

Are You a Good Christian?

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon, everyone. My name's Ian. Like Alistair and Peter, I have the privilege of being on the staff team here at church, and I'm delighted to repeat their welcome to you this morning.

I want today to think about a very important question, and it's on the screen there. That question is, are you a good Christian? Are you a good Christian?

Let's take a minute, Rudy, just to think about that. No need to talk to anyone else or discuss it. But let's just quietly for a minute think about this. Would you say you are a good Christian? I wonder what your answer is. Maybe it's like one of my friends here.

There's Satisfied Simon. Satisfied Simon says, yes, I think I'm a good Christian. I know I'm not perfect. Nobody is. But I live a good Christian life by the grace of God.

I'm involved in church. I serve others. I'm generous with my money. I believe that I'm a good Christian. Or maybe you're like Humble Helen. Humble Helen says, well, I don't really think I am. I'm a work in progress.

[1 : 0 9] By God's grace, I think I'm beginning to come to know Jesus better and to love him more. But I know I have a long way to go. I don't think I'm a good Christian yet.

Or maybe you're like Sad Stan. Sad Stan says, no, I'm not a good Christian, and I never will be. I've just got too much baggage in my life, too many things that will hold me back from really being a good Christian.

I'm really envious of people who seem so happy in their Christian faith and who seem so committed to God. I'll never be like that. My last friend is confused Connie.

And confused Connie says, well, what is a good Christian? I don't really know what it means to be a good Christian. I don't think I am one, but if you tell me what it means, then maybe I can have a think about it.

Don't know if you identified with any of these, perhaps even a bit of more than one, or perhaps you thought of something completely different. But what Paul is looking at in the passage that we're studying this morning is what is a good Christian.

[2 : 1 9] Or rather what he's doing is he's taking something that people say, you need this to be a good Christian, and he's saying, actually, you've got it wrong.

It's something completely different that you need to be focusing on. I have to admit that this is a difficult passage to understand in detail.

There are lots of different views about what some of the things mean. So I'll explain a little bit about what I think they might mean. If you disagree with it, it doesn't really matter, because the broad thrust of the passage is very clear.

Even though detail isn't that obvious, the broad thrust of the passage is quite clear. And Paul essentially says three things that people in his day were saying, you need this to be a good Christian, and he says, you've got it wrong.

So the first thing he says is you need to lose legalism. That's in verses 16 and 17 if you've got your Bibles in front of you. Lose legalism.

[3 : 19] So legalism is when someone says, a good Christian must do this. You're not a good Christian unless you do these things that I believe are very important.

So the people in Colossae that Paul is writing to, the kind of things that were being said to them, was you must be careful what you eat and drink. Only eat and drink certain things because other things a good Christian wouldn't do.

Or you need to observe all these religious festivals. New Moon celebrations, Sabbath day, that kind of thing. If you don't do these and observe these the way that we say, you're not a good Christian.

You can only be a good Christian if you do what I tell you, and that is legalism. And Paul says, don't have anything to do with it.

If someone says to you, you can't be a good Christian unless you do this, just ignore them. It's not right. Now, how might that translate to today? Well, there might be some people tell us what to eat or drink and say some kind of spiritual thing.

[4 : 28] And there are all sorts of religious days and festivals. And people might say to us, well, this is how you have to behave on a Sunday. This is how you have to celebrate Christmas or Easter or Remembrance Sunday or whatever else.

And some of the things that Paul says here, perhaps they can translate fairly easily to our culture. But I think we need to look a bit beyond that. And perhaps more likely we'll get things that people would say or perhaps imply to us, unless you worship the way that I say, you're not really a good Christian.

Or you need to pray in this particular way if you want to be a good Christian. Or you need to do these kinds of service for God if you want to be a good Christian.

Or you need to read these books if you want to be a good Christian. They're adding things to what the Bible says and saying these are conditions for being a good Christian.

Now you may have noticed Paul doesn't condemn the things that people are talking about. He doesn't say these are really bad things. No one should ever do them. What he's condemning is the people who say you must do this if you want to be a good Christian.

[5 : 41] If you don't do it, we won't have nothing to do with you. Things here are probably largely hangovers from the Jewish faith, from the Old Testament, and the way people are told to worship in the first century based on the Old Testament.

