

# Easter Friday 2016

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Preacher: Sam Low

[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning and let me add my welcome. My name is Sam and I'm on the ministry team here at St Paul's. I'm going to pray for us and then we're going to reflect on that passage and the story of Easter that we have been reminded of this morning.

Father God, we thank you for the chance to gather this morning and we ask that you might give us clarity as we reflect on a story that might be familiar, that might even have baggage attached for us personally.

Please give us the ability to look fresh and to hear what it is that you want us to hear. Amen. This week, the British comedian Ricky Gervais was asked by the Wall Street Journal to write an article for Easter.

It was a follow-up to an article that he did around Christmas time entitled, Why I'm a Good Atheist. This article he entitled, Why I'm a Good Christian. He was quick to concede that the heading was provocative and misleading.

But in his article, he talked about how he admired Jesus. He admired the teachings. He admired the life. Although he rejected any claim that Jesus might be a God or a saviour.

[ 1 : 12 ] And he expressed that he was frustrated with Christians who claimed to follow Jesus but were so drastically nothing like the one they claimed to follow. And from there, his article proceeded to work its way through the Ten Commandments, one at a time, basically showing how he was ticking the box on all ten of them.

And then finished with the sentiment that he guesses, in light of his ticking the box on the commandments, he's as good a Christian as anyone. Now, I find Ricky Gervais a very funny comedian.

I really enjoy the stuff that he does. And so, I was interested in his reflections. Obviously, I disagree with him on a bunch of stuff. But what stuck out for me was where he ended up having been asked to write something about Easter.

He's clearly not a believer. He doesn't think that Jesus legitimately died and rose again. But having been asked to write this article, he didn't wrestle with the historical reliability of Jesus.

Didn't touch it. He doesn't express difficulty believing that Jesus rose again. For him, an article about Easter is an article about morality.

[ 2 : 29 ] That was, for him, what it meant to respond to the question, what is Easter for me? It was to measure how good or bad he thought he was by this apparent standard that God sets.

And for a lot of people, and even for some Christians, that's all Easter is. Following Jesus is about little more than living some kind of exemplary moral life.

And, of course, holding other people to do the same, being the moral police. Now, I don't know what your perspective on Easter is. I don't know why you came into this building this morning.

This could be your annual or your biannual church visit. Now, I don't know what interactions you've had with Christians in the past, good or bad. But I do know that many people I speak to approach a day like today feeling guilty.

We've sung and we've been reminded of the savageness savageness of that first Good Friday. That an innocent man would be butchered. And it could be that you're here today because you know you're supposed to be.

[ 3 : 41 ] You know that it is significant, you know it matters, and you get this sense that if you don't come here, you might be doing something wrong. And so you are here. But maybe there's a part of you, maybe it's even a really big part of you, that will breathe a sigh of relief when we get to the end of our time together.

And maybe you can go back into that normal pattern where maybe you know that God might not be happy with you, but it's easier to kind of hold it at arm's length. If that's you, I want to say I'm really glad you're here.

Because I actually believe that God has something significant that he wants to say to you this morning. Something that might actually transform the way that you not just view Easter, but the way that you view Jesus himself.

Because Easter is not about guilt. Jesus didn't die on the cross so that then he could spend the rest of our lives making us feel bad about how far short we fall of the kind of life that he calls us to.

Jesus didn't go through everything he went through so that we could be pressured into being more moral. Easter is the high point of God showing us who he is.

[ 4 : 50 ] Easter is the moment where God tries to just zoom in on himself for us so that we might get a picture of what he's like, how he works, who he is.

And the Bible makes it really clear, God is love. Not just God loves, although that's true, but the Bible actually says love is who he is.

It's how he works. And so importantly, it's how he feels towards you. I want to show you two things this morning about God's love that I hope and pray will transform the way you feel when you come to Easter, when you think about church, when you think about Christians.

But more than that, I want to show you two things about God's love from the Bible that I believe could transform your whole life. And so I want you to bear with me.

I want you to give God a chance to speak a little bit louder than maybe some of those negative interactions or unhelpful voices have spoken in the past. And I want you to hear from him two things.

[ 6 : 02 ] First one, God loves you. God loves you. I remember growing up as a kid, one of my biggest fears was whether or not God loved me.

Now, it's not something that I would focus on regularly. It's not like I walked around thinking, does God love me now? But I had this awareness. I knew enough about God. I'd heard enough Bible stories. I'd heard the Easter story enough times.

