

Have you ever seen one of those car dealership commercials that says, "Anyone can buy a car here!" But then you look at the fine print at the bottom of the screen and see that "Anyone" really means the people who pass their credit check? Or have you ever tried to get a special deal on a cell phone plan you saw a commercial for, and the commercial claimed this new deal was for anyone, only to be told that discount only applies to a certain group of customers? It sure seems like whenever people say "Anyone is welcome," or "Anyone can cash in on this deal," they don't really mean anyone, do they?

Read Matthew 4: 18-22. There's always a catch.

Read Luke 9:23 Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."

When making the invitation to potential followers, Jesus invites "Anyone."

1) Anyone Is Welcome

But over the years, we've gotten to the point that even when we hear Jesus say anyone we think, "Yeah right. What's the catch?" There's no catch. No small print. No hidden fees. It's all laid out in that verse, and it's open to "Anyone." And when Jesus said "Anyone," the crowds would have looked at his disciples and known that He meant it.

You have to understand, to his society, Jesus was a rabbi. Homeless, unconventional, but a rabbi nonetheless. And a rabbi was a teacher of God's Word, which was then the Old Testament. rabbis had extensive knowledge of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and all of the writings of the prophets.

Rabbis were also special because they had a group of talmid (pronounced tal-meed). The word talmid translates to "disciple" or "student." So, essentially, every rabbi had a class of students. This was an incredibly exclusive group of students. Most people didn't end up as students of rabbis. In fact, those who didn't make the cut most often ended up learning some sort of trade, typically one that was passed down in their family. They'd work as stonemasons, fishermen, tradesmen.

For those students wanting to become the talmid of a particular rabbi, you had to go through an application process. Firstly, there were hefty pre-requisites before even being considered to become a talmid. These were the equivalent of the GPA and transcript pre-requisites for getting into an elite college or academy.

If you want to go to Harvard, you better have a 4.0 GPA, or a 32 on your ACT, or a 1600 SAT score. Without those kinds of stats, you're probably not going to get in, right? Well, it's the same with a talmid applying to join a rabbi's school.

Talmids had to have an impressive knowledge of Scripture, and a rabbi would quiz a prospective talmid, asking them to recite an entire book, or to tell him the number of times the name of the Lord was used in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus. This was an intense, painstaking process. But rabbis had to be thorough, because the excellence of the student reflected the excellence of the teacher. If a rabbi just let anyone in, it was clear he was not a sought after teacher. On the other hand, if a rabbi's group of talmid were especially brilliant, the rabbi would be respected and admired. But then Jesus changes the system, especially when he invited a tax collector to be a talmid.

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So when word gets out about a new rabbi who is picking out followers at random, people start to wonder what's up. They come to hear from this incredible teacher named Jesus, but when they look at his disciples, they must have been confused. They must have shook their heads and thought, "These are his students? They're nobodies! Those two used to be fishermen, a few of them are just political hotheads, and that guy's a local tax collector!"

But then Jesus makes the invitation, and when people hear that anyone can come learn from this incredible rabbi, I'm sure they started to entertain the idea. People who had given up the dream of learning from a rabbi a long time ago were now wondering if they'd be welcome in this new rabbi's group. And slowly but surely, people started to come and want to follow this rabbi Jesus. They realized when He said "Anyone," He meant it.

When Jesus said that anyone was welcome, the crowds began to understand that meant everyone was welcome. And it's true, Anyone means everyone.

2) Anyone Means Everyone

But here's the struggle: though we'd never say it, we don't always buy into the idea that church should be for just "Anyone." We kind of like church the way it is, don't we? We usually prefer things to stay the same. And same soon becomes standard, and pretty soon a standard becomes a qualification. I think Jesus knew that's how things would go, and I think Luke 9:23 is here to remind us that there shouldn't be any qualifications.

So Jesus does away with the qualifications to follow. He got rid of the long list of prerequisites; he did away with the standard application process. And I think the Church should do away with some of our qualifications.

We usually don't talk about it, but we've got our own unwritten code, don't we? For instance, there's kind of an unwritten dress code, right? Over the past few decades, there's been a little bit of an unwritten political code, too. And in most churches, there have been all kinds of things added to their unwritten code. Whether or not you should ever consume alcohol. Whether or

not you should listen to this or that style of music. What your income is. What your social agenda is. What your church denomination is. The list stacks up pretty quickly. Sure, the church keeps saying, "Anyone is welcome." But when you look at how the members dress, or what their political leanings they prefer, or what style of music they accept, it becomes clear that there are some qualifications.

