

Acceptance is received not earned

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome if you're visiting this morning. See my cousin Mike and Heidi, welcome. And John Lill from Sydney, friends from college, welcome.

Anyone else who's visiting, yeah, you're more than welcome with us and hope you stick around for a cuppa afterwards. Why don't we pray before we get into God's Word?

Would you pray with me? Our Father, we ask that you would speak to us this morning each one of us needs to hear you.

We know that we don't live on bread alone but on every word that comes from you. We need you, God, to live. Lord, please speak to each one of us. God, I pray that you would speak into our hearts just how much we are safe in you.

In Jesus' name I pray, amen. Amen. Well, on what grounds are you acceptable to God? If you already believe in Jesus, you'll be thinking, God's grace makes me acceptable.

[1 : 09] That's why we've got grace in our very church name, Grace Evangelical, for this reason. We hear the words grace and mercy and love in our songs, in our prayers, in our children's talks.

The idea of grace is everywhere. We talk about it a lot, don't we? And that's excellent, so we should. On the grounds of God's grace, through faith in Jesus, I am acceptable to God.

That is incredible. Such good news. But what does our society say? On what grounds are you acceptable at school, at uni, at work?

How are you acceptable in your social interactions? It's not grace, is it? It's your own merit, I think. Merit is about what you bring to the table. What value do you have to offer that someone should recognise it and should welcome you for it?

[2 : 15] What do you bring to the table? Do you have enough money? Are you wearing the right clothes with the right brand names? Are you funny?

Is your body acceptable? Are you skilled enough? Are you knowledgeable enough? Have you got enough marks at uni and school?

Have you secured a respectable job? Are you performing in that job? Are your kids thriving in school? Are you achieving in every area of your life? Career and fitness and family, socially, romantically, sport.

It's a lot of pressure, isn't it? The grounds of acceptance in our society is our own merit. It's the air we breathe every day, isn't it?

Now, I think we have a love-hate relationship with merit. We hate it because it makes us live in fear, doesn't it?

[3 : 21] Because either I fail to meet the standards and I feel inadequate and I feel ashamed, or I meet the standards and I feel proud and confident for a few moments, but I know that tomorrow I've got to work hard again to make sure I keep up those standards.

We're constantly living in fear. We hate merit because of that. It's hard work. It's a heavy burden.

But we also love merit. We genuinely love it. We love it because if my acceptance is based on what I've earned, I can control it.

I can control the acceptance. I can demand what I've earned. I've worked hard. I deserve this holiday. I deserve it. It's my right. I've worked hard for this money.

I can spend it whenever I want. We want to be able to control it. And think about relationship advice. Isn't most advice about give and take?

[4 : 31] You've got to give and take in a relationship. Isn't that just saying, if I do X, Y, and Z, that person has to do what I want after that? We love merit because we can control our life or we think we can.

So we hate merit because we live in fear, but we love it because we get control. When someone becomes a Christian, there's a fundamental shift from thinking about God and this world and yourself according to merit or lack thereof and a shift to thinking according to what Christ has done on my behalf and given to me freely out of his love.

There's a huge shift that happens. But still, even as Christians, every single day, today, every situation we're in, we have to choose. Am I going to die to this old merit way of thinking or am I going to rest and rejoice in the acceptance God has given me in Christ?

Every situation, we're confronted with that choice. So let me try and explain that a bit more. Jerry Bridges, he explains our day-to-day problem like this.

A Christian believes that when we're originally accepted by God, it's by grace. We know we're sinful. We need God's forgiveness. So we know we start by grace.

[6 : 04] And a Christian also believes that we're going to end by grace, that God will only accept us into the new creation that he's promised by his grace alone. So start and finish, we 100%, we talk about grace, don't we?

But what about in between? What about in our day-to-day Christian walk? Jerry Bridges describes it as like a little mouse running on a treadmill.

And I think we can all resonate with it. So on a good week, when I've read my Bible, when I've gone to church in small group, when I've been kind and not nasty, on a good week, when I haven't given in to those besetting sins, on a good week, when I pray, aren't we confident that God loves us and we're acceptable?

We feel confident. We feel bright. We feel close to him. But what about on a bad week? I haven't read my Bible personally.

I didn't go to small group. I have been nasty on purpose. I did give in to those besetting sins.

[7 : 22] I didn't pray. What happens then? Don't we despair and just feel a massive sense of failure? So what's going on?

One week, we're confident. The other week, we just feel like a failure. And what do we do to try and fix it? We just try harder the next week.

So this is the performance treadmill we're in every single day. God says, through Paul in our passage today, acceptance is received, not earned.

He began the good work in saving us and he will bring it to completion. We don't have to perform. We can't possibly perform to God's standards. But Christ did it for us. We can rest.

