***WORTHY OF WHAT?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

November 5, 2023

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13 and Revelation 5:11-14

As if last week’s call from Leviticus to be holy were not hard enough, this week we hear Paul telling the fledgling church in Thessalonica to “*lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into God’s own kingdom and glory.*” *A life worthy of God* – is that how you would describe your life these days, or are you living a life worthy of someone a little less divine, or maybe a lot less divine? In the passage from Revelation that I just read we hear the angels and heavenly chorus singing in full throated praise of one who is certainly worthy of God:

*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive*

*power and wealth*

*and wisdom and might*

*and honor and glory and blessing!*

To which we all might add a hearty, “AMEN!” for if anyone is worthy of those lofty blessings, if anyone is worthy of God, it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, crucified and risen, who is one with God! But we are not Jesus, and while we are created in the image of God, we are not worthy of all those divine gifts. Can we then really be worthy of God in any way?

The great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards did not seem to think so. In his famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*,[[1]](#endnote-1) he ominously declares:

*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire.*

Have a good day! This is not exactly *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*! It seems to be the Puritan forerunner of Scared Straight – an attempt to frighten people into faith, emphasizing how far short of the glory of God we all fall! It offers little in the way of hope that we could ever be worthy of God, since in Edwards’ estimation God views us as worthy only of being burned to a crisp. But that very thought does shed some light on what being *worthy of God* might mean.

*Being worthy of God* is not meriting some divine reward; God’s favor is not bestowed upon us because we have somehow earned it – for better or worse. Rather, being *worthy of God* is being of value to God in some good way. There is an adage by that prolific writer Anonymous which says:

*Count that day lost whose low descending sun*

*Views from thy hand no worthy action done*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

That adage counts a worthy action as being a worthwhile action, something of value, a good thing; and if by the end of the day you can identify no good thing – no *worthy action* – done, then perhaps it is a lost day, or at least a day of lost opportunities. In that light, being worthy of God – being valued by God for some good purpose – is something to which all of us might aspire as disciples of Jesus Christ, disciples who seek to make every day count, children of God created in the image of God who try to live into our created purpose. But is it realistic to think that we might be *worthy of God* in that way?

Paul seems to think so. As he recalls his ministry among the Thessalonians, he speaks in almost wistful terms of being like a nursing mother to them, gently nurturing them in faith and in faithfulness by sharing with them what Paul calls *the gospel of God*. He speaks of being like a father to them, urging and encouraging them to lead a life *worthy of God*. These young Christians are like family to him, those with whom he shared not only the gospel of God but his own life because they were so dear to him. In doing so, in teaching them, encouraging them, loving them, and showing them by his example what it is to be a faithful disciple of Christ, he hopes they will grow in faith and faithfulness to be of value to God for God’s good purposes. And the glimmer of hope he has that this is possible is reflected in his thanks to God for their acceptance of that gospel of God he shared with them; they accepted it, not as Paul’s word ***to*** them, but as God’s word ***for*** them, acceptance that was reflected in their lives as believers. In so doing they could be useful to God, leading lives worthy of God. Far from being an unattainable goal, Paul saw it is as a faithful way of life that embraces in word and in action the gospel of God.

Isaiah too seemed to think that the lives of God’s people might be worthy of God. Thus says the LORD, says Isaiah:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine…I am with you! (Isaiah 43:2, 5)*

You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you, says the LORD. Far from the loathsome insects dangling over the fires of hell in Jonathan Edwards graphic imagery, the LORD here embraces the people in love, claiming them and saving them, and promising to be with them always. It was not because they had proved themselves worthy of God’s love and salvation that they received this gift; it was not a reward for good behavior. It was a gift offered by the grace of a God who valued them for who they were: those created in the image of God and claimed by God to be God’s people, imperfect and tarnished as they might be.

For, the gospel of God of which Paul speaks, the good news that the Lord spoke to exiled Israel through Isaiah, is a gospel of grace, a gospel of hope, a gospel of salvation; fundamentally it is a gospel of love – God’s love for us and our call to love God and one another. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” writes Paul. Not because we had earned it, not because we were worthy of it, not because we deserved it, did Christ die for us, but in love he died for us, knowing who we were – sinners in the hands of a loving God who longs for us to embrace that gospel, turn our lives around, and so live in a manner worthy of God, a manner that is useful to God.

As you may have heard me say before, the goal of the Christian life is not: to get to heaven. That is in God’s hands. The goal of the Christian life is: to be faithful today, to be worthy of God today, for that good work does lie in our hands. As Laura Everett puts it in her book *Holy Spokes*, “*How we travel through life – not just where we end up – matters*.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Paul urges us to travel through life faithfully, to travel with the gospel of God as our light and our guide, to travel with gratitude to God for the hope that we hold, to travel by leading a life worthy of God because how we travel matters. It matters to Paul and to the church at Thessalonica and to God – and it should matter to us!

This Dedication Sunday we come to offer our commitments to God in our pledges for 2024. They are not the sum of our lives, but they are a significant part of them. And so I ask you to take a look at whatever commitments you are making and consider: Are your commitments worthy of God? Are you leading a life worthy of God? For, if not, today might be a pretty good day to start! Amen

1. Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” 1741 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, John Bartlett, Justin Kaplan, general ed., Little, Brown & Company:1992, p.779 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Laura Everett, *Holy Spokes: The Search for Urban Spirituality on Two Wheels*, Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 2017, p.129 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)