

Life's Ultimate Question

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[0 : 00] Our friends, I'll pray. Our Father, we thank you so much for your Word, who is the Lord Jesus Christ, your living Word. But thank you also for the Scriptures who point us toward him.

Thank you that those Scriptures are living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. Please cause them to do that with us tonight, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Our friends, the world that we live in is in a mess. It abounds with massive problems. And the indicators are multiple, aren't they?

Look and see. Poverty, injustice, war, brutality, violence, large-scale abuse of children, family breakdown, environmental degradation and destruction, the dangers of religious fundamentalism, sickness and ageing, personal addiction to destructive behaviours such as technology, drugs, alcohol, pornography and the like, racial hatred and disharmony, disease, economic manipulation.

Our world is a world with very severe problems. We don't like it. And inevitably, we look for causes. And there's no shortage of likely suspects.

[1 : 21] Human greed, unharnessed nature, corrupt politics, unjust economics, wrong social theory and bad psychology and wrong religion and ignorance and lack of education.

And again, the list could go on and on, couldn't it? We humans have tried to identify the culprits and causes. And we've proposed all sorts of solutions. But things are no better.

In fact, there are signs they're getting worse even. And it's here that God comes into the picture. You see, God agrees with us. He knows that the world is in deep trouble.

But more than that, God outlines a view as to the cause of the problem. On page three of his word, the Bible, God spells it out.

Underneath the problems we face, he says, is one major problem, one cause. And it is our independence from God. You see, all of us were created by God to live dependently upon him, our creator.

[2 : 22] We're made to live in right relationship with him, right relationship with other fellow human beings and right relationship with the environment that he placed us into.

Most critically, most importantly, however, we were created to live in a right relationship with our creator, our maker, our Lord. But the long and sorry story of humanity is that we do not like this idea.

We all seek to live without God and without dependence upon him. We all sin. That's the biblical word for living independently from God. And our bid for independence deeply grieves God.

Let me show you. If you've got your Bibles there, you could flip to Genesis. Just hold your finger in Galatians. But flip to the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, and flip to chapter 6, verses 5 to 6.

So Genesis 6, verses 5 to 6. After some period of time with humanity, this is God's assessment of humanity.

[3 : 27] Verse 5. And the Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

And the Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. I mean, that's an overwhelming statement, isn't it? Friends, this is the situation in which humanity finds itself.

Every inclination of the thoughts of human hearts is only evil continually. As a result, every human stands under the judgment of God. And such a situation raises the great ultimate question.

If we were made for God, and yet we are out of sorts with God, we are out of relationship with him, distanced from him, and he's grieved by us, then how can that be rectified?

Can humans ever be right with God? Can humans ever be right with their creator? And that, I think, is the ultimate question for us as human beings. Can we, is it possible to be, right with God?

[4 : 35] And that, I think, is the question that the Apostle Paul thinks has been answered in Jesus. It's that question that he addresses in our passage today from Galatians. However, before we look at the verses, I should refresh your minds regarding the context.

A number of years before this letter, Paul had founded this particular church up in the middle of Turkey in Galatia. However, soon after, he left to continue his evangelistic ministry elsewhere, and a controversy erupted within the church.

Certain people who weren't too thrilled with Paul began to filter into the congregation, and they began their own sort of follow-up program to what Paul had done. And that involved telling these new Christians that if they hadn't been circumcised like Jews, then they couldn't be full-blooded as Christians.

What they really meant was that to be a full-blooded Christian, you not only needed to believe in Jesus, but you also needed to keep all the laws found in the Old Testament.

Now, traditionally, Jews had sort of three boundary markers that showed whether or not you were willing to do this. That is, three things that said, yeah, I've lined up with that.

[5 : 42] You showed yourself to be a Lord keeper by keeping the Sabbath, by, if you're a male, being circumcised, and by keeping Jewish food regulations. They were sort of traditional markers that existed for Jews.

All three of those things were visible in one way or another. People could tell whether you were doing them or not. All three things were, as I said, visible in one way or another. All three things made you stand out as Jews.

And all three things cost you something. And it appears as though Gentile Christians were being told that they needed to do these things. Effectively being told that to be proper Christians, they needed to become practising Jews.

And Paul is far from thrilled with this. And so he writes to his congregation, and in his letter he records an argument that he had with the Apostle Peter in Antioch over this very issue. We looked at this last week.

And you can see what happened in verses 11 to 14 of our passage. This, as I said, is just background to where we're getting to. In Antioch, Peter began to stop eating meals with Gentile Christians. It was a mixed congregation, had Jews and Gentiles in it.

[6 : 47] In the words of verse 12, he drew back and kept himself separate from Gentile Christians out of fear of the Jewish ones that were around, the circumcision faction. But non-verbally, the action was potent, wasn't it?

