

Worthiness, Grace, & Stepping Up

Ephesians 4:1

July 31, 2016

In Ephesians 4:1 the Apostle Paul writes, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Living a worthy life is a proper and natural response to what Paul has written in chapters 1-3.¹ Living a worthy life is a worshipful response of wanting to bring God glory through our lives. Last week we wrapped up chapter 3 with a beautiful doxology of praise. Ephesians 3:20-21 says, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Right on the heels of this doxology, Paul urges us in the very next verse, Ephesians 4:1, to live a life worthy of the calling we have received from our powerful and glorious God.² When Paul urges Christ-followers to live a worthy life, it is motivated by a worshipful response; one of wanting to bring God glory through our lives.

Living a worthy life is also a behavioral response to our spiritual blessings in Christ. Ephesians 2:10 teaches us, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” In Romans 12:1 we find Paul urging this same kind of thing, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

“God’s gracious calling not only bestows great privileges on [us]; it also carries with it solemn responsibilities.”³ Beginning in chapter 4, Paul transitions his letter to the Ephesians from a focus on worship and theology, to specific challenges toward Christian living.⁴ Ephesians 4:1 serves as the ‘topic sentence’ for the last half of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian believers.⁵ So, we are going to spend our time today talking about this one key verse.

In Ephesians 4:1 Paul says, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Paul is actually writing from prison, because of the very fact, that he has been living a life, worthy of the calling HE received. It led him straight to jail! Multiple times in fact! Later on in Ephesians 6:20, Paul will call himself an “ambassador in chains.”⁶

Picture Paul as an Ambassador in Chains; with a pair of handcuffs on. Paul likely wrote the book of Ephesians during his 1st Roman imprisonment.⁷ But this is not his last nor his only imprisonment. In 2 Cor. 11:23-27 Paul says he’s, “...been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”⁹

But, none of this keeps Paul from putting the challenge to the Ephesians believers: I urge you! Live a life worthy of your calling! No matter the cost. Here is something we should reflect on as Christ-followers: There are still people all over the world today who are being imprisoned and killed for their

¹ Best, E., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, Edinburgh 1998, p. 353.

² In fact, remember back to how Paul started out his letter to the Ephesians. He began Ephesians 1 with a long doxology of praise. He wrote: v. 3, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” v. 6, “to the praise of his glorious grace...” v. 12, “in order that we, ...might be for the praise of his glory.

³ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 275.

⁴ Stott, John R.W., *God’s New Society*, 1979, p. 146.

⁵ O’Brien, p. 273.

⁶ Paul’s “physical captivity arose out of his bondage to Christ.” (See Phil. 1:13 and O’Brien, p. 226)

⁷ See Acts 28:16-31

⁸ Probably written about 5 years earlier than Ephesians...

⁹ Earlier in 2 Cor. 4:7-9 he explains, “7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

faith in Christ. And, the days may soon be coming, here in America, when Christians will be jailed for preaching God's truth.

Have you seen the movie, *God's Not Dead, Part 2*? There's a special scene during the closing credits where the pastor is arrested for contempt of court, for not producing his sermons upon the judge's orders. This closing scene may seem farfetched to some of us. But personally, I found it a little sobering. I remember talking with my wife about this after we left the movie theater. What would we do? How would our family handle something like this? Ultimately, we can't let our fears around these kinds of possibilities hinder us. Rather, let's embrace our cross. Let's boldly live out our call to ministry, come what may!

I'm convinced that this word "*Worthy*" in Ephesians 4:1, "...I urge you to live a life *worthy* of the calling you have received," produces 1 of 3 particular responses in most of us. And, each response is powerful in its own way. One possible response is:

1. An awareness of guilt. This is a necessary response for Christ followers.

If we know that we are making INTENTIONAL choices to live in sin, we SHOULD feel guilty. That's the HS convicting our conscience. For Christ followers, intentional sin is an abuse of God's grace. Not only are we taking advantage of His kindness but we're underestimating His discipline. Plus, we are miserable because God feels so distant from us. Sure, we may enjoy the pleasure of the sin to some degree, but there's a significant unhappiness within us. We know we are way out of line and we're constantly wrestling and struggling within ourselves: should I give up this sin or should I hold onto it and just keep pretending?

It's also a negative witness. Rather than being an ambassador in chains for Christ, we become an ambassador in sin for our enemy, Satan. Ephesians 2:1-2 says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." When our actions don't live up to who we claim to be as Christ-followers, it's called hypocrisy. When we continue to follow the ways of this world, we are in direct conflict with what Paul has been trying to teach us. *Brennan Manning* is often quoted: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

Brothers and sisters, may this not be said of the Christ followers within our fellowship here. But rather, may we repent of such things! 1 Corinthians 15:34 rebukes us: "Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame."

