

Title: *Living a Worthy Life*

Text: Colossians 1:9-14

Tony Campolo tells the story of having gone to a Christian college. Since it was a Christian college, they would often begin classes with prayer. He was called on to pray one day and prayed, “Lord, thank you for loving such a worthless sinner like me.”

He said the professor stopped him right in the middle of his prayer and said, “Mr. Campolo. You are not worthless. You are unworthy, but you are not worthless. Continue your prayer.”

In essence, that is the good news of the gospel. It’s in a line in one of the invitation hymns that we often sing. “Though unworthy of salvation, Jesus sought me for his own.”

We feel worthless. I’m just a speck of dust in this whole vast universe, why would God care about me? Yet, the good news of the gospel is that he does, he gave the supreme, ultimate demonstration of that love on the cross.

If I’m unworthy and Christ has given the ultimate, highest demonstration of love that there can be, the challenge for me then is somehow to walk as worthily of that great gift as I possibly can. How many times have we prayed something like, “Lord, thank your the gift of your son. It’s a wonderful gift, one we can never repay, just help us live for you in such a way that is worthy of that gift?”

That is a good prayer. I’m not criticizing it at all. The question becomes, What are those things that I have to do in order to live and to walk worthily of the salvation that I have been given in Christ.

That should be each of our concerns but it is also the concern for one who is in Christian leadership – for someone who has responsibility to lead and to disciple someone else in the Christian faith.

It was the concern of Paul as he wrote this letter to the Colossians. We spoke last week about hope. Hope is that power that helps us to see a better future that motivates us to service for Christ. It is a real hope grounded in something solid and substantial.

Paul lets the Colossians know that he is praying for them. They are facing challenges. They are being influenced by a heresy that exalted secret knowledge. There was a belief that matter was evil and the spiritual was good. So much so in fact that the only way one could get to God was through an endless chain of celestial beings.

Paul is going to have to correct their understanding of who Jesus Christ is and he will have to get them back on a solid footing as far as their trust in Christ goes, but he is thankful. It is for this reason that Paul has continued in prayer for them.

For most of us, our most urgent prayers come when things are not going particularly well and in times of crisis. They’ve just had a lot of medical issues lately and the doctor hasn’t been able to nail down what it is so we need to be especially fervent in prayer for them.

Paul is one who is instant in season and out of season. Fervent when things are going well and when they are not going so well. Sometimes when things were going well, he felt an even greater burden to pray for them because he knew that it would be then that perhaps Satan would be plotting his next attack.

C. S. Lewis wrote to a friend, "I specially need your prayers because I am (like the pilgrim in Bunyan) traveling across "a plain called Ease." Everything without and many things within are marvelously well at present.

It is interesting what Paul prays for them first. It is the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. To a group of people who are taken in by a quest for knowledge, Paul reminds them of the knowledge that really matters. It is knowledge of God's will.

There are primarily 3 things that we need to realize. Understanding God's will involves recognizing how Christ is the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes, how God's salvation is open to all people, and how God intends for Christians to live in whatever situation they find themselves.

John Calvin said, "Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge. And this is, indeed, knowledge not only of God but of the divine will."

The point is not just to know God, as essential as that is, but to know His will. To understand what he wants me to do and how to live for him. Someone has said that there are two great moments in a person's life. The day they were born and the day they discover why they were born.

This knowledge of His will comes through spiritual wisdom and understanding. Paul says, "When you have a knowledge of God's will, you can begin to walk worthily of what he wants for you with a knowledge of his will.

I've been reading a biography of George Muller, a great man of faith in the 19th Century. He was known as the apostle of faith. He was born in Prussia and moved to England after coming to Christ. If you had known him as a youngster, you would have thought him one of the least likely people ever to become a hero of the faith.

He is remembered for running his orphanages without ever letting anyone know of his material needs. He prayed in everything that was ever needed. There were even times when there was no food in the house in the morning and in response to prayer. He was asked how he was able to maintain such a strong track record of answered prayer. He said, "I wanted to make sure that I was in the will of God." The next question would be, "How can I know I'm in the will of God?"

Muller proposed a 6-step process of making sure we're in God's will.

1. I get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter.
2. I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impressions.
3. I seek the will of the Spirit through or with connection to the will of God.

4. I will take into account providential circumstances.
5. I ask God in prayer to reveal His will to me aright.
6. Thus, through prayer to God, the study of the word and reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge and if my mind is thus at peace after two or three more intercessions, I proceed accordingly.

Now you could say George Müller was serving orphans. The Bible says that's pure religion and undefiled. Of course God would bless him and guide him. Müller's principles can give us guidance when we're trying to decide what God wants us to do. Paul is not unconcerned with finding guidance when it comes to what God wants us to do but it is primarily more concerned with what God wants us to be. What kind of person does he want us to become. What are those faith attributes that are a part of the kind of character that is pleasing to God? What is it that enables us to live a worthy life?

Paul says, "We pray this so that you can live a life that is worthy and can be pleasing to him." The first thing Paul prays is that they will bear fruit in every good work. Fruit bearing is something that is important in the Christian life. Jesus cursed the fig tree because he went to it with the expectation that it would bear fruit and it was fruitless. He told us the way that we can know the authenticity of someone else's life and work is by the fruit they are bearing. If their life is producing good fruit, they're from God and they're genuine. If all around them is discord and destruction, they are not of God. We completed a series this past summer on the fruit of the Spirit – those attributes that ought to be a part of our life when God's Spirit is at work in us.