Non-verbally, Peter was giving a very clear message to Gentile Christians. He was basically saying, look, if you are to be fully acceptable to me and us other Jews, if you're to be fully acceptable to the apostles in Jerusalem, if you're to be, in effect, fully acceptable to God, then you'd have to become Jews.

You'd have to keep Jewish food laws, and the Sabbath would need to be kept, and males would need to be circumcised, and Gentile Christians would have to keep the law. And Paul just could not handle this. And so he spoke out against Peter and charged him with hypocrisy.

And it's a very potent statement. Look at verse 14. He says, You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it that you then force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?

But then comes the crunch in verses 15 to 21. And let me tell you that these verses are grand. Paul explains the gospel. In other words, he explains how he thinks that a person can be right with God.

[8 : 03] And as far as he's concerned, all the answers to this question can be boiled down to two. There are two ways of being right with God. Let's just have a look at them. Answer 1 goes something like this.

If you want to be right with God, then you have to please him. We know what pleases him by reading it in Old Testament law. The core of these laws is, of course, the Ten Commandments. And they are a good start.

If you want to please God, I'm sort of paraphrasing as you may have worked out. If you want to please God, if you want to be right with him, then you need to keep all these laws. And you need to keep them perfectly. Then and only then you'll be right with God.

That's answer number one, as it were. And that, I think, is the answer that Paul's addressing in verses 15 and 16. And his reply goes something like this. You can follow it in the passage as I paraphrase it.

Paul says, Now look, we Jews, did you notice the we there? We Jews, because he's speaking to Peter, we who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, we know better than anyone else that answer number one is a dead end.

[9 : 07] We know that it's not by keeping laws that human beings are justified or declared right with God. You cannot make yourself right with God by performing a set of laws. And you only have to read the Old Testament to know that that is the case.

Because throughout Jewish history, they fail. And the Bible makes very clear that that's what happens. You cannot make yourself right with God by performing a set of laws. There's no future to that answer.

If human beings are to be justified or declared right with God, then it must be by some other means. We Jews, we know we've tried it. And it's no good.

It's a dead end. If you follow it, then you'll be, as it were, up the creek without a paddle. You know, there's no future for you. Now, all of us know that, though we're not Jews, we know that Paul is right, don't we?

We can never be good enough. We can never meet the sort of standards that God expects of us. So answer one is out of court. There's no future in being good to get to heaven, as it were.

[10 : 07] Let me give you a picture of what I mean. It's a very simplistic picture and a bit ridiculous, but it might help you understand. Imagine for a moment, when I first preached a sermon, I lived in Perth.

Okay. So imagine for a moment, we're all standing on the West Coast of Australia, right? Perth. access to beautiful sea, you know, all that sort of thing, and South Africa, if you look far enough.

Okay. Anyway, we are told that there's some impending danger from the East, because if you live in Western Australia, there's always impending danger from the East. Anyway, in order to be saved, we have to all swim to South Africa.

Okay. Now, we'll be lost if we don't make it. How many of us are going to make it? Swimming, that is. None. Now, you might do better than me. You're younger, fitter, and so on.

You might get out 100 metres before the sharks get you. They want to do that at the moment. Someone else might survive a kilometre or two. Someone might even make it to Rocknest Island to take a breather, and before they press on.

[11 : 09] But no one is going to make it to South Africa, are they? Not swimming. Or would fall short of the mark. Or would sink to their death. Well, in one sense, that is how things are spiritually, with us.

There's a gap between us and God. We tried hard to get across that gap using answer number one. And we could do it in all sorts of different ways, couldn't we? We might say, well, I'll go to church, I'll keep the commandments, I won't intentionally hurt others.

We try to be morally correct. And by those various efforts, we are, in one sense, trying to swim as far as we can. We think that God will accept those who are better swimmers. Those who can swim the furthest.

We think that God will, as it were, lower the standards. Bring South Africa a bit closer, just beyond rottenest, or something like that. We think God will lower those standards, but we've got it wrong.

God has only one standard, perfection. So it doesn't matter how good you are, if you're not perfect, you will sink to your death, as it were, spiritually. If you're trying to make yourself good enough for God, then you're in trouble.

[12 : 14] So there must be another way across, another answer. Must be an answer number two, or there's no way at all. And there is an answer to. And Paul picks it up, verse 16.

Again, I'm going to summarize him. Paul says, but. There is an alternative. There's an answer to. Here it is. And it's a winner. Look at the end of the first sentence in verse 16.

Paul says, but through faith in Jesus Christ, that is by believing in Jesus, believing in who he is and believing in what he has done.

Now, that means believing that he died. And that he rose from the dead for us. But did you notice the next sentence? Paul uses the word we.

Who are the we here? I think that we are the Jews like him and Peter. You see, Jews, such as Paul and Peter, have come to believe in Christ Jesus.

