

Who Is Accepted by God?

Psalm 15, Acts 10:34–35

Acts is a book of transition. It records the opening up of the Christian church to the Gentiles. This, of course, is a huge “sea change” (to use the words of Shakespeare)—a profound and notable transformation.¹ In the book of Acts the Christian church begins as exclusively Jewish—just Jesus and the twelve apostles just prior to his ascension. But by the end of the book, Paul—not even a Christian in Acts 1—is in Rome, preaching the gospel to Romans, and the church is predominantly Gentile. Peter is a key figure in this process, for he was the acknowledged chief among the apostles. Acts 10 records how God convinced Peter to take the gospel to the Roman city Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. The home is filled with his relatives and friends, who have been invited to come meet Peter. Last week we began a study of Peter’s remarkable sermon on this occasion. Last week we focused on verse 34, which states that “God is no respecter of persons” (KJV)—that is, he does not choose anybody on the basis of their pretty face or their personal worthiness, but only by his sovereign grace.

Today we advance to verse 35, where Peter states (again in the words of the KJV), “But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” I use the KJV because of its use of the word “worketh,” which is clearly a present-tense verb (important, as we shall see). Peter speaks of a person who “worketh righteousness”—a critical expression that we must examine closely. Our Old Testament text, Psalm 15, uses the same expression. King David asks the question, “Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?” Answer: “He that walketh uprightly, and *worketh righteousness*.” Both our Old Testament and New Testament texts use the exact same expression. It is an important expression, and it is critical to understand it properly. The doctrine expounded by the apostle Peter in verse 35 seems to be largely taken from Psalm 15, and is an elucidation of that text. Psalm 15 answers the question, “Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?”—in other words, who is going to go to heaven. In our New Testament text Peter speaks about the person who is “accepted” by God—again, who is going to go to heaven. Can there be any more important question than that? Every son and daughter of Adam ought to be intensely interested in that question: “Will I go to heaven? Will God accept me? Will I live forever in his tabernacle and dwell in his holy hill?” A person may become very successful in this life and in the end spend eternity in hell. Jesus asked, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his

¹ From Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (i. ii. 403), cited in the New Oxford American Dictionary (electronic edition); cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_change_\(idiom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_change_(idiom)), accessed 4-11-21

own soul?” Yes, what profit is there if a person gains everything this world has to offer, yet suffers eternally in the lake of fire?

Who is accepted by God? You need to know! Both our Old and New Testament texts answer that question, and their answers are essentially the same. It is critical that we understand what King David and the apostle Peter are saying.

So consider with me Peter’s words “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” Consider especially the elements “in every nation,” “he that feareth him,” “[he that] worketh righteousness,” and “is accepted with him.”

1. “In every nation”

The first element is “in every nation.” Consider the context: just the day before, Peter had been up on the rooftop, praying. He fell into a trance and saw a great sheet being lowered from heaven, with all manner of unclean animals—animals that an observant Jew was not allowed to eat. Up until that time Peter had never once eaten pork or shellfish; they were not kosher. The kosher laws were part of the ceremonial law intended to separate Jew and Gentile. Jews were a distinct people: they were circumcised, they kept the seventh-day sabbath, they ate kosher, they kept apart from gentiles. God had revealed himself to their forefather Abraham, and they were his spiritual and physical seed, the people through whom he would reveal himself to the world—but along the way the Jews began to take pride in their ethnicity and culture. They began to rejoice in their Jewishness, as expressed by the Pharisee words, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men” (Luke 18:11). Isaiah’s teaching that the Messiah would “bring forth judgment to the Gentiles,” that Israel would be “a light to the Gentiles,” that the Messiah would be “salvation to the ends of the earth”² did not fit in with the Jews’ understanding of who they were supposed to be as the covenant people. The Jews wanted to preserve their Jewishness; they wanted to maintain an exclusive society. Peter had imbibed this mindset; up until 24 hours before, he would have been horrified at the thought of going to a Roman home. But now, here he stands before a sea of uncircumcised Romans. Cornelius himself was a God-fearer: “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.” God had worked in his heart. Cornelius was much like the centurion in Luke 7, with whom Jesus had interacted during his earthly ministry. The centurion of Luke 7 also had been generous, a benefactor of the Jews. It was said of him, “for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue” (Luke 7:5). Now, looking out over an audience of uncircumcised Romans, Peter states that “God is no respecter of persons: but *in every nation* he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” Think of the