But Jesus didn't just get rid of the qualifications. When Jesus said, "Anyone," he did something else. In eliminating the qualifications, Jesus got rid of all the excuses.

3) No Qualifications Means No Excuses

See, when Jesus invites anyone to follow him, He doesn't just break down the barriers that keep so many people from learning more about God. He also gets rid of all the excuses different people were hiding behind. So now the tradesmen had no excuse not to follow a rabbi. Now the drop out student couldn't complain about his past anymore. Now the mother of four couldn't say she never got a chance to learn from a rabbi.

So what has your excuse been? I think most of us have been holding off on a relationship with Christ because we say we're busy. So what is it for you? Is it because you're too busy with putting in hours at the office?

Is it because you've really been focusing on your marriage lately? Is it because the kids need a lot of time and attention? Is it because times have been tough and you just got a second job?

Others say it's because they've got a past they're not proud of. So the baggage from the addiction or the divorce or the bankruptcy has been your excuse for a long time. It's easy to hide behind those kinds of excuses, because who's going to argue with someone who's been through a tragedy, or someone who's been emotionally scarred? But Jesus gets rid of all the excuses when he invites "Anyone."

Anyone is welcome to have a relationship with Jesus. Anyone.

Sexual past? Anyone. Ex-con? Anyone. Inmate? Anyone.

Recently divorced? Anyone. Legalist? Anyone.

Alcoholic? Anyone. Pot head? Anyone.

Addict? Anyone. Hypocrite? Anyone.

Now, we need to be ready for what can happen when we embrace the invitation to "Anyone." Because if anyone can come to church, that'll kind of mess things up. All of the sudden, the church gets filled with a lot of "un-churched" people. If we really accept "Anyone" into our churches to follow Christ, we'll be forced to deal with our unwritten codes. We'll be forced to get out of our comfort zones and rub shoulders with people from different backgrounds and social circles, people who have different music collections and recreational activities than us, people whose wardrobes confuse or annoy us, people who are hard to tolerate and even

harder to love. But followers are willing to break down walls, trash the unwritten codes, and welcome “Anyone” into God’s family right alongside Jesus.

Some of you are probably thinking, “Wait a minute! We can’t just let anyone into our church! We can’t just let people show up and invite them into God’s family and tolerate anything they want. That’s not Biblical!” And you’re right. That’s not Biblical. I’m not saying we tolerate or condone anything sinful. When a person wants to become a Christian, it’s right to make sure they understand what God’s Word allows and what it doesn’t.

But when Jesus makes the invitation, he says, “Anyone.” So some of the people who respond to that invitation will have a past that you don’t approve of. Some of them will have been involved in lifestyles you’d be embarrassed to hear about.

Fans don’t know how to handle new people like that. They prefer not to know. Fans prefer things to be shallow and comfortable. But followers are willing to listen, willing to hear stories of brokenness and sin and still welcome those people with open arms. This next point is crucial to making sure that we help all of us—both brand new Christians and long-time believers—move into a completely committed relationship with Jesus.

4) It’s Anyone, But It’s Everything

When Jesus makes His invitation, he welcomes anyone who could come after Him. But He also makes clear that when you choose to follow Him, you were giving up everything. So it’s Anyone, but it’s Everything.

When a talmid was finally accepted into a rabbi’s school, they would leave their homes, their jobs, whatever was holding them back, and they would go and follow the rabbi. Literally, they would follow the rabbi wherever he went.

So if the rabbi decided to go to market, his students would follow. And if a rabbi decided to go to another town, his students would follow. If the rabbi needed to visit some sick in the area, his students would follow.

Now, to follow the rabbi named Jesus, this would cost even more. Because if the rabbi decided to live without a home, his students would follow. And if Jesus the rabbi decided to go among the sinners and the shameful, his students would follow. And if Jesus the rabbi decided not to flee from persecution, his students would follow.

And that’s what Jesus offers. The greatest teacher who ever lived offers you the chance to become one of his students. And when he says anyone, he means everyone. And with no qualifications, you’ve got no excuse. But even though He makes his invitation to anyone, He also guarantees that it will cost you everything. Are you ready? Are you willing to follow the rabbi Jesus?