[13 : 12] Why? So that they may be justified. Declared right with God. That is, even Jews have taken the second answer to the question as to how to be right with God. They've come to understand it's only by believing in Jesus that people can be declared right with God.

And in verse 16, Paul closes by repeating himself just to make sure that the point has sunk in. No one will be justified by works of the law.

So, friends, if you want to be right with God, then only one answer will do. And it's the unexpected one. It's the second one. By faith in Christ Jesus, in Jesus Christ.

By the way, I should say, lest you think that Paul is, you know, on his own, that that is confirmed by Jesus himself. Do you remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in, in the New Testament?

There's this tax collector who, well, the Pharisee comes before God and says, you know, I thank you. I'm not like everyone else. No, I do everything good.

[14 : 17] And the tax collector comes beating his chest and says, you know, I'm a sinner. One boasts before God. The other acknowledges his unworthiness before God and throws himself on God's mercy.

Be merciful to me, the sinner. The passage declared that the one that has a right approach to God was the second one. That is the tax collector. You see, the one who stops in, stops boasting in who they are and in what they can do and cast themselves on God's mercy is the one who is justified before God.

This is the one whom God will declare righteous. But let's return to Galatians 2. Look at verse 17. What I think is probably happening here is that Paul is answering an accusation that had been brought against him by those infiltrators into the church.

Now, perhaps it went something like this. Now, look, Paul, the law is clear. The law prescribes certain food laws. Those food laws are automatically broken when you eat with Gentiles.

Therefore, when you say we are all at the same level because of Jesus, and when you then non-verbally demonstrate this by eating food with Gentiles, then what you're doing, Paul, is using Jesus as an excuse for breaking the law.

[15 : 36] Faith in Jesus has become an excuse for sin. And before long, you'll be breaking the whole of the law and you'll be telling everyone else to do the same thing. In other words, faith in Christ causes you to go backward into sin.

And Paul's answer flies back. Can you see it? Verse 17. Certainly not. No way. It's lovely in the Greek. It's, you know, no way.

No, no, no possible way. Certainly not. Perish the thought. Go back. You're heading the wrong way. Okay. You've got it back to front. The one who is backward in their thinking is not me.

The one who goes backward is the one who says, I am right with God by believing in Jesus. And then in the next breath says, now I'm going back to that old way. To answer number one. Or going back to keeping the law to measure how good things are.

Because the minute you go back to the law, what do you find? Exactly what you found before. You can't do it. You can't keep it. It's sort of like, well, catching the ferry to the first island west of Perth, the rottenest, and then trying to swim the rest of the way.

[16 : 41] Paul's point is clear. You see, becoming a Christian by faith, and then going back to keeping the laws amounts to no longer accepting answer number two and going back to answer number one.

And let me tell you, we Christians have always had a tendency to do this. Haven't we? Most of us have standards that we apply to ourselves or to others. They may be things from the Bible, but they're sort of hidden lists of things to do and not do.

They may be, as I said, things from the Bible. They may not be, but we apply these lists to ourselves and others. And we say, well, God must be pleased with me because I have done this and I haven't done that. In other words, we are still using when we do that, our own efforts to judge how, and I put it in inverted commas, pleasing we are to God.

Of course, you still please God when you do right, but you understand pleasing in a sense of saving. And to this, Paul would say, wrong. You see, to do this, you're going back to answer number one.

And that's not on if you're Christian. You don't have commandments hanging over your head, judging just how spiritual you are. There is simply faith in Jesus. Simply answer number two.

[17 : 56] You can't build up against, says Paul, the very things you tore down in order to become Christian. All that that will prove is that you are indeed a transgressor, a sinner, a breaker of the law.

And so we reach verse 19. And again, you can see Paul's argument here. Again, I'll paraphrase, go something like this. When I believed in answer number one, it ruled my life.

Legal requirements were my boss. They were the Lord of my life. The Lord determined all that I did. Not anymore. I died to the law. You know, that means I died to it.

That is, there was a law and I said, no, I'm dying to it. Okay. I died to the law so that I might live to God.

Now, Jesus is the Lord of my life and he determines all that I do. But that's not all. I have been crucified with Christ. That is, his experience of crucifixion has become my experience of crucifixion.

[19 : 01] I was there with him as it were. As he died and rose to a new life, so have I. The old me who lived by answer number one has died and there's a new I that exists now. A new me has come to life.

A new me who lives by answer number two. A living by faith me, not a living by law me. Okay, a living by faith me, not a living by law me.

I don't put my trust and faith in keeping laws anymore. Instead, I put my trust in Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

The one who rescued me from that hopeless answer number one. The one who makes me free. Friends, please understand at this point, we Christians have come to understand that there is a whole new way of living before God now.

A way of life that trusts in the death of Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. How can we go back to an old way of living? How can we sort of, you know, I've been crucified with Christ and I've died to that way of living and we go back and we think, I'd like to dig out the corpse again and resurrect it.