And I knew enough about me that there was some sort of a gap there. I knew God was powerful. I knew he was holy. I knew he was perfect. I knew he was in charge. And I knew that I was the kid at school that other kids' parents would say, don't hang out with that kid.

I knew what it was to do the wrong thing and get punished. I understood how life worked. If you do something bad, then there's consequences. And so for me, taking that correct understanding of life, that do something wrong, pay the price for it, and then this God who is good and requires me to be good, those things coming together didn't make sense to me.

I'd heard the phrase, God loves you. I'd heard the sentiment that God is loving. But I couldn't understand how someone like me, who was bad, is bad, could be loved by God.

[ 7 : 17 ] The way I had experienced love in my life was so restricted to when I do good things, I'm loved. And when I do bad things, I'm punished.

It's not to say my parents were harsh or bad or anything like that. They were great. But that is how we engage with love with one another. We tend to love when it's positive coming back the other way.

But when someone hurts us, that love quickly dries up. And so from that place, the idea of a God who is love and could love me was really difficult to comprehend. And this is why Easter can be offensive.

This is why I understand, and it makes sense that some people maybe don't want to be in church or around Christians or hear this message. Easter and the cross and Jesus' death is the answer to the problem that God is holy and we are not.

So even wrapped up in this message and wrapped up in the fact that God is trying to show you how loving he is towards you, part of that message is you actually don't deserve that love.

[ 8 : 22 ] It's not the whole message, and that's the problem. When we just stop there, hearing that we're not good enough and walk away feeling worse or feeling this pressure to try harder, it's not the whole message, but it is part of the message.

And so if you have come here this morning and you do feel that sense of guilt or failure, I want to say on one level, that's actually kind of okay. Because it's true.

You and I and everybody else isn't worthy of the love of a perfect God. The way that we treat him when we live, the things that we put in front of him in our lives, the things that we treat as more important, is not okay, is offensive, but it's just not the whole message.

And see, the issue is, when you come to Easter and you hear something like that, what do you do with that? You can do the Ricky Gervais trick and just move the goalposts a bit. He just changed the way he read the Ten Commandments to give himself a tick on all of them and then you might feel a little bit better.

Alternatively, you could just reject God and say, I'm not interested and I won't be held to your standard. But maybe there's a third option. Maybe there's something better that God actually designed for us.

[ 9 : 37 ] As Steve was reading out that passage for us, two thieves were crucified on either side of Jesus. So one on either side of Jesus. And there's two responses there.

I remember hearing this story as a kid. There was a children's storybook version of the thief on the cross. And I always found it entertaining because one thief just looked like a derelict.

You know, he was unshaven. He had a scowl on his face in each of the illustrated pictures. You knew straight away that he was the bad guy. But the other guy who eventually asks for Jesus' mercy somehow looked like it was an accident that he was there.

He'd been mostly good. I mean, he was even clean shaven. And then somehow he just ended up in the wrong place and was alongside this other criminal. But just to be clear, that's the kid's story version and it's wrong.

All the Bible says is that there were two criminals and they both deserved to die for how they had lived. That's the man's own admission.

[ 10 : 42 ] We're getting what our deeds deserve. These two men, when confronted with the innocent death of Jesus, respond in two completely different ways. One is to mock and reject the fact that Jesus could possibly have any right over his life, could possibly be loving towards him.

The other one is to recognise that actually when you stand next to the perfection of Jesus, the only response is to recognise, yeah, I am unworthy.

But this thief recognises something else. That Jesus is here to deal with that unworthiness. The whole reason he came was so that God's love could steamroll our inadequacy.

God's love is an offer for anyone. When I say God loves you, it's not some vague hope that possibly he might love you and you might think, Sam, you don't know who I am, what I've done.

You don't know my past. You don't know my thoughts. It's not a hope that God might love you. What this story shows us is that God can and does love the worst person on the worst day.

[ 11 : 59 ] In this passage, he offers forgiveness to a thief who does nothing except ask for it.

There's not even the opportunity for this thief to somehow try and make up for the life that he had before. He's about to die. And yet Jesus says, I love that person. One of the most significant prayers in Scripture was in verse 34.

Just try and be in this moment. Jesus has just had nails driven through his wrists and feet.

He's hanging on a cross, slowly suffocating, barely alive from the beatings he's had for the previous few days. And he looks down at the people who have done this to him.

And he prays, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Even in their moment of most active opposition to Jesus, he still has love for them.

[ 13 : 10 ] He still has care for them. And so I can say, and you can know, that even in your worst moments in your life, even in the points where you most actively reject God and ignore him and treat him like he doesn't matter, that love is still offered.