It doesn't really matter. Whatever it is, if we have something that says you need Jesus plus something else to be a good Christian, then we need to be very, very careful because the Bible doesn't say that.

The Bible says all you need is Jesus and faith in him and you shouldn't add to it. Anything you add to it, even if it's a good thing in itself and something that you might feel is worthwhile, it's not the real thing.

It's a shadow. And who wants to be looking all the time at shadows when you could be looking at the real thing, when your eyes could be on Jesus and following him?

So we need to lose legalism, lose telling people this is what you must do if you want to be a good Christian. Second thing Paul says is end elitism.

[6 : 51] So that's in verses 18 and 19. And this is people who say, if you're a good Christian, you must have had this experience.

You can't be a good Christian unless you have experienced certain things that I've experienced. Now it looks as if in this case, what they were talking about is they'd had some kind of visions.

Perhaps it was the kind of vision that John had in the book of Revelation, when he's got a glimpse into heaven and he saw the angels and all the heavenly hosts worshipping Jesus.

That's maybe what the worship of angels means here. And these people were saying, I've had this great vision, this great experience in my past, and I'm a better Christian than you because you haven't had it.

Now Paul also talks about false humility here. I think this is a bit like when you sometimes get someone who's given an award and they stand up and say, this award makes me feel very humble.

[7 : 52] It's very humbling. And actually what they mean is, I'm very proud of all that I've achieved. And that I think is what's being talked about here. You've got people who've had these experiences and they're saying, I'm very humble because this has happened to me.

Actually they're saying, I'm much better than you because this has happened to me. And Paul says there's no time for that kind of elitism in the Christian church.

We can't be looking at other people and saying, I'm better than you because I've had this happen to me. Now if you've had a special experience of Jesus or of the Holy Spirit, I'm not here to play it down or to say it's not relevant.

But I would say two things. One is, if you've had a special experience, be thankful for God's grace. But don't think it's happened because you are better than other people or that it makes you better than other people.

Perhaps actually you needed God's grace. You needed that experience more than others did. And that is why God gave it to you. The second thing I'd say for all of us, if it was some kind of experience in the past, where we've been very aware of God's presence, whether it's a vision or some kind of special awareness of God's presence, don't judge it by how intense it was or how spiritual you felt at the time.

[9 : 16] Judge it by the differences made in your life. Has it drawn you closer to Jesus? Has it given you a greater desire to read the Bible and to understand it?

Has it helped your prayer life? Has it made you kinder to others? Are you less likely to gossip or to be angry or to rubbish other people?

Does it make it more likely that you'll help those in need? These are the kind of tests the New Testament would apply to our Christian experience. And if we truly know the Lord and have an experience of him, that's what the impact should be.

It's not so that we can look at ourselves and say, I'm better, I'm more privileged than others. It's so that we can be drawn closer to Jesus and become more like him.

We'll come back to verse 19 in a few minutes, talk about the head. But Paul's saying here, the people who've had these experiences in Colossae and who are effectively boasting about them, actually they're so focused on themselves that they've lost contact with Jesus.

[10 : 25] And their faith has become valueless. We'll come back to that towards the end. But Paul says, end elitism. And then the third thing he says is, acts ascetism.

Now we can say ascetism is when we try to stop doing things because we think it makes us more spiritual. When we don't do things because we think that will make us more spiritual people and therefore we'll be better Christians, if that's the word that we want to use.

Now let's be clear about this. Paul's not saying that we shouldn't have disciplines in our Christian life. If you read the words of Jesus again and again, he talks about how we should deny ourselves if we want to be his disciples.

So that's not what Paul's criticizing here. When I was growing up, as a family, there were some things we didn't do. We didn't go to football matches.

We didn't go to the cinema. We didn't go to the pub. Not to think that there's any thought that these things are intrinsically wrong. They had connotations then. They maybe don't quite have so much now.

[11 : 38] But they were things which my parents judged, and I'm sure rightly, potentially could distract us from our Christian faith, could draw us away from the Lord Jesus and serving him.

Now I have to say, I still don't do these things. I choose not to. But I'm certainly not going to criticize anyone who does them in moderation. And I'd also say there are probably lots of things that I do, and I'm quite happy to do, that you may think it's better that you don't do.

But these kind of disciplines can be helpful to us if they give us more opportunity to focus on the Lord Jesus and to come closer to him.

