

Becoming Qualified

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 6:37-46; 1st Peter 4:1-11



The world looks at our achievements to measure our qualifications for service. Employers often want workers with advanced degrees, 20 years of experience, adult maturity, and the energy of a teenager. The greater the responsibility, the greater grow the expectations. What are God's requirements for service? Can we measure up to God's expectations? Can we become worthy enough to ear the title of servants of the Most High?

God's ways are not like our own. Isaiah is pretty clear on that. God's list of qualifications for service are different than those of society. We should expect them to be different. Indeed, they are not what we might expect. First of all, God's focus is on the internal character of our lives, not on our external achievements, skills, and abilities. God focuses upon the heart.

Peter sets out some pretty high expectations for believers. He does not distinguish between those who do and don't desire to serve God. Service is not optional. It is part and parcel of taking the name of Christ Jesus as Lord. Peter expectations might seem beyond our reach. He wants us ready to lay down our very lives in the line of duty to serve God. Those are pretty significant expectations.

His words call to mind Christians struggling against regimes that have repressed people of faith in Christ. That was, after all, the context from which Peter was writing. We think of believers under communist or Muslim regimes disallowing the open worship of Christ Jesus. We think of believers facing conflict in the Spanish Inquisition, in Colonial era Virginia, or early Baptists in England in the 1600's. We recall our forefathers who established this very congregation in the face of recrimination from the Colonial authorities.

As we think of oppression and persecution so removed from our present reality, it is easy to cast Peter's words as irrelevant to our lives. We think they would apply if and only if we lived under persecution. No one demands our death for professing and living out faith in Christ Jesus. No one will forcibly stop us from coming to church, reading the Bible, praying, or sharing our faith in public. We are free to discuss faith, doctrine, and our personal perspectives on God. We are not called to die for professing our faith. Our lives are not on the line. Why, then should the question of suffering apply to our lives and Christian service?

Certainly, Peter had in mind believers taken to task for their faith. They might be tried in Roman court for treason—deemed traitors to the stability of the social order for not sacrificing to idols or an effigy of the Cesar. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish sacrifices on behalf of Cesar had ceased. Serving an invisible God with no graven image became risky in light of the concerns of an idolatrous society. Believers could be accused of atheism, and executed to allay the wrath of the gods upon the social order.

Such is hardly our context. We are free to worship and free to ignore our responsibility to serve God. We are free to live out our faith in corporate expression here or any other place. We are free to cut ourselves off from worshipping with other believers. We are free to pick and choose from myriad options of televised services. We are free to ignore worship altogether. Our earthly lives are not at risk.

So what do we do with Peter's words? Do we simply ignore them as non-applicable? In our free context, the demands of faith must be less than under a repressive regime. In our freedom, we certainly can live with lesser expectations placed on us than believers in Peter's world. Society tells us to live it up. Christian authors and television personalities tell us the same. Peter would have softened his words if writing to believers enjoying our freedoms, wouldn't he?

Peter says we must place serving God ahead of human desires. He is obviously talking about the gross, immoralities of pagan life—things like lust, drunkenness, and idolatry. Free of those big-ticket sins, we become fully-qualified servants of Christ, don't we? Is it not on that basis that we qualify as servants of Christ Jesus? Peter does go on to say that we should get on with administering the grace of God in its various forms. In our context, this need not be a high-demand issue, should it? When our lives are not on the line, why should we be inconvenienced by the apparent demands of Peter's words?

Jesus was God's message of freedom, love, grace, and forgiveness. Surely his perspective would relax expectations on our faith. Then again, Jesus' words do not sound a call to a relaxed faith. If anything, the demands of the gospel are deeper in the Sermon on the Mount than in Peter's clarion call to lay down our lives. Jesus says not to judge, nor to condemn, but to offer forgiveness freely. We should forgive in accord with the measure of forgiveness we desire to receive.

We have a knack for judging and condemning others, after all, we are only human. It is a very human trait to measuring others against our own qualifications. We judge people by their clothing, hair, tattoos, and piercings. We judge people by their ties to gross social sins we can easily catalog. We judge one another on the traditions and trappings of faith that we have inherited. We judge people as to our agreements on Biblical interpretation. Unintentionally, we stack others against our demands on their behavior instead of the demands of the gospel. The gospel's demand is love.

We too often miss that love's coin in trade is not condemnation, but forgiveness. This is what Jesus was getting at. Like the Pharisees, we are quick to judge others according to our traditions about the gospel. We are quick to condemn others when it makes us look better or feel superior. That is a tried and true way to keep from feeling uncomfortable around people who are different. Jesus did not call us to any ministry of condemnation. Rather, he demanded that we engage in a ministry of acceptance and forgiveness. That is what love is about. That is the essence of grace. Forgiveness is love's coin in trade. Forgiveness is the heart of grace.

This is Peter's understanding of placing God ahead of earthly desires. Jesus reminds us to shower others with forgiveness. It requires casting aside our human desires to live by God's love. Grace calls us to assume God's expression of love in Christ, denying his own comfort to offer grace and forgiveness to a world in need.

The gospel calls us to unite in service to Christ. Its prerequisite is not the quality of our past deeds, but our willingness to grant others forgiveness. We forgive because we have recognized our own need for forgiveness. God is not so concerned with our achievements to date. God is rather concerned with the recognition of our failure to measure up to the demands of love and grace. It is only through grace and forgiveness that we are able to serve God. Are we ready to set aside any sense of superiority in order to serve the world with the love of Christ Jesus?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*