

Unlikely Candidates: Never Too Late

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning and welcome here for the Sunday, September 25th, 2022. My name is Kent Dixon. I'm the lead pastor here and welcome whether you're here in person today or whether you're listening on the phone or whether you're listening on the podcast or on the website.

We've got people tuning in in lots of ways and that is fantastic. And God is at work in different ways and that's awesome. So last week we began a sermon series, a new series called Unlikely Candidates.

Over the next several weeks we're going to be taking a closer look at some specific people from the Bible. Some that may be familiar and others that may not. And we're going to consider how God may have chosen them and recognize that.

How he worked in and through them. And what we can personally learn from their stories. How we can apply those things into our lives. And my hope is that this will be an enlightening and encouraging journey for all of us.

So in our introduction last week we considered the qualities of unlikely candidates. And I'm just going to highlight that for us again. We recognize that they may be relatively unremarkable in some ways.

[1 : 1 7] Unlikely candidates are also often people who recognize their need for a savior.

They recognize that they need to be redeemed. Need to be rescued from their circumstances. Unlikely candidates are also, we talked about last week, not boastful.

They don't seek the spotlight. They don't crave attention. The praise of other people. And ultimately they may even intentionally reflect that attention back to God.

So then another thing we recognized last week is that unlikely candidates have no special qualifications. Right? We talked about that.

God does not call the equipped. He equips the called as that saying goes. And God promises in his word that he will equip us with whatever we need to carry out the divine purpose to which he has called us.

[2 : 3 9] He will show up and provide and make a way when we step up, when we step forward. So this morning I'm going to explore something here off the top.

There's a famous work by painter James Tissot. And it is called, this is zoomed in a bit, but it is called View from the Cross.

It's also sometimes called What Our Lord Saw from the Cross. And that's what's up on the screen now. Tissot traveled to the Middle East in 1885, 1889, 1896 to further his knowledge of the landscape, of the architecture, of the clothing, of the habits of the people.

So that he could illustrate more faithfully the New Testament context. And that project, that research that Tissot did, resulted in 350 individual works that were shown for the first time in Paris in 1894.

And all of them are now in possession of the Brooklyn Museum in New York. So this painting, View from the Cross, has become very personal to me.

- [4 : 02] And I had never seen it before until we studied it in one of my seminary classes about six years ago. Our prof passed out a glossy print of it to each of us.
- And then we talked about it. We studied it together. It gives us this deeply moving image. And honestly, this does not do it justice.
- Google it when you get home, and even that will not do it justice. I want to find a large print of it at some point and have it. But this is likely a fairly faithful depiction of what Jesus would have seen as he hung from the cross.
- The people gathered around, the landscape, the context, the clothing, as I said. And if you remember all the stories that you've heard of the crucifixion story, you can probably identify, you know, there's a centurion.
- There's Mary and some of the other women at the foot of the cross looking up. There are the chief priests and Pharisees off to the side looking quite happy with what they've accomplished.
- [5 : 09] There are folks off in the background. You may have some thoughts about who those folks may be. But we may recognize as well that on that day when Jesus was crucified, he wasn't crucified alone.
- Right? And our sermon this morning is titled, Never Too Late. So the song choices that Vernon and Kathy made, again, just beautifully aligned.
- So this unlikely candidate may be familiar to you. And yet we know very little about him. And I'm going to share a few different verses, a few different passages from the gospel accounts.
- So the accounts in Matthew and Mark are quite similar. But the account from the gospel of Luke adds some additional insight. And so, as you imagine, the setting of our sermon this morning is the crucifixion of Jesus.
- So looking at Matthew chapter 27, verses 38 to 44, if you want to turn, I will also read it for us. It says, Two rebels, some translations say robbers, were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.
- [6 : 32] Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, You are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days. Save yourself. Come down from the cross if you are the son of God.
- In the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him. He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself. He's the king of Israel.
- Let him come down now from the cross. And we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him. For he said, I am the son of God.
- In the same way, the rebels, or robbers, who were crucified with him, also heaped insults on him. The different context from Luke 23, verses 32 to 43 says, Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.
- When they came to the place called the skull, they crucified him there along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
- [7 : 47] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, he saved others, let him save himself.
- If he is God's Messiah, the chosen one. The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.
- There was a written notice above him which read, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him.

Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us. But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said. Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve.

But this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[8 : 53] And Jesus answered him, Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. Our unlikely candidate this morning is never referred to by name in the Bible.

Not anywhere. We don't know if he was married or he had children. We don't know how old he was. Obviously he chose to become a criminal at some point.