If Easter time makes you feel guilty, I guess that's okay. Because you are guilty. But you need to understand, there is no standard to meet if you're going to be loved by God.

The fact that you don't deserve God's love doesn't actually disqualify you from it. There's no entry requirements. Just stop running and ask God for his mercy. There were probably nicer, better people than the thief and the soldiers on that day.

But they were the ones who said, God, I want the love that you're offering. God's love isn't his way of saying, look, let's forget about some of the rough edges in your life.

Let's pretend they never happened. He's not looking at you through rose-colored glasses. Easter is God saying, I know the worst bits about you.

[ 14 : 31 ] And I love you anyway. But more than that, the second thing that God says to you at Easter is look at how I love you.

Because just love in itself might actually just add to the guilt. I mean, the idea of love sounds fantastic, but maybe that's not enough if you're feeling guilty.

I believe it was a few months ago that some hackers cracked the internet site Ashley Madison.

It's a site that exists to facilitate extramarital affairs discreetly. Some hackers decided that they would go in and take the database of members from that site and make it public.

The result being that thousands and thousands of marriages were thrown into disarray when suddenly the infidelity of one partner became public. The awkwardness of this, it even resulted in instances of some people committing suicide because they couldn't deal with the guilt.

[ 15 : 41 ] And I read one story of a wife whose husband had committed suicide and her devastation was that she would have worked through it with him. She would have continued to love him.

But can you understand that the awkwardness in a scenario like that is that even though one party has been unfaithful and the other party has said I'm willing to keep loving you, the unworthiness of the love that this cheating partner is receiving almost makes the love hurtful.

It almost makes you feel worse because you know you don't deserve to be treated this way because that's not the love you've been giving. And so it could be that you hear God is loving and it's not that you haven't heard that message but really it just makes you feel worse.

You hear that Jesus loved you so much he died on the cross and if anything you're like stop telling me that because he would love me that much while I'm over here treating him like he doesn't matter.

If anything it might just heap guilt on you. But Easter isn't just God saying he loves you. It's showing you how his love fixes that issue.

[ 16 : 53 ] God's love is more than just some feeling or some sentiment. The cross is not some masochistic bunch of flowers or hallmark card. It's effective.

It works. It does something. In the Old Testament in the book of Isaiah written a long time before Jesus turned up God promised that he would provide a saviour to deal with that issue that gap.

And the way that saviour would save us was through an exchange. Now let me read it to you from Isaiah 53 it'll be on the screen. He grew up before him like a tender shoot this is describing Jesus and like a root out of dry ground he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind a man of suffering and familiar with pain like one from whom people hide their faces. he was despised and we held him in lower seam.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering yet we considered him punished by God stricken by him and afflicted but he was pierced for our transgression he was crushed for our iniquity the punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed.

[ 18 : 16 ] What happens in the cross is that that all the things that are part of our life and our character and our values and our actions and our thoughts and part of us that in any way draw the just judgment of God it is completely transferred to Jesus.

When we look at him on the cross as an innocent man we look rightly but what we need to look harder and see is the reason he's there is not just to do something dramatic as an innocent person but so that the punishment we deserve can actually be given.

God can't just shrug his shoulders he can't just let us off. What we have done deserves to be punished and what Jesus does is absorb that punishment.

The forgiveness that God offers isn't a let's forget what you've done it's a let me pay for it let me cover it over let me atone for it he takes on him every bit of you that is unworthy of God and his love and not just takes it but exhausts it satisfies it absorbs it deals with it finishes it Easter isn't just God saying he loves you but it's God saying my love is enough for every bit of you it's God saying if you would just accept my love if you would just ask for my mercy then you would never be unloved it's God saying the death of the God man of Jesus is sufficient for everything you've ever done or will do and so guilt's not there anymore even if you make mistakes in the future

Jesus' death in your place is enough Easter is not a time to feel guilty there is a weight and a gravity about Good Friday but it's not a time for guilt today is the day that we remember and celebrate that God offers freedom from guilt forgiveness from sin love unconditional unending please hear God today as you are right now no changes no improvements no adjustments as you are right now God says I love you that's why Jesus came that's why he died so that you could know God loves you so that you could have confidence that in spite of who you are God will keep loving you but one last thing this isn't some transaction going on it might all sound a bit mechanical so ours goes over here dealt with we're good ticket to heaven fantastic might sound like we get this little bit of God's love to be forgiven we look forward to heaven and then we've got this earth waiting room and maybe there's some half truth there but the cross means more than that

