

STANDING FIRM

III. “Live Worthy Lives”

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Ken Peterson

1 Thess. 2:1-12

TEXT: *...live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

1 Thess. 2:12

INTRODUCTION

This last week I was in the bank to deposit my paycheck. I was getting some cash back, and as the cashier was counting it out for me, she exclaimed, “Ooh, I **hate** ugly money!” as she set aside a \$5 bill that looked pretty beat up. Then she added, “Of course, it all spends the same.”

Coming back to the office to work on this sermon, I thought, there’s an important truth there. Some \$5 are new, pristine, unwrinkled and look great. Then sometimes you get one that’s wrinkled, torn, looks like it’s been through the wash. Which is more valuable? We know, that no matter how beat-up it is, it is still worth \$5.

There is an important truth here for us. I find most of us struggle with feeling worthwhile. Our value is often judged by outward things, and measured by wrong standards. Did you know that the great physicist, Albert Einstein could not speak until he was four and didn’t read until he was seven? When Thomas Edison was a young boy, his teachers said he was so stupid, he could never learn anything. He said later on, “I remember I used to never be able to get along at school. I was always at the foot of my class... my father thought I was stupid, and I almost decided I was a dunce.” And Beethoven’s music teacher said, “As a composer he is hopeless.” And, when F. W. Woolworth was 21, he got a job in a store, but wasn’t allowed to wait on customers because he “didn’t have enough sense.”

You may feel like a \$5 bill that’s been through the wash, the wringer, ripped, crumpled, and stomped upon. But, in spite of outward appearances and no matter how this world measures your successes or failures, you still are of incredible value and worth to God. He loves you. You are created in His image. Every living soul is worth more than they imagine to God. He loves all of us— not based upon our performance, intelligence, wealth, looks, or abilities— but based upon the fact that we are all created in the image of God.

In our text this morning, we see Paul dealing with what some were considering failure for him. After only three weeks in Thessalonica, he was hauled before the city officials for preaching the Gospel. He and Silas fled under the cover of darkness. Here we get a wonderful insight into how Paul viewed ministry, and from Whom he gets his sense of worth.

TEXT

LIVE WORTHY

The last verse of our reading gets to the heart of this passage:

...live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

It is a powerful reminder of what we're really about. God has called you into His kingdom and glory in Christ Jesus. It feels good to be called, to be selected, especially if it is by a person you highly esteem. Suppose Billy Graham called me and said, "I came across one of your sermons on the internet. It was so good, I would like your permission to quote from it when I speak at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast." What would that do to my sense of worth? Well, all of us here have been called by Jesus to be part of His team in redeeming planet earth. I don't need to tell you things are a mess, wherever you look. But Jesus has come to set it all right with His rule. He's asking for your help. Could there be any higher calling? It is what we pray for, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Do you have that sense that you're on His team, participating in this awesome purpose?

These Thessalonians are getting pretty beat-up with persecution. When most everyone seems to be against you, when you're facing ridicule, injustice, false accusations, and rejection, it is easy to begin feeling worthless. Paul is reminding them of who they really are. All of us are of such value to God that Jesus died for us and He's counting on us to walk with Him in overcoming the world. Knowing to whom we belong makes all the difference in their worth.

In 1996, there was an auction of Jackie Kennedy Onassis's estate. There, a very worn footstool went for \$33,350 and a silver tape measure for \$48,875 and a walnut tobacco humidor that had belonged to President Kennedy sold for \$574,500. The items themselves were nowhere near that valuable. But, because of the one to whom they belonged, they had enormous value.

These new Christians in Thessalonica may not feel valued by the world. They are rejected, hunted, and maligned. But Paul affirms their worth because of the One to Whom they belong.

Not only are we called into His kingdom, but we are destined for His glory as well. Jesus is the fullest revelation to us of God's glory. So, think of this as being like Jesus. That is our calling— to live and be like Jesus. Isn't that hard to believe that God is working in us to bring that about? But, isn't that the greatest thing we can imagine for our lives— reflecting His nature, character, power, and goodness? We are being changed into His likeness.

What we see as our identity is so important. People whose lives are dogged with low feelings of worth are often timid, withdrawn, dogged by anxiety, defensive, perfectionists, angry, abuse alcohol or other drugs, are sexually promiscuous, and on and on. And, if your evaluation of worth is coming from this world, unless you're one of the few on top, you probably struggle with feelings of inadequacy. But, if you get your value from God, that makes all the difference. It is a call to cause us to be motivated to be our best. Paul says it well in Romans 12:1-2, after 11 chapters of establishing our worth and power in Christ:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good,

pleasing and perfect will.

That's what Paul later describes walking worthy of our calling.

Now that we have in mind where Paul is taking us, let's look at how he gets us there.

INTEGRITY (vs. 1-6a)

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure [in vain].² We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.

The fact that Paul would even mention “failure” here, hints that he may have struggled with those feelings. Now Paul does not seem to be one given to self-doubt. Yet, I'm sure he wasn't immune to it—especially because he was engaged in ministry and the devil loves to accuse us of messing up whenever we're working for His kingdom. He mentions that they had *previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi*. You probably remember that story. Paul and Silas got into trouble with the authorities there and were beaten with rods and put in stocks in the prison. Now the Jews limited beatings to 39 lashes, but not the Romans. So we don't know how badly they were beaten. But, as Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns in prison around midnight, there was an earthquake and all the prison doors flew open. Paul took charge and kept everyone there and the jailor and his family were converted. After a public apology, Paul and Silas were escorted out of town. Then they traveled over the mountains to Thessalonica, where again they were in trouble. When we keep running into trouble, it can cause us to question things.

