

# Who Gets Behind the Velvet Rope?

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Leviticus 21:16-24** (TNIV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: ‘For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the LORD. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God. He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.’”

So Moses told this to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites.

## **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

The message about the cross is nonsense to those who are being destroyed; but to us who are being saved, it is God’s power. It is written: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intellectual I will nullify.* Where is the wise person? Where is the scholar? Where is today’s expert? Hasn’t God made the world’s wisdom nonsense?

Since in God’s wisdom the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided to save those who have faith through the proclamation of nonsense. Because Jews ask for signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified – to Jews a stone to trip over, to Gentiles nonsense, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ: God’s power and God’s wisdom! Because God’s nonsense is wiser than people, and God’s weakness is stronger than people.

Friends, have a look at your own calling: not many of you are wise by human standards, not many of you are powerful, not many of you are well-bred. But God chose the world’s fools to shame the wise. And God chose the world’s weak to shame the strong. And God chose the world’s poorly-bred nobodies, who amount to nothing, to stop the “somethings” in their tracks, so that no one may boast before God, by whom you are in Christ Jesus, who for us has become wisdom from God, and justice and holiness and redemption, so that, just as it is written, *Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.*

## **Children’s Story**

It was a long time coming, but the Possum Club was finally open. That first Saturday afternoon Sammy the Squirrel was standing in line, hoping to get inside.

I say, “hoping to get inside,” because the Possum Club was very exclusive. Only the very best animals from the very best species were welcome at the Possum Club.

No skunks. No lizards. No toads. No vultures – certainly no vultures! No chipmunks. No blue jays. There was a long list of unwelcome animals at the Possum Club.

But squirrels were welcome, and deer and robins – some of them anyway. And, of course, possums were welcome. It was the Possum Club after all.

That first Saturday afternoon Sammy was standing in line, hoping to get inside the very exclusive Possum Club.

While Sammy was waiting, Chester the Chipmunk was turned away. No Chipmunks allowed!  
Then Chili the Chickadee was told to turn around. No Chickadees either!

Then Robin the Robin was refused, too. Robins were okay, but Robin wasn't a good enough robin to get inside the very exclusive Possum Club.

When his good friends were turned away, Sammy went away with them. He decided he didn't want to get inside such a very exclusive club after all.

I think Sammy made a good choice.

### **Sermon**

Do you remember last Sunday's sermon? It's a bad sign for you, or for me, if you don't. Or maybe for both of us. A bad sign because last Sunday's sermon was about remembering of all things. And about being remembered. "We want to remember," I said. "And we want to be remembered." We want to remember, but we forget. We want to be remembered, but we are forgotten. Our minds and our memories fail us. That was last Sunday's sermon.

Our minds and our memories fail us.

Then we have our bodies.

**Our bodies are really important to us.** We live in our bodies. I was at Children's Hospital on Friday, waiting for and waiting through Topher's surgery. During the waiting, I spent a lot of time watching Toby. Watch Toby, or any toddler, for a while and you'll have no doubts that we live in our bodies. Sitting. Standing. Jumping. Falling. Hugging. Being hugged. Right from the start, we live in our bodies.

We also live by our bodies. All the experiences and interactions that add up to a life come to us by our bodies. Our arms and legs trigger the endorphin rush of exercise. Our eyes channel the visual splendor of the Grand Canyon. Our nose and tongue and teeth conspire together to satisfy us with the texture and taste of a barbecued hamburger. Our ears open doors to the conversations of friendship and of love. We live by our bodies. We are human by our bodies.

And we live for our bodies. How much of life isn't about our bodies? We feed and clothe our bodies. We test and stretch our bodies. We soothe and medicate our bodies. We measure ourselves by our bodies – whether they are well-toned, well-proportioned, well-preserved. We can't think of ourselves apart from our bodies. Our hopes and our expectations are wrapped up with our bodies.

What it all means is that our bodies are really important to us.

**But . . . our bodies really disappoint us.** You know that scene that comes up again and again in movies and in TV commercials, the scene with the velvet rope? It's at a swanky nightclub, maybe in L.A., maybe in Manhattan. A crowd of people have lined up, hoping to get in. Barring the way? A bouncer whose biceps are bursting the sleeves of his tuxedo jacket. And a velvet rope.

Most people stand in that line for hours. They stand there in front of the bouncer, in front of the velvet rope. They stand and they stand. And they never get into the nightclub. They never make it behind the velvet rope.

But then a limo pulls up. The door opens to reveal a pair of long sexy legs, legs that belong to one of the beautiful people. She rises from her limousine, and the velvet rope parts like the Red Sea for her and her escort. Everyone else . . . everyone else keeps waiting.

