

## **What Does It Take For God to Accept Me?** (Luke 23:32-43)

Asking for a Friend Summer Sermon Series

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Today we continue our series about “Asking for a Friend,” where we are dealing with some heavy-hitting questions that perhaps we’ve heard our friends ask – or maybe that we even ask ourselves. Earlier this month Melissa kicked things off by focusing on the Trinity: What it is and why it’s important. Next week I’ll deal with a question that may get me into trouble: “Does everything really happen for a reason?” And on July 2 we’ll focus on the idea of, “Will God bless me if I live a good life?”

But today we’re going to talk about this: “What does it take for God to accept me?” Or to say it a bit differently, “Do I have to have my life ‘together’ before God will accept me?”

I do want to provide you with a few passages of scripture that focus on answering this question, but I just won’t have time to include in the sermon today. They’re up on the screen and I encourage you to investigate them further...

- Micah 6:8
- Matthew 19:16-22
- John 6:28-29

For some of us, we haven’t considered the question of whether or not God accepts us for a long, long time. I’m painting with a very broad brush, but for those of us who have been Christians and been a part of church for years and years, we tend to fall into the rut of taking God’s acceptance for granted. “Of course God accepts me,” is what many of you may be thinking right now.

But for others of us, this is a really big and a really important question – especially if you’re kind of new to the Christian faith, or for those of us who have made some poor choices and decisions in our lives that we regret. Sometimes when we’re in those situations, it seems nearly impossible that the God of the universe would accept me, knowing all the dark and bad stuff that I carry around deep inside me that I try to keep hidden.

And on that note, I want to make an important point that’s not really the main point of this message. When we think about people who are new to the faith, or who are outside the church walls, or who simply walk into this building to check it out for the first time... Even if none of us think about it consciously, one of the biggest things they’re hoping for – often yearning for – is to be accepted for who they really are. (And quite honestly, that’s something we all desire deeply, even if we don’t realize it.) And for those folks, whom God loves just as much as he

loves you and me, the way we – as Jesus’s church – accept them or don’t accept, they equate with whether or not God accepts them or doesn’t accept them. I’ll try to say that a little bit better: When we, as God’s church, accept people as they really are, then we are a living example to them that God accepts them as they are.

Now, I’m not going to get sidetracked this morning on the differences between God’s “acceptance” and God’s “approval.” Because there is a difference. This morning we’re going to be focused on God accepting us – ALL of us – as we are.

So, what does it take for God to accept you, and for God to accept me? When I wrestle with questions like this, I first turn to what Jesus said or did that relates to the topic.

The passage that was read earlier in the service is the first thing that came to my mind. Jesus, who is hanging on the cross and paying for the sinfulness of all of humanity, has a brief conversation with two men hanging on each side of him. Both of them were sinners, thieves. I’m taking some liberties here, but I imagine they weren’t the kind of men who showed up to worship at the synagogue every Sabbath. They probably weren’t involved in a Bible study group. More than likely, they were the kind of people that we would judge in a very negative way before we even spoke to them. And their sins, their poor choices, had finally caught up with them. So they were sentenced to death on the cross.

It’s fascinating to me how they both found themselves in the exact same situation, and yet each responded incredibly differently. They both seemed to know – without question – that Jesus was someone special... someone who had the power to save them and give new life. But they each acted on that knowledge very differently.

We hear from the unrepentant thief first in verse 39:

- 39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him (Jesus) and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

This man knew he needed help, but his approach to getting the help he needed missed the mark. The word “deriding” in this verse could also be translated as “blaspheming,” which really means that even though he spoke words asking to be saved, his heart was still opposed to God and drawing near to God.

But then the second man speaks up, who is also a thief and also condemned to death...

- 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.”

This second man gives us a glimpse into what it really does take for God to accept us. He uses the phrase “fear God.” This phrase is found often throughout the Bible – it’s mentioned more

than 300 times – and it can be a strange saying for us to get our minds around. When we hear the word “fear,” we begin to think of being afraid... maybe even being punished or being hurt – it’s a very negative word.

