

Jesus

Religion or Relationship?



Good people go to heaven don't they?

So what is Christianity?

Many people believe that Jesus was just a good man who talked about love and peace, and became the leader of a religious movement we call Christianity.

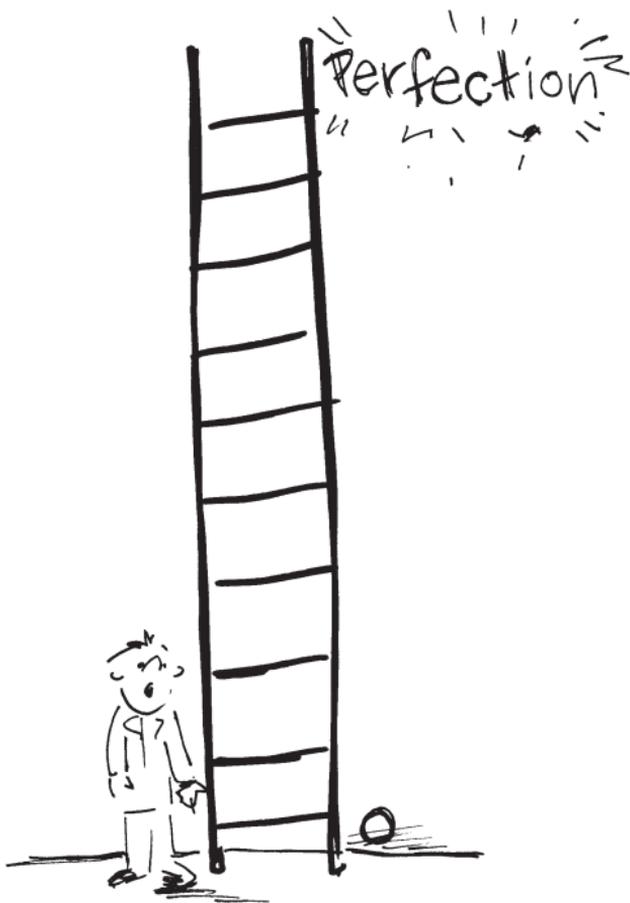
It is true that Jesus was the founder of Christianity, and has impacted our world like no other solitary figure, but to pigeonhole him as a religious leader would be to miss him altogether. Why? Read anything about the life of Jesus and you will soon discover that he was a harsh critic of religious activity undertaken to impress others, particularly God! This is why I can confidently say that....



Christianity is not about Religion

Religion is the word we use to describe the variety of ways people try to connect with God. For many, religion is nothing more than trying to live by a series of rituals and rules. You know — people trying to do something in order to make it right with God, like attending a church at Easter or Christmas, giving to a charity, meditation, serving in the community, being a good person who shoots off the occasional prayer when caught in a tight situation or, maybe for some, the occasional trip to the confessional when you know you've blown it. These are just some expressions of religious activity. They might be good activities, but we can easily fall into the trap of believing that religious actions are in themselves a way of squaring things up with God. Like my car mechanic once said, "If God doesn't accept me into heaven after all the money I have given to charities over the years, then I will be pretty ticked off!"

You see, the problem I have with thinking about life and God through this kind of framework is that it always leaves me with the nagging question, "How good is good enough?" I mean how do you ever know if the number of good things you have done has balanced out all your shortcomings? What's more, whose criteria are we to use as a standard?



Let me illustrate what I mean. Suppose this ladder represents a scale of goodness. The top of the ladder is moral perfection, let's say a 10. Now, in my estimation, the only one who I think deserves to be up there is God himself. The bottom represents just the opposite, a big fat zero — real bad.

Now consider some really good people. Let's say Mother Teresa, Ghandi, or Nelson Mandela. Where do you think they should be placed on this ladder?

Now think of some really bad people. Don't think for too long, it might get depressing.

Where do you think you would place them?

Now what about yourself? Where do you think you should be?

Just before you answer, I think it's only fair that I tell you where I would place myself. I am committed to modelling my life after Jesus, but honestly, I know myself well enough to say that I would place myself somewhere around the middle of the ladder. I haven't embezzled millions of dollars, hijacked a plane, or committed any real 'biggies' that I am aware of, but I do know that in comparison to God and those other 'good' people you have ranked, I would place myself somewhere below them.