You and I? We keep waiting. Even at our best, we keep waiting. We're not young enough, most of us, and we're certainly not beautiful enough to get behind the velvet rope. We have too many pounds and not enough hair. We have a gap-toothed smile. We lack the up-front qualifications, the kind that put a briefcase in your hands on prime time TV. And our skin is rough and blemished, beyond the help of "age-defying" makeup. Even at our youngest and best, we don't get behind the velvet rope.

And, of course, we don't stay at our youngest and best. Once we reach a certain age, our metabolism slows, hair starts growing everywhere but on top of our heads, our muscles get weak, our joints stiffen up

and start to stab us with pain. It becomes obvious that our bodies are losing their race against time and against gravity. In the end, our bodies will and do fail us.

Meanwhile that end is sneaking up on us. The disappointment we have with our bodies accelerates and intensifies every day. Some of us have a lazy-susan full of prescription bottles to prove it – or maybe a pill-caddy smorgasbord because our pill-taking memories are failing us. As time goes on, it's clear: the only ropes we are sure to get behind are the ropes that will lower our casket into six feet of earth. The Apostle no doubt had something else in mind in Romans 7, but his words ring true: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

**The good news? In the end, this bodily disappointment doesn't matter.** It doesn't matter. Here's what really matters: loving God, serving God, belonging to Jesus Christ. Being one of the beautiful people, getting behind the velvet rope? That's not what matters! What matters is entering – not exclusive nightclubs, not gated communities, not prestigious professional organizations – what matters is entering the kingdom of God. What matters is entering a hoped-for world of justice, peace, reconciliation, health, and wholeness, entering a world that God will create by the Holy Spirit, a world we seek to anticipate through our own creative and re-creative work, work that we do energized by the Holy Spirit, who lives among us.

One week from tomorrow night, we and those we invite will join with others at Veterans Memorial Auditorium, working together to anticipate the justice God wills for his kingdom and for all people. What matters is not getting behind the velvet rope. What matters for us these days is getting to the BREAD action meeting on May 5! What matters is entering God's kingdom and entering into the work of that kingdom.

And how do we enter that kingdom? Not by some bodily standard. Not the standard from Leviticus for priests serving at God's temple, a standard that allowed no physical defects at all. And certainly not by the standard of beauty displayed on the covers of women's magazines. You do know, don't you, that those covers are faked? No one, for example, looks like Faith Hill looked on the cover of Redbook magazine a year or so ago. Not even Faith Hill looks like that cover. [Click [here](#).] So, no, we don't enter the kingdom by meeting some bodily standard of beauty or of fitness or of proportional perfection.

Nor do we enter the kingdom by measuring up to some cultural or religious standard. Paul's first century Jewish audience wanted demonstrations of divine power, the kind of power that would turn the Roman-dominated world upside down. Certainly not the weakness of the cross. And Paul's first century Greek audience wanted evidence of superior learning and of intellectual and philosophical sophistication. But Paul said all that was beside the point. He said that God deliberately overturned every standard when it came to entering the kingdom. God, he said, preferred nonsense to wisdom. God, he said, preferred weakness to power. God, he said, preferred nobodies to somebodies.

And so, the kingdom is entered by faith. The faith of the hopeless and the helpless. The faith of the powerless and the ignorant. The faith of the fat and the ugly and the ordinary. The faith of the immature and the unsophisticated. The faith of the breaking down and the dying. Faith that clings, not to my qualifications of heart or mind or body – faith that clings to Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ is for us wisdom from God. Jesus Christ is justice. Jesus Christ is holiness. Jesus Christ is redemption. He is what we need more than anything, more than everything else.

Still, our bodies do disappoint us, deeply, for now. But in our bodies we shall be saved. The coming resurrection of the dead affirms our bodies, affirms our bodies as it promises to save them and to perfect them. Through the sacraments, God touches, claims, and accepts our bodies, washing our bodies in baptism, feeding our bodies at the table. In our bodies we shall be saved, saved by a Savior who came to us in a body. And that body matters, because only in that body, only incarnate, is there "Christ crucified." Only in that body do we have Gospel "nonsense" to proclaim and to believe. The nonsense that overturns every standard. The nonsense that overturns every expectation. The nonsense that makes sense of it all.

Our minds and our memories fail us. We forget and we are forgotten. Our bodies disappoint us. At their best, they fail to get us behind the velvet rope. And it's all downhill from there. We sag. We wear out. We break down. We quit altogether.

But God remembers us, and God saves us.

When Jesus died in the body, the temple curtain, the curtain that kept God and people apart, the curtain that no priest with a physical defect could come near – when Jesus died in the body, the temple curtain ripped in two. The velvet rope, in other words, was taken down. God has come out to us.

We don't need to qualify for the kingdom. All we need to do is to receive the kingdom, to receive the kingdom that has come to us in Jesus Christ, to receive the kingdom that has come to us through the Holy Spirit, to receive the kingdom and to share its life, a life that embraces people who will never measure up and welcomes them to a world without velvet ropes.