Can a person who has mental retardation experience salvation? The answer is a resounding yes! “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Whoever, according to my understanding of biblical truths, consists of the whole human race, including those who have mental retardation.

Whoever, again according to my understanding of biblical teachings regarding salvation, entails certain mental abilities. In John 9:41, Jesus told the Pharisees: “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

Jesus rebuked these religious leaders, teaching that they were still in their sin because they claimed to have spiritual sight but had rejected Jesus. He explained that those without this sight would not be held responsible for their sins. By implication, this means that those who are mentally incapable of knowing their sinful condition before God will not be held personally responsible for their sin.

Then in John 15:22-24, Jesus stated: “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father.”

Jesus’ point was that people who receive a revelation about Him have no excuse for remaining in their sinful condition. He told His disciples that if He had not revealed Himself to individuals, then “they would not have sin.” By implication, I understand this to mean those who cannot mentally comprehend the revelation of Jesus will not be held personally responsible for their sin.

What About People Who Are Mentally Challenged?

There are three functioning levels of mental retardation: educable, trainable, and severe/profound.

People in the first two levels, which consist of about 87 percent of all who are mentally challenged, have an IQ from 36 to 70 and would come under John 3:16. Those who are either educable or trainable have the intellectual capacity to know right from wrong. Their level of mental ability may compare to that of a 4-year-old to a 12-year-old individual. Therefore, it is my belief that they are personally responsible to alleviate their sins before God. They need to make a personal decision to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Although they may think as children, Jesus advocated for them and warned us: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matt. 18:3-6).

Both educable and trainable mentally challenged individuals may have an advantage over us. We are more mentally capable, but they possess a more “childlike” faith. So we who teach them about faith should avoid—at all costs—becoming stumbling blocks to those who have childlike faith and mental
challenges, regardless of their chronological age.

Now what about those who are identified as severely/profoundly mentally challenged with IQ levels ranging from 0 to 35? Do the Scriptures John 3:16; John 9:41; or John 15:22-24 apply to these individuals? Without hesitation and because of God’s sovereignty and grace, I would apply all three passages to them.

Why? First, because of God’s sovereignty, only He can know who is mentally able or unable to understand her sinful condition before Him. Those who can understand are held personally responsible by Him to alleviate their sins by making a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, His Son, who died on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. When the severely/profoundly mentally challenged individual gives any observable evidence of comprehending salvation, we must exercise childlike faith in God by trusting that God recognizes this individual’s commitment as genuine and continuing to disciple her.

Second, because of God’s grace and His foreknowledge, those who do not have the intellectual capacity to discern right from wrong would be considered sinless before God, according to my understanding of John 9:41 and John 15:22-24. Although this may be the case with some of these individuals, this does not give us as teachers and stewards of His Word permission to withhold His Word at any time because only God knows those who are under His special grace.

Examples from My Experiences
For 17 years, God has given me the blessing of teaching His Word to individuals who are mentally challenged. I have to trust in the Lord completely regarding their comprehension of His Word. It isn’t easy to evaluate their comprehension level. Many times after presenting a Bible lesson, I think to myself, I sure hope they understood what we were trying to teach them. Then there are those times of excitement and reward when individuals respond to the lessons presented. Let me share three scenarios from my experience.

Nick, mentally challenged and slightly impaired by cerebral palsy, works as a janitor and is sent out on assignments on behalf of a sheltered workshop. He lives in a group home where he shares in cooking, laundry, housekeeping, and yard maintenance. Nick uses public transportation without any assistance. He can do some simple math, such as that required to go to a local convenience store to purchase a couple of candy bars and a soft drink. Nick is able to hand out church bulletins and assist in gathering the offerings. He also can fill other roles of an usher.

Depending on the situation, Nick’s mental responses range from that of a 7-year-old to that of a 12-year-old, although Nick is 45 years old. Although Nick can recognize certain words such as God, Jesus, food, Coke, and so forth, he is unable to read a text unless he follows someone who is “modeling” reading for him. After attending our Special Friends Class and worship service for a few years, Nick on his own initiative invited Jesus into his life and followed Him in baptism. After his profession of faith, Nick slowly became more sensitive to what was right and wrong in God’s eyes and aware that God wanted to help him do the right things in his life.

Syd’s intelligence ranges from that of a four-year-old to an eight-year-old. In his late 40s and able to accomplish a few things independently, Syd requires more supervision than Nick in carrying out daily tasks. Whereas Nick can do certain household chores without being constantly reminded, Syd needs constant reminders at times. While Nick lives in a group home with 4 supervisors over a 24-hour period, Syd lives in a group home that requires 6 supervisors over a 24-hour period. Syd’s response speed is one-fourth that of Nick’s; but unlike Nick, Syd has a certain ability in reading and comprehending the newspaper.

Syd was able to understand the Bible lessons as teachers used flannel board and Bible characters. He also was responsive to the worship services. After six months Syd made a profession of faith. My coworker and I were somewhat slow to recognize and give credit to Syd’s physical manifestation of wanting to make a public profession of faith. After a month of attending Sunday School and worship services, Syd started to respond to the altar calls. Since Syd had
been attending for only a month, we were not sure he understood the significance of the altar call. Was he making a sincere commitment to Christ? Or was he just mimicking others? These two questions were on our minds for the next four months. Then I counseled with Syd, assisted by one of his house supervisors who is a Christian. The Lord confirmed to me through Syd's answers and witness that he had indeed made a personal commitment to Jesus and wanted to follow Him in baptism. So we proceeded to baptize him. After being baptized, Syd no longer went forward during the altar calls.

Ana, who is in her early teens, had half of her brain removed after being physically abused by her natural parents sometime between the ages of two and three years old. As a result, her physical and mental functions are that of a one- to two-year-old child. She is unable to speak, walk, sit up, or have any bowel or bladder control. As with some of those who have cerebral palsy, Ana lacks motor coordination of her muscles throughout her body, causing her physical movement to be distorted. She must be strapped into her wheelchair in a prone position.

Although Ana's communication abilities are limited to a few grunts and groans, she loves to listen to Christian music on a handheld cassette tape player with earphones. She even can distinguish between what she calls “good music” and “bad music.” When Ana is able to attend Sunday School and the worship service, she brings along her music. Ana often seems to listen to the Sunday School lesson for about 10 minutes. Then she starts giving a familiar grunt to signify that she wants to listen to her Christian music. She will not stop grunting until one of us complies.

Has Ana ever put her faith in Christ? I do not know. Does she have the mental capacity to understand God's salvation for her? I do not know. Where does someone like Ana fall in regard to John 3:16; John 9:41; and John 15:22-24? Once again, I really don't know. But since God knows the answers to all of these questions, I must go on and minister the gospel message to Ana and to those like her while leaving the results to God.

So the question is this: Can a mentally challenged person experience salvation? The answer is yes! Do all mentally challenged individuals experience salvation as their counterparts do? Only God knows! What is our responsibility as bearers of the gospel to those who are mentally challenged? We are to faithfully continue to teach them the good news and leave all the results to God.

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