**Thesis:** We’re all looking for a sense of acceptance somewhere. From high school cliques to seeking praise in the workplace. If you’ve ever been rejected, you know how hard it can be to overcome that feeling. But we have a God who looks past our outward appearance and into our hearts. God is full of mercy and compassion and wants to accept you into His family.

**Introduction:** This is the Jesus Podcast, a year of stories showcasing the depth of Christ’s love and the glory of God’s truth. I’m Zak, your host from Pray.com. I’m so happy you’re here to join us . We’re halfway through our mini-series of Jesus and the outcast. Today is a story of Jesus’ love and acceptance. Follow along with the podcast so you don’t miss an episode!

**Context:** If there was one way to ensure you were an outcast in Jewish society, it was to be a tax collector. Serving on behalf of the Roman government, you were the face of their injustice in your community as you collected money for the benefit of your oppressors. Together we’ll learn about Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in the city of Jericho. Though small in stature, Zacchaeus is a man who had built up a world of wealth for himself. But we’ll find that for all his possessions, he still found a hole in his heart. Perhaps there was more to live than amassing mountains of money. Was it worth the rejection and ridicule he faced from the people around him? These are the types of thoughts that flooded Zacchaeus’ mind as he heard the murmurings that there was a rabbi who was the friend of tax collectors. Could this be what Zacchaeus needed to turn his life around?

**Message:** We’ve all been on the giving and receiving end of acceptance. Likewise, we’ve likely all been on the giving and receiving end of rejection. Whether we’re up against prejudice, an unfavorable experience, or gossip from others, the battle for acceptance is a daily struggle. But it’s not impossible to overcome. We read in *Romans 15:7 “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”* God has accepted us, and we have a call to accept others.

Zacchaeus had long lived without the acceptance of others, instead choosing a life that put his well-being and security first. He had risen the ranks to the chief tax collector and had great rewards because of it. The land, the house, the clothes, the savings. There wasn’t much more he could ask for regarding wealth. But that doesn’t mean he had everything he needed. While he may have found everything he needed materially, what Zacchaeus lacked went much more profound as he felt an emptiness inside. Emotionally drained, socially outcast, and spiritually dry, there was a lot he was lacking in the areas that mattered most.

In our story, we see Zacchaeus honest with himself about this. As his fellow citizens threw insults his way, spitting at his feet, he held his head high but felt his heart heavy with the burden of knowing it was all true. At times, the scorn and ridicule we receive from others is unwarranted. However, we sometimes bring it upon ourselves, much like Zacchaeus. When it comes to acceptance, we must be honest with ourselves. What sort of lifestyle are we leading? What areas need to change? Where have we allowed ourselves to drift from the heart of God? The people who care about us aren’t looking for us to be perfect, but there should be a level of transparency. If we can’t be honest with ourselves and others, how can we expect people to welcome us into their lives? Honesty in who we are is important in forming relationships with others and finding our place in a community.

While everyone may not accept us as we are, we can be sure that Christ will. And as we embrace His open arms, He begins to change our perspective on life. Acceptance in the kingdom of God is contrary to acceptance from the world’s point of view. God isn’t looking for fame, wealth, and power in the people He calls His children, citizens, and friends. He’s looking for the humble, generous, and meek who put Him first. As Jesus is teaching His disciples in Matthew 20, He tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard. At its conclusion, He says, in *Matthew 20:16 “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

His point is that there is no social hierarchy in heaven. All have sinned, and all have been accepted. All are one in Christ Jesus. Ask yourself what’s most important to you. What are you striving for in life? What do you want to be known for? Being accepted by God allows us to view the world differently. Where once money and success ruled our lives, the forgiveness and love of God find predominance.

Being accepted by God produces tangible change in our lives. Jesus accepts us just as we are, but He doesn’t want us to stay the way He found us in. God’s acceptance doesn’t mean He condones our sin and lifestyle in contradiction to Him. He draws us in to free us from the sin that hurts us because He cares deeply for us. Christ’s loving acceptance opens us up to the work of the Spirit that transforms us. The profound nature of God’s love for us isn’t that He just accepts us, it’s that He wants what’s best for us. God doesn’t ignore you or tell you to change before He welcomes you into His family as His child. Nor does He invite you into His presence with the expectation that you’ll still be trapped under the weight of your sin. He gives us mercy to enter into His presence, and then pours out grace to give us a better life.

Paul explains it like this in *Romans 6:1 “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

If you’re looking for acceptance, the search is over. Jesus came to this earth to seek and save the lost. He has found you in your brokenness, feeling like an outcast, and He gladly welcomes you to live life with Him. Feel the warm embrace of His love. Find joy in knowing that you may not be perfect, but through the sacrifice of our Savior, God sees the righteousness of Christ placed upon you. And as you grow as a disciple, ask God to give you the same heart of acceptance towards others. Avoid labeling others and writing them off. Don’t overlook anyone because of their past, but see the potential God has for them for the future. The gospel message is powerful enough to bring anyone from the darkest places and draw them into the light. We all started life in the same place, born into sin. But remember the beautiful truth the apostle Paul lays out in *Ephesians 2:4 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith….”*

The love of Jesus is unstoppable, and it can change your life.