

What Did Jesus Expect of Non-Jews?

When Jesus was born, the people of Israel were pretty isolationist. They refused to join in the religions or even the customs of the Roman Empire. You might think that the Jews of that day were hostile to all outsiders, but that wasn't necessarily true.

Among the non-Jews who interacted with the people of Israel, some were identified as "righteous," decent people even though they weren't Jewish. These were usually friends and neighbors who had been living among the people of Israel for a long time.

Non-Jews were included in the Mosaic Covenant

When Moses led the people out of Egypt, the group included some who weren't Jewish even then. When Moses received the law up on the mountain and brought it to the people for their agreement, some of those in the crowd who accepted the covenant weren't Israelites. They'd escaped from Egypt with the people and traveled with them, but they didn't share the same religious commitment to the God of Israel.

Moses gathered together all of the people of Israel as well as the non-Jews who were living with them, when he proclaimed the covenant:

All of you are standing today in the presence of the LORD your God—your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, together with your children and your wives, and the aliens living in your camps who chop your wood and carry your water. You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, (Deuteronomy 29:10-12)

Every seventh year the covenant would be read to all the people, Israelites as well as those who were not Israelites but living among them. This was to remind all of them of the law they had accepted and agreed to live by.

The term for foreigners, resident aliens, in Hebrew scriptures is "גֵר (gēr)" in Hebrew. This word can be translated as "alien," "sojourner," "foreigner," or "stranger." It implies living in a place where you're not part of the local society or culture, a place where outsiders may not even own land and where their rights are only those allowed by the resident culture.

Aliens, including non-Jews, were subject to the law of Moses, and the law itself specified which of the provisions that applied to them.

Non-Jews were expected to obey the moral parts of the law

What does it mean for a non-Jew to be righteous among the people of Israel? After all, most non-Jews were known to be idolatrous and violent, capable of murder, rape, incest, and a whole range of bad behavior. I was curious, so I took my word processor to the Mosaic law in the scripture to find out which parts of the law actually applied to aliens living among the people. What I found was a group of provisions in the law that specifically included aliens:

- idolatry is not allowed
- blasphemy is not allowed
- bloodshed is not allowed

- sexual immorality is not allowed
- justice is required for all
- one may participate in Sabbath and festivals

It turns out the moral provisions of the law, rather than those about religious rituals, were identified by Jewish scholar Jonathan Klawans of Boston University. Non-Jews living among the people of Israel were expected to comply with the moral, but not ritual, provisions of the law in order to be considered righteous people.

Jews were expected to treat non-Jewish neighbors with respect

There is a story in the Mishnah that shows the way neighborly Jews and non-Jews got along during Jesus' time. It has to do with respecting the Sabbath and not working on that day. The rabbis say, "*They do not give hides to a [gentile] tanner, or clothing to a gentile laundryman, unless there is sufficient time for them to be done while it is still day.*" This lets the work be done before sunset so that the workers won't violate the Sabbath.

The story continues, "*R. Eleazar b. R. Sadoq said, 'Members of the household of Rabban Gamaliel had the habit of giving white clothes to a gentile laundryman three days before the Sabbath, and colored ones on the eve of the Sabbath.'*" The rabbis drew a very interesting conclusion from this observation: "*Accordingly we infer that white ones are harder to do than colored ones.*"

The rabbis taught that it was appropriate for Jews to honor the needs of non-Jews to respect the Sabbath. This story also shows that in the mix of cultures living in Palestine during the Roman occupation, interactions between Jews and some non-Jews were friendly and honored the Jewish law.

How did Jesus interact with non-Jews?

In the first century, during the life of Jesus, both righteous and barbaric foreigners were part of everyday life. Jesus grew up in the Galilee, which was called Galilee of the Nations in those days because of the many cultures of the folks living there. There were Roman cities intermixed with Jewish villages, so Jesus had lots of exposure to outsiders.

We know that non-Jews were included in the Gospel, since Jesus told his followers in the Great Commission to carry the Gospel to all the people of the nations. Jesus said,

teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:20)

So what kind of behavior did Jesus himself expect from these non-Jews?

At a minimum, Jesus expected that Jews and non-Jews would all be welcome into the kingdom of God. He spoke to non-Jews as well as Jews, and he told his followers to include both Jews and non-Jews in their work. He expected that non-Jews would be welcome at the great banquet at the end of time, and that they would stand with the people of Israel without partiality or prejudice at the time of judgment.

Jesus met many non-Jews who were capable of great faith. In his encounters with non-Jews, Jesus always pointed out that it was their faith that made the difference, that their faith made their healing possible. Faith, the one critical element required for salvation, was equally available to Jews and non-Jews. Jesus made sure that each non-Jew heard about its critical importance.

In addition, Jesus expected righteousness from non-Jews, just as he did from Jews. He ordered his disciples to teach all people “*to observe all that I commanded you.*” His command to repent, to turn away from sin, was always the first step on the road to the Kingdom of God.

Did Paul really say that the law was obsolete?

When we listen to Paul we can get confused about righteousness and how it relates to the law. Paul says,

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

(Romans 7:6)

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4)

It may sound like the law is obsolete or no longer matters. On the contrary, Paul’s letters to the people of the churches are very clear that they’re still expected to behave themselves. Whether it’s dissention in the church or sexual immorality, Paul is clear that righteous behavior is action that matches the moral teaching of the law.

For Paul, the meaning of righteousness itself didn’t change with the coming of Christ. It was still there in the moral provisions of the law. What changed was the way that people should reach for and could acquire the righteousness of God. Salvation does not come from obeying the law, but from faith. In faith we’re forgiven our sins, our violations of righteousness, and welcomed as righteous before God.

But what standard identifies the things we should do and things we should not do? It’s the law that sets the standard that establishes what a righteous person, a godly person, should be doing and should not be doing. This moral law is still a standard for all, Jews and non-Jews.

How do we relate to the law today?

For those of us who follow Jesus these days, where do we fit in? Some of us may have a Jewish inheritance, and a few of us may be Jewish Christians. But I expect that most of us are like me, descended from those non-Jews who knew nothing about the people of Israel when Jesus was born.

We’re blessed that he came for all of us, and that through him we’re all adopted into the people of God. We’re forgiven our failings and accepted through him, even when we fail in the righteousness we should be striving for. In these days, how do we know the way we should be living and the righteousness we should be seeking?

The scriptural law still sets the standard for moral behavior for all people, Jews and non-Jews, the same way it sets the standard for Jews to live out their relationship with God. The list of moral provisions is still a guide and standard for our behavior:

We must respect God and not indulge in idolatry or blasphemy

We must avoid bloodshed

We must avoid sexual immorality

We are required to provide equal justice for all

We must participate in times of worship and celebration

For those of us who come to Jesus with the other non-Jews who made their way to him, we can live by these standards and show God's righteousness through our lives every day.