[20 : 18] I like doing things, you know, that way, I feel a bit more secure doing things that way. How can we drag out the corpse and try and make it live again? There can be no return for us if we are Christians now.

No returning to keeping the law as a gauge of pleasing God. And again, I mean pleasing in the sense of salvation. Well, of course our deeds can please God, but I'll never please him enough for us to be saved by them.

Only Christ has fully and finally pleased God. And it's only by believing in Jesus that we will be justified before him. Now let me tell you that many Christians have never been quite happy with Paul's answer.

I guess there might be some of you here tonight, you might be thinking, oh, okay, I accept Jesus died to rescue me from answer number one. But Andrew, you're going further than that, aren't you?

You're saying, I'm now dead to that. I don't have to do anything, I don't have anything to do now with answer number one. I no longer have to go on keeping laws and commandments in order to be saved.

[21 : 30] Or even to show how good I am to God or to the world. You're saying, I merely have to live a life of trusting in Jesus who loved me and died for me. Well, Andrew, that's fairly gutless, actually.

it dishonours and insults God. It makes nothing of God's mercy. What you do is receive all the benefits of Christ's death and then you use them to get out of a living life of obedience.

You've thrown out the law. You've thrown out the baby with the bathwater. And in so doing, you've made nothing of God's grace. Nothing of God's grace. It's in those sorts of, it's those sorts of objections that Paul is responding to in verse 21.

And his reply comes back like this. Again, paraphrase. No, I haven't. Can't you see it? If I could make myself pleasing to God by keeping rules, if I could earn a right standing with God by ticking off how many I'd kept, if I'd lived this way either before or after becoming a Christian, then Christ need not have died.

Christ need not have died. In fact, his death would have been for nothing. He died for something he didn't need to die for. In Paul's own words, no, I don't set aside the grace of God by saying what I've just told you.

[22 : 58] For if righteousness could be gained through keeping the law, then Christ died for nothing. And with that, I think Paul tells us how we could insult God.

You insult God by insulting the death of his son. And you can do this before or after becoming a Christian in some ways. You see, you can insult God anytime you think that you can justify yourself.

any time you think you can justify yourself by any other means than, that is, be justified by any other means than believing in who Jesus is and what he's done.

Any time you think you can be right with him other than through the death of Jesus. Any time you turn to God and say, it's okay, I can do it myself. No, that really insults what God has done in his son.

It's to make his grace null and void. It's to say Christ died for nothing. So, I want to close today with two encouragements to us.

[24 : 06] One, for us as Christians, for those of us here who are Christians and with an encouragement for those who are not first. For those of us who are Christians, let us today rejoice in what God has given us in Jesus.

And what better way to do it than, you know, to join in with Paul here in rejoicing in what God has done. And, I love the psalm that extols God in this way.

Blessed are those whose sin is forgiven, whose iniquity is put away. Blessed are those to whom the Lord imputes no blame and in whose spirit there is no guile.

Friends, that is how God sees us in Jesus. If we are believers in him, how blessed we are and how overwhelming is God's grace. We are those who through Jesus and because of him God imputes no blame.

Wow. Friends, how good is that? How good is that? How truly blessed we are in Jesus. So that's our first response if we're Christians, praise and blessing to God.

[25 : 17] The second, well, the second response is to determine never to go back to using our own efforts at making ourselves right with God. God. Let's depend upon Jesus.

For this alone is the effective way to establish and maintain relationship with God. We've acknowledged that in confessing our sins today and then accepting the forgiveness. If we did that earlier on today, we're right with God.

This alone honours the death of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. So let's together live by faith, faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

But let me have a last word for those of us who are yet not sure about all of this. That is those who perhaps are not yet Christians. Friends, if you're not yet a Christian but you're a believer in God, if you aren't a believer in God, you ought to be, you need to be, but if you're not yet a believer in Jesus, let me urge you that God has declared fully and finally as to how you might be right with God.

And there's only one way to be right with him in terms of to be declared right and that is through trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only one.

[26 : 38] There's only one way to be saved. As Jesus said about the Pharisee and the tax collector, there's only one way to go home justified, casting yourself on the mercy of God and that is expressed in God's great gift in Jesus Christ.

So, if you are here tonight and you've never done that and I urge you to do it tonight and I'm going to pray a prayer that we can pray whether we're Christian or not yet.

So, let's pray together. Father, we come before you as we've already acknowledged tonight as people who need your forgiveness for we know that you have demands of us in your world that we cannot possibly meet.

And so, today, we come and we cast ourselves on your mercy offered in the Lord Jesus and in his death. faith, we come and we put our faith, our trust, our dependence in him and all that he has done and we confess that we want to live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

So, Father, we pray that you'd help us to live this way all the time. help us to live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

[28 : 18] So, Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.