² Isa. 42:1–4, 6; 49:6

significance of those inspired words: not just among the Jews but in *every* nation the one who fears God and works righteousness is accepted by God. And it is still true today, as we witness the gospel going forth among the nations. God continues to build the church of Jesus Christ. Churches are being planted in every nation. This morning we heard how the Gideons travel at their own expense to pass out Scriptures and witness to people of every nation. The powers of darkness mount fierce opposition. It is illegal to be a Christian or even mention Christ in North Korea. In Islamic countries, the raiding of Christian villages and murder and rape and destruction of Christian homes continues unabated, and the government does nothing. But Christ said, “I will *build* my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The church of Jesus Christ marches forth, carrying the gospel to the world, and the gates of hell—the powers of darkness—are powerless before it. The church of Jesus Christ is unstoppable. The word that goes forth from God’s mouth through the company of the preachers “shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). A new day has dawned. The gospel now goes forth powerfully into every nation, converting the elect. Secondly, consider

2. “He that feareth him”

Again, remember: “in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” What does “he that feareth him” mean? It means to have a healthy respect and reverence for God, to live one’s life in light of the final judgment. When Abraham observed, “There is no *fear* of God at all in this place,” he meant that there was no respect for law and individual life—things that exist only when a people fear God. When David observed that “he who rules over men must be just, ruling in the *fear* of God” (2 Sam. 23:3), he meant that public officials and judges, to fulfill their calling, must be men who worship God and understand their responsibility to make all their official decisions according to his unchanging law.

Cornelius had earlier been described as a man who *feared* God with all his house (v. 2). He had shown himself to be a man with a worshipful and reverent attitude by publicly telling Peter, “Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God” (Acts 10:33). Wise Solomon states, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: *Fear* God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13). The last clause is also translated “this is the duty of all mankind” or “this applies to every person.” Fearing God is not just for those inclined to religion; it is the duty of all people everywhere. Yet Paul in Romans quotes David in Psalm 36 when he concludes his case that all men are sinners: “There is no *fear* of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18). Here is a fitting summary of human sin. Yet those who are not born again do

not fear God, for if a person truly feared God, he would obey him without question.

Do you fear God? If you do, then it will be evident in a life of obedience. You will want to obey him in all your thoughts, words and actions. You will not do something just because you *want* to do it. Instead, you will ask yourself, “Does this please God? Is this what he would have me to do?” You will want to cast aside all ungodly thoughts and bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

If you truly fear God, then you will want to worship him. Man’s responsibility is to worship God with his church every Lord’s day, unless providentially hindered. What is providential hindrance? It is an unforeseen illness, accident or emergency that prevents us from attending church as we had planned. Years ago an ice storm brought down trees at both ends of Wieland Road, preventing cars from passing through to church. That morning we were forced to cancel worship; however, by late afternoon the road was reopened, so we had evening worship. That week, Grace OPC was providentially hindered from holding morning worship.

If on a Sunday morning you wake up ill and cannot get out of bed, then by all means stay home and tune in to the livestream. Or if you are an older person who cannot safely get down the icy steps out your front door, then by all means tune in to the live-stream. It is the Lord who sends the weather, according to his perfect will. If you cannot safely go out, then consider yourself providentially hindered, and tune in if you can. Make sure the hindrance is such that you would not go anywhere else, either. Some people seem to have “providential hindrances” that mysteriously strike only on the Lord’s day. If the same thing happened on a weekday, it would not hinder you from getting to work. Ultimately, you are going to have to answer to God; if something that keeps you from church would not have kept you from getting to work or meeting up with friends, then it’s not really a providential hindrance.

