

Study Eight

WALKING WORTHILY OF THE CALLING

Paul begged the Ephesians to lead a life worthy of the calling with which they had been called (Eph. 4:1). He had in mind such things as lowliness of mind, love, and unity. He prayed, however, for the Thessalonians that God would make them worthy of his call by fulfilling their every good resolve and work of faith (II Thess. 1:11). He clearly understood that a walk worthy of God's calling would combine all the operations of man's life and all the operations of God in man. The filling out of the call would not leave man able to boast of his achievements, nor leave him slothful and inactive.

Large sections of Paul's epistles (as well as other epistles and the gospels) deal with the manner of conduct which is consistent with God's call. For example: Romans 12–15; I Corin. 5–14; Gal. 5–6; Eph. 4–6; Col. 3–4; I Thess. 4–5; II Thess. 3; Titus 2:3, and many other isolated passages. These support Paul's claim that, like a father, he encouraged, and exhorted, and charged Christians, to lead a life worthy of God who called them to his own kingdom and glory (I Thess. 2:12).

WORKS ARISING FROM GRACE

However, patterns of behaviour alone do not constitute a life that is worthy of God's call. The church at Sardis had a name that they were alive when in fact they were dead. Their reputation must have derived from their ability to do the things that were the evidences of true life. In fact they were on the point of death (Rev. 3:1–4). It may be observed, both in persons and in history, that virtue (or the appearance of) can be maintained for a period after its original impetus has gone. But this ability inevitably wanes; and the true facts emerge. So the Sardis church was asked to strengthen what remained because its works were not perfect. In particular they were asked to remember what they received and heard, keep that, and repent. Those without soiled garments, would walk with the Lord because they were worthy.

We may compare the situation of this church to Israel whose fear of God was a 'commandment of men learned by rote (Isa. 29:13). If the knowledge of God, is not present to a person's mind and affections, his actions have no life. A 'worthy' life arises from being filled with the knowledge of God's will, and so bearing fruit in every good work and increasing more in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:9–10). Therefore, throughout the NT (and OT) instruction in living and the promise of grace are inter-woven, and in fact are really one thing.

This fact is clearly shown in II Peter 1:3–11, when we are told that God's power has granted to believers all that pertains to life and godliness. This is focussed in 'great promises' so that believers may escape corruption and become sharers in the divine nature. Clearly these promises are to be believed, and because of the greatness of the promises, believed in a whole-hearted manner that includes virtue, knowledge, self-control, etc. The original

Greek does not suggest that faith is inadequate by itself, but rather, strong enough to include all the other elements ('supply, in your faith . . .'). If these are not present, the believer has forgotten that he was cleansed; i.e., his faith was deficient before his works revealed that fact. (This is parallel to the Sardis dilemma). Jesus, when asked how one could do God's works, explained that the work of God was that they believe . . . (John 6:29). We may explain these words by saying that true faith encompasses all expressions of confidence in God.

When Titus was dealing with Cretians, Paul advised to 'rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith' because of a Cretian tendency to be liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons (Titus 1:12f.). Their faith could not flow if it did not give rise to appropriate behaviour. Paul explained that God's grace trained people to renounce irreligion and espouse upright and godly living (2:11f.). Grace not only is intended to lead to good works, but is eminently designed to foster them. Titus was to insist on these things, viz., good works by grace, so that those who believed in God would be careful to maintain good works (Titus 3:3–8).

THE UNWORTHY ARE WORTHY

Basic to being worthy of God's call is to live consistently with its nature. It is a call which came when we were unworthy (and of which we never will be worthy). The prodigal son understood that he was not worthy to be called a son (Luke 15:19; cf. Jacob; Gen. 32:10), yet he came to understand sonship far better than the older son who superficially had been worthy of sonship. True sons never see their own actions as deserving praise. Having done all that is commanded, they say: 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty' (Luke 17:7–10). The love of their father is their consuming concern.

The Capernaum centurion was called worthy for Jesus to heal his son because he had loved Israel and built a synagogue (Luke 7:4 and Matt. 8:8). Although this was the view of those who had benefited by his generosity, Jesus agreed with their estimate even if for more profound reasons. He said he had not found a faith like this man's anywhere in Israel. However, the centurion did not have eyes for himself; he said he was not worthy to have Christ under his roof. So worthiness of God's call must include an understanding of unworthiness. Compare John the Baptist of whom Jesus said that there was none greater born of woman: the man himself said he was unworthy to undo his Master's shoes. (John 1:27).

The centurion's love for Israel plainly related to the truth they held, and his desire for God. He would have hungered and thirsted for righteousness; he would have been eager to hear, and would have known that he needed a 'doctor'. It was such worthy people whom Jesus instructed his apostles to seek out as they travelled about preaching the good news (Matt. 10:9–15). Those who were worthy of the gospel were those who would forsake all and take up their cross and follow Jesus (Matt. 10:37f.). This forsaking all would have been not so much a requirement as an indication that the seeking of truth had become a consuming passion.