As we consider this, let's not imagine that Paul never struggled with sin. Paul writes in Rom. 7:21-25a, "So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Before we can ever live a life worthy of the calling we have received, we have to take our own personal sin problem seriously. Romans 2:4-8 asks us, "OR do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God 'will repay each person according to what they have done.' To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."

God hates sin! Take a hard look at your life this morning. If your gut response to the word "*Worthy*" is an awareness of guilt, I urge you: repent!

Another response to this word "*Worthy*" is...

2. A feeling of worthlessness. This is an unfortunate and incredibly painful response for Christ followers. It's an overwhelming feeling, that some of us have, that we are worthless. Not just unworthy and in need of grace, but worthless; that we have little or no value. And so, our gut response to Paul's

urging in Ephesians 4:1, is hopelessness; how could we ever measure up to living a life worthy of our calling?

It makes me wonder if Paul ever felt worthless. In Ephesians 3:8 he says about himself, “Although I am *less than the least* of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.”¹⁰ Acts 7:55-8:3 fills in some details for us about Paul’s past; about why he considers himself “less than the least:” “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul...”

Now this young man Saul is actually Paul. They used to call him Saul. And, he was not always a Christ follower. There was a time when he strongly opposed Christians. One of those Christians was this man named Stephen. The story goes on in v. 59: “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

This is what Paul was referring to in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”¹¹ 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” So, all of this makes me wonder if Paul ever felt worthless? After all, he did seek to destroy the church, the bride of Christ.¹² Apparently, Paul found healing for any of his feelings of worthlessness. And, he went on to live out an abundant life in service to God. “Although he is deeply conscious of his own feelings of unworthiness, this does not hinder him from stepping up to his missionary responsibilities in relation to the Gentiles. He sets about fulfilling this task energetically, profoundly aware that God has called him to it.”¹³

I’m not sure that any of us here this morning, could portray our sin and failures as any worse than murdering and destroying the bride of Christ. Whatever feelings we may have, of worthlessness, are not beyond the healing power of God. Whether they come from a story something like Paul’s, or whether they come from something else in our personal past; we can find healing for this sense of worthlessness. Through counseling and prayer, we need help to dig out from under these unfortunate and unnecessary feelings of worthlessness and shame. This becomes vital to our ability to fully live out our lives, worthy of the calling we’ve received. And so, if our gut response to the word “*Worthy*” is a feeling of worthlessness, let’s consider the encouragement of 2 Timothy 1:9, “He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.”

The third and ideal response to this word “*Worthy*” is...

3. An eagerness to step up to the call. This is a God-intended and appropriate response for Christ followers. When we hear Paul’s urging, it should well up in our souls as Christ-followers to be all that we can for our precious Lord! This ideal response to Paul’s challenge is also found in Titus 2:11-14, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior,

¹⁰ Less than the least is basically a super superlative. We use superlatives all the time to help us express comparisons. We talk about something that is small, smaller, or smallest. Here Paul goes one step further: from little, less, least right down to “less than the least.”

¹¹ “Stresses the enormity of the crime: it was God’s church that Paul sought to destroy.” O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 240, footnote #74.

¹² In the OT, God’s people are called the apple of His eye. See Dt. 32:10 and Zech. 2:8

¹³ O’Brien, p. 241.

Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

Ephesians 2:10 has already told us, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” All that we do in life is our worship to God. We need to be on mission with Him in everything. We won’t find much in Scripture about being exempt from serving in ministry. There’s no exemption for being too busy, too tired, too old, or too young. Or even too sinful, too worthless, or too messed up. No matter who we are or what we’ve done, or even how we feel about ourselves, we are still given opportunities to live a life worthy of the calling we’ve received. Our response to this worthy calling, should be one of eagerness to step up!

In Ephesians 4:1, Paul was not complaining about having to be in prison.

He was not trying to lay a guilt trip on the Ephesians believers.

He was challenging them to take stock of the high calling God has for their lives.

He is urging them, along with us today, to take our discipleship seriously! We need to count the cost of what it means to truly follow Christ.

Luke 14:25-28 tells us that, “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?”

Christ followers need to count the cost. Jesus is not really talking about here; He is illustrating that we need to decide: Are we “all in” for the long haul as a fully devoted follower of Jesus, or not?

If our world has ever been a mess; it’s today.

If ever there has been a need for godly men and women to step up; it’s today.

And, it’s today, that Scripture gives us this challenge, urging us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received!

In Philippians 3:12-14 Paul admits: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that, for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal, to win the prize, for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

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