

What do you want from God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 April 2017

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Dr. Victor Chang was an Australian doctor. And Dr. Victor Chang was shot dead in a suburb.

! And if you don't know who he was, he was a great heart and lung specialist in Sydney. I can't get my kids to bed by 7 o'clock. But this guy could give you 25 years of life extra.

There's people who are alive today in Australia because of the skill of this surgeon. He went to a church where a friend of mine is a minister. And Victor Chang was extraordinary. He worked long hours, very long hours. He was very committed to his patients. Things were said about him in the aftermath of his tragic death, which will probably never be said about the rest of us. He was a Malaysian Chinese man. He stood for the very best that human beings can produce.

The men that shot him stand for the very worst. Victor Chang's hands were devoted to saving lives. The hands of the men who shot him on that Thursday morning were devoted to taking lives. This is how it happened. He was driving off to work to extend the lives of a number of people. And as he went off to do heart transplants, he was pulled over on the side of the road by these two men. It turned out later they'd begun. They were basically trying to force the hands of notable Chinese people in the Sydney community. He was the first. And Victor Chang resisted.

He didn't want to pay them off as they pressured him. And they shot him dead on that morning. The best and the worst that humanity can produce. I don't know who you'd put in that category.

[1 : 59] Who represents the very best? It's hard to think about, isn't it? Who represents the very worst of humanity? There's lots of candidates. Well, Jesus in this story, from verses 9 to 14 of Luke chapter 18, puts the very best and the very worst of his community side by side.

In the presence of God in a temple. And he does that for a very, very simple reason. It's not rocket science. Look at the opening sentence. He tells you why he's telling this story. To some, he says, who trusted in themselves. Who were confident of their own righteousness. They thought that they were in the right before God.

They were in the right with God. And they looked down, can you see it, on everyone else. They treated others with contempt. That's the target. That's the reason. And the story really is a critique of anyone who wants to invest their hope in their own performance before God.

And when you invest your hope in your own performance before God, that always has to be at the expense of someone else. And that's exactly what he's doing here. This man, he not only trusted in his own righteousness, but he looked down on everyone else.

So what we have is two categories of people. You have a Pharisee and a tax collector. You have somebody of the order of Dr. Victor Chang. And you have somebody of the order of Dr. Victor's murderers. Two people who, on the moral scales, are as far apart as you can get.

[3 : 49] Now, do you understand how the original hearers would have heard this? It's always helpful. If you were a gambling person, and you wanted to blow, let's say, a thousand pounds on a bet. And your choice was, who would you bet gets into heaven? Mother Teresa, or Adolf Hitler. Who would you put your money on?

Unless you're an idiot, you'd go from Mother Teresa. And everyone listening to this story would have put their life savings on the Pharisees.

And I'll tell you why. These Pharisees weren't religious people like monks or priests or ministers. They were actually a lay movement within Judaism. And they took the things of God very seriously. They were spiritual giants. They were the guys voted most likely to be sainted. They weren't like spiritual marathon runners. They were like spiritual ultra-marathon runners.

They don't run 26 miles. They run 26 miles every day for three weeks. You know those ultra-marathon runners? They're in a category all of their own. And these Pharisees were like that.

[4 : 59] They had a very high standard. They had a very high success rate. And if anybody had grounds for thinking they had done enough, it was these guys, the Pharisees.

On the other side of that spectrum was the tax collector. These guys, they sided with the enemy. In the enemy, Israel was an enemy occupied territory by the Romans.

And the Romans used tax collectors to not only take the tax that the tax collectors lined their own pockets while they did it.

They creamed off taxes from their own people in the service of the enemy. And they were despised. Kids went to bed hungry because of men like this.

They bled decent people of a decent living. You mentioned the word tax collector to the people of Jesus' day and it kind of generated the same kind of gut reaction as the word pedophile does for us.

[6 : 10] It was just bad. And so knowing that, who do you think Jesus would back to get into heaven? Well, let's see. The Pharisee comes very confident, doesn't he?

He's in the right and he thinks he appears to have done everything else of him. This is his prayer. We know exactly what he's praying. Look at verse 18. Turn off verse 18.

Verse 11. So there he is in the temple and he says this. The Pharisee standing by himself prays, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. Extortioners, unjust, adulterers.

Or even like this tax collector. So he starts off with his prayer. And his prayer sounds pretty good. He is grateful, isn't he? It's good to be grateful, verse 11.

I thank you. And this guy not only knows the Ten Commandments, but he's kept them. I'm not a robber. I'm not a thief.

[7 : 09] I'm not an evildoer. I'm not an adulterer. I've not slept with another man's wife. But most of all, he is proud of that he hasn't turned out like, well, that scam over there at the end of verse 11.

