



# Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

This is not a typical *Lifeline* because this is not a typical week. I've been wrestling with the difference between what we think we believe vs. the core beliefs that determine what we do. I decided to lay this out in print to see if what I'm thinking resonates with you.

If we were sitting across the table from each other at a coffee shop, I'd open my journal to a blank page and draw a line down the middle—top to bottom. At the top of the line, I would draw a cross. On the right side of the cross, I would write the word *accepted*. On the left side of the cross, I would write the word *condemned*.

Jesus Christ is the bridge from condemnation to acceptance. When I accepted Christ, I believed that His perfect life, death, and resurrection were for me. That's when He pulled me all the way into Himself—fully accepted into His family. He fully accepts me and delights in me as His child—not just in eternity, but right now. God fully accepts all who are united with Jesus. So—why is it so hard for us to accept ourselves?

Our self-talk is often brutal. We slam ourselves not only when we sin, but when we are tempted, struggle with a decision, need sleep, or feel emotional. God is not worried when we need forgiveness—He provides that freely. He never frowns or scolds us when we ask for His wisdom. He wants to freely give it to us. He designed us to need rest and to have emotions. He accepts our limits so much that He took on a body with limits. He accepts our emotions so much that He feels with us.

Our unkind thoughts and words never motivate us toward the kind of life-change Jesus died to give us. The Spirit convicts us, but conviction is nothing like condemnation. When we condemn ourselves, we actually side against God who accepts us to join the defeated enemy who is set on stealing, killing, and destroying—through constant accusation and condemnation.

While it seems crazy for us to join the defeated enemy in condemning ourselves, it is also remarkably easy. Here's my theory on at least one reason why. As children, when our lives get painfully disrupted, we try to figure out the meaning of our pain. In a child's way of thinking, it is not uncommon to conclude that we cause bad things to happen. For example, there are many reasons parents leave—through disease, death, or divorce. Yet, kids often believe they are to blame for what goes wrong.

Paul, a guy who wrote some of the books of the Bible, said that when he was a child he talked, thought, and understood like a child. But as an adult, he put off childish ways of talking, thinking, and understanding.

When Jesus rescued me from the condemnation side to the acceptance side, I still had habits from a childhood of talking to myself and about myself from a place of shame. I had lots of brain pathways of deeply embedded self-condemnation. These thoughts shaped how I viewed God, myself, others, and how life worked. Shame was such a deep part of my understanding that I didn't recognize it as anything but normal. As long as I continued my internal dialog of self-condemnation, the defeated enemy was delighted. Not only did I give the defeated enemy a foothold in my mind, but practicing on myself gave me skill in condemning others. I am so thankful God has given me a counselor and



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close friends who help me notice when I am operating out of self-condemnation so I can flip the script to match what God and kind friends think about me.

Remember the journal page with the cross at the top of the dividing line? To be accurate, we need to add two more crosses—one on each side of the line. I guess it's no surprise that the thief on the condemnation side condemned Christ (how's this for irony) for being a worthless Messiah since He didn't appear to save Himself or them. The thief on the other cross accepted Jesus as the innocent Messiah dying in their place. That thief simply accepted the gift of being accepted by God.

I talked to someone recently who thought it would be easier if we could die right after coming to faith in Christ as living out our faith is so hard given all that we struggle with. Could it be that our pain would be more bearable if we were not telling ourselves a condemnation story about why we are in pain? What would happen if we worked to change our brain pathways to align how we think about ourselves and our struggle with the same acceptance God has for us?

If we were sitting in a coffee shop together, this would be the place when I finally come up for air after so much talking so that I can ask you what you are thinking. Even though we are not talking in person, I'm still curious. How do these two sides of the cross relate to your story? Do you think some of your decisions come from a place of feeling condemned? What would change for you if your mind and heart fully adjusted to living out of the acceptance Jesus died to give you?

I hope that what you experience this Easter helps you understand how dearly God loves you. He longs for you to know how fully He accepts every part of you. I'd love to hear what you are thinking and welcome you to write me back if you would like to share.