So what about you?

Perhaps a few rungs higher?

I'm curious though, based on this kind of thinking and scale, who do you think makes the grade?

I have met many people who sincerely think that it's

the 'good' people who get to go to heaven, wherever that is. When I ask them to tell me who the 'good' people are and where the line should be drawn, it's not surprising to find that most people think the line falls somewhere just below them. I can understand that. Most of us would consider ourselves to be relatively good. At least good enough for God and his heaven, should they exist.

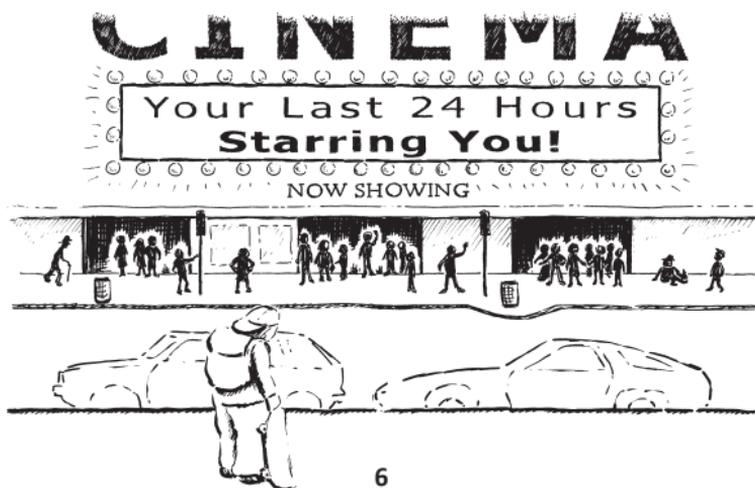
Not surprisingly Jesus had a lot to say about God, life and the place beyond. He pointed people toward God's purpose for life and how to please him. So would you like to know where Jesus draws 'the line' on how we should live? He said in a talk given on a hillside many years ago, that we should be perfect just like God! Ouch! I know, I felt the same way when I first heard this too.



He also indicated that in God's eyes, if you so much as break one of his commands in your thought life, then it's just as if you have done it in the flesh! An angry thought, or lustful glance, is enough to remind us that we aren't as squeaky clean as we might think.

Now, if that is the standard, then honestly, I'm in trouble and I think it's fair to say that you are too! If you're not convinced that we're on a sinking boat then let me ask you this, "How would you feel if I held a private showing of all your thoughts over the past 24 hours?"

What's more, would you mind if I invited everyone you have entertained those thoughts about to come and watch the screening? I heard someone once say that the real difference between humans and animals is that animals don't blush!



So what do you think now?

If Jesus believes that the measure for life, God, and his heaven is perfection, then wouldn't you agree that we are all in the same boat?

Like passengers on the Titanic, we might kid ourselves into believing that we are sitting safe on the first class deck, but relatively speaking, we're all on the same boat, and it's sinking. **Unfortunately "she'll be right" just won't cut it in the Creator's eyes.** In fact, the Bible tells us that this 'condition' actually distances us from God. Jesus understood this condition and gave it a name. He called it 'sin'. It sounds a little old fashioned I know, but Jesus understood sin to be that internal desire we all have to rule ourselves, serve ourselves and please ourselves. It's this power that compels us to look out for ourselves at the expense of others. It's this power that causes us to consciously or unconsciously say to God, "I don't need you, I want to live life my way!" Don't get me wrong, Jesus wasn't bent upon trying to convince people that they were all dirty rotten scoundrels, but that they were only *relatively good*. Personally, compared to God, I know that my mercy, kindness and patience run out. His doesn't. The great problem with this powerful force called 'sin' is that it robs us of any real connection to God's life and is the cause of most of

the pain and suffering we experience in our world. Consequently Jesus spent most of his time on earth convincing people that they were of infinite worth to God but also in need of great repair. That repair comes when someone decides to come back to God.

