

17371Lift Up Your Hearts, Pt. 5
WIJD: What Is Jesus Doing?
Ephesians 1:

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My theologian pal Gary Deddo wants to start a new trend. He wants to market a new rubber bracelet, or leather if you prefer. Dangling beads would be optional. But each wristband would say, WIJD? *What Is Jesus Doing?* For Deddo that's a question much more potent than asking what Jesus *would* do. It's also a question whose answer leads to considerably more power in our lives than gutting it out trying to imitate our perfect master. WIJD. What is Jesus doing? What's he doing right now? After his ascension, the Apostles' Creed tells us that Jesus sits at the right hand of his Father. But what does that mean? Is he just chillaxing? Occasionally asking his Dad to pass the remote? Taking a sleepy peek at things down here now and again?

Actually what Jesus is doing right now is extraordinary. And of highest importance to our daily lives. I thought it might be interesting to consider what Jesus is up to in terms of answering three essential questions. We all ask these questions all the time. Though we seldom know we're even thinking about them. We don't usually voice them. But the truth is, they dominant our lives. Let's lift these questions out into the light today.

1) Am I acceptable? You may never say it that way, but you and I are asking that question a thousand times a day. Every time you check yourself in the mirror, you're asking, "Do I look OK?" We want to be sure our hair, or what's left of it, is in place. We want to know if we've got spinach between our teeth or something hanging from our nose. We want to know if we look as tired and stressed as we feel, and if how we look is going to lead to a lot of nosy questions. This is the question we ask every time we watch the faces of people with whom we're talking. You tell a story and watch to see if people are getting bored, or if they realize how weird you are, or if they think you fit in with them. We want to know if our work is OK, if the boss thinks we're doing a good job, or at least doing a job good enough to stay employed. Am I acceptable?

We think about that on a deeper level in our friendships and our loves. Do my children ever want to be with me? Does my spouse still find me attractive? Are

my parents proud of me? Will anyone ever look at me again as someone to be desired?

And we wonder about God. Is he keeping count? Is he finding out every fault? Are there naughty and nice lists? And if so, which one am I on? Is he ready to hurl thunderbolts at me? Or will he say to me, “Well done, good and faithful servant”? Am I going to face judgment or welcome at heaven’s gate? Is he sorry he made me? Am I acceptable to God?

Of course if we get it right about God, all the others fall into place. Were you ever in love? Can you remember finding out that the one you loved also loved you? You walked around with a silly grin on your face and you didn’t care who saw you. You didn’t care if you forgot a class or got fired from a job. She loves me, and that’s all that matters. That’s the whole world. As James Taylor sang, “No one can tell me that I’m doing wrong today, whenever I see you smile my way.”

So here’s the truth. What is Jesus doing now? He is at the Father’s right hand speaking your acceptance in him. Ephesians 1: 6 declares that we are “accepted in the beloved.” We are favored with the Father by being included in the person and work of his Son. As long as the Father accepts his Son, we are acceptable to God, because we are included in Jesus.

Let’s put that another way. Jesus stands *surety* for us. He co-signed the note of our lives. His life and work guarantees the acceptability of our life and work. I Peter 1 tells us what we have because of what Christ has done. Peter declares that we have been “born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

In myself, I am nothing. My rightness is but a filthy rag. My faithfulness no better than a wandering sheep. But in Christ, I am the beloved. I am enfolded into the full atonement he made for all my sins. I am accepted in my beloved Jesus Christ. So Paul says, “The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2: 20).

What is Jesus doing now? Pleading the merits of his blood on my behalf. As Charles Wesley wrote, “Before the throne my surety stands. My name is written on his hands.” My acceptance is as sure as Jesus’ place at the Father’s right hand. My beloved pleads my case and in him I am continually accepted. He takes me with him to his Father’s presence.

2) Am I out of control? Once again, I may not ask that question out right. But I am trying to answer it all the time. I don't like to be out of control. I want to know where the next meal is coming from. I want to know where the next bathroom is. I want to know I can get out of here and get into fresh air and open spaces. I want to know that no one is about to pick me up and take me some place I don't want to go. I want to be in control of all these daily situations.

