

Jesus. All about Acceptance

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[0:00] Thanks, Aidan. Good morning, everyone. It's good to be here. Just before I share this example, I actually need to know that you know what I'm about to talk about. So, hands up if you know Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Most people are familiar with that.

Ebenezer Scrooge, the Thai guy who wants to stir up all his money and not share it and make everyone work Christmas Eve. Okay, good, good. Well, in A Christmas Carol, there's a powerful exchange between the ghost of Christmas present and Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge notices something moving near the foot of the spirit's robe. When he inquires about the odd form, the ghost reveals two malnourished and miserable children grasping his ankles. The children are symbols of the effect of Scrooge's selfishness. They glare at him with condemning eyes. Scrooge knows their accusations are well placed. Though they carry different names in the story, I think they can be accurately renamed guilt and shame. Spirit, are they yours? Scrooge asks.

They are humanities, the spirit replies. So it is with guilt and shame. They cling to us, not easily dislodged. Guilt and shame. We know them well, far better than we wish. We would love to part with them, but they won't leave us alone. But they're not identical. Guilt is usually tied to an event. I did something bad. Shame is tied to a person. I am bad. Guilt is the wound and shame is the scar. Guilt is isolated to the individual. Shame is contagious. No one can share in your guilt, but many can share in your shame. Guilt can be well founded, but shame can be placed on you when you're not even at fault. The family whose parent is imprisoned, the spouse whose partner is unfaithful to their marriage vows, the victim of abuse, they all share in the shame as if somehow it's their fault. They feel their self-worth is lessened. Shame can shackle around our ankles tightly, allowing us to shuffle through life, but never to run or to flourish. Guilt and shame, as the ghost says, beware of them both. But most of all, beware of shame, for on its brow is written, doom, unless the writing be erased. What guilt begins, shame is sure to finish, and it threatens our existence. We need solutions for addressing the facts of wrongdoing, for our guilt, but we also need navigating and help to navigate the emotional trauma we experience in the wake of our sins and the sins of others that spread to us. Today in our series, Jesus is all about acceptance.

This is good news, and it's extremely relevant. There's not a person alive that isn't touched by this. From conception, we find ourselves searching to see where we belong. Where do I fit in? Where's my place?

[3:42] Who's my crew? Who will accept me? In the grand scheme of life, we want to be accepted. We go to great lengths and expense to be liked or followed or friended. People even do things they know are wrong, hoping to fit in or to belong. Have you ever noticed birds of a feather flock together?

Where's my crew? There's people into vinyl. There's people into biking. There's people into Elvis. There's people into line dancing. I remember backpacking a few years ago, and I got to London, and all the Aussies seemed to go to Earl's Court, and that's where they all hung out. So I didn't want to go there. I didn't want to hang out. Anyway, and Australia is multicultural. And if I was to give you a suburb, don't call it out, just say it in your head, I bet you could name the dominant cultural demographic for that area. If you immigrate, it's an easy move into these areas because you feel accepted. You feel like this is where you belong. So I'm going to have to say a few suburbs. Auburn.

What are you thinking of? Cabramatta. Leichhardt. Bellevue Hill. Chatswood. Birds of a feather flock together.

Where do I belong? Who will accept me? If people knew what I was really like, what I was really like, would they love me? See, we've got a public face, but we know what we're really like behind closed doors.

Our real motives, our secrets, our unacceptable behaviour, the guilt and shame we carry and hold within. We might not like what we look at when we look in the mirror. Might not be happy with ourselves. But here's the good news. Jesus still loves you. Jesus takes us as we are because we can come no other way. Jesus says, come as you are. I accept you and I love you and I love you too much to leave you the way you are. I want to heal you, restore you. I want to rebuild you and I want to change you from the inside out. The beauty of the gospel is that it's for all people, all ages, all genders, all nations, all cultures, all persuasions, only in Jesus do we find complete acceptance. [6:16] In his book, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Pastor Gordon MacDonald recognises There is such a large assortment of baggage from people's pasts. Much of it is heavy and bulky.