In truth, if we don't move beyond the "How good is good enough?" kind of thinking, then we end up treating God like an insurance company wanting him for nothing more than assurance for the life beyond. So I guess you can see why Jesus was a great critic of religious activity undertaken as a means to secure a place in heaven or to earn God's approval. It simply ends up reducing God to nothing more than a heavenly accountant whose only role is to audit our lives once we die. It also leaves us with the uncertainty of never really knowing if we have done enough good stuff to pass the test! Frankly, I just don't think God works this way.

What if we are simply asking the wrong question?

What if Jesus was interested in our present lives even more than the life beyond? Personally, I find that people are far more concerned about life right now and where to find happiness, than getting worried about where they go once they die.

If that's right, then perhaps a far more relevant question might be, "How can I experience a more satisfying life right now?"

Jesus once said, **"I have come that you might have life, and experience it to the full."** Now this is where Jesus gets real interesting. He seemed to believe that a full, satisfying, enriching life was to be found

through knowing God and then genuinely caring for what he cares about, namely his planet and all the people on it!



Jesus points us to encounter a personal relationship with the Creator, God Himself.

This is why I can confidently say that at its core, Christianity is all about relationships. God designed us to be relational. Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment was to love God. The second was to love our neighbour in the same way we would love ourselves. This makes sense to me. One of our greatest human needs is to be in relationship with others.

I once heard that the silent killer of our Western world was loneliness. If true, then this just highlights the core need we all have to experience meaningful, satisfying, personal relationships.

However, the Creator also designed us to be in relationship with himself. In fact, he says that this is the primary reason he created us, to enjoy a personal relationship foremostly with himself as well as one another. Why? **Because that is what he is like, he is relational and loving.**



God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows there is nothing in this world — no power, no material possession, nor any other person — that can ultimately satisfy the longings of our soul apart from being in relationship with him. All those other things are meant to **complement** our lives but not **complete** them. Only God can do that.

My experience tells me that even when I enjoy the many pleasures in life, like good food, entertainment, holidays, fashion or even significant relationships, I experience momentary happiness, but not that deeply felt peace and contentment we all yearn for. Only God can do that. That's the way he made us. Someone once said, "You have made us for yourself God, and we will not find rest until we find it in you."

A friend recently said to me, "I lived all my life with an internal pain inside. I tried to fill that with drugs, the fast life, and trendy gadgets, but they did not remove this pain. I have discovered that only God can do that." My search for fulfillment and inner peace has led me to agree with him. **A personal relationship with God through his son Jesus is the only thing that will ultimately afford us the peace, joy, and fullness we long for.**

You might say, "Well I have satisfying personal relationships, and I'm pretty content with my lot in life, I don't need God." Fair point, and I don't doubt

your feelings for a moment. However, there is a word which comes to mind, ***perspective***. Have you ever considered that there might be more to life than what you have already experienced? If so, how do you know that Jesus isn't a man of his word and has something far greater for you than you could ever imagine? For example like those people who said that humans couldn't fly to the moon... ***perspective!***

Secondly, and sorry to bring it up again, but that personal moral condition we've already discussed means knowing God isn't a given. In fact all of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, have communicated to God that we would prefer to run our lives ***our way***. In Australian



terms you might say, "We have all gone walkabout from him". Our imperfect attitudes and actions are testimony to this.

However, God knows that our greatest potential is to be in relationship with Him, but also that our greatest need is for forgiveness and inner ***transformation***.

That is why he sent his son Jesus. He did not want us to be eternally separated from himself, so he sent Jesus to provide a means by which we could experience God's powerful presence in our lives now and forever. He loved us and all his creation so much, he couldn't just let us go walkabout without making a way for us to come home to him. God couldn't just abandon a broken and hurting world without stepping in to make things right. Astonishingly, making us and this world right with him involved a cross and a crucifixion.

When Jesus died on that Roman cross 2000 years ago he said he was doing it for you and me. He said that his life was being given in exchange for ours and the entire world, like a ransom.

