

Bible Study Lesson: Grace at the Cross

Scripture: Luke 23:32–43 (NIV)

Theme: Jesus offers saving grace to anyone who turns to Him in faith.

Key verse: Luke 23:43

Estimated teaching time: 40–45 minutes

Lesson objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should understand:

1. How Jesus demonstrated mercy while suffering unjustly.
2. Why the two criminals responded differently to the same Savior.
3. What the repentant criminal teaches us about confession, faith, grace, and salvation.
4. Why no person is beyond the reach of Christ's saving grace.

1. Opening and introduction — 5 minutes

Begin by asking:

“If you knew you had only a few hours left to live, what would matter most to you?”

Most of the things that consume our attention would suddenly lose their importance. Money, possessions, status, arguments, and unfinished projects would fade into the background. Our thoughts would turn toward God, family, forgiveness, eternity, and whether we were prepared to meet the Lord.

Luke 23:32–43 takes us to a place where three men are facing death. Jesus is crucified between two criminals. All three are experiencing the physical agony of crucifixion, but only Jesus is innocent.

The three crosses appear similar, but they represent three very different realities:

- One man is dying **in sin**.
- One man is dying **to sin**.
- Jesus is dying **for sin**.

At the center of this passage is an extraordinary demonstration of grace. A guilty man, with no time to repair his life or prove his sincerity, turns to Jesus. Jesus responds by promising him eternal life.

This lesson could be summarized in one statement:

It is never too late to turn to Jesus—as long as we still have the opportunity to turn.

Have someone read Luke 23:32–43 aloud from the NIV.

2. Jesus was counted among sinners — 5 minutes

Luke tells us that two criminals were led away with Jesus to be executed. At the place called the Skull, Jesus was crucified between them.

This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12, which said that the suffering servant would be “numbered with the transgressors.”

Jesus had committed no crime. Pontius Pilate repeatedly acknowledged that he found no basis for a charge against Him. Nevertheless, Jesus was publicly treated as though He were the worst kind of criminal.

The position of the crosses is important. Jesus was placed in the middle. The authorities may have intended this position to identify Him as the most prominent offender. God, however, used that position to show us something about His Son.

Jesus is always found in the middle of human need.

He stood between:

- A holy God and sinful humanity.
- Divine judgment and condemned sinners.
- Death and eternal life.
- A rejecting criminal and a repentant criminal.

Jesus did not save us from a safe distance. He entered our brokenness, carried our sin, endured our judgment, and died in our place.

Discussion question

What does Jesus’ willingness to be identified with sinners teach us about the character of God?

Possible responses:

- God does not abandon us in our sin.
- Jesus is willing to come near to broken and guilty people.

- God's love is demonstrated through sacrifice.
- Jesus understands rejection, shame, injustice, and suffering.

3. “Father, forgive them” — 6 minutes

While the soldiers were crucifying Jesus, He prayed:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

This is one of the most remarkable prayers in Scripture.

Jesus was not praying from a comfortable sanctuary. He was praying while nails held Him to a cross. He was not praying for people who had apologized. He was praying for people who were actively hurting Him.

The soldiers divided His clothes by casting lots. To them, Jesus' garments were more valuable than His life. Yet Jesus responded with prayer instead of revenge.

This does not mean that ignorance makes people innocent. The soldiers were still responsible for their actions. Jesus' prayer shows that they did not fully understand the spiritual significance of what they were doing. They did not realize they were crucifying the Son of God.

Jesus practiced what He had previously taught:

- Love your enemies.
- Do good to those who hate you.
- Bless those who curse you.
- Pray for those who mistreat you.

At Calvary, Jesus did not merely preach forgiveness—He demonstrated it.

Discussion questions

1. Why is forgiveness especially difficult when the offender has not apologized?
2. What is the difference between forgiving someone and pretending that the offense never happened?
3. Is there anyone we need to place before God in prayer today?

Forgiveness does not always remove consequences. It does not require us to remain in an unsafe situation, and it does not mean that trust must immediately be restored.

