of sin. They're in the grips of its tentacles and you and I are included and we are unable to break free. Even if we woke up tomorrow morning and said today I break free from the power of sin.

Today I always do. Every second of this day everything that God requires of me if we are honest and we go to bed that night and lie in our bed and we say we have failed again to do it.

[27 : 03] I am under the power of sin. Why then are Jews for whom he's writing here it seems at an advantage? Because they've received the oracles of God.

But they're no better off. Their advantage is they've been given the right diagnosis and the right diagnosis says you are no better off because Jews and non-Jews all people without exception from wherever they are and whatever age they live are under the power of sin.

Yes it's an advantage for us if we're Christians who've received not only the Old Testament but the New Testament to have received God's diagnosis but it doesn't mean that we're better off because we are under the power of sin.

And so Paul finishes this section by saying in verses 19 and 20 now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

For no human being will be justified that is declared righteous or acquitted in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

[28 : 16] God's law his moral standards if you like lead to a knowledge of sin and that is our advantage we who receive God's word in the Bible.

Sometimes that works for our good. Sometimes as we hear God's law explained or we read it in the Bible it actually leads us to a conviction of what we're doing wrong and leads us into changed and right paths.

sometimes reading God's law leads to a conviction of sin. For example there was a couple who were living together they were not married.

This is a true story. They were lying in bed that night reading their Bibles because they were newly converted Christians and whatever bit of the Bible they were reading I don't know it led them to a conviction that what they were doing by living together was wrong because they were not married but they were Christians and so there and then that night as they were lying in bed he got out of bed he packed his bag he left the house and sometime later they got married and he moved back in again.

That is reading God's law leads to a knowledge of sin and in his case and their case it led them to repent of it and change their behaviour before they were able to put it right.

[29 : 37] Take the person who's a worker an employee who's converted again a true story. Having been converted he realised that for many years working for the company for which he worked he'd done wrong.

He'd stolen their stationery, he'd cheated on the time clock, he'd taken extra supplies and abused telephone privileges. But having become a Christian and having understood what God's standards were he confessed his guilt to his employer and he said to his employer that it may well be right for him to sack him.

But he was certainly willing to work extra hours for no pay to make up what he'd stolen and cheated or he was certainly willing to have his pay docked to bring up the balance.

His employer was astounded. Just in recent months in England there is an evangelist called J. John who's been preaching. He's just preached a series on the Ten Commandments in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral in England.

And this is a report from the United Kingdom's Daily Telegraph of the 31st of May this year. Liverpool Cathedral has been swamped with hotel bath robes and library books after a recent sermon series on the Ten Commandments.

[30 : 49] J. John, a Church of England evangelist, preached on the Eighth Commandment, Thou shalt not steal. And he asked 3,000 worshippers to place their stolen goods in amnesty bins. Two wheelie bins on the steps of the Anglican Cathedral have been filled with National Health Service crutches, videotapes, company pens, ashtrays, CDs, library books, about 400 pounds in cash, that's millions of Australian dollars, and several letters of confession.

But the bulk of the contents consists of bathrobes and towels which are being posted back to hotels all over the world. Anything that cannot be returned will be given to charity. The evangelist said he was amazed by the response.

He said he'd received a letter from a carer in a nursing home who said that she had returned jewellery she had stolen from elderly women. And two others told him that they had been inspired to return money received through fraudulent insurance claims.

The law of God leads to a knowledge of sin and sometimes that leads to conviction of sin and repentance and returning away from it to right things and right practices.

God's law exposes our sin. That's one of its jobs. If I was to give you a blank piece of paper and ask you without a ruler to draw a straight line across it, many of you would draw a line that looked to the naked eye relatively straight.

[32 : 15] You've done a fairly good job. But lie a ruler alongside it and see its crookedness exposed. Ask any builder who builds houses or buildings, do they build by naked eye?

Well, most of us can see whether something's straight. Why not just get a few bricks and yeah, I reckon I could build a straight brick wall or a house without using a ruler or a thumb line or a spirit level. Of course we can't.

Try building something like that, you might think oh yeah, it looks pretty good. But put a ruler alongside it or a straight edge or a spirit level and we realise just how crooked the building is.

You see, our eyes and our senses are not good enough to get it perfectly right. And the same applies morally. We may think our lives are pretty good, are pretty straight, are pretty much in line with what God's law requires.

But when we read God's law, the straight edge of God's law exposes the crookedness of our lives and our sin and failure is exposed. And so we read, love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.

[33 : 21] And what do we have to say? God, I haven't done that. I failed to do that. The great commandment. I failed time and again. Love your neighbour as yourself all the time.

Whoever your neighbour is. God, I failed. I think I'm a pretty loving person. I certainly care for people. I don't want to bring them harm. But when I read, love your neighbour as yourself, I realise that my sin is exposed.

I failed your law badly. Honour God as God in all things that we do. No, God, I haven't done that either. Have you exchanged the glory of God for a lie?

Well, yes, God, I realise that I've done that. Have you exchanged the glory of God for idols and self-righteousness? Yes, God, I failed. The straight edge of God's law exposes our sinfulness and our failure time and time again and we are left with nothing to say.

As verse 19 says, the point of this is so that every mouth may be silenced. I've got nothing to please, God. Your law has exposed my sin. I've got no defence.

[34 : 23] I've got no excuse. I've got no plea. As the hymn writers say, let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand.

Or in another hymn, no merit of my own I claim. Or elsewhere, not the labours of my hands can fulfil your law's demands.

You see, this is bad news indeed. And that is why Jesus is such good news indeed.

No merit of my own, I claim, but holy trust in Jesus' name. nothing in my hand I bring, but simply to thy cross I cling.

My hope is...