But what did he do before that? Where was he from? We can assume he was deemed to be guilty of some sort of crime or offense. Some translation refer to him as a robber or a rebel even, some others say.

So we can assume he may have had a trial of some kind. That he was found guilty. He was sentenced then to the most horrific death, the most horrific punishment of his or any time.

Crucifixion. And I believe, honestly, that we tend to gloss over these two men next to Jesus. On either side. These two men who were crucified with him.

[10 : 08] So why is that? Why do we do that? Well, likely because Jesus is the focus of this story. And that's a good thing. Rightfully so.

He is the focus. But perhaps we're uncomfortable with considering that our Lord, our Savior, the Son of God, was executed in the same degrading and horrific manner as these two men who were actually convicted criminals.

Makes us squirm a little, I think. Or maybe we have some sense of personal conviction or guilt when we consider some questions here.

If we had been there, if we had been one of the people in the background, would we have been standing at Jesus' feet at that place?

Would we have been declaring him as the Son of God? That was a pretty small crowd at the base of that cross. Would we have snuck away and blended into the crowd like those who had once followed him?

[11 : 13] Once called him Rabbi? Or would we have been shouting, crucify him? Along with the mob.

We read this morning, we read this morning, that both of these criminals initially hurled insults at him. Right? That's what it says in Matthew. Both of them hurled insults.

But then in Luke, there's a different sense there. That one of them ultimately relented and repented. So what can we learn from him?

What can we learn from this unlikely candidate, a man who is literally at death's door? Well, first, he recognized and declared what others denied and even condemned outright.

As this man hung on his own cross, likely overcome with pain, overcome with exhaustion and despair, there's no appealing crucifixion, right?

[12 : 23] It is a final sentence. But he still repented of his sin. He recognized his need for a Savior. He was on full display in front of an angry crowd that wanted Jesus dead.

And yet he recognized him as the Son of God. He declared his allegiance to him in that moment. Second, this condemned man during his final hours when he could have easily been reflecting on or overcome with his own pain, his own condemnation, his own guilt and unworthiness, he became focused on Jesus.

So perhaps we may be cynical about this moment of repentance. Does that apply to you? Do you think about, well, of course he repented. What did he have to lose?

I mean, he was going to die regardless. Jesus is the Son of God or he's not. Take the chance. What choice do you have, right? I hope that's not your perspective.

I believe what we witness in this man's story is the saving grace of God. A grace that reached down to a man who had lived a hard and brutal life.

[13 : 51] A man who recognized the Son of God at the 11th hour and by God's grace, it is never too late.

I've always been moved by the fact that Jesus, even in his own agony and torment of crucifixion, remember, friends, he was human, granted forgiveness.

He extended grace that his own pending sacrifice would fulfill. Isn't that awesome?

Third, this man put his life, put his circumstances, put his eternal destiny into God's hands without question.

conversion. This story includes a powerful experience of conversion as this criminal who was united with his colleague on the other side in mocking Jesus came to recognize him as the Son of God.

[15 : 04] He came to repent and seek forgiveness. Can you recognize here that there is no one who witnessed to this man? No one.

No one stood there and said, this is Jesus, by the way, so you should really, no one did that. There was no sermon. Jesus didn't stop and say, well, in closing, I'd like to say the following.

He did not say that. And yet, God changed this man and changed his heart. The saving power of the cross was already at work.

So perhaps it was Jesus' example that spoke to him as he watched Jesus carry his own cross down that road without complaining, without cursing at the people who had condemned him.

Maybe it was Jesus' plea to his Father to forgive those who had condemned and cursed him. Maybe that was the moment that changed this man.

[16 : 09] I also find it moving that not only did the man recognize and call upon Jesus as his Savior, he also rebuked the other criminal.

Rebuked him for his behavior, for his condemnation, for his cursing of Jesus. He asserted Jesus' innocence. In contrast with his own guilt.

But whatever it was, maybe it was one of those things. Maybe it was a combination and maybe it was none. Whatever it was that changed that man's heart, the decision he made in that moment changed his eternal destiny.

My friends, our unlikely candidate this morning powerfully demonstrates for us that it is never too late to turn, to return to Jesus as your Lord and to surrender to him.

Lots of us feel like we're getting older. Maybe we feel like we're running out of time or time is short. But it's never too late. It's never too late to rededicate your life to Jesus.

[17 : 22] To reach out to God and say, use me. Use me according to your will and I will obey. Friends, there is no time like the present to seek God's forgiveness and his will and his plan for your life.

As 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 2 so powerfully reminds us, now is the time of God's favor. now is the day of salvation.

Amen.