

## Baptism is the Great Equalizer

Acts 10:34-38 (NIV)

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. <sup>36</sup> You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” (verses 34-35) Are any of our beliefs challenged by Peter’s statement? Maybe not, given the Word of God that we heard last Sunday. Isaiah prophesied that all nations would come and assemble before the Lord, which happened as the Magi came from the East and worshiped Jesus as their king. Paul revealed this mystery, this same truth, when he wrote: “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 3:6) God does accept people from every nation without showing favoritism. At the same time, though, isn’t there some favoritism in that God only accepts people who fear him and do what is right?

The phrase, “God accepts the one who does what is right” causes me to pause. I hear it and my first thought is: “Well, okay, as long as I do good things, the right things, then I’m okay with God. He’ll accept me and take me to heaven based on what I do.” What my mind doesn’t immediately jump to is, “Wait, I’ve not done the right thing many times before. How many times of not doing the right thing can I get away with before God doesn’t accept me? Can I get away with doing 1 thing wrong? Well, I need more mulligans than that. How about 100 things wrong? You know, I better be safe. How about 1,000 things done wrong? Can God allow that much wrong as long as I do a greater number of right things?” Can God accept me based on that record?

The other half of that acceptance phrase is that “God accepts the one who fears him.” Fearing God is not really so much the idea that I need to be afraid of God (although I certainly can be because I have not always done what is right), but more the idea that I respect or revere God for who he is. And, yeah, I respect him. I praise him. That’s why I’m here in church. That’s why I pray to him. But do I respect him, fear him, on my level or on his level? Do I respect him only up to the point where he corrects me? Where he points out that I’m at fault, that I’m wrong, that I haven’t done right? Do I respect him as long as he doesn’t challenge or contradict my current level of thinking? Do I stop respecting him if he says that I’m not accepted by him if I do 101 things right and 100 wrong or that I do 1,001 things right and only 1 wrong? If his measure of what is acceptable does not line up with my measure of acceptable, do I stop fearing him? Do I insist that he come down to my level, an achievable level? Do I truly fear God for who he is?

I don’t always do what is right and I don’t always fear God. Because of this, I am unacceptable to him. In fact, we all are. The whole favoritism part really doesn’t matter because there is not a single one of us who can own the phrases, “I always do what is right” and “I always fear God.” Who, then, can ever be accepted by God?

This is the lesson God is teaching Peter, a man named Cornelius, and us. In Acts chapter 10, we have picked up right in the middle of an event. It’s been about 7 years since Jesus was resurrected and ascended into heaven. We are introduced to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Luke says about him, “He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” (Acts 10:2) An angel of God appeared to Cornelius telling him to summon Peter. The next day, Peter gets a vision himself from God with a sheet filled with all kinds of animals and a voice telling him, “Get up; kill and eat.” Peter protests saying that he has never had anything unclean or impure touch his lips. The voice responds, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This vision happened to him 3 times that day. Then Cornelius’ men arrived, asking for Peter. Peter went with, being assured by God that he should be with these Gentiles, these non-Jews. When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ house, he found that Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends to hear what Peter has to say. Peter voiced his cautiousness saying, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.” (Acts 10:28) This leads into verse 38 of Acts chapter 10 where we started today. Peter now gets it that “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” (verses 34b-35)

Cornelius had done a lot of what is right, but Peter does not continue by saying that Cornelius and his guests are all the ones who fear God and have done what is right and so are accepted by God. No, he starts telling them about someone else. He says, “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” (verses 36-38) It wasn’t your fear of God or the things that you have done right that caused God to accept you, Cornelius. No, God accepted you because of the one who did do what is right. You have heard about him. His name is Jesus. He is the one who was accepted by God because he did what was right and he feared God. That’s what was proclaimed at his baptism.

Jesus came to John the Baptizer to be baptized. John immediately knew that he stood in the presence of someone who had always done what is right, one who truly feared God, respected him and honored him as he truly is. That’s why John tried to deter Jesus. “You come to me to be baptized? You’ve always done good, done what is right. You should be baptizing me.” But Jesus insisted: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. (Matthew 3:15) As soon as Jesus was baptized, heaven opened! God the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove and lighting. God the Father declared, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) There’s the acceptance! Jesus had done what was right. God the Father himself declared it to be true. Jesus feared God, respected him, honored him, so he was baptized, even though he didn’t have any sin. He fulfilled all righteousness for us. This is the task that he was chosen for, as Isaiah said: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.” (Isaiah 42:1)

The acceptance from God that Jesus has is given to people from every nation without showing favoritism. How? Through baptism.

In baptism, God uses simple water and his powerful Word to wash away our sins. That means that every single one of those times we did not do what was right are gone. Our life is not a balancing act of trying to do more right things than wrong things, but all the wrong things are cleared from our record and are remembered no more because of our baptism. At the same time, in baptism, we are clothed with Christ. Jesus’ good works, his fear of God, his doing of what is right, is put over us. His record of doing what is right is now our record of doing what is right. In baptism, God accepts us by putting his own name on us – in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He has taken us as impure as we are and made us clean. He has sent the Holy Spirit to us in baptism and has created in us a new heart, a new life, one that believes that Jesus is our perfection, that he did everything right so that we would be covered with it and so be accepted by God.

This is why “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” (verses 34b-35) Baptism is the great equalizer among us. All the gifts that God gives us in baptism - how he washes away our sin, how he clothes us with all of Jesus’ good works, how he accepts on those merits – are the same for each and every single one of us. No matter where you were baptized – whether it was at a font in church or in the Jordan River itself where Jesus himself was baptized - or how you were baptized – whether it was with a splash of water or full immersion – or at what age in life you were baptized – whether you were 90 minutes old or 90 years old – all the same blessings are communicated and given to us all. Through his gift of baptism, God makes the same declaration about us as he did of Jesus: “This is my Son [my child], whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) As Peter summed up his message saying, “All the prophets testify about him [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:43) It’s not about how well we did what was right, but how Jesus did it for us and credited us his good works through baptism.

So, when you feel like a failure, that you never are doing enough good, that you are pretty much incapable of doing what is right, that you don’t feel like you can be accepted by anybody, especially God, remember your baptism. Your baptism, my baptism, says that God accepts us, no matter where we came from, no matter what we have done, no matter how old we are, no matter how many wrongs we have done. Baptism is our great equalizer before God in that we all have all our wrongs washed away and we are all credited with all the right and good that Jesus did. Baptism gives all of us the same status before God as loved, forgiven, perfect children of God. Amen.