Forgiveness means surrendering personal vengeance to God and refusing to let hatred control our hearts.

4. The voices around the cross — 7 minutes

The religious leaders, soldiers, and one of the criminals mocked Jesus. Their words carried essentially the same challenge:

“If you are who you claim to be, save yourself.”

This temptation had appeared earlier in Jesus’ ministry. In the wilderness, Satan repeatedly said, “If you are the Son of God...” At the cross, the same kind of temptation returned through human voices.

The people assumed that if Jesus truly were the Messiah, He would prove it by coming down from the cross. But Jesus proved He was the Messiah by remaining on the cross.

If Jesus had saved Himself, He would not have saved us.

The leaders said that Jesus had saved others but could not save Himself. They were wrong. Jesus could have saved Himself. He deliberately chose not to do so because He was giving His life for the salvation of others.

The sign above Jesus read:

“This is the King of the Jews.”

The authorities intended the sign as mockery, but it proclaimed a deeper truth. Jesus really was—and is—the King. His throne, however, looked like a cross. His crown was made of thorns, and His royal victory came through sacrificial love.

Teaching point

The cross challenges our understanding of power. The world sees power as the ability to dominate others. Jesus demonstrated power through obedience, sacrifice, forgiveness, and love.

Discussion question

Why do people sometimes demand that God prove Himself on their terms?

People may say:

- “If God is real, He must solve this problem immediately.”
- “If God loves me, I should never suffer.”

- “If Jesus is Lord, He must do exactly what I request.”

Faith does not require God to submit to our conditions. Faith trusts God’s character even when we do not understand His methods.

5. Two criminals, two responses — 7 minutes

Both criminals were physically close to Jesus. Both heard His prayer. Both saw the sign above His head. Both witnessed His response to ridicule and pain. Both were given an opportunity to believe.

Yet they reached opposite conclusions.

The unrepentant criminal

The first criminal joined the mockery:

“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

He wanted Jesus to remove his immediate suffering, but he did not acknowledge his sin. He wanted rescue without repentance, relief without surrender, and a change in circumstances without a change of heart.

He did not ask Jesus to save his soul. He wanted Jesus to get him off the cross.

People sometimes approach God in the same way. They want God to remove the consequences of their decisions, but they do not want God to rule their lives.

The repentant criminal

The second criminal responded differently. His words reveal several stages of genuine faith.

1. He feared God

He asked the other criminal, “Don’t you fear God?”

The beginning of wisdom is recognizing that God is holy and that we are accountable to Him.

2. He admitted his guilt

He acknowledged that they were being punished justly and were receiving what their actions deserved.

He made no excuses. He did not blame his childhood, his companions, the government, or society. Whatever influences had shaped his life, he accepted personal responsibility for his choices.

Repentance begins when we stop defending our sin and start agreeing with God about it.

3. He recognized Jesus' innocence

He declared that Jesus had done nothing wrong.

Although religious leaders rejected Jesus and soldiers mocked Him, this dying criminal perceived the innocence of Christ.

4. He recognized Jesus as King

He said:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Consider the faith required to make that request. Jesus did not look like a king. He was bleeding, wounded, rejected, and dying. Yet this criminal believed the cross was not the end. He believed Jesus had a kingdom beyond death.

Others saw a dying prisoner. Faith saw a coming King.

5. He made a humble request

He did not ask for a prominent place in the kingdom. He simply asked Jesus to remember him.

True faith does not bargain with God. It throws itself upon His mercy.

Discussion question

What differences do you see between the requests of the two criminals?

The first criminal wanted Jesus to change his circumstances. The second wanted a relationship with Jesus that would continue beyond death.

6. Salvation by grace — 6 minutes

Jesus answered the repentant criminal:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Every part of that promise is significant.

“Truly I tell you”

Jesus gave the man certainty. Salvation rests upon the promise of Christ, not the strength of our emotions.

The man did not have to wonder whether he had been good enough. He trusted the word of Jesus.