[8 : 28] We can rest in that. We can rejoice and have joy in that truth. Every single situation. So, this morning, let's get into our passage.

We're going to hear first about a warning. Don't listen. Don't listen to evil thinking that says God wants you to earn your acceptance.

Don't listen to that thinking. Why? Because we are the people of God who rely and boast in Christ, not in ourselves. And then, Paul offers himself as the ultimate case study in someone who boasts in Christ, not in their own ability.

And he lets us in on his thinking. He first says, humanly speaking, I can claim more merit than anyone. then he shows us it's all worthless.

Zero value. I'd rather belong to Christ and participate in his death and resurrection. And why is that?

[9 : 40] Because God accepts me by giving me righteousness in Christ through faith. And therefore, we can rejoice. We can always have joy.

A deep joy. So, as we put ourselves in the shoes of the Philippian church, we have to remember one important thing.

The early church didn't consider itself as an offshoot from Judaism. The early church thought of themselves as in line with the Old Testament.

Jesus was the promised one, the promised Messiah. He set up the new covenant which the prophets foretold. They were in line with the Old Testament. But this begs the question, where's the place of the Old Covenant law now?

And then enter some passionate Jewish missionaries who are moving around the congregation or preaching in public who are saying, you have to still be circumcised and obey the law.

[10 : 48] God requires this. How would you respond? Seems tricky, doesn't it? Here's how Paul responds in verse 2.

Have a look. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

Can you hear the seriousness that Paul takes this threat, this way of thinking? This is some of the strongest language he uses in all his letters and he repeats the warning three times.

Look out. Be on your guard with this kind of thinking. It is deadly stuff. And to discredit the thinking, he uses irony which is kind of funny and he just dismantles them.

The Jews prided themselves on being so ritually and morally clean that they'll call everyone else dogs, filthy dogs. But no, these law imposing people, they're the dogs, they're the unclean ones in God's eyes.

[11 : 58] These Jews prided themselves on doing only good according to the law. No, God sees them as only doing evil. They're not trusting in Christ. These Jews insisting on circumcision as being the mark of belonging to God's people.

No, you are mutilating the flesh. Don't listen to these people. Don't listen to this type of thinking. So why this strong language? Christians at Philippi, don't listen to this kind of thinking for a second.

Verse 3, for we, Jews and Gentiles, we who trust in Jesus Christ, we are the circumcision. We are God's chosen covenant people.

We serve God not according to external laws. We serve God according to the inwardly empowering Holy Spirit who works in us to want and to do what pleases our Father.

we boast in what Jesus has done for us. We don't put confidence in ourselves. That's who we are.

[13 : 14] That's who God's people are. To help us see and think this way, Paul offers himself as the case study. So let's get into Paul's mind.

But before we do, can I ask you to take a moment and think what merit could you possibly show God that he would approve of you? What merit do you have? Humanly speaking.

Would I show this sermon to God? You're probably thinking that's not a good idea Dave. Don't do that. What would you show?

Would you show your children as evidence of your parenting, of all the sacrifices you've made? would you show your Bible study commitment, your niceness?

Would you show how well you can articulate theological ideas? Would you show all the books you've read? Would you show how much money you've given away?

[14 : 17] Would you show how reliable you are in your work ethic? What would you show God? What merit have you got? What do you think makes you a good person?

I challenge anyone to have more merit than me says Paul humanly speaking. Let's see how we measure up.

Circumcised on the eighth day as the law of Moses required. I too belonged to the covenant people. I wasn't a convert. I'm a descendant. not just any descendant.

My lineage can be traced back to Benjamin, the tribe who remained loyal to King David's line, the tribe who was there who returned from exile. And my upbringing was thoroughly Hebrew in every way.

And then there's my achievements. As to the law, I studied hard and I disciplined my entire life under the laws of Moses and the more careful, stringent laws of the Pharisees.

[15 : 24] And as to zeal, I was 100% loyal and protective of God's original covenant. I was burning with passion. And as to righteousness under the law, I was blameless. I wasn't sinless, but no one could fault me.

That's quite a list, isn't it? How's your merit list looking compared to this guy? If anyone, anyone, could have confidence based on their own merit that God would declare them righteous, this guy was it.

This is the man. But what does he think of all that? But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

When Christ revealed himself to me, I saw what I once measured as gain for what it really was, worthless. All my merit is really just offensive in God's eyes because I'm trying to control God.

King David prays in Psalm 143 verse 2, he prays to God, enter not into judgment with your servant, judgment for no one living is righteous before you.

[16 : 51] No one does what is right. No one can stand on their own merit and God look at the evidence of their life and go, they are good, they are righteous.

