

Why Isn't Being Good, Good Enough?

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- [0 : 00] Quickly, Christmas is approaching. I've got a six-year-old girl. I take her to Santa's grotto. She sits on Santa's knee.
- There's a pile of presents over on one side of Santa. Just before she gets given a present, Santa asks her a question. What does he ask?
- Have you been good? But what if Hannah, my daughter, said, Santa, when you say good, exactly how good are we talking about here?
- I even came across this. I walked past this at Morrison's near me just this week. Santa, define good on the T-shirt there. Just define good for me. But at the end of the day, everyone gets a present, don't they?
- I mean, yes, there might be some evil, wicked child somewhere in the world that doesn't get a present. They get a piece of coal or something. But generally, every child I've ever met has got a present at Christmas time.
- [1 : 07] They haven't been disqualified for bad behavior through the year. So when we say good, thinking about Santa, what we really mean is, well, good-ish.
- I mean, a bit good. Okay. All right. And the thing is, that a lot of people think of God a bit like Santa.
- I don't just mean the whole white beard thing, but in terms of how we relate to him. When we get to heaven, what question will he ask? We think it's, have you been good?
- And when we think, how good exactly? Well, Hitler can't be there. He'd spoil it. But for the rest of us, us here in this room this evening, we're okay, aren't we?
- Good-ish. We'll be all right. Surely we're good enough for God. That's exactly how I used to think about God.
- [2 : 13] I was 18. I remember being in a pub with my friends, and one of them said, what's the point in all that Christian stuff? If there is a God, as long as we're good, why is he going to mind?
- And that stuck with me for years. It's how lots of people think about God in Scotland today. But if that's what you think, then this encounter that this man had with Jesus is something of a shock.
- Because Jesus says here, no one can be good enough for God. Let's put that point on the back of the cards there. But if we just look at that reading that Darren read for us again, from John's Gospel, Nicodemus comes to talk to Jesus, and Jesus says to him, in that second paragraph, where there's the number three, very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.
- And that phrase, kingdom of God, is what we would think of as heaven. It's God's place. Jesus is saying, to get to heaven, you must be born again.
- Now I totally get that that phrase, being born again, carries a bit of baggage with it today for us, in terms of what we understand that to mean. But just put that aside for a moment. Can you see what Jesus means by that phrase?

[3 : 43] Left to yourself, you're not going to get to heaven. Just imagine, to help think about the phrase, that I go out and play football one day up on, in Calvin Grove Park, just up the hill there, there's a place you can play football.

And imagine Gordon Strachan walks past, Scotland coach, and I see that he's watching, so I start showing off a few of my silky skills, doing some keepy-ups, try and take it through someone's legs.

And after a few minutes of running around after the ball, trying to dribble and tackle, I go up to Gordon Strachan, and say, Gordon, really good to meet you, thanks for watching. Do you think I've got a chance?

What do you think? And imagine if Gordon Strachan says to me, if you want to play football seriously, you'll have to be born completely again.

It's quite a put-down, isn't it? Do you see what he's saying? You, as the person you are, with the life you've had so far, would have to start all over again as a human being to have a chance of playing football well.

[4 : 52] That's the kind of put-down. And if we don't find that shocking about Nicodemus and getting to heaven, it's because we don't know who Nicodemus is. Verse 1, the first sentence, we're told that he's a Pharisee.

Now, the Pharisees worked really, really hard to be good. They had rules for every part of their lives to be good with. And in verse 2, it says that he is a teacher.

Well, sorry, in the next line, it says he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. So he is a top, top bloke. Later, in John's account of Jesus' life, we find out that he is a teacher of Israel.

So he's like a professor of the theology department as well. Imagine somebody with the kind of goodness and generous spirit of Mother Teresa and the spirituality of the Dalai Lama and the religious position of the Pope all rolled into one.

That's the kind of thing that we're talking about here. He is as good as you can get. And Jesus says, left to yourself, you're not going to get into heaven.

[6 : 08] And if that's true of Nicodemus, it's true for us as well. I don't know how good you think you are, but if Nicodemus isn't getting in, none of us is.

