

The Unexpected Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Poor Japanese fishermen from the Japanese island of Makaido who had a cow fall from the sky and sink his fishing boat.

I heard the story on ABC Radio a few years back. Maybe you heard it as well. Apparently there was a Russian cargo plane which was carrying live cattle. And one of them was getting quite restless.

So the pilot and crew opened the back doors and let it out. Which happened to be quite unfortunate for the Japanese fishermen. Cows will not fall from the sky for all of us.

But from time to time we're caught by surprise. Some things in life will take us by surprise because we think we know what life is all about and we find out that we don't.

I think many people have this experience when they come to understand what being a Christian is all about. Because what Jesus says about being a Christian is not what we might expect.

[1 : 0 2] Well what is being a Christian all about? I've heard recently that if you were looking for role models for this you'd have to ask who was the most well-known Christian in the world.

And you'd be surprised to know it's not the Pope. It's not the leader of the Anglican Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury. It's not even Jesus Christ. It's Ned Flanders from The Simpsons. For many people, for better or for worse, Ned is their only contact with the Christian message.

And what understanding of Christianity do we find in Ned Flanders? Well, Ned's a do-gooder. He does right no matter what. No matter how bad Homer treats him, Ned is always just oakley-dokeley.

He's a moral, upright member of the Springfield community. He helps out at charities. He goes to church as often as he can. He has two boys, Rod and Todd, and they complain that they only get to go to church three times a week with his wife, Maude.

Ned and Maude are while away the hours playing Bible board games. Their family life's the complete opposite of Homer's, isn't it? It's impeccable. In short, Ned, apart from one wild weekend with Homer in Las Vegas, is morally perfect.

[2 : 1 5] Isn't that what being a Christian is all about? You see, if you're bad, you'll get in trouble with God. But if you're good, if you're a nice person, you'll make God happy.

Isn't that what being a Christian is? Doesn't it work something like this? Imagine that big building in the middle of town. I think it's called the Rialto Tower. I think I've heard it's got about 60 floors.

Now, we rank people based on how good they've been. So, up on level 60, you might put Mother Teresa and Ned Flanders, and we grade it down from there based on how much good you've done.

So, we've got beneath Mother Teresa, we've got the good people, and then we go down, we've got the not-so-good people, and by the time we hit the ground floor, we've got the really, really bad people like Hitler. And when we die, God sets a cut-off point.

If you're above that cut-off point, you get to go to heaven. Let's say it's about level 32. So, if you're above level 32, you get to go to heaven. If you're beneath level 32, well, you go to hell.

[3 : 24] Good people, they go to heaven. Bad people go to hell. Today, we read a story in which Jesus says something that we might not expect him to say.

The story asks the question, who is the one that God is happy with? And Jesus' answer to this question is quite surprising. I think it hits you between the eyes, because it's not the person you might expect who God is happy with.

If you've got your sheet there, you'll see in verse 10 that we are told that there are two characters in this story. The first character is the Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees are the religious leaders of their day.

They're kind of like church ministers. If you had to put your money on who was going to heaven, it would have to be the Pharisee. He seems like a great guy. Read along with me in verses 11 and 12.

God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

[4 : 33] He doesn't steal. He doesn't do bad. He doesn't commit adultery. He fasts. He goes without food to show how committed he is. He's a churchgoer. Basically, this guy is the first century version of Ned Flanders.

The second man, the tax collector, is the complete opposite. It might surprise you to learn that tax collectors were not favourite dinner guests in first century Palestine.

And the reason they weren't is because they were incredibly corrupt. In order to become a tax collector, you had to bribe your way there. You only stayed a tax collector for about three years, at the end of which time you had to bribe the same people to stay on.

And how did the tax collectors make their money to keep paying these bribes? They made their money by riffing off the average bloke. They'd raise the tax rate.

And if you couldn't pay, well, they'd send around the boys. But it's even worse than just corruption. The people the tax collectors had to pay off were the Romans. Israel had been invaded by and was controlled by the Roman Empire.

[5 : 43] These guys worked for Roman overlords. They were more than just corrupt. They were traitors to boot. Basically, these guys are scum.

It's no wonder you don't invite them around for parties. What a contrast between the two. One is the church-going Ned Flanders and the other is the scum of the earth. Which one is the one that is okay with God?

This is the point where Jesus doesn't give us what we'd expect. Read along with me in verse 13. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. He went home justified before God. He went home with his sins forgiven.

He went home with God happy with him. Jesus certainly doesn't tell us what we'd expect. Why is it that Jesus says this?

[6 : 52] Why is Jesus saying that the scum of the earth tax collector is actually the person that God is happy with? The reason is because Jesus is concerned with what happens on the inside.

Jesus is concerned with what we trust in. Certainly, the Pharisee is a pretty good person. But you probably notice he's got a certain air of confidence about him. God, I thank you that I'm not like those other people.

Thieves, rogues, adulterers. You know, even like that tax collector over there. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income. God, at least I'm better than those adulterers.

I'm a pretty good person. I don't do what's wrong. At least there are people who are worse than me. The tax collector seems to think that he's made God happy by being better than someone else.

On the scale of things, he's done enough good. What does the Pharisee trust him? Himself. Why should God like him?

[8 : 03] Because he's pretty good. Now the problem with that is it's just not true. No one is good enough to live a life that pleases God all the time.