THE ‘WORTHY’ ARE UNWORTHY

Men would like to be worthy of the call of God, because then they would not be under obligation to God. However, for those with faith, their acceptance while unworthy is the driving force in their walking worthily (I Tim 1:12–17). Their whole attitude is one of grateful memory (cf. II Peter 1:9). A believer never becomes worthy in a moral or legal sense as though he had made up for the past and could live satisfactorily in the present. Even if his present life were perfect, this would not be seen as creditable, but as a natural response of love. He who sees himself as worthy is unworthy of the calling of God if only because he has set a value on the work of his own hands—and become an idolater. (Isa. 48:3–5)

FORSAKING ALL

It is in this setting of being worthy by recognising one’s unworthiness, that Jesus could freely forgive people on the one hand, releasing them from all bondage, and on the other hand, ask for and receive absolute allegiance to himself, and the determination to master one’s instincts (eg. John 8:11, Luke 7:47–50). Paul can tell Timothy to take his share of suffering for the gospel, in the power of God who called with a call that was not related to works (II Tim. 1:8f.). This is the spirit of the apostles who were glad that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ (Acts 5:41). Paul, who once was confident in the flesh, came to see that his whole life consisted in his relating to Christ, and he bent his energies towards identifying with Christ’s saving actions—not his own, that he might attain the resurrection—not that he could or needed to, but that was his passion (Phil. 3:8–11).

Without attempting to summarise all the elements of practical instruction in the NT, we may now observe certain emphases that are particularly related to living worthily of the calling of God.

GRACIOUSNESS

If the basis of God’s call is grace, walking worthy of it must include giving to others what has been received. The virtues of forgiveness, love, tender-heartedness, patience unselfishness etc., whereby Christians were redeemed must be freely offered to all, regardless of their deservingness (Matt. 18:23–35; II Corin. 8:7–9; I Peter 2:21–25).

UNITY

Paul said he was commissioned to tell Gentiles about Christ, and to ‘make all men see what is the plan of the mystery . . . that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known . . .’ (Eph. 3:7–13). The plan he spoke of was the one whereby Jew and Gentile were accepted, in one body, making peace, and bringing hostility to an end (2:11 – 3:6). This plan, encompassing, potentially, the whole creation, but being lived out now by the church, was intended to reveal to authorities in the heavenly places, God’s plan for the uniting of all things (1:10).

Therefore living a life worthy of the calling would have to include lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearing one another in love, and being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1–3; and Phil. 1:27). As this unity of inter-relationship was built up under the direction of the authority gifts to the church (Eph. 4:11–16), the church would imitate God, and walk in love, as Christ did when he gave himself up for the church (5:1–2). No human ruler has yet been able to cause men to live together in true harmony, but the world should constantly have before it a working case history of unity as a display of God’s own wisdom.

When the church makes distinctions between groups of people, it causes the name of God to be blasphemed (James 2:1–7).

FREEDOM

Stress is laid in a number of places in the NT on avoiding submission to external regulation, in regard to religious practise or to earning the favour of God (Rom. 10:1–4; Gal. 5:1–12; Phil. 3:1–3; Col. 2:8–23). When it is considered that the function of such external regulation is elementary (ie. for children) or temporary (until the gospel comes) and condemnatory, it can be appreciated how such a submission would dry up the well-springs of love to God, so bringing shame to the gospel rather than adornment. All action is to flow from the freedom Christ gives from such regulation (cf. Ps. 32:8f.). But each believer needs to see that his freedom is expressed in loving service, to fellow creatures (Gal. 5:13–25). There is no love without freedom, but alternatively, there is no freedom without love. Jacques Ellul (‘The Ethics of Freedom’) notes that the church should incarnate this freedom, but in fact, in all its history, never has. Individuals have exercised it he claims, but never the church (p 289).

HOPE

Both Jesus and his apostles taught that a believers actions and attitudes should be profoundly influenced by what is yet to come. Jesus said his disciples should ‘watch’, with clear reference to how they lived, because they did not know when the Son of man would return (Matt. 24:36–51, also Ch. 25). Paul said believers should be wide awake, conducting themselves becomingly because salvation was nearer at hand than when they first believed (Rom. 13:11–14; see also I Thess. 5:1–11 and II Peter 3:11–13).

Obviously, Christians can learn from the past but are strongly drawn on by what is yet to come. One could observe that if Christian action were based predominantly on the past, everything would grind to a cautious halt. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, met Israel in the wilderness, saw and believed what God had done for his people, but did not want to go with them to the promised land. He returned therefore to his own country and possibly to his own gods (Exod. 18:8–27; cf. Num. 10:29–31). Paul on the other hand, pressed onwards for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13f.). Acceptance of God must include an acceptance of his onward call.

Hope is essential to living worthily because not to hope is to assume God has done all he can do. Paul said frankly that if this was so, Christians had every right to be miserable (I Corin. 15:19). But believers have their sights on a world yet to come where God's righteousness and glory will be adequately displayed. Because they know that this alone is worthy of God, God is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:13–16).

It is because of such a hope that Christians can patiently bear suffering now, and by such hope, they are made worthy of the kingdom of God (II Thess. 1:4f.; cf. Luke 20:35).

CONFIDENCE AND CONTENTMENT

Confidence in God's gracious sovereignty will result in sure-footed action worthy of God's calling. The Philippians were exhorted to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel, not being frightened in anything by their opponents. Paul explained that such confidence was clear indication of the truth of the gospel (Phil. 1:27–30; also I Peter 3:6).

On the other hand, while abnormal and unresolved situations continue to exist, the believer does not need to become frustrated and anxious but wait patiently for God to act (Phil. 1:12–14;, 4:11–13). Not to do so is to indicate that one is dissatisfied with the Lord's management of his affairs. The Christian does not have neat solutions to human problems and is not called to build a utopia. These ultimate concerns are in greater hands than his and he leaves them there.

CONCLUSION

Christians then should strive with all diligence to be worthy of the calling by which they were called, understanding that to be worthy is not to accumulate credit to themselves, but to reveal the worth of Another. Among such Christians deep bonds of fellowship may grow (Phil. 2:19–23; I Sam. 18:1–4).