[ 21 : 42 ] God's love is bigger than just a tick on your report card and something to look forward to in the future remember that the whole point of Easter is that we might see what God is see how he works see what he's like being loved by God is not so much about the love that God gives it's about the God who gives that love that's what Easter is about that's what the barrier of us not being good enough and God being perfect that's the problem that we're not connected to him that we can't relate to him that we can't talk to him that we can't depend on him Jesus death in our place doesn't unlock a fix of love it doesn't give you a shot in the arm to make you feel better about yourself and so that you don't have to fear hell Jesus death on the cross actually takes you from being far away from God the Bible even says being an enemy of God and draws you into a relationship with him where you are a precious child where you are immovably brought into the family loved protected provided for

Jesus love isn't a fix it's a foundation for life I remember as a kid growing up I used to sometimes question my parents love for me in the little things they would do big things for me they would look after me they would provide food for me they would take me to school they would support me and encourage me in whatever I was doing but oh horror sometimes they would deny me McDonald's and in anguish sometimes in tears I'm not embarrassed to admit I would wonder whether they still loved me I would sit in my room reflective angry mooney thinking how could they possibly love me and deny me something so amazing and as I grew and matured ever so slightly I began to realise that the costly ways that they loved me the big things that they did in my life at their own expense gave context to the little ways they loved me that I didn't understand it was out of love for me that they didn't allow me to eat

McDonald's every day and it's out of love for me that they discouraged my habit at the moment but in that moment I didn't understand it it wasn't until I was that little bit older and could actually look at the big things they done in my life the sacrifices they made so that I could do what I needed to do that I suddenly realised that even though I don't get it even though it doesn't make sense to me they're actually probably loving me there because it would be ridiculous for them to do something that costs them and is painful for them out of love and then to withhold something small and insignificant like a five dollar McDonald's meal just to spite me the New Testament tells us in Romans chapter 8 it's on the screen he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things he who did not spare his own son

God who was willing to send Jesus to the cross put him to that through the anguish of absorbing our punishment when that becomes the baseline of the way that God loves us we can be confident that there is no moment no circumstance no difficulty no struggle no joy where God is not actively loving us what Easter does is not just give you the tick of forgiveness although that is incredible what Easter does is not just give you the guarantee of heaven in the future although that is overwhelming what God does in the cross is give you the baseline for his love he gives you the biggest thing the most costly thing so that even in struggle you can say even though I don't get it I know that God would not withhold something good for me even though he might not be making me better quick enough for me even though he may not be giving me a job quick enough even though he may not be solving my financial struggles quick enough even though he may not be settling my anxiety quick enough even though he may not be providing the partner that I desperately want quick enough or even at all

I know he still loves me because the baseline is he gave me the biggest best most costly thing first so how would he not also give me every other good thing for me out of love what Easter does what the cross does is gives us a foundation for life because of Jesus you can know that God loves you even though you don't deserve it and you don't have to spend your life feeling guilty about that because he's wiped away the guilt he's paid the debt it's done there's no point dragging it back out it's been pushed to the side Jesus has said it's finished and so you can bask in the love of God confidently you can know that his love is sufficient for even now when you fail and you can know that his love is limitless because the God who created everything has already given his best gift to you his most costly gift to you and so in any situation no matter how painful and there will still be painful situations you can know that

[ 27 : 55 ] God is loving you then because of Jesus even if you don't understand it you can look and say I know he loves me because he's already given me his best there is nothing he would withhold from those who are his precious children I don't know why you came today I don't know what Easter meant for you when you walked in the door but I really pray that today you hear and believe God's words to you he says I love you just as you are no conditions no strings attached my love is enough to deal with anything you have done or will do and my love for you is unconditional undeserved unlimited and unending I pray that today you might taste and feel that kind of love for you and have your whole life transformed by it let's pray father God we want to thank you for Jesus we want to thank you that even though we don't deserve it you were willing to go to incredible lengths that we might be confident that your love is not just a sentiment it's an action it's sufficient

God I pray that if there are people in this room now who maybe are following you but are wrestling with doubts wrestling with their own failures may they know that your love is enough there are people in this room wrestling with the insecurity or uncertainty of circumstances in life may they see the cross as the guarantee that there is no limit to your love if there are people in this room who don't yet know what it is to be loved like that I pray that today might be the day where like the thief they ask for mercy and they taste and experience your perfect love Amen beautiful Amenippa