I think, if you will, of the Ten Commandments. We see there something of the way that God wants us to live. He tells us he doesn't want us to murder or to commit adultery.

Well, the one about murder is probably one we've all kept and maybe the one about adultery. Do not steal. Maybe. You see, with some effort we might be able to keep those ones.

But what about the small ones? Do not covet. Have you ever found yourself wanting somebody else's car or their house or their money?

How about do not lie? Have you ever lied? I heard of a study recently by the University of California and the study was about lying.

[9 : 12] And what the survey did was to record people's every word for three weeks straight. And at the end of this time, they reviewed the recordings to see how many lies these people told in their everyday lives.

Now, these people were Californians, so we probably want to adjust the figures for us Aussies. But they found that on average, each person told a lie, wait for it, every eight minutes.

That's rather impressive, isn't it? On an average lifespan, I've worked out that would be a total of 180 lies a day and a grand total of 5,584,500 lies.

That's a lot of lies. If we're honest with ourselves, if we don't lie to ourselves, we know that we all do what is wrong.

The Pharisee doesn't even want to think that that might be a problem that he has. He's all right. He's the good guy. He's so good. He's so good that he doesn't really need God.

[10 : 19] He prays to God just to let God know that he's really good. The Bible tells us that that attitude of independence, that attitude of not needing God, the attitude of just trusting in yourself, is the very thing that God does not like.

You see, we turn to the one who made us and we say, look, I love what you've done with the place, it's really great, but I think I'm pretty right now. And then we go and live our life our own way with God there, just so that we can tell them that we're pretty right, we're okay.

The Bible tells us that to act like this, to act turning our back on God, has some consequences. See, the problem with it is that God is incredibly fair.

He'll give us what we want. If we turn our back on God, God will turn his back on us. If you think I'm exaggerating about that, I encourage you to read the book of Luke for yourself and find out how seriously Jesus takes this attitude.

Well, the problem with the tax collector is that he trusts in himself. In stark contrast to the Pharisee is the tax collector.

[11 : 49] Listen to the way the tax collector prays to God. Verse 13. For the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven. But he beat his breast and he said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

There's no false confidence here. He realises that he's failed to live a good life. He knows that he needs God's help.

His attitude is one of dependence on God. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God, do something about my sin. God, do something to help me.

And God does. The book of Luke, which we've only looked at a little bit of, is the story of how God helps his world.

A few chapters after Jesus tells his story, we read of what happens when Jesus is killed. We read the tragic story of Jesus hanging on the cross. And it is a serious miscarriage of justice.

[12 : 59] The people at the cross knew that Jesus was innocent. Even the common criminal who's hanging there, being crucified next to Jesus, knew that Jesus was innocent.

As he hangs there, he cries out, we're punished justly, for we're getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. You see, Jesus' death is more than just a senseless killing.

Jesus died for a reason. Jesus' death is the greatest demonstration of God caring for, God helping his world. Because on the cross, the Bible tells us, Jesus takes the consequences of our sin.

On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for the wrong that we have done. This is the way the Apostle Paul writes about it a little bit later on in the Bible.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[14 : 10] Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies in our place. Jesus dies in our place. Although we have turned our back on God, although we've lived life our own way, God has never turned his back on us.

He knows that we have done what is wrong. And God himself, in the person of Jesus, came and helped us. Well, it's not what you expect, is it?

It's not the good people who make it into heaven, because there's no one that fits that description. Heaven is a place for bad people, for sinners, for sinners who throw themselves at God's mercy, for sinners who trust in what Jesus has done on the cross.

Remember that building we were talking about where the people were divided into two halves, the good people who make it into heaven and the bad people who don't make it. Well, Jesus tells us that the building isn't divided like that at all.

It's divided from top to bottom. On the one side are those who trust in their own goodness to make it. Those who, like the Pharisee, trust only in themselves.

[15 : 25] And on the other side are those like the tax collector who can admit their wrong. Those who can turn to God and ask for his mercy.

Those who can trust in what Jesus has done on the cross. And the question for us is, what are we trusting? If your trust is in yourself, if you think that you've done enough to make God happy, I urge you tonight to reconsider.

Jesus is very clear that this does not make God happy. What makes God happy is when his creatures turn to him, ask for forgiveness, and trust in what Jesus has done.

I'm going to pray a prayer that does just that. It's basically the prayer of the tax collector. The prayer is written at the bottom of your handout. I'll read it out to you.

This is what the prayer says. Dear God, I admit that I have done what is wrong. I admit that I do things my way. I admit that I have tried to live life without you.

[16 : 45] God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God, I ask for your forgiveness and trust now in what your son Jesus did to save me.

In Jesus' name, Amen. If you realise you are not perfect, if you realise that your trust has been misplaced, if you realise that you need to come and trust in Jesus, then I'm going to pray that prayer and ask you to join along with me.

And how I'll do this is that I'll say one line and I'll ask you to repeat that line silently to God. So let's pray together. Dear God, I admit that I have done what is wrong.

I admit that I do things my way. I admit that I have tried to live life without you. God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

God, I ask for your forgiveness and I trust now in what your son Jesus did to save me.

[18 : 06] In Jesus' name, Amen. The good news is that if you've prayed that prayer, if you've turned to God in your heart, then you are justified.

Then you go home right with God. I'm going to ask Paul to come up now and explain how we can help you further if you've prayed that prayer for the first time. Thanks, Paul.

Thank you.