

It's you I Like
Acts 15:1-13, 19-21; Genesis 17:9-14
July 8, 2018

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Genesis 17:9-14

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Acts 15:1-13, 19-21 (The Message)

It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: “If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved.” Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. “You have to circumcise the pagan converts,” they said. “You must make them keep the Law of Moses.”

The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the

floor: “Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can’t be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person’s thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

“So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don’t we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?”

There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

James broke the silence. “Friends, listen. here is my decision: We’re not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. We’ll write them a letter and tell them, ‘Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians—blood, for instance.’ This is basic wisdom from Moses, preached and honored for centuries now in city after city as we have met and kept the Sabbath.”

There are so many things in this life that we have to qualify for.

What job we’re going to be offered. I recently read about someone applying for a job who left a process after being interviewed by eleven different people without being in the final round yet. She really had to qualify for that position.

What college we’re going to go to. So many of my friends and I admit that we never could get into the schools we went to back in the day if we were applying now! We’d never qualify without higher test scores and grades.

Social clubs often want a number of references before we can qualify for membership. Online dating services let you qualify potential suitors based on education, body type, and whether or not you want kids.

We have to qualify for so much in our lives.

But do we have to qualify in some way to get into the church? Is there some action that we need to take before God will approve us to get in? Do we have to get rid of all of our sins?

Are there eleven interviews? Is God going to eliminate us based on our test scores? Or is the problem our body type? Do we have to qualify for a relationship with God?

That's the question that comes up in Acts 15. It's a long passage, but it's a pivotal one in the history of the church, and in the book of Acts. In fact, there are almost exactly the same number of words before this chapter, and after this chapter, in the book. It's like the fulcrum of a teeter-totter as the Gospel gets spread further and further out from Jerusalem.

Our Old Testament passage gives us the background we need to understand the story from Acts. All the way back in the very beginning of God's relationship with the Jewish people, there was an understanding that all of the baby boys would be circumcised as a mark of their belonging to God. It was a way to set them apart from the people groups around them. So if a male was circumcised, they were a part of this special community of people who belonged to God, and if a male was not circumcised, they were NOT a part of this same community. Of course there's an awful lot of patriarchy inherent in this system, but that's another sermon for another day. For now, let's just focus on how circumcision was the sign for whether or not someone was in the community.

Fast forward centuries later, and Jesus appears on the scene and people begin to follow him. Jesus is a Jew, and his first followers are Jewish. Jesus continues on with this special community of people who belong to God, and at first virtually all of them are circumcised.

But as disciples like Paul and Barnabas keep telling the good news to more and more people in the book of Acts, more and more people who are not Jewish start believing. They start coming to faith. They start moving toward this special community of people who belong to God.

But since they're not Jewish, they're not circumcised. And the specific question arises, do they need to get circumcised in order to join this community, or not? The bigger question is, do they have to do something to qualify for a relationship with God, or not?

Everyone comes up for a big church meeting in Jerusalem to figure out the answer to these questions. Everyone loves a big church meeting! For you die-hard Presbyterians, it's kind of like the first presbytery meeting. One of my friends says that a presbytery meeting is kind of like a hockey game—no one really understands the rules and it's only good when a fight breaks out.

Well he would have loved to have been at this meeting. A big fight breaks out. The Pharisees, who think the best way to connect with God is by following the laws, insist that the folks who aren't Jews need to get circumcised in order to connect with God and join the community. That's how they need to qualify.

But Peter wasn't having any of that, and he reminds the Pharisees of the grace that Jesus used to save all of them as they came to faith in him...and that it was faith and not works. The Gentiles don't need to get circumcised, because they don't have to qualify with their actions to come to faith. They just need to rest in their belief that Jesus has come for them and died for them...and they're saved. No need for eleven interviews and no matter their test scores or body types.

We don't have to qualify to come into our relationship with God. We don't have to qualify to come into the church. That's been what we've tried to hold onto as a church ever since this happened back in the early church. It's one reason why we baptized Nelle this morning.