The tax collector. Who's pretty much broken every rule in the book. And so in verse 11, this guy, the Pharisee, did not sing amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

He's more likely to sing amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like him. The hymn of verse 11, his favorite hymn would be, I did it my way.

By Francis Arjo, which is amazingly one of the most common songs played at crematoriums. I did it my way. So in verse 11, this category of person is not, only not bad.

He is positively good, isn't he? He is genuine. Verse 12, I fast two days out of every seven.

Remember we saw this morning, this morning in the Old Testament, the Bible said that you only have to fast on one day a year.

[8 : 24] But these guys, well, they didn't fast one day a year, or one day a month, they fasted twice a week. Positively, they gave one pound out of every ten to the house of God.

That kind of money mounts up, doesn't it? And so, instead of going to Switzerland on his holiday, he would go to Scotland. Instead of going on a round-the-world cruise, he'd go to the Lincoln District, or something like that.

The money mounts up. All the great cost. All the great cost. And he comes to this God, he comes to God with all this quote of good that he's tucked under his arm. And you get the impression, as though God owes him, doesn't he?

Now what this man doesn't do, what he does not do is, he doesn't hope to be put right with God.

Notice, there's no hint of confession is there on this man's lips. There's nothing that he can see that is bad.

But then when you come to the tax collector in verse 13, on the other hand, he's very much of his failure before God. So his body language is telling you everything that you need to know.

[9 : 37] He doesn't even symbolically look up to the heavens, as it were. He dare not muster the confidence. You see, the tax collector stood at a distance.

And this is his prayer. He would not even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast at breast, and he said, God have mercy on me, a sinner.

And it's not low self-esteem. He's not an introvert either. He really has come to that point. It's an honest evaluation of himself in the presence of God.

And he knows as he comes before God, that God is holy. God is different. God is morally perfect. God is other. A holy God whose standard is perfect. And interestingly, he places no hope whatsoever in any good deed that he's done.

[10 : 35] And the chances are, are they, that this guy actually probably would have been quite a good father. A decent husband.

He probably was a decent man. If you ask his friends, they would say he was a great guy, that he nurtured and cared for them. We know from the rest of the Luke's Gospel that tax collectors were constantly having parties.

They were very sociable people. They were a gregarious lot. I suspect they gave to charity in abundance. But he doesn't appeal to any of that.

He knows that they are but crumbs before God. A God he's ignored and rebelled. And now all you hear from him are five words. Have mercy on me, a sinner.

That's six words. But literally, it's have mercy on me, the sinner. Now in effect, what he's saying behind this word, mercy, is admitting, I know God that you are rightfully angry.

[11 : 45] His conscience tells him that. You are rightfully angry with me at the way I conducted my life. And what I'm asking you is to deflect your anger away from me. Now how is it that two men approach God on the same day, in the same place, on radically different criteria?

And let me suggest two reasons why I think it's stuff that you and I are really familiar with. The first is being good. Being genuinely good can be self-deceiving.

The Pharisee is tripped up by his many virtues. The Pharisee was a good man, relatively speaking. Compared with the rest of society, these guys were good men. But do you know what he did? He made the most fatal mistake that could be made. He went from thinking, I'm a good man, therefore I'm good enough for God.

Do you see that step? It's a fatal mistake to make. I'm a good man, therefore I'm good enough for God. He put his confidence in his own performance, in his own righteousness.

[13 : 00] And the implicit warning is, the better you are as a human being, and I hope you are, the more sincere, the more compassionate, the more loving, and the more kind, the greater danger that you run in thinking those are the very qualities that will buy you a place in heaven.

And buy you a place of God's approval. He had really forgotten, had he, what the Bible had said. The Bible is blunt, quite blunt, about the extent of how good we are.

It actually says, as the prophet Isaiah says, even our good works, they are like filthy rags. He'd forgotten the words of Jesus, that there is no one good.

No one is good except God alone. He hadn't tuned in to what the apostle Paul would say, no one is righteous. No, not one, not even one.

And so tonight, if you were to look into my heart right now, if you were to look into my heart, you'd spit in my face. not because of what I'm feeling right now, if you knew the sort of things that go on in my heart, and the things that go on in your heart, we just couldn't tolerate it.

[14 : 23] It's actually a really good thing, that human beings have limited knowledge of each other. This is the state of humanity.

The tax collector though, he has got no sort of goodness to be deceived by. He knew he was a monk, and so did everyone else.

And so that's the first issue. The better you are, the greater danger you run in thinking that these are the qualities that earn me a right to God's approval.

The second reason why I think these people come before God on different terms is I think the Pharisee is tempted to do what we've all done it. I've certainly done it. He made other people rather than God the yardstick.

Can you see that from the verse? So he measured his performance in relation to the tax collector. And of course he's better than the tax collector. He was heaps better.