Part of the genius of the Lord’s requirement for his people to gather in his presence for public worship every Lord’s day—week in, week out—is that it forces us to be accountable. Each member is important: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”³ If you miss on occasion, you will likely get a phone call from one of the other members, asking about your wellbeing. If you keep missing, the elders are going to be concerned. Christ is the great Shepherd of the sheep, and he has appointed undershepherds—pastors and ruling elders, to keep track of the flock.

This past week I heard the poignant story of an old woman who apparently died at home on a Monday, and her lifeless body was discovered by her son three days later. Her son opened the door, saw his mother’s lifeless body and immediately

³ 1 Cor. 12:21

called the sheriff. The family checked her phone log, listened to her voicemails and was able to figure out the time of her death. This woman of faith was in her nineties, and it had long been her wish to die at home. She was an orderly person. The morning of her death, she had gotten up, made her bed, fixed breakfast, sat down in her favorite chair, and stopped breathing. Since she was trusting in Christ, we know that at the very moment she closed her eyes in death she awoke in heaven in the presence of her Savior who loved her and gave himself for her.⁴ But if it had not been for friends and family who cared and checked in on her, her death may not have been so quickly discovered. Same with church. Weekly in-person worship as prescribed in the word of God provides accountability.

If a flat tire on your car keeps you from church, ask yourself, would you have found some other way to get to work, if it had happened on a Monday? The Lord knows the thoughts and intents of your heart.

Under the New Covenant the ceremonial law has been abrogated, but the underlying moral duty (keeping on day in seven holy to the Lord, gathering with his people to worship) remains. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”⁵

“What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption? The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the *word, sacraments, and prayer*; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”⁶ The word, sacraments and prayer are the main elements of public worship.

When we become communicant members, we affirm that we will “participate faithfully in this church’s worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline.” God wants us to fear him, and godly fear is shown in the worship of God. Thirdly,

3. “[He that] worketh righteousness”

Peter states: “he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” When he speaks of working righteousness he clearly refers to the man Cornelius, for he was “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.” The angel assured him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.” Cornelius was a man who was known for his charitable gifts to the poor. Probably Cornelius had ever seen any of the Old Testament Scriptures, for

⁴ 2 Cor. 5:8

⁵ Heb. 10:25

⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 88

they were written in Hebrew and had not yet been translated into Latin. But even nature teaches us the responsibility of kindness. God himself is kind. In his common grace he sends the nourishing rain upon both just and unjust. Since God is generous, he expects men to be as well. Giving of alms to the poor is a good work.

What are good works? Our Confession of Faith gives a definition: “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.”⁷ The Bible tells us things that we should do, such as be kind and considerate; and things that we should not do, such as tell a lie or put a stumbling block in front of a blind person. There are two aspects of good works: *form* and *quality*. The unregenerate can do good works in the formal sense. The man out for a run with his dog when my dogs ran across the street and began chasing him did something good when he interrupted his run, stopped dead in his tracks and choked up on his dog’s leash. As long as he kept running, my dogs were going to keep pursuing him, barking at the top of their lungs. But when the man stopped, it was a service to me. It was a kindness. It enabled me grab hold of my dogs and take them away to safety. I immediately thanked the man, and we parted ways. Now was the man regenerate? Did he do that good deed to me out of a pure love for God and his Christ? I never found out. What the man did was clearly a good work as to *form*. But was it a good work as to *quality*? Did the man take pity on me and my animals out of a desire to let his light shine before men, that people would glorify the Father in heaven? Did he do it out of a pure, selfless love for God? Only Judgment Day will tell. If you or I do a good work out of a desire to be seen by men or to win people’s approval, then, while it may be a good work *formally*, it is not a good work as to *quality*. Moreover, *none* of our good works is perfect, for “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). Those who are born again by the Holy Spirit of God want to do good works out of gratitude, but the fact is that we can *never* earn our way to heaven, for all our works fall short of the glory of God. Only Christ perfectly measures up to God’s perfect standard, and the only way we will ever enter heaven is through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, by faith.