And I want to be in control of myself. I know what happened when that girl in kindergarten dropped my army man into the abyss of the huge tub of blocks. He was lost and I screamed out. That brought down judgement swift and sure. Not upon the silly girl for losing my army man. But upon me for failing to have self-control. Scolding and shame followed. I'm not going there again. No unsightly demonstrations of emotions. Nothing to get me toted off to the Behavioral Health Unit. And by the way, was there ever a more terrifying name for a place than that?

But of course, the truth is I am in control of nothing. The aneurism might explode while I'm finishing this sentence. Another car may plow into me on the way home. Someone might kidnap me. And, sooner or later, I am going to have to fly on an airplane again.

Speaking of planes, the week before last I was back in row 28 with the other plebeians who don't get upgrades. Of course the mother with a toddler was in the row across from me. He was old enough to express his feelings quite clearly. He was young enough not to care what other people thought about him. And he was not happy. "No!" he cried into his mother's arms. "No, no, no, noooooo." I checked to be sure no physical harm was coming to him. And then considered if some should be applied. His mother patiently held him. He cried and cried. His complaints reached me through my headphones. There was nothing I could do to get out of there. So it came to me that perhaps I should join his lament.

Not verbally. But emotionally. What if this little chap was giving voice to the suffering in the world? What if he was one of those about whom Jesus spoke, "Blessed are those who mourn." *No, no, no, noooooo*. This is not right. This is not the way it's supposed to be. As I listened, I let him voice my sadness. Suddenly I was four and hearing the news of my grandfather's death. I was 10 and my dog, my lifelong companion was making his last trip to the vet. *No, no, nooooo*. My own parents were passing. My children were suffering. *No. Please, no*. The world is broken and all around us the ravages of evil are crushing the littlest and the frailest. *No*. His cries gave voice to the sorrow of being helpless before all this pain and all

this death. He would not be silenced and everything I usually stuff rose cathartically through me. Straight into the ears of the one who alone is in control.

Our passage from Philippians 3 last week reminded us that Jesus will transform our lowly bodies, our frail, fading, fragile lives, to be like his glorious body. He will do this, Paul says, “By the power that enable him even to subject all things to himself.”

What is Jesus doing now? He is reigning over all things, holding the universe together, preparing a place for us and weaving together the events of the world to lead to what Acts 3: 21 says will be “the restoration of all things.”

John Calvin is too often thought of as a cold and forbidding theologian. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Calvin was a warm hearted, albeit serious, pastor, who knew by experience the spiritual struggles we all face. I’d like to highlight an excerpt from one of Calvin’s sermons that was in your Lenten guide this week:

Thus, since [Jesus] has gone up there, and is in heaven for us, let us note that we need not fear to be in this world.

It is true that we are subject to so much misery that our condition is pitiable, but at that we need neither be astonished nor confine our attention to ourselves.

Thus, we look to our Head Who is already in heaven, and say,
Although I am weak, there is Jesus Christ Who is powerful enough to make me stand upright.

Although I am feeble, there is Jesus Christ who is my strength.

Although I am full of miseries, Jesus Christ is in immortal glory and what He has will some time be given to me and I shall partake of all His benefits.

Yes, the devil is called the prince of this world.

But what of it? Jesus Christ holds him in check; for He is King of heaven and earth.

There are devils above us in the air who make war against us. But what of it? Jesus Christ rules above, having entire control of the battle.

Thus, we need not doubt that He gives us the victory.

I am here subject to many changes, which may cause me to lose courage.

But what of it? The Son of God is my Head, Who is exempt from all change. I must, then, take confidence in Him.”

This is how we must look at [Jesus'] Ascension, applying the benefit to ourselves. (John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, pp. 238-9).

Jesus right now reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords. He is in control.