No one. David prays for mercy, not justice. And what about those who try and obey the law? We've seen in chapter 2 of Philippians already that Christians are called to stand out as children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

Now that phrase, Paul didn't come up with that phrase, he borrowed it from Moses. Just before Moses died, he wrote a song to teach God's people how to think about God, how to live well before God.

We see it in Deuteronomy 32. What does Moses want to tell Israel before he leaves them? The first thing he says about Israel in this song is they have dealt corruptly with God.

They are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are crooked and twisted. generation. The law never, never gave anyone grounds or ability for someone to earn their acceptance.

[18 : 21] The law only exposed our sin, forcing us to rely on what God gives us, not on our own merit. The law never made anyone righteous.

So what's the better way to think? We see Paul's deepest desire in verses 10 and 11.

Here's how to think. That I may know him, Christ, and the power of his resurrection. When the resurrected Christ revealed himself to Paul, he understood in that moment that to be in relationship with Christ is to be in right relationship with God.

He wanted the acceptance that Christ received from the Father, resurrecting him. He wants that sure acceptance, not the arrogant, self-based, wishful thinking.

He wants that sure acceptance in Christ. He wants it so much. He wants to know Christ so much that he wants fellowship with him, not only in the good times but in sufferings.

[19 : 38] He knows that to belong to Christ, he needs to become like him in his death, that the old self that tries to earn favour with God needs to be put to death. the way we experience the power of the resurrected life requires this putting the old self to death.

He wants to live that new resurrected life in right relationship with God now. He wants to call God Father now. And he wants the full experience of that resurrected life later, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

He's not expressing any doubt here. We see in verse 9 that he knows that God counts him as righteous. He's not expressing doubt. And we see in verses 20 and 21 that the Christian is waiting for that resurrection to happen.

The Christian isn't just wishing for it, they know they're going to get it. So he's not expressing doubt. I think Paul is saying the way or route I'm going to take to get to the resurrection, I'm not sure.

I could die in prison tonight or I go on serving the church, which requires a daily dying. Either way, I'm not sure what's going to happen there, but I want to experience that final resurrection.

[21 : 07] Paul treasures Christ and so he wants more of him. But to do that, he knows that now is the time of sharing in his humble mind of choosing to die in obedience to the Father, in the service of others.

And later on he knows that he's going to experience that final resurrection. That's Paul's goal, the resurrected life.

So what is it exactly that makes us acceptable to God? Let's have a look at verses 8 and 9.

They explain it for us. Paul says, I have suffered the loss of all things. I think he's expressing that this actually hurts.

He has suffered the loss. It's actually losing what he once relied on to give him life. His reputation, his sense of superiority to others, any sense of self-made accomplishments.

[22 : 21] He's had to give all this up. We actually have to give it up and it's going to hurt. But on the other hand, Paul sees all this stuff and he now sees it for what it truly is.

He uses a word that I'm not quite game to say publicly right now. He uses crude language to describe what worth this stuff actually has.

I use the word manure, but it's a worse word than that in Greek. Em and I have just started a compost bin. We're trying to help the planet or something like that.

Less waste, which is really good. It's working. Anyway, this compost bin, every time I lift the lid to put more veggies in, I'm just hit with this powerful stench.

It's disgusting. It's good for the environment, not good for your nostrils. If you lift the lid and have a close look at your merit, it stinks.

[23 : 28] God does not like the smell. It stinks.

Count it for what it truly is. Here's what's actually valuable. Being found in Christ, receiving righteousness from God, receiving it.

Christ. We heard in chapter two, Christ was the obedient one to the Father. Christ was the only one with true and consistent humility.

Christ is the only righteous one. If you want to be righteous, you have to share his righteousness. It's on offer to you. Share it by trusting in Jesus, giving your life to him.

Faith is not a different way to earn merit with God. Faith is not relying on yourself, but relying on Christ and what he's done for you.

[24 : 33] This is the only way to be acceptable with God. That day of God's judgment, when he decides whether you are righteous or evil, deserving of eternal life or eternal death, that judgment has already happened to Jesus.

He was condemned for our evil. Our evil, which in part is us striving for our merit, that was condemned in Christ. When he was raised, we are raised with him, counted righteous with him. That final judgment has already happened when Jesus rose from the dead. You are righteous if you have faith in Christ because of his righteousness.

We share in it. We receive it. Oh, what a relief. If you are entrusting yourself to Christ, heaven has started.

We're waiting for the full thing, of course, but it's already begun. You can call God Father. If you are still trying to earn your way in life and with God, stop living in this fear.

[25 : 59] Stop trying to control your life. Come and rest in Christ. Come and have joy in him. Acceptance with God is received.

It's not earned. So while we are waiting for this final resurrection, how should our right relationship with God affect our thinking?