In scripture, this idea of “fear God” is much richer, much fuller. There is a healthy amount of reverence and respect for who God is. But instead of cowering in terror, it’s more about realizing that God is God – a god worthy of reverence and respect – and I’m not god, not even close. That I should strive to honor and live for God because that’s how God created me to exist. And this is the difference we see in the two thieves hanging next to Jesus. One is begging to be saved, but he doesn’t truly fear, or respect, or honor God. But the other man does truly fear God, which leads to a humble spirit... an attitude that Jesus can work with. And that leads to these hard-to-believe words from Jesus himself to the second man:

- 43 He (Jesus) replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

So perhaps the fact that the second thief “feared God” – or to say it a different way, he accepted God for who God truly is. And when did that, he was accepted by God himself.

In the last few days I’ve thought a lot about the things in our lives that sometimes get in the way of us “fearing God.” The things that lead us to respond to Jesus more like the first thief, instead of the second thief...

1. I thought of those of us who have pasts that we’re ashamed of... those of us that carry around a lot of guilt and regret. Sometimes we think we’re just too far gone and there’s no point to “fear God” now or in the future.
2. For many of us as teenagers, there’s just something about finding our own way and proving ourselves that can make it hard to “fear God” in the right way. And beyond our teenage years, really this applies to any of us who find ourselves in a “rebellious stage.”
3. For those of us who have been hurt by others, who have been victimized. We tend to have a very hard time honoring and fearing God... to really trust that God is for us and with us.
4. For those of us who have accomplished a lot and achieved success in life... why should we “fear God” when we’ve got it all figured out on our own?

Does this story of Jesus and the two thieves help answer the question of “What does it take for God to accept us?” I hope it does for you.

For me, it also reminds me of a theological term that I’ve never heard talked about in church before. I was introduced to it in seminary, but have never heard it mentioned since then. It’s a theological belief that was first introduced in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries by early church leaders like Augustine of Hippo and St. Ambrose. Perhaps more familiar to us, and definitely much closer to our time period, it was talked about by John Wesley – the father of the Methodist Church movement in the 1700s.

The theological belief I'm referring to is called "Prevenient Grace... or what also can be referred to as "preceding grace."

- Latin: gratia praeveniens - means "grace that precedes"

It's this foundational belief that God is at work in our lives before we ever discover salvation... before we turn to God... before we ever make Jesus the savior and leader of our lives. It's about the Holy Spirit being involved in our lives, drawing ourselves to God and giving us opportunities to respond to God's grace BEFORE we actually do respond.

So if we go back to the story of the two thieves on the cross, and apply this concept of Prevenient Grace to that situation, it means that God was at work in the lives of those two men before they were placed feet away from the very one who could save them. One of them missed the chance to accept that grace, and one of them humbly accepted it.

To wrap all of this up, I come back to our original question for the day: "What does it take for God to accept you?" The great news is that Jesus showed us again and again that God accepts us as we are. He welcomes us with open arms...

- Just like the prodigal son who squandered everything he had on food, drink, and women before he realized he was missing what was most important.
- Just like the woman caught in adultery who everyone in her community wanted to stone to death – except for Jesus, who stood up for her and showed her the path to a better life.
- Just like the second thief who hung on the cross next to Jesus, who "feared God" in the sense that he knew that Jesus, God's son, had the authority to provide him with what he really needed. And that wasn't erasing his criminal record or the punishment for his crimes – but it was something much more significant in the grand scheme of life.

There are two foundational truths I want to make sure you hear today:

First, you don't have to "clean your life up" in order for God to accept you. God accepts us when we accept God for who God truly is... when we "fear God." And when we turn to God and begin following Jesus the best we can, then our lives begin to make sense, and have purpose, and become all that we hoped for.

Second, God's prevenient grace is already at work in your life, even if you haven't made the decision to follow Jesus yet. That's how much God loves you; God isn't waiting for you to turn to him first. Instead, he's already turning toward you and moving toward you.