[15 : 31] And I think people all over the world are pinning their hopes on this similar criteria. For as long as I can get above average morally speaking, I must be doing okay.

Two weeks ago I used the statistic that 80% of UK men think that they are above average at sport. 80% of UK men think that they are above average at sport.

I love that quote. There's something wrong with that statistic. We take comfort, don't we, in the fact, well at least I'm not a murderer. As if that somehow, if I'm not a murderer I must be okay.

Now it's as simple as this. What's your point of reference? Do you remember we had a man in the church, I'm called Shisoo. I'm from Malaysia. Shisoo was 5'3".

And if Shisoo was standing here today, you would not think that he's a tall man. But when Shisoo was living in Malaysia, he was the tallest man in his village.

[16 : 37] Shisoo went to study in Holland to do some research. And he fell in love with Christina, who was 6'0". In Malaysia, Shisoo was a giant.

He towered above the other men in his village. And for as long as Shisoo made the rest of his village of Malaysia his reference point, he would think, I tower over everyone. I'm tall. And then he moves abroad. And he's looking up, not looking down. For as long as you have a selective reference point, you'll have yourself on. And maybe you're having yourself on tonight. That's exactly what Shisoo was doing in Malaysia. Don't be deceived by democracies. So what if you seem better than most people in this room? Big deal. So what if you are the best person? Technically, theoretically, there is someone who is the best human being. I wonder who it is.

[17 : 46] Certainly not me. I doubt if it's you. You may tonight want to put up your hand and nominate yourself. You may theoretically be the best person in London tonight.

You could be the best person in the UK. You could be the best person of the six whatever billion people it is on this planet. So what?

What does the tax collector do? He doesn't measure his performance as the Pharisee or say, at least I'm not like that hypocrite. What the tax collector does is he measures himself in relation to God.

And when you measure yourself in relation to God, when you do that, your only comeback is have mercy on me, the sinner. And that is why it's such a clean confession.

There's no but hanging over this confession, is there? There's no sorry but I'm working harder.

[18 : 52] So I can get my kids into a good school. There's no I'm sorry but hey God I do lots of good. There's no sorry but you don't understand how bad my marriage is.

What you see is he lines himself up against God's perfect standards. And your only comeback is to cringe and say have mercy on me, the sinner.

You see the Bible is very very tough isn't it? But it's also very very kind. The Bible won't pretend with you.

But it will come. And it will envelop you with so much mercy. But you have to understand the bad news before you can get to the good news.

That's just the way it is. If we measure our kind of sins and rebellions against God. Let's try and do that.

[19 : 58] Let's try and do it in monetary form for a minute. I think that's sometimes helpful. So imagine if God would say to you. In fact one of the Lord's prayers is forgive us our debts. We say sins in the mornings but forgive us our debts.

Because sin is a debt. And let's say our rebellion has incurred a debt towards God. So it's not a bad example to use. If I were to value your rebellion against God and my rebellion.

In monetary terms. Let's say by this stage in your life you have accrued a debt of £50,000. Well you've got a lifetime to pay it off.

And you think I can do it. It's a manageable challenge. If I was to say to you. Actually the debt you've accrued before God is £200,000. Well it's going a little bit serious.

But you can do that. Remortgage the house. Sell the car. Sell the kids. You can't pay that off. You can't pay that off. Now if God would say to you.

[21 : 01] The debt you've incurred tonight is closer to £500,000,000. When you come back to that. You are not going to pay £1.25 back to God are you?

And hope he's going to be satisfied. Your only comeback when you realise the problem of that order. Your only comeback is to do exactly what the tax collector did.

And say have mercy on me the sinner. The tax collector here has done what God expects everyone else to do. It doesn't matter what story that you come up with.

It doesn't matter what story you come from. It's actually essentially you have to give up. It's funny isn't it?

The way to go forward in the Christian life is to begin by giving up. We've used the illustration of that maze. You go round and round the maze.

[22 : 10] And there's this maze where there's a door as you go round it which says for the elderly and the disabled. A way out. And as you go round the maze the only way you can get out of that maze is through that door.

For you to realise that you are either elderly or disabled. And the only way for you to get on in the Christian life and to go forward in the Christian life is to realise you are elderly and disabled.

And you need to give up. To give up. To give up on ever thinking that your good works will purchase your place in God's heaven. The tax collector sees things.

And then tells Jesus how he sees things as the judge of the universe. Which is what he's been appointed by his father to do.

And he now issues the verdict at the end of the story. And here is the shark. Do you see the shark? In verse 14. I tell you this man. This man. This man. Went down to his house justified in the right with God.

[23 : 18] Rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. But the one who humbles himself will be exalted. So let me tell you that that last sentence.

This man went home to his house justified. Rather than the other. That comes with all the authority of a judge. This horrible tax collector.