It takes a lot of energy to carry it and the fatigue of carrying it brings out the worst in many of the baggage handlers. I'd like to name three pieces of luggage of the past as examples. They are unresolved relationships, unaddressed guilt and untreated pain. Let's continue with unaddressed guilt, which I've already touched on with the Christmas carol story. We usually experience guilt as a feeling, but it's actually spiritual pain. Real guilt is the result of the inner spirit created in God's image crying foul. When we violate God's law, guilt is conceived in rebellion and we feel it at our core. Something deep within us shouts out, you've failed. But that emotion is almost simultaneously joined by shame. Guilt says, you did something wrong. Shame says, that's why you need to hide. You're no good. You're unacceptable. And I'm going to keep reminding you, I will surround you with others to hold you in contempt and dredge up your shortcomings of the past. You're not worthy of love. Shame is far less logical than guilt. Guilt is connected to events that can be defined in objective journalistic terms. Who, what, where, when and why. But shame is far less concerned with details or even the truth. Unaddressed guilt and shame makes for unstable choice making. It distorts perspectives, twists meanings and undermines the confidence we need to press forward in the present.

We cannot expect to live healthily in the future when the baggage of the past keeps banging away at the trapdoor of our minds demanding attention. Guilt is dispelled only when truth is told, when the cover-up is exploded away, confession made and restitution accomplished. Only then will guilt and shame melt away and the writing be erased. Untreated pain. These are the open wounds created and sometimes perpetuated by others in our worlds. Untreated pain can exist far below the surface of our conscious minds smouldering like an underground coal fire seeking oxygen. It simply awaits a distant moment when it can explode. What happens when we leave this pain unattended? Sometimes a struggle with self-confidence. Sometimes an inability to trust others, especially anyone who reminds us of the one who may have caused hurt in the first place. Have you ever met someone who reminds you of someone and you do a transference onto them? It's not fair on them, but we do it. You remind me of such and such and you're like, oh.

We can be left with an expectation that we might be mistreated again. So we resist participating in a relationship or a task that might raise the risk of a repeat experience. And unresolved relationships. Who hasn't got those? Some tension of falling out with a parent or partner or family member, a friend, a colleague. I don't know anyone who's not carrying any baggage in this area. Signs you have unresolved trauma.

[9:53] It's a bit of a list here. There's loneliness in your life. You push away, but you still want to be loved. When things go wrong, you internalise and try to solve it yourself and control elements around you that seem out of control.

You are known by many, but not many people can call you their best friend. You struggle to trust other people's opinions of you, are good or bad. You're surrounded by people, and yet you feel isolated or disengaged.

You feel exhausted and drained when you try to engage socially. People might see you as successful, yet you struggle to see your own worth. You need attention, yet you feel unsafe with affection.

You long for connection, yet you do not know how to connect. You know you should be kind and compassionate, but you feel indifferent. You seem happy from the outside, but inside you're sad and empty.

You know love is a choice, but you find yourself bitter and resentful. Our memories are deep, seemingly bottomless, unless we search them and seek a cure for our burdens that are liable to betray us when unresolved relationships or unaddressed guilt and shame or untreated pain tap into our spiritual circuitry.

[11 : 20] One of the churches I've worked for in the past was in the eastern suburbs, and we had a letter board, and the minister there really liked putting one-liners on the letter board in the hope, I think, to catch people's attention, but also he liked to make it into column 8 of the Sydney Morning Herald.

Well, in July 2000, the GST came out, and so on the letter board, GST, guilt and sin, the tax we all owe, and it made column 8.

Beware of them both. Doom, unless the writing be erased. Where are you now? Do you find yourself in a spiritual wilderness?

Have you wandered away from God? Are you gripped by shame, constantly reminded of your mistakes? Do you find yourself thinking that you've done something so unacceptable and disgraceful that you can't be accepted by God?

Unaddressed guilt and shame, untreated pain, unresolved relationships. Come to Jesus, who is gentle and lowly.

[12 : 34] In all four Gospels of the New Testament, there's really only one place where Jesus tells us all about his heart. In one place, the most wonderful words ever uttered by human lips.

We hear Jesus open up his heart. Matthew 11, come to me, come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Jesus pulls back the curtains and lets us peer into the core of who he is, gentle and lowly in heart. In biblical terms, the heart is not part of you, the heart is not part of who we are, but the center of who we are.

Our heart is what defines and directs us. In Jeremiah 17, 9, we're reminded, the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

[13 : 39] Who can understand it? Jesus can. Jesus tells us what animates him most deeply, what is most true of him, the innermost recesses of his being.

Jesus has God's heart. It's gentle and lowly. The Greek word for gentle is *praus*. It occurs just three other times in the New Testament, meaning meek, humble, gentle.

Jesus is not full of self-importance. He's not harsh or unkind. He's not trigger-happy, reactionary, easily exasperated. He holds no grudges.