Nelle didn't have to qualify to be baptized. She didn't have to get her life in order. We didn't need to wait until she slept through the night three weeks in a row. She didn't have to memorize the Apostle's Creed or the Lord's Prayer. She's beautiful, but it doesn't matter what she looks like, or if she cried the whole time or was out like a light. Nelle didn't have to qualify at all to be baptized.

It's like the French Baptismal Formula says—that statement that got read as she got walked around the sanctuary. Here's just a portion of it:

For you, Nelle, Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is finished!" For you Christ triumphed over death, rose in newness of life, and ascended to rule over all. All of this was done for you, little one, though you do not know any of this yet.

It does not say, For you, Nelle, once you stopped crying in church, Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is finished!"

The statement is not, All of this was done for you, little one, once you finally got your act together and could explain the doctrine of predestination.

Nelle did not have to qualify to be welcomed into God's special community—and neither did any of us. We don't have to qualify to have a relationship with God.

The challenge, of course, is that there are often unspoken expectations that churches or individual Christians put up that communicate what we have to do to qualify for the church or even for a relationship with God.

- If you don't dress a certain way, you don't really qualify to come to church here.
- If you aren't as wealthy as us, you don't really qualify to come to church here.
- If your personal hygiene isn't very good, you don't really qualify to come to church here.
- If you don't believe the same way that I do, you don't really qualify to be in a relationship with God.
- If your politics aren't the same as mine, you don't really qualify to be a Christian.
- If you drink, you can't be a Christian.

I had someone directly tell me last one that in college. Now, most of these statements don't get spoken out loud. But that doesn't mean that new visitors or new acquaintances don't pick them up loud and clear,

even if they're unintended. What could we do to remind others that no one has to qualify to be welcome here? Or to qualify to be a Christian?

Countering this message that you have to qualify to be welcome is so important. It's one reason why I think that the documentary "Won't you be my neighbor?" is so popular. It's a film about Mr Rogers—several of us went to see it together a couple of weeks ago and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it.

Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian pastor, and used his show to embody the Gospel to children and their families—in many cases, probably completely unbeknownst to them. The core of his message was that children are unique creations and deeply loved, just as they are. In other words, they don't have to qualify to be loved.

My favorite scene in the movie was when Mr. Rogers was interviewing Jeff, a young boy who was paralyzed and in a wheelchair. At eye level with each other, Mr Rogers talked to him with such respect about his illness and then he invited him to sing a song with him. It's called "It's you I like." It's about a minute long, and I want to play a recording of it now.

*Lyrics: It's you I like, it's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair, but it's you I like.
The way you are right now, the way down deep inside you,
Not your toys, they're just beside you.
But it's you I like, every part of you.
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like, it's you yourself
It's you. It's you I like.*

Did you hear it? It's not the things Jeff wears, or how he does his hair, or his fancy chair that Mr. Rogers likes. It's just him. Jeff doesn't have to qualify in any way to be liked.

There was a lot of sniffing in the theater during this scene. I was glad, because it meant I wasn't alone as I felt the tears trickle down my face. I felt like I could hear Jesus singing to me,

It's you I like, It's you yourself. It's you. It's you I like.

I don't have to figure it all out. I don't have to be the most extraordinary pastor ever. I don't have to qualify for Jesus to like me. And neither do you. It's you he likes.

Just one quick postscript to this amazing news.

At the close of our passage, James points out that the non-Jews don't need to be circumcised, but that there are three or four things they should be careful about doing as new Christians. Three or four ways that they need to behave if they're going to be Christians. I think about these things as a matter of grace and gratitude.

Jesus has given them so much grace—welcoming them into the new community, welcoming them into an amazing relationship with God that they don't have to qualify for. They don't have to get it right. When we receive grace like that, the natural response is to be grateful.

And grateful lives are changed lives—changed lives that witness to those around them by living out their faith in Jesus Christ, by doing those three or four things that James lists out.

It's not that doing those things are what makes them a Christian. Otherwise we'd be back to them having to do them to qualify their way into the faith. No - their lives are changed because they're grateful for how Jesus has come to them in grace.

For how Jesus has told them,

It's you I like, It's you yourself. It's you. It's you I like.

And they've responded,

“Just as I am, without one plea...O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”