I remember when I first entered the ministry, after almost every Sunday's sermon I felt like a total failure. Mondays were my day off, but I was generally pretty depressed. I was sure I hadn't done a good enough job, I remembered every mistake, and was sure I hadn't prayed enough and that the anointing was inadequate. It happened too after most visits, hospital calls, and counseling sessions. I felt sure I hadn't said the right things and I wasn't being led by the Spirit. Fortunately, before too long, I realized this smacked of an enemy attack. It made me feel like quitting, giving up. The devil had me trapped in evaluating by my standards and looking at things the way this world does in terms of numbers and results. Once I understood that and accepted my inadequacies, even failures as something God was great enough to use— I no longer struggled as much with feelings of failure. I came to accept, as Paul tells the Corinthians he learned from Jesus,

But he [Jesus] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10)

Ministry was not about me. It was all about Jesus. Once I got that down, it helped and I was no longer as vulnerable to Satan's attacks about my inadequacies.

Now Paul goes on to give the reason for his confidence in the Lord. He is operating from pure motives.

3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 4 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed— God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

Paul is serving God, not people. He is trying to please God, not impress anyone. So, Paul's sense of worth and fulfillment are not based upon human interpretations of success or failure. If God is pleased, no matter how it might look, Paul knows he can feel good about it. Now he's not being presumptuous here, for he says he is letting God test his heart in vs. 4. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and impure motives. And Paul is saying he is letting that happen, letting his heart be examined by God through the Holy Spirit.

This is such an important truth for us. If we're trying to please people, they can play us like yo-yos. If we are dependent upon other people's love for our sense of worth, we're vulnerable to compromise or shading the truth to keep them loving us. We aren't free to be ourselves. But if we know we are loved by God, and it is more important that He be pleased with us than other people, then we will be boldly obedient to God's call to us. And remember, while Paul is talking here about ministry, we are all called to a ministry. It applies to everything in our lives as we walk in obedience to Christ's call.

Paul goes on to say, not only were our motives right, but we went about the ministry in the right way— demonstrating our love and commitment to you.

DEMONSTRATING GOD'S LOVE (6b-12)

While Paul maintains his right as an apostle to be supported by the church, he instead worked hard at a job to support himself, "*we worked night and day*" (9), making tents, in order to not be any financial burden and in a practical way, show his love and commitment to them. I'm sure that increased Paul's dependence upon the Lord for this work. I expect he often felt, "How can I do God's work when I'm this tired?" But then, as Paul knows, *when I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Cor. 12:10).

He goes on to express his manner of ministering among them saying, *we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children* (7) and that they shared their *lives as well* (8). This is incarnational ministry— putting into our lives the love of God, expressing it through our actions. Then he continues on in vs. 11-12 saying he was like a father with his own children, *encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

The way Paul carries out this ministry is modeling the way Jesus did it. The words, "gentle," "encouraging," "comforting", and "urging" are good ones for us to keep in mind as we try to live out and model the Christian faith for others. This is a "coming alongside" of people to help them. People need encouragement. We have no idea how sad, lonely, overwhelmed, or discouraged people may be. Booker T. Washington who did so much to make a way for education for blacks

in America observed, “There are two ways of exerting one’s strength; one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.” There is far too much “pushing down” going on in our world. We are called to pull people up— lifting them from discouragement to the light of hope and the power in Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have an incredibly high calling from Jesus. Don’t settle for the tawdry, people-pleasing ways of this world. Don’t let this world’s idea of success be how you measure your life. Instead, keep sight of your true worth and value. You belong to God and are involved with Him in turning back the powers of the enemy in this world. Live your life for his final, “*Well done, good and faithful servant*” (Mt. 25:21).

The word Paul uses here translated “failure” is the same as he uses in 1 Cor 15:58, when he talks about our labor not being in vain. It is the concluding verse of Paul’s great resurrection chapter in which he gives us all the assurances that Christ’s resurrection give us. While it means a promise of eternal life and the resurrection of our bodies, it also keeps us going here and now when the going gets tough.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

During World War I, a British commander was leading his soldiers back into battle after a furlough. It was a cold, rainy, muddy day. Their shoulders sagged because they knew many of them would die. It was a heavy time.

As they marched along, the commander looked into a bombed-out church. Back in the church he saw the figure of Christ on the cross. At that moment, something happened inside that commander as he remembered the One who suffered and died and rose again. There was victory after the cross. As the troops marched along, he shouted out, “Eyes right, march!” Every eye turned to the right, and as the soldiers marched by, they too saw Christ on the cross. As they beheld Him, their shoulders straightened and their countenances changed to ones of courageous determination. After the suffering of the cross there was the triumph of resurrection.

Because of the resurrection, nothing done in the Lord can ever be lost. Don’t ever evaluate things by how they look in the short-run. Keep the long-range view. Let’s all be determined to, in the words of our text, *...live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*