They're not what Paul's talking about here. Paul is talking about people who would say a good Christian doesn't do this, and produce a long list of things that they say Christians shouldn't do this.

Do not handle, he says. Do not touch. Do not eat. All sorts of things that people might say, if you want to be a good Christian, you've really got to beat yourself up and be very careful that you don't get involved in this and that and the other, because they are not things that good Christians do.

[12 : 51] And Paul says that kind of instruction, that kind of ascetism and forcing it on others, is not productive. It is not a good thing. It's not good, first of all, because it focuses attention on me and on what I don't do.

And I'm constantly thinking, what can I do? What can't I do? And it draws our attention away from Jesus. Our thought should be on Jesus and all that he has done for us, rejoice in him rather than beat ourselves up about things that we may or may not do.

And Paul says, actually, it's not good for another reason, because this kind of attitude actually doesn't help you to do good, and it may even lead to you doing the things that you didn't want to do.

So at the end of the chapter, he says, they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. If I'm at home in an evening and I've not got anything very interesting to do, I am very attracted to the fridge and the biscuit box.

I will sit all evening, think I'm not going to eat anything. I won't, I won't, I won't, I won't, I will. I just, my willpower gradually goes, because I've not got anything else to think about, and I think I'm not going to do this, and eventually I give in, and I do.

[14 : 08] And that's what Paul's talking about here. If you're constantly focusing on things you don't think you should do, and people have told you you're not allowed to do, it becomes much more likely in the end that you'll do them.

If I'm at home in an evening and I'm doing something I'm really interested in, hours can pass and I don't think about food at all. So I've got something that's taking my attention to something positive, and I'm not having to think these negative thoughts.

If I can take a sneak peek into chapter 3, which we'll be looking at at the start of next year, that's what Paul says we should do to keep from falling into sin.

He says, set your heart on things above where Christ is. Set your mind on things above, not earthly things.

So the secret of doing right and of avoiding sin is not to spend all our time thinking about it and trying to resist it. It's filling our thoughts with the things of the Lord Jesus, with the Bible, and meditating on all that he has done for us.

[15 : 20] And then these other things, they become unattractive, they become unimportant to us. As Paul says in verse 20, you've died to these things if your focus is on Jesus.

So we need to act ascetism. Not listen to people who say, a good Christian doesn't do this and this and this, unless of course it's in the Bible that we're not to do it, and that's a different thing, but that's not what Paul's talking about here.

Now you may think there's a bit of an irony in what I've said so far. I've been saying, Paul says a good Christian doesn't do these things. I've precisely been saying, don't do these things.

Don't get involved in legalism or elitism or ascetism. So let's end on a more positive note. What can we say positively about a good Christian, and a good Christian chooses Christ?

That is what Paul is focusing on here, and it's not about what we do or what we don't do or what we've experienced. It's about what we are in the Lord Jesus.

[16 : 29] So let's quickly go back through the passage and see what Paul has to say to us about that. So the first thing he says, and it's in verse 17, is that the reality is found in Christ.

So a good Christian is someone who has found reality in Jesus Christ. Now at the beginning of our passage, you may have noticed it, is the word therefore.

And so we need to look back and say, well, what is it that Paul said up till now that implies what he's about to say in these instructions that he gives us? Some of us were looking at our home groups this week.

And Paul has been talking about the marvellous things that God has done for us in Jesus. When we were dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ.

He forgave all our sins. He cancelled the charge. He nailed it to the cross. And he had this great victory parade as he triumphed over the forces of evil through his death on the cross.

[17 : 38] Jesus has done all these things for us. Therefore, let's not get involved in all this nitpicking and pernicious legalism and asceticism and all the rest of it. Let's focus on what we are and what we have in Jesus.

A good Christian, a Christian indeed, is someone who has found reality in Christ. We're not interested in the shadows. They can have some value, but they're not the key things.

The most important thing in our lives should be the reality that we found in Jesus. Recognising our sin, our failure, and the fact that he took that on the cross at Calvary.

And as we trust in him and as we seek to live for him, then he changes our lives. And he gives us forgiveness. He gives us eternal life. And he makes all the difference to the way we are.

A good Christian is someone who has found reality in Jesus Christ. Second thing Paul says more positively is, a good Christian is someone who remains connected to Christ.