3) Will everything be all right? Are things going to be OK? Will I get through this? Will the good finally triumph over the evil? In my life and in the world? Once more, this is an unspoken question that permeates our daily life. As living creatures, we instinctively strive for balance, order, safety, health and comfort. Of course we do. Our bodies possess a will to live. And we have the capacity to love. We want things to be OK for those in our care. We have the capacity to consider the future. So we plan for the future. We strive to look ahead and make things OK over the long term. It's what we do. And precisely for those good reasons, we worry.

Now like me, my dog seeks her immediate comfort. She wants to be in balance. But unlike me, she does not worry about when she will get sick and what her death will be like. She worries if she senses tension in the room, but she does not contemplate the future of relationships and what trouble might lie ahead. She cares for the people in her home, but she has no sense of the wider world. It is uniquely human to ask not only, "Will I be all right?" but "Will the whole world be all right?"

The answer of course is both Yes and No. When Dr. Mike Hackler was diagnosed with mesothelioma, the church poured out prayers for him. Dr. Mike faced his decline with peace. He was famous for saying to those who visited him, "You know, you're not getting out of here alive either!" Indeed, on one very obvious level, things are not going to be all right. We will age. We will decline. We will die. No exceptions. We will lose our power, our voice and our place in the world. Things like that are not going to be all right. And the circumstances I'd like to have may not come to pass. Being a Christian is no guarantee of experiencing blessings the way we want them. In fact, such "prosperity" teaching is one of the most dangerous heresies in the church today. Scripture promises us suffering. Scripture promises us a worldly demise. Scripture promises the struggle with the apparent futility of life in a fallen, mortal world.

Just before his arrest, Jesus predicted that Simon Peter would deny him. Peter boldly proclaimed that he would stick with Jesus to death. But Jesus explained, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when

you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22: 31-32). The evil one seemed particularly to hate the big fisherman with his bold affirmations that Jesus is the Son of God. He wanted to shred him. But interposed between Satan’s evil intent and Simon Peter’s weak flesh were Jesus’ prayers. Satan wants to sift you like wheat. *But I have prayed for you.* When life comes unspooling wildly into chaos, Jesus drops down a stay: *But I have prayed for you.* His prayers put a pause into the shredding. His prayers put a stop to the unravelling. *But I have prayed for you.* Jesus’ prayers intercept evil intent.

But notice Christ’s next words. “When you have turned again...” Jesus’ prayers don’t stop Peter from being tempted. Jesus’ prayers don’t keep Peter from making his free choice to deny Jesus. Peter feels his heart broken and his soul shredded when the rooster crows and he knows he has disowned his Lord. Satan still monkeys with us. But he does not get the last word. *I have prayed for you.* You will fall. But not forever. You will turn to me again when you come to yourself. You will regain your trust in me. Everything will not be all right for a while. But it then it will be all right. You will come back around.

And for a purpose. Watch this! Jesus does not say, “When you have turned again, go home, get a cold drink and watch the game, secure in a comfortable life.” He says, “When you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” You have work to do. I pray for you. Not so things won’t be hard. They will be. I pray for you, not so you can get through hard times and live for yourself. I pray for you so that you can go through rending, shredding failure and come out working for my mission in the world. In that way, you will know that everything is all right. And everything will be all right.

What is Jesus’ doing now? Romans 8 and Hebrews 7 both affirm that Jesus is praying for us. Right now, he is interposing his prayers against the evil and chaos in your life. Right now, Jesus’ prayers intercept the evil one’s schemes. Jesus assures you that he will make you what he wants you to be. I cannot promise you that life will work out to eliminate discomfort, sorrow, failure or illness from your life. Those things will come. But I can stake my life on this truth: Jesus prays for you. He will not let you fall outside his care or his purpose. He stands surety for you at the Father’s right hand. He promises your eternal acceptance in him. And he reigns over all. The cosmos will work out as he intended. What is Jesus doing now? Only that which guarantees that joined to him by faith, you are acceptable and all is, profoundly, truly, well.