Rather than the other one. The Pharisee went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. And he who humbles himself will be exalted. That is such a shocking statement isn't it? He declares the shocking tax collector right with God.

It's saying. It's not saying this man is not perfect.

Jesus knows that what he said is right. But his trust in Jesus. His resting in God's mercy.

[24 : 21] And in God's mercy alone. Is how Jesus declares him justified. His sin. His sin. His sin.

This man is now deemed perfectly forgiven. The Pharisee. He goes home that day. And he remains in his sin. And he is cut off from God. You see this.

The Pharisee. Wanted from God. What he thought he deserved. And he got it. It's rejection. And the tax collector.

Is asking from God. What he knows. He doesn't deserve. And he got it. Mercy. And so here's the question.

I want to leave you with tonight. What do you want from God? Because the Pharisee. Wanted from God. What he thought he deserved. And he got it. Rejection.

[25 : 23] And the tax collector. Is asking from God. What he knows. He doesn't deserve. And yet he got it. Because whatever you want.

You're going to get. If you want. What you think you deserve. You're going to get it. But are you sure you want it? Because the Pharisee.

Thought he wanted. What he deserved to get. And he got rejection. Rejection. And the tax collector. Wanted from God. What he didn't deserve. And is that what you want? Because you will get it. Because you will get it. A number of years ago. There were missionaries. From our church. That went to Afghanistan. Some of you here tonight.

And one of their colleagues. And their team. Gail Williams. Was gunned down. On her way to work. In Afghanistan. And the family. From our church. With their three girls. Had to leave. And they stayed in India.

[26 : 21] For some time. And then remarkably. Much to our amazement. They went back. To Afghanistan. And their eldest daughter. Was approaching. Secondary school. And they applied. For Twyford C of E school.

From Afghanistan. It's always massively. Oversubscribed. Emily was number 45. On the waiting list. Which means. She had no hope. The family was in Afghanistan.

So I was packed off. To go to the appeal. I put on a tie. And it's a pretty terrifying thing. If you ever have to go to an appeal. In Twyford. It's set up like a courtroom. You stand on one side of the room. And you were asked.

To give evidence. And then. Somebody speaks on. Why Emily shouldn't get in the appeal. So you're supposed to go in. And spell out the reasons. Why you. Why the girl. Has not been given a place. And then you lay out the evidence.

And you say. I want you to change your mind. And so I went in. And so I went in. And they asked me. Do you have any evidence to give. I told the story. And they said. That wasn't really evidence.

[27 : 17] And they said. Do you have any other reason. Why we should change your mind. Why we should change your mind. And I said. No. The man said. Why are you here then? And I said. To ask for mercy.

And I knew. And they knew. There was no reason. Why that girl. Should have been led into that school. But what I'm asking for is mercy. And they showed mercy. And I'm here to tell you tonight.

That the reason. That this church exists. Is because God is dying. To offer you mercy. God's son died.

To make that mercy possible. When Jesus died on that cross. His hands weren't simply stretched out. Because of the nails. That kept him there.

Out to welcoming mercy. And so please. Please don't be like the Pharisee. He thought in the end. He could pay his own way.

[28 : 20] Do you remember how the parable began? He trusted. In himself. It comes down to this. Don't wait. Don't wait. Don't wait. Don't wait.

Don't wait. Don't wait for the day of judgment. When that day comes. I hope you don't see the day of judgment. As a negative thing.

As a purely negative thing. The day of judgment. Makes every decision in your life significant. You take the day of judgment. Out of history. Out of the universe. And every decision you make.

Is completely and utterly meaningless. The day of judgment. Makes every decision. Everything in your life meaningful. It's that day. That makes you significant. And every choice.

You make. Is significant. And you are very important to God. What you do. Is a big deal. And what God is saying to you tonight. Is don't wait. For the day of judgment.

[29 : 16] To discover. That you are not good enough. No matter how good you are. And I am sure tonight. That you are better than the average person. But don't make the mistake. Of thinking. I'm a good person.

Relatively speaking. I'm good enough for God. Why don't you ask for mercy? Because he really is dying. To offer you mercy.

And so here's the challenge. What do you want from God? Because you are going to get. What you want. But are you sure you want it? Mercy.

For what you deserve. The famous. Anglican divine. Called Thomas Hucker. Thomas Hucker.

On his deathbed. Just before he died. A friend came up to him. And came up to him. Thomas Hucker was a very impressive man. He'd walked with God. For many years. And his friend. Comes up to him. Thomas.

[30 : 18] I want you to know. You are going to receive. The reward. Of your labors. You are going to get. What you deserved. But quick as a flash.

Thomas Hucker said. No I'm not. I'm going to receive mercy. To some of those. To some of those. To some of those. To some of those. To some of those. To some of those. To some of those.