[18 : 51] That's verse 19 that we referred to briefly a few minutes ago. Paul says these people, these people who are involved in this elitism and thinking they're better than others, they've lost connection with the head from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

A head without a body is dead. It is through our head that we see, we hear, we smell, we taste, we eat, we drink, we breathe, we think.

And we've not got a head, then the rest of the body is just dead flesh. When the head is in place and is working properly, Paul says the whole body grows and is supported together by ligaments and sinews and everything's got its place.

So in the church, Christ is the head of the church. He is the key to life and to growth and to having a good Christian life.

And unless we have that connection to Christ and are focused on him rather than ourselves, then there is a real danger, Paul says, that we lose our connection from the head and our Christian lives become sterile.

[20 : 08] They effectively become dead. A good Christian is someone who remains connected to Christ. Lord Jesus uses a slightly different analogy, doesn't he, in John 15 when he talks about the vine and the branches?

Very much the same idea though. Unless you're connected to the vine, you have no chance of being fruitful. Unless we're connected to Christ, we can't consider that we live a good Christian life.

And then finally, Paul says, a good Christian is someone who has died with Christ. Verse 20, since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual force of this world, why do you act as though you still belonged to the world?

Here's a clue for a Bible study. If you ever see anywhere in the New Testament that it talks about dying with Christ or dying to sin, look forward a few verses and you'll find somewhere where it says that you're alive in Christ.

So here we've got, Paul says in verse 20, you died with Christ, and then we move into chapter 3 and verse 1 says, since then you have been raised with Christ.

[21 : 22] The Christian is someone who has died to sin, and we symbolize that in baptism, when someone goes under the water and comes back up as a witness to the Lord Jesus.

But a Christian is more than that. A Christian is someone who is alive in Jesus Christ. We've died with him as he died on the cross, so we have in the spiritual sense died with him.

And as he was physically raised to life, so we have been spiritually raised to life with him. And then as we said earlier, what we need to do is to keep our minds and our hearts focused on him and to recognize that the key to a fruitful, a joyful, a good Christian life, if you want to put it that way, is our relationship with Jesus and remaining close to him and living for him in everything we do in our lives.

It doesn't come through legalism. It doesn't come through elitism or experiences we may have had. It doesn't come through ascetism and denying ourselves worldly pleasures.

It comes from knowing Jesus, having our faith in him, knowing the salvation that comes through him, and day by day living for him and seeking to serve him.

[22 : 39] That's what makes a good Christian. Someone who has reality in Jesus, someone who remains connected to him and recognizes him as our head and seeks to obey him, someone who has died with Christ so that the things of this world would distract us from him become less and less important as we recognize the reality of the new life that we have in him.

Let me finish with a quotation. It's quite a surprising quotation that I found on the BBC. Now, unfortunately, it's not on their website just now, but it was on their website a few years ago. It's now part of the archive.

And this is what it says. Being a Christian is not about keeping rules and regulations, performing rituals, or even going to church.

It's about a friendship, a friendship with Jesus. And that very much sums up what I've been trying to get across this morning.

We as a church, if we're following Jesus, can't be just about rules and regulations. You must do this. You mustn't do that. We need to be about focusing on Jesus and building relationships with him and knowing him as our friend and as our Lord and seeking to bring others to know him as well.

[23 : 59] We as individuals, if we want to be a Christian, far less a good Christian, it is only found through that relationship with Jesus. By recognizing by ourselves, we could try all we want for our whole lives and we won't be able to do enough to make up for all the sins that we have committed.

We can never start to pay for all the wrong that we've done. But Jesus has done it all. We sang that, didn't we, in the song before I got up to speak.

Jesus pays it all. And let's focus on him and have our lives and our eyes fixed on him. Do away with rules and regulations and just concentrate on our relationship, our friendship with Jesus and our allegiance to him as our Lord.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for these words of Paul. Thank you that he was able to take what appeared to be a really big issue for the church at Colossae and was able to demonstrate how the things that people were trying to impose on them were worthless and meaningless and actually would distract them from what is important.

We pray to help us to focus our minds, our thoughts, our hearts on Jesus to make sure that we know him as our Savior and then day by day to walk with him as our Lord and as our friend.

[25 : 29] We thank you for your presence as we've worshipped this morning, as we've learned from your word. And we commit ourselves to you now and pray for your continued blessing on us in the remainder of the day.

We give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.