

Being Worthy of the Gospel of Christ

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a rich book filled with wonderful treasures on which to meditate, but as I was reading through it this morning, my thoughts kept coming back to one particular verse that says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1.27). Thinking about this, I wondered, "How does one do that?" How can we ever conduct ourselves in a manner that would be worthy of the gospel? Is it possible to be worthy of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ the Son of God, the one who is God in the flesh, who lived a perfect life, and who gave all that one can give for us? It almost seems mind-boggling. But Philippians is not the only place that we are told to walk in a worthy manner. Compare also Eph 4.1: "...walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called"; Col 1.10: "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord"; and 1 Thes 2.12: "...walk worthy of God." Worthy of God? Is that possible?

It's much easier to speak of our unworthiness (Rom 3.23). Certainly we can never merit the sacrifice that was made by Jesus on our behalf. We can never earn our salvation, which is by grace. No one, in fact, was ever stronger on the idea of grace than the apostle Paul. So how then can he ask us to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, worthy of our calling, and worthy of the Lord and of God? Of course, it helps greatly to read the whole verse and paragraph in each context. For example, in its entirety, Phil 1.27 speaks of "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And Col 1.10 speaks of pleasing God, bearing fruit, and increasing in the knowledge of God. Thus, Paul is not talking about becoming perfect (in the sense of flawless). Flawless perfection is not the goal. In one sense, we already have it—by grace—for we "have become the (perfect) righteousness of Christ" (2 Cor 5.21; cf. Phil 3.15). Too many Christians strive for that which in one sense they already have, and which in another sense (by our own efforts) can never attain. Even in Philippians Paul says that his goal is not to be found as "having a righteousness of my own derived from law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (3.9). Our only "worthiness" is by grace through faith. But that only brings me back to my question: How then can Paul ask us to walk in manner worthy of Christ?

Perhaps it is simply that "worthy" is defined in this context more by one's progress and intention than by the idea of perfection. That is, to conduct ourselves worthily means to do our very best to obey God in all things, to be ever learning and growing, to be pressing on to maturity (Phil 3.12-14). I think that is true, but I think there is more. As I read these admonitions to conduct ourselves in a worthy manner, I am reminded that though we may never be perfect, we take our walk seriously. Our lives ought to reflect the life of Jesus who lives in us. We have a high calling, the highest there ever was. And our speech, behavior, dress, activities, priorities, thoughts, etc., should reflect the glory of our calling, the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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