He's gentle and considerate, and he's the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to Jesus is not a pointed finger, but its open arms.

And lowly, the Greek word overlaps with gentle, together communicating a single reality about Jesus' heart, one of humility.

[14 : 43] And this is not so much humility as the virtue, but more linked to the undistinguished, the socially unimpressive, those who aren't the life of the party, but rather cause the host to cringe when they show up.

For all his power and resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness, no one in history has been more approachable than Jesus.

There's no prerequisites. There's no impossible hoops to jump through. The point Jesus is saying, I'm accessible. Matthew 11 tells us explicitly who qualifies for fellowship with Jesus, all who labour and are burdened.

We can't. We can't. We can't sort ourselves out. We can't unburden or collect ourselves and then come to Jesus. The fact is, we just can't do it.

Our burdens are the very thing that qualify us to come to Jesus. Where are you now? Jesus' gentle heart is never outmatched by our sins and insecurities or our brokenness and doubts or our anxieties or failures.

[15 : 59] The minimum bar, the minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply open yourself up to him. It's all he needs.

It's actually the only thing he works with. Jesus is all about acceptance. And Jesus became unacceptable so that we can be accepted by God.

Jesus understands where we're at. He's walked in our shoes. A victim of a miscarriage of justice, oppressed, helpless, rejected, weak, abandoned, forsaken by his heavenly father, so that on the cross he could carry our unaddressed guilt and shame, our untreated pain, our unresolved relationships.

Christians aren't saved by summoning their strength or by laboring hard. We come to God empty-handed when we admit our weakness and our need for a saviour. Come to Jesus, all you who are weary and burdened, and find rest. This is unlike all other faith traditions that demand acts of devotion to remove our baggage or attain some meritorious favour. [17:19] Like, I need to wash in the Ganges or I have to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. It still leaves you with no certainty that you'll ever be good enough or that your deity will accept you.

And this is unlike the secular view with an obsession with well-being and self-improvement. Try harder. Turn your life around. Turn a new leaf over.

But we can't remove the baggage. It doesn't matter how many hobbies or goal-setting tasks or self-medicating. We can't remove the shame. We can't cover it up.

Because we know the truth when we've been unacceptable. Christians recognise their baggage. The GST. The guilt and sin.

The tax we all owe. And we can't save ourselves. Salvation comes by God's grace. As God's love can't be earned and it isn't deserved, we just have to accept God's love through Jesus, whose heart is gentle and lowly.

[18:24] Come to me, says Jesus. I love you so much that I will die in disgrace in your place to remove the doom.

The writing is erased. All is forgiven. As we open the Gospels, there is revealed Jesus' heart in action. He accepts the woman at the well.

He accepts the adulteress. He accepts the prostitute and the tax collector. He accepts the thief on the cross. None of these people had anything to offer. All of them were weary outcasts, aching to belong, to be accepted, to be welcomed, to be freed from their burdens and forgiven, to be loved, for the writing of guilt and shame to be erased.

In Matthew 8, we have this encounter. A man with leprosy came and knelt before Jesus and said, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I'm willing, he said, be clean. Immediately, he was cleansed of his leprosy. Just a reminder, leprosy was a tragic and dreaded affliction in the ancient world.

[19:42] As nerve endings became numb, the condition rendered the body a mass of ulcers and decay and it was death by inches. It carried shame as people assumed punishment for God for some sin.

In the scriptures, the leper is symbolic of the ultimate outcast, infected by a condition they didn't seek, rejected by those they knew, avoided by people they did not know, condemned to a future they could not bear.

The leper was not allowed to mingle with anyone, no exceptions. Ringing a bell, they'd cry out unclean and people would cover their mouths and distance themselves immediately as far as possible from the leper.

We see here the heart of Jesus in action. He doesn't recoil from the man, he doesn't heal him first then touch him, he firstly reached out his hand and touched the man.

So imagine that. Unworthy of human touch but worthy of the touch of God. I'm not sure how you feel about this. Our love tends to be conditional.

[20:46] We distance ourselves from those society deems unclean or we have, who we've judged as unworthy of our love or our touch. Notice the touch doesn't heal the disease.

Amazingly, Jesus could have said, whoa, you're a leper, be healed, now I'll touch you and embrace you. But he, instead, he did something for a man that no doubt he hadn't experienced for some time.

Before he healed the man, he touched him. The infection was banished by a word from Jesus. The loneliness was treated by the loving touch of Jesus.