“Today”

Salvation was immediate. Jesus did not tell the man that he would face an uncertain waiting period or earn his way into God’s presence. Before that day ended, he would be with Christ.

“You”

The promise was personal. Jesus was not merely announcing a general religious principle. He was speaking directly to a guilty man who had placed his faith in Him.

“Will be with me”

The greatest promise of heaven is not merely streets of gold, freedom from pain, or reunion with loved ones. The greatest promise is being with Jesus.

“In paradise”

The criminal’s final destination was completely changed. He began the day as a condemned man and ended it as a citizen of Christ’s kingdom.

This man could not come down from his cross to perform good deeds. He could not be baptized, join a church, give money, repair his reputation, or demonstrate years of faithful living.

He was saved entirely by grace through faith.

Good works do not purchase salvation. Genuine salvation ordinarily produces a changed life and good works, but this man had no remaining lifetime in which to demonstrate them. His salvation rested completely upon Christ.

Important application

The repentant criminal teaches us that no one is saved by being good enough. The unrepentant criminal teaches us that no one is saved merely by being close to Jesus.

Both men were close to Jesus, but only one trusted Him.

We can attend church, own a Bible, sing Christian songs, and associate with believers without personally surrendering to Christ. Salvation requires a personal response of repentance and faith.

7. Life application — 5 minutes

This passage gives us four important truths.

1. No one is beyond the reach of grace

The criminal's past was serious enough to receive the death penalty, but his sin was not greater than Christ's mercy.

We should never decide that another person is beyond salvation. As long as someone is alive, we can pray, witness, love, and hope.

2. We should not deliberately postpone salvation

This criminal was saved near the end of his life, but the other criminal was not.

One thief was saved at the last hour so that no one would despair. Only one was saved so that no one would presume.

We are not promised another day or another opportunity. When God speaks to our hearts, we should respond.

3. Jesus wants more than a change in our circumstances

The first criminal wanted escape from pain. The second wanted entrance into Christ's kingdom.

We should certainly bring our needs to God, but Christianity is not merely a method for obtaining easier circumstances. Jesus came to reconcile us to God and transform our lives.

4. Forgiven people should become forgiving people

Jesus prayed for His enemies while they were hurting Him. Those who have received grace should extend grace.

This does not mean ignoring injustice. Jesus' death demonstrates that sin is serious. But it does mean that we resist hatred, surrender vengeance to God, and seek the spiritual restoration of others.

Closing discussion

Ask participants to consider:

1. With which criminal do I most identify?
2. Am I asking Jesus merely to improve my circumstances, or have I surrendered to Him as King?
3. Is there a sin I need to admit without excuses?

4. Is there someone I have considered beyond the reach of God's grace?
5. Is there someone I need to begin forgiving?

Conclusion

At Calvary, three crosses stood side by side:

- One held a man who rejected Jesus.
- One held a man who received Jesus.
- The center cross held the Savior who made salvation possible.

The repentant criminal had no religious résumé. He had no good works to present. He could offer Jesus nothing except confession, repentance, and faith.

That was enough—not because his faith was impressive, but because the Savior in whom he placed his faith was sufficient.

The message of the cross is not that good people can earn their way into heaven. The message is that guilty people can receive mercy through Jesus Christ.

The criminal prayed, “Jesus, remember me.”

Jesus answered with more than the man requested. He did not merely promise to remember him someday. He promised to receive him that very day.

That is grace.

Grace reaches the guilty.

Grace speaks forgiveness.

Grace opens the kingdom.

Grace changes our eternal destination.

And that grace is still available through Jesus Christ today.

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus, thank You for remaining on the cross when You had the power to come down. Thank You for bearing our sins and offering forgiveness to guilty people. Help us to confess our sins without excuses and trust completely in Your grace. Teach us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Give us compassion for those who appear far from You, and remind us that no life is beyond Your saving power. May we recognize You not only as Savior but also as King, and may our lives reflect the mercy we have received. In Jesus' name, amen.