Let's get inside our minds. Verse 1 tells us what we should do. Rejoice in the Lord. Those who rely on their own merit can never rest, can never have joy because in five minutes time you could stuff it up big time.

But we are in Christ. We will always be in Christ. So in him we can rest and rejoice in our relationship with God.

We have relationship with God now and we know that we're going to be raised. That's a certain hope. We can rejoice in that. That frees us to lay down our lives in obedience to God.

[27 : 14] Not trying to earn it. That's not real obedience. But if we know we're righteous in him we can obey God, delighting to obey God in service of others. And that's going to be painful.

But even in that pain that reminds us that we belong to Christ. And so even in that pain we can rejoice. It's a deep joy.

So what might this look like if we think this way, if we're rejoicing in receiving our acceptance rather than trying to earn it?

Here I'm going to rely on Tim Keller because he really helps to show the difference between an earning merit religious way of thinking and a gospel receiving way of thinking.

So let me just use a few of his words. Merit thinks I obey God, therefore I'm accepted. Gospel thinks I'm accepted, therefore I obey God.

[28 : 22] Merit thinks motivation is based on fear and insecurity. Gospel thinks motivation is based on grateful joy. Merit thinks when I'm criticized, I'm furious and devastated because it is essential for me to think of myself as a good person.

Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs. That's the merit way of thinking. Gospel thinks when I'm criticized, I struggle.

But it's not essential for me to think of myself as a good person. My identity is not built on my performance but on God's love for me in Christ.

Merit thinks my self-view swings between two poles. If and when I'm living up to my standards, I feel confident but then I'm prone to be proud and unsympathetic to people who fail.

If and when I'm not living up to standards, I feel humble but not confident. I feel like a failure. That's the merit way of thinking.

[29 : 38] Gospel thinks my self-view is not based on a view of myself as a moral achiever. In Christ, I am at once sinful and lost, yet accepted.

I am so bad he had to die for me and so loved he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper humility and deeper confidence.

The way of thinking along the lines of merit and gospel, they're completely different, aren't they? Completely different. Our passage is telling us think gospel in everyday life.

So what might this look like? When you're tempted to sin in that same way today as yesterday, or when you're burdened with guilt and shame immediately after sinning in that way, let's be thinking acceptance is received, not earned.

God loves me in Christ as much in this moment of temptation or guilt. He loves me just as much in those moments as he does in every other moment because it doesn't depend on me.

[31 : 05] It depends on Christ. So I can move back into the struggle. When you feel like you're failing as a child, as a parent, when you're failing as a spouse or as a friend or in your job, let's be thinking acceptance is received, not earned.

My main identity is that I am in full and right relationship with God because I belong to Christ. No amount of failure can touch that.

So I can move back into the struggle. When you're weighed down and just restrained by sickness or mental health and you feel like you've got nothing to offer, let's be thinking acceptance is received, not earned.

Christ has shared all of himself, all of his relationship with the Father, all of his plans to restore the world with me, all of it I have received in him so I can have deep joy even while I'm hurting, hurting bad.

I can have deep joy in that and I can move back into the struggle. When we're frantically trying to serve in those ministries, when we're anxiously trying to put on a respectable front as being a good Christian, let's be thinking acceptance is received, not earned.

[32 : 41] I can rest. I can rest in how God sees me because of Christ. So I can move back into the struggle of being genuinely concerned for others.

When someone in the church doesn't meet your standards, perhaps they are clearly not meeting God's standards either. Let's be thinking. Acceptance is received, not earned.

I want them to know they are fully and always loved by God so that they can move back into the struggle.

When we see people in our society openly sinning against God, even proud of the fact, let's be thinking acceptance is received, not earned.

I really want that person to know the love and acceptance that I've received. Please God, show them your son. If we are to live worthy of the gospel, if we are to have joy in the Lord being our motivation, then we've got to think acceptance is received.

[34 : 00] It's not earned. Would you pray with me? Let's pray. Our Father, I pray that you would heal the broken hearted this morning in the knowledge that you love them fully in Christ.

Lord, give them strength in that love, in that joy to keep struggling on trusting you. Lord, I pray for those of us who are trying to put on a good front, a good face in this church community, struggling to serve in ministries just to be seen for doing good.

Lord, I pray that you would help us to rest in you, in the righteousness you've given us in Christ. Help us to rest and have joy and serve one another out of love.

Lord, for those of us who are weighed down in sin, I pray that you would help us to see ourselves as you see us in Christ. That you love us fully in those moments as every other moment.

Thank you, God. Father, I pray that you would help us as a community to look at one another as you see us. Lord, help us to extend your grace to others as much as we want it for ourselves.

[35 : 38] God, help us to be a people who boast in what you've given us in Christ, not in ourselves. Oh, that would be such a joyful way to live and so pleasing to you.

And so we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.