Now this is a short episode recording one of Jesus' miracles. Matthew, Mark and Luke consider it significant enough to include it in their Gospels and it's obvious why. In this brief encounter, Jesus reveals the character and the heart of God.

Jesus' response to the leper shows the extent and depth of God's love for us and what lengths he's willing to go to for us so that we can be accepted.

[21:54] At the cross, Jesus' arms wide open reaching out into humanity, touching us with the love of God. We're all broken in some way, unaddressed guilt and shame, untreated pain, unresolved

relationships.

We're laboring, we're weary and burdened. Jesus reaches out to the unclean, the outcast, the sinful, embracing us. Like Christian, the traveler in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, laboring and carrying the weight of sin, guilt and shame on his back.

Weary, he approaches the cross. where Jesus accepts him and he removes and he erases the baggage. It's the only way to lift our burden.

We need to leave whatever we're carrying at the cross. When I was in my first year at university, my grandfather, my father's side, had never known Jesus and refused to talk about it.

His son, my dad, became a Christian and sort of, his dad didn't want anything to do with him and the faith. He was terminally ill and I went to Cogger Hospital and I didn't know he only had three more hours to live.

[23 : 15] And I rang up my mum and said, oh, what Bible passage can I share with him? So I got to the hospital and I asked the nurse, is there a Bible? And she found me a Bible and I sat next to him and he was lying there and I didn't know what was called the death rattles.

He was breathing laboured and really quite heavy. And I sat next to him and I just, his name was Harold. His name was Harold but everyone called him Harold. His kids called him Harold, I called him Harold.

And I just read to him, Matthew 11, 28, come to me. Now, he was unconscious I thought and said, Harold, Jesus has come to me all who agree and burden and I will give you rest.

He sat up for real and he looked me in the eye and he nodded his head and then he laid back down. I got home to Wongong where I was at uni and mum said, oh, he's passed away.

He experienced God's grace. Not everyone's going to have those moments. We need to leave whatever we're carrying right now at the cross, right now.

[24 : 19] We all seek acceptance. How we view ourselves determines how we approach life. If I am what I do, I'll always need to do more and achieve more to find my value and I'll grow weary from my labour.

If I'm what others say, I'll always try to please people instead of my heavenly father. I'll be burdened. I will never measure up. If I'm defined by my mistakes, I will carry the guilt, the past and live in shame and disgrace.

But if we listen to who God says I am and embrace his acceptance of us, we'll finally see where we belong as children of God. God says we are wise and restored, that we're a brand new creation in Christ.

We are chosen. Our sins are erased. We are holy and blameless before God. He calls us his masterpiece. We are dearly loved by God. He says, I'll make you complete through the grace and mercy of Jesus our Saviour.

In Jesus we'll flourish, able to live out all God has planned for us. And when we see ourselves the way God sees us, we walk with confidence because we trust Jesus who is all about acceptance.

[25 : 31] as we accept God's grace we are forgiven. Not just of all our baggage but with the opportunity to heal and have a new heart. The heart of Jesus who calls us to forgive as well.

Peter once asked Jesus, how many times must I forgive? Jesus' response, remember in Matthew 11, is learn from me. Learn from me. He says, don't keep a record of wrongs.

Accept the unacceptable. Keep on forgiving regardless of the details or reasons forgiveness is needed. If forgiving someone more than once or twice seems unreasonable, just remember how often God forgives us.

He doesn't put a limit on how many times we turn to Him with a sincere heart seeking forgiveness. He's just glad when we return. You know when it rains and you put the wipers on and there's a little bit of rain and you put the wipers on intermittent and you've done something wrong like Jesus says, I forgive you.

And when it's bucketing down and like you've got the wipers on like this, Jesus is saying, I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. Jesus said, come to me, all who are weary and burdened, who labour.

[26 : 39] I'll give you rest for your souls. If you've been wandering away, come back to Jesus today. Leave your baggage at the cross. Come to Jesus. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, for all of us who recognise we are hurting and broken within, overwhelmed by the weight of our sin. Soften our hearts to hear Jesus calling. As we come to the end of ourselves, as

we thirst for a drink from the well, may we respond to Jesus calling.

At the cross, may we leave behind our regrets and mistakes. Come today. There's no reason to wait as we hear Jesus calling. As we bring our sorrows, may we trade them for joy as a new life is born.

Jesus is calling. Come to me, all you who are weary, who labour and are burdened, and I'll give you rest, even rest for your souls. Amen.