Peter states that “he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted by him.” Is Peter teaching salvation by works? We need to consider this carefully. First, a little review. What is the gospel?

The gospel is *not*: “*You can save yourself*” (Pelagianism).

The gospel is *not*: “Christ Jesus came into the world *to help sinners save themselves*” (Arminianism).

⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith 16.1, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 928

The gospel is: “Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15). That is the biblical gospel. Let that sink in for a moment: “Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*.”

If we interpret a verse to make it contradict the gospel, IT IS THE WRONG INTERPRETATION!

When Peter states, “he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted by him,” he is speaking the truth. The person who truly fears God and always and only works the righteousness required in God’s law is indeed accepted. But the plain fact is that *no one measures up to that standard*, and that is why we need the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now someone might say, “But that is the teaching of the apostle Paul. Perhaps Peter had a different understanding.”

Let me answer that one for you: No, he did not! It was Peter who preached, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Peter is crystal clear: there is no other name by which a sinner may be saved than the name of Christ. If John Smith is going to be saved, he must put his faith in Christ. That is the biblical gospel. If John Smith can save himself, then *John Smith* is a savior. If John Smith can be saved *with Christ’s help*, then there are two saviors: Christ and John Smith—but that is blasphemy; clearly contrary to the teaching of the Bible. No! John Smith is *not* the Savior; *Christ* is the Savior. There is no other name by which a sinner can be saved than by the name of Christ. Christ charged Peter and the other apostles to go into all the world and preach the gospel—the good news of Christ’s salvation. Peter took that commission seriously. Peter believed the gospel.

In 1 Peter 4:17 he wrote these words: “The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the *gospel* of God?” Clearly, “the house of God” is the church, the believing community composed of those who have received the gospel. Outside are people “who do not obey the gospel of God.” In Peter’s understanding there are two types of people: those who obey the gospel and are saved and part of the church, and those who do not obey the gospel and are lost and outside the church. Peter’s theology and Paul’s theology agree perfectly. The person born of the Spirit works righteousness as the fruit of a true and living faith.

Peter states: “he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is *accepted* by him.” What a comfort, to know that you, though guilty before a holy God and deserving nothing but wrath; because of Christ are “accepted in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6). If we could do this in our own strength, then we would have no need of Christ. We could save ourselves by our own goodness. There would be no need of the gospel. But Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners. The gospel is for

sinner who realize their need of Christ. They come to him by faith, then they live out their faith, working righteousness.

Today on the back of your bulletin is a testimonial concerning one of our member's father, a man who served as a deacon in the PCA. As related by OPC minister Ross Graham, this dear saint, recently promoted to the Church Triumphant, "ministered to Nikki and to me in an extraordinary fashion during the death of our infant son when we were a young pastor and family in Vincennes in 1975. It is a story that I have told many times to young men preparing for ministry. Your dad had just recently been ordained as our church's first (and, at the time, only) deacon when our second child was born suddenly and prematurely and lived for just 13 hours. He showed up at our home only minutes following our arrival from the hospital. He struggled for words, but made sure we knew he believed his place, as a deacon, was with us in our hour of need. He prayed and he wept with us, then he reached into the black pouch he carried and presented us with a check for our needs. Neither Nikki nor I can remember the amount of the check, and that wasn't the point of it. Rather, he had brought the church and its care into our lives single-handedly, and to this day we have not forgotten it. My point to the young men to whom I have told the story is, when God calls a man to be a deacon they will know it and show it." As Ross Graham related, "[Your father] was that kind of deacon to two twenty-eight-year-old parents in need a long time ago."⁸

May we, too, live lives of good works that assure us that we belong to Christ. Amen.

⁸ Ross W. Graham, email to Wes and Melissa Reynolds, 4-5-2021