Fruit is the work that God's Spirit produces in our life, such as the fruit of the spirit – those things that make us more like Jesus. Those things that make us into the kind of person we would really like to become. Fruit is also the result of our witness. What kind of difference are we making in other people for the sake of Jesus Christ? It may be someone that you have led to Christ and nurtured in the faith. It may be that you really encouraged someone and helped them make it through a difficult season in their life and the change that was made there is something that you helped them make. It is just the fruit, the natural outcome of your life and what you do and how you live.

As you walk worthy of the Lord, day by day, you will be becoming more and more like Jesus and because of your life and witness others around you will be drawn to him and be becoming more and more like him. That's how you can walk worthily of the Lord.

Then he says, You can come to church and to Sunday School and learn things about God, or you can have a meaningful personal relationship with him where you daily come to know him better and better. It's the difference between reading a book about some great historical figure and having the opportunity to shadow them for a day or for a week. It's not just knowing things about God. I overheard a conversation recently about church. The man said, "I know the Ten Commandments." I thought well good for you. I hope you don't think that makes you right with God. Satan knows Scripture but he's definitely not saved.

The whole process of growing in knowledge of God is what the Christian life is all about. Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” If eternal life is to know God, is it a stretch to say that the quality of that life – the abundance of life that Jesus talks about – is found as we grow in and deepen our knowledge of God. How do we do that? Spend time with him in his word. Reading his word. Meditating upon his word. Memorizing his word. Obeying those promptings of the Holy Spirit when they come. Spend time in prayer and in worship and in fellowship with his people. Make it the daily prayer of your life, “Lord, I want to know you and then order your life so that you are in those places where you have opportunity to get to know him better. Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Then Paul says, “Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.” In 1983, Australia hosted its ultramarathon, a 573.7 mile foot race from Sydney to Melbourne. This is a race that takes *days* to run, and professionals from all over the world came to participate. Shortly before the race began, a 61-year-old farmer named Cliff Young, wearing overalls and goulashes over his boots, walked up to the registration table and requested a number to enter the race. The people at the registration table thought it was a joke—that somebody was setting them up—so they laughed. But Cliff Young said, "No, I'd really like to run." So they gave him a number and pinned it on his old overalls.

Cliff Young walked over to the start of the race. All the other professional runners, who were decked out in all their running regalia, looked at him like he was crazy. The crowd snickered. They laughed even more when the gun went off and the race began, because all those professional runners had sculpted bodies and beautiful strides, but not Cliff Young. He didn't even run like a runner. Cliff Young ran with an awkward, goofy-looking shuffle. All through the crowd people were laughing, and finally, someone called out, "Get that old fool off the track!"

Five days, 14 hours, and four minutes later, at 1:25 in the morning, Cliff Young shuffled across the finish line of the 573.7 mile ultramarathon. He had won the race. And he didn't win by a matter of minutes or even an hour or two. The second place runner was nine hours and 56 minutes behind him. Cliff Young had set a new world record for the ultramarathon. The press mobbed him wondering what kind of special running shoes he must have had, and they rummaged through his backpack wondering what he'd survived on—he'd lived primarily on pumpkin seeds and water—and then they discovered the secret to his success: Cliff Young had shuffled his way to victory without ever sleeping. The other runners would run for 18 hours straight, and then stop and sleep for three or four hours. He endured running five days, 14 hours, and four minutes at the age of 61.

How can you live a Christian life in such a way that you can keep going and going and going and going? Cliff Young had a remarkable accomplishment, superhuman we might even say. The Christian life is like that. There's not a finish line until you enter his presence in heaven. It takes supernatural strength to make it through.

It also takes thankfulness. The deeper you go into the Christian life, the more gratitude you ought to have for what Jesus has done for you. You ought to be filled with joy and you ought to have that joy in heart and mind as you ponder what it means to be brought from darkness into light, from guilt into forgiveness.

I love a story that Lee Strobel tells:

An acquaintance called with what he said was an embarrassing request: His little girl had been caught shoplifting from our church bookstore, and he wanted to know if I would represent the church so she could come and apologize. He said he wanted to use this incident as a teaching moment. I agreed—but I had a much bigger lesson in mind.

The next day, the parents and their eight-year-old daughter trooped into my office and sat down. "Tell me what happened," I said to the little girl as gently as I could.

"Well," she said as she started to sniffle, "I saw a book that I really wanted, but I didn't have any money..." Now tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. I handed her a tissue. "So I put the book under my coat and took it. I knew it was wrong. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I did. And I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. Honest!"

"I'm so glad you're willing to admit what you did and say you're sorry," I told her. "That's very brave, and it's the right thing to do. But what do you think an appropriate punishment would be?"

She shrugged. I thought for a moment before saying, "I understand the book cost five dollars. I think it would be fair if you paid the bookstore five dollars, plus three times that amount, which would make the total twenty dollars. Do you think that would be fair?"

She nodded sadly. "Yes," she murmured. She could see the fairness in that. But now there was fear in her eyes. Twenty dollars is a mountain of money for a little kid. Where would she ever come up with that amount of cash?

I wanted to use this moment to teach her something about Jesus. So I opened my desk drawer, removed my checkbook, and wrote out a check on my personal account for the full amount. I tore off the check and held it out to her. Her mouth dropped open. "I'm going to pay your penalty so you don't have to. Do you know why I'd do that?"

Bewildered, she shook her head. "Because I love you. Because I care about you. Because you are valuable to me. And please remember this: That's how Jesus feels about you too. Except even more."

At that moment, she reached out and accepted my gift. I wish I could find the words to describe the look of absolute relief and joy and wonder that blossomed on her face. She was almost giddy with gratitude.

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