In effect, the cross was God's huge billboard to the world saying, **"Come Home — All Is Forgiven."**



When Jesus was crucified, he said it was the most genuine expression of love he could show us, the kind of love that could provide forgiveness and freedom from sin's power over our lives. As proof he rose from the dead three days later just as he had promised. His followers were eye witnesses. That's why the message they proclaimed was that they had seen a dead man come back to life! If that really happened then I think it is fair to say that Jesus' life, death and resurrection has meaning for the entire world!

Can Jesus' death really connect me to God?



Have you seen the movie *Les Miserables*? Jean Val Jean is an ex-convict on the run from the ruthless guard Javert. There is a powerful scene where Jean Val Jean is offered a free meal and bed for the night by the town priest. During the night Jean Val Jean steals all the silverware, and upon being discovered, he knocks the priest out cold and heads for the hills. So much for gratitude! The next day unfolds in a most unexpected way. Jean Val Jean has been apprehended and is forcibly brought before the priest who is nursing a most obvious blackened eye. Upon seeing Jean Val Jean in the custody of the guards, the priest shouts, “Jean Val Jean I am very upset with you my son! Why didn’t you take the candlesticks? I told you that you were to take them as well!”

The guards stand up in surprise. “You mean that you gave him your silverware?” they enquire.

“Yes”, replies the priest, “But he did not take the candlesticks! I am most upset!”

At this he fetches the candlesticks and places them, together with all the other silverware, in Jean Val Jean’s rucksack. The guards depart without the pleasure of an arrest, leaving the two solitary figures standing face to face. “Why are you doing this?”, asks Jean Val Jean, to which the priest replies, “Don’t forget, you’ve promised to become a new man. Jean Val Jean my brother, you no longer belong to evil —

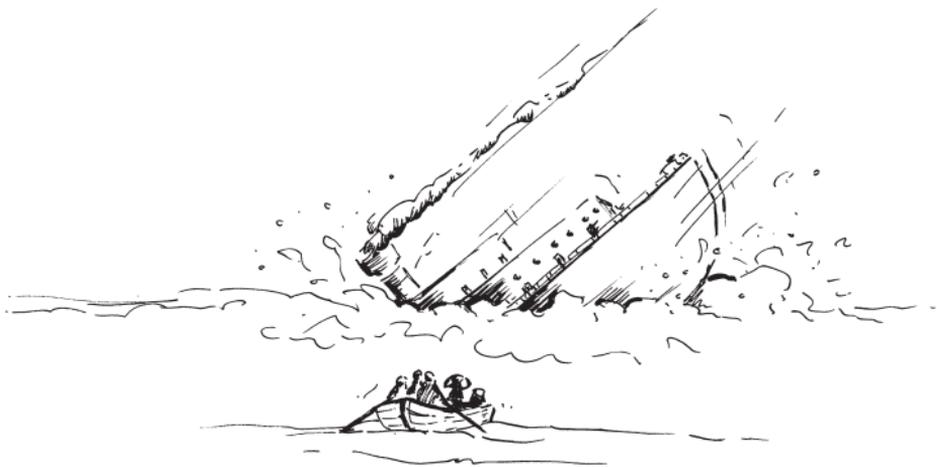
with this silver I bought you, I ransomed you from fear and hatred and now I give you back to God.”

A powerful story of undeserved generosity. If you like, the actions of this priest represent what Jesus has made possible through the cross. His death ransoms us and brings us back to God! Quite amazing really.

Now if someone wants to experience the life God created them to know, they must respond to Jesus’ sacrifice on their behalf, just like Jean Val Jean responded to the priest’s generosity.

It is not enough to just intellectually agree that what Jesus did was a selfless act recorded in the pages of history. You must personally respond to it. This involves **acknowledging** that he is who he claimed to be, God’s Son who lived, died and rose to new life, and **inviting** him into your life to become your personal leader, Lord or CEO.

The Bible uses the word **receive** to describe this response. It basically means that we are personally **turning** to Jesus and placing our **trust** in him. This involves accepting that through his death we can be forgiven, and just as he was raised to new life, so too we can be raised up to new life with God. If you like, imagine for a moment that you are on a sinking ship. Jesus would represent the life boat that could take you safely to shore.