And so I think we need to think about why that is. And so what I'd like to think about is the enormous offense of a creature rejecting its creator.

Nicodemus asks, how can someone be born when they are old? Surely they can't enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. But Jesus says to him, very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born of water and the spirit.

That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? What Jesus is doing here is he is explaining this born again thing using an Old Testament promise from about 600 years earlier.

It's from Ezekiel. And I've put it on the sheets. Ezekiel was a prophet. And on the back there, you can see what he promised God was going to do in the future. It says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

[7 : 22] I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Did you notice, as I read that, what problem is being addressed there? What's the problem? At the beginning there, it's that the people are dirty.

And they're dirty because of their idols. Did you see that? God had rescued this people. Israel were his people. He made them into his own. He established them in a wonderful relationship with himself.

And they were to live with him as their God. But the story of the Old Testament before Jesus came is that that's exactly what they wouldn't do. It's what they refused to do. They kept on ignoring God, offending God, rejecting God, and even giving their affection and their attention to idols, to shrines about false gods.

Now, that might not sound like your world, but the truth is that that is exactly our world. We might not be going to shrines on the way to work, on the way to the office on a Tuesday morning to offer a sacrifice to some model of a god or something.

[8 : 41] Maybe that's not what we're doing. But it's been said before that the human heart is an idol factory. And what we mean there about an idol is an idol is anything that you make into your God.

You make it into your ultimate thing. So it's the thing that you serve and trust and live for because you think, if I had that, my life would be fulfilled.

That would make me happy. That would make me secure. That would give me fulfillment. It might be a good thing. It might be your career, your home, your friends, holidays, sex.

It might be a really good thing. But the problem is, we make it into our ultimate thing. We think, that is what I need above everything else. And so, it's an idol.

It's become God to you. And that's what Israel had done. And it offends God enormously. It makes them dirty when he looks at them.

[9 : 43] Imagine a father and a son. The father loves his son. He cares for him. He raises him. He provides for everything his son needs. And he teaches him how to live.

Be kind to all people. Don't tell lies. It's a loving, caring relationship. The day comes when the boy goes off to university.

Keep in touch, the dad says, as he leaves. A week goes by, no news. The dad phones, no answer.

He texts, he emails, no responses. His son doesn't get in touch all term. He keeps accepting the bank transfers, but he doesn't come home at Christmas.

I hope this isn't sounding too familiar, by the way, to anyone. But he doesn't come home at Christmas. He ignores his dad. How does the dad feel?

[10 : 46] What do you think? Hurt? Upset? Confused? Angry. And rightly so.

And that is God and Israel. In fact, that is God and all of us. He is the good, generous creator of us and everything good that we have.

He provides our very breath so that we can be alive. And we were made to live with him in charge. And I don't know how you treat God personally today, but we tend to either completely ignore him or deny him or at least push him away from the center of our lives to the periphery.

Certainly, none of us lives with him right at the heart of everything we do as we should. And if a father is right to be offended by that with his son, how much more a creator by a creature that treats him so badly.

Now, from that we can see why no one can be good enough for God. Imagine the father tracks down the son, goes to meet him at his university, finds him somewhere and confronts him and says, where have you been?

[12 : 07] I'm furious with you. And the boy says, what do you mean, dad? But, I've been nice to old people. I've not told any lies.

Do you think the dad would say, oh, well that's okay then. That's fine. Of course not. Because what the son has done is he's rejected the relationship with his father.

He's rejected his dad. The fact that he has done some things that the father likes doesn't change that because something more fundamental has gone wrong.

He's rejected the love of his father and the central relationship in his life. It's the same with us and God. God is offended and angry with us.

And Jesus Christ explains later as you read about him in John's Gospel that one day we will face God in judgment and we'll experience how he feels about the way we've treated him.

[13 : 10] Now on that day will we say to God, but God, I was quite nice to old people and I didn't tell any lies and whatever else we might want to add that we think makes us good.

To be honest, it doesn't matter. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not that those things are bad to do, they're good things to do, but we've got things rather more fundamentally wrong than that when it comes to God.