What now?

You might be asking questions like:

“Can I really trust Jesus?” or “Will knowing God really make a difference to my life?”

Well, all I can say from the ‘other side’ of making that decision some years ago now, is that, although life didn’t become ‘perfect’ the moment I received Jesus, through him I have come to know a freedom from guilt, a freedom from the fear of death and life, and a freedom to trust that God is with me and is for me. I have found that this makes all the difference. In fact, I have come to experience a sense of peace, and joy, and a hope which nothing else on this earth can give me.

So how can I receive Jesus?

For some, to receive Jesus just seems too easy, but actually it is the greatest decision you will ever have to make. God says that to all who receive Jesus he gives the right to become part of his family. You can receive Jesus into your life by praying to God. Now I need to say at this point that there is no magical formula. However, turning to God will involve a heartfelt response that includes sentiments like a **thank-you**, a **sorry**, and a **please**.

For example:

Dear God,

Thank-you for your love for me.

Thank-you for sending Jesus to die for me.

I am sorry for living life my way and I am sorry for the wrong things I have done. Please forgive me.

Please come into my life and lead me.

Please fill me with your presence, your Holy Spirit.

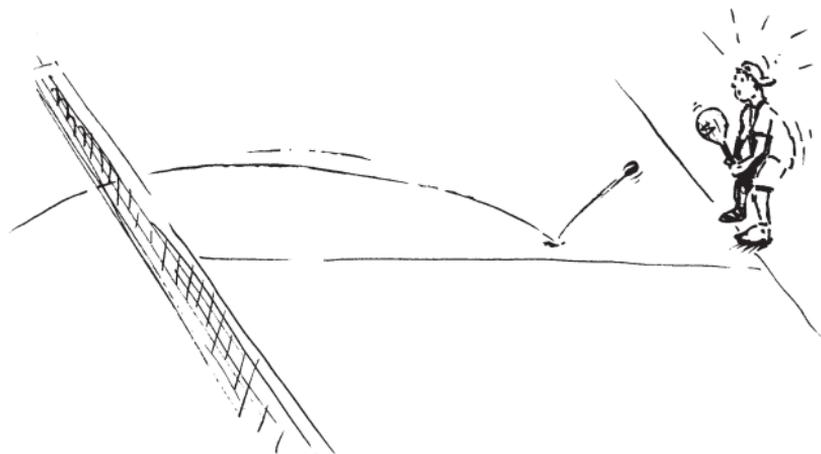
Empower me to live the life you desire for me.

As I said, this prayer is not some magical formula to God, but it expresses the kind of honest sentiment required to receive what Jesus offers. It basically affirms a desire to make Jesus the living centre of your life. It is like deciding to sit in the passenger seat of your own car whilst giving Jesus the keys to drive. Perhaps you have been reading and thinking, “Sounds

reasonable, but I need time to think.” Sure, go ahead, an important decision requires some necessary reflection.

If you have questions, then I would encourage you to seek out a Christian to talk to. God is a gentleman when it comes to relationships. He loves you, but won't force himself upon you.

Remember though, we all want to be happy in this life, and sooner or later most people will go looking for answers. Jesus is God's answer to our longing for a life free from fear and guilt, and our quest for inner peace. So the ball is in your court.



If however, whilst reading, you have been impacted by the reality of these words and sense God speaking to you, then I would invite you to find a quiet space

where you can verbalize this prayer to him.

It might seem strange, praying into thin air, but I can assure you that God hears all the same. If it is any easier, perhaps picture Jesus standing in front of you and speak as if you are talking to him.

If you have responded to God in this way, then can I simply say how thrilled I am for you. God is even more excited and says that at this very moment he is throwing a rather large party in heaven for you.

Next steps

May I encourage you to tell others about your decision, especially a Christian friend who can support you in this. A relationship with God opens up a whole new life journey, but now with him and other people who have made that decision as well. Life was not meant to be done alone — that's why becoming part of a church community is also an important step along the way. Being part of God's family means that we all play a part in encouraging and supporting each other, as **we seek to partner with God in transforming or changing his world for good.**

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