We're mere creatures and we've rejected the creator. In fact, the Bible says later that when we are faced with God on that future day and we're faced with what we've done and how we've treated him, that we'll be silent before him.

none of us will even think of saying, I gave money to charity. None of us is good enough for God.

We've rejected him. And that's to bring us to my second point on the back of the cards there where the Ezekiel promise is, no one is good enough for God, but anyone can be put right with God.

[14 : 26] Let's hear that promise again from Ezekiel. This time, listen, not to the problem but to what's being offered. He says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean.

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

God promises here that one day he'll clean his people and he'll change them on the inside so that they follow him. And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us that he has come so that God can keep those promises.

Just think about those two parts. Jesus is offering to cleanse us. I know it's not a popular thing to say around here in Scotland I mean but in 1966 when England won the World Cup ignore that bit it was at Wembley and England were captained by Bobby Moore the footballer and so he was the one who'd go up and meet the Queen and get the trophy from the Queen but he'd been playing football for 120 minutes and so he was absolutely covered in mud and as he looked up at the Queen waiting for him to hand the trophy to him she's standing there with pristine white gloves on ready to shake his hand and you can see on the footage that as he's running up the stairs he's frantically rubbing his hand on his red shirt to try and clean it before shaking hands with the Queen now it's just a picture but it's a picture that the Bible uses for the way that we've treated God and how it makes us look to him that we're dirty and Jesus is saying

I can wash you clean I wonder if you'd like that to have everything that we've done wrong every blot on our conscience everything that we wish we hadn't said our thoughts or done in our past every way we've ever offended God washed away so that God can see us as perfectly clean and we can walk into God's presence freely confidently because we know Jesus has cleansed us that's what he's offering us here and secondly Jesus offers to change us he says I will put a new spirit in you so he puts a new spirit in us to help us turn our lives around so that we do what's good in God's sight from now on how does he do that well as you step into the Christian life as you speak to God and turn back to God what God shows you is that in reality he is the source of everything good and that knowing him will give you what nothing else could give you in fact the things that we're living for now that we think will make us happy and fulfilled the things we're looking for from money and sex and power and homes and holidays all of that is just a glimpse of what God can give you when you enter a relationship with him and when you realize that it changes your desires so that you want to live God's way the writer

[18 : 05] C.S. Lewis said this it's not that God finds our desires too strong but too weak we are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea we're far too easily pleased well when you come to God through Jesus gradually as you grow in your trust of him you realize that knowing God is so rewarding it changes you and that's the spirit that Jesus gives you to help you change there was an old film Crimson Tide it still does the rounds on things like film 4 and at Christmas time Crimson Tide I don't know whether you've seen it set on a nuclear submarine Gene Hackman Denzel Washington epic cast and there's this sort of war going on in the film over who controls the submarine what's interesting is that how they transfer command on the bridge see the captain

Gene Hackman if he's on the bridge he'll say the captain has the con and then if he needs to go and powder his nose or something or go and have a rest he hands over control by saying the commander has the con and he'll hand it over to Denzel Washington and then when he steps back on the bridge Denzel Washington will say the captain has the con and it goes on like that for about two hours actually as they hand control to and fro between them well we were made to live saying the good God has the con he's in control of my life and instead we've said no God I've got the con and like that we're dirty and Jesus says I will clean you I can wash you clean and I'll put my spirit in you so that you say to God I want you to have the con now I want you to take control of my life again it doesn't mean that we're perfect of course not but it means that fundamentally

God's in charge now and Jesus calls that being born again because it's so radical it's like starting a new life a new life with God changed renewed so that we can live with God as our perfect father in this world and live with him face to face in the next so when we meet God he won't ask you have you been good no what will matter is have you been born again have you come to Jesus Christ for cleansing and for change and if you'd like that you could do that this evening you can ask Jesus please cleanse me and please change me it would be a wonderful thing to do you'll have to change

I wouldn't do it lightly but it would mean you live in this world with God as your father and you'll live with him face to face forever in the world to come close ■âu and you'll have a great example to rank and your father over under a when you get a ID or the charges on and me and and hopefully you'll have to love before you man