

1 Thessalonians 2:5-12  
A Living Parable  
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8-16-15

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I want to welcome you once again this morning. If you have been with us for the last few weeks, we are walking together through a letter in the New Testament, written by a man named Paul, to a group of people in the Macedonian City of Thessalonica. And throughout this letter, Paul takes the time to encourage them because in their lives together they display three gospel characteristics: diligent faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope. Throughout Paul's letters, these are golden keys he gives to all his churches.

If you were here with us last week, you will remember that he tells them, from his own experience, that when a person stands up and chooses to follow Jesus, they will always and necessarily face some type of resistance. It may come from outside us when someone or something seeks to discourage us from following God, or it may come from within, from that inner voice telling us it's not worth it. The question is, to whom will you listen? Will it be the voices of others, who categorize you by what you are on the outside? Or will you allow God that place, the one who calls you beloved?

The question I would like for us to wrestle with this morning is: what does it mean to walk worthily? Worthy of what? There are many things that our lives can be worthy of... Recognition? Accolades? Criticism? Honor? What does it look like to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of God?

**For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.**

**For you remember, brothers and sisters, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**

The Apostle Paul, before he encountered the risen Jesus, was a part of a religious group called the Pharisees. These were men who were meticulous keepers of Torah, the Law of Moses (Ten Commandments). They walked around Jerusalem all day long talking with one another about what it meant to be an obedient Jew. They would ask a lot of questions of one another about their Torah interpretation, not as to draw them closer to God, but to sound very religious. Paul was a Pharisee; he used to do things like this.

If you were to ask a Pharisee what it meant to live a life worthy of God, they might tell you about how well they had kept the 613 laws in the Torah. About how they had never defiled themselves. About how often they prayed and offered sacrifices. Or how much of the Scriptures they could recite. For these men, a life worthy of God was what they did to show God that they could be pleasing to God.

Do you know what this is like? Do you know what it is like to have someone offer conditional love, love that is dependent upon how well you perform, or how high you achieve? Do you know someone who is religious like this? Someone who works very hard to keep up the appearance that they are someone who is pleasing to God? Someone who will go out of their way to appear righteous? Someone who speaks very piously with lots of “thees” and “thous”? Have you ever met someone like this? Are *you* like this? It’s exhausting, isn’t it?

There is an interesting point that Paul makes with his word selection. The root word he uses for the verb walk is the word *polis*. It’s the Greek word we use to get the word state. Paul says, may the state of your being, or the state of your community, be one in which God can be present. It’s a subtle distinction. One way of reading involves what we do for God to show ourselves worthy. But Paul’s word is more passive; it involves allowing our inner beings to move in such a way that the gospel of Christ can flow through us.

Have you ever had a time in your life when something very good was quickly followed by something very bad? You were on a mountaintop one minute, and the very next it felt like you were in the valley of dry bones. Has anyone had an experience like that? It’s disorienting, right? Confusing. Especially when it comes unexpectedly and with little explanation.

In Acts chapter 16, Paul and Silas and Timothy had an experience like this in Philippi. The text tells us that one day, they are meeting and sharing the Gospel with a woman named Lydia, a business woman and leader, along with her family. Things are going very well, the family is convinced by the words they speak and they receive the Gospel... AND are baptized that very day. And the very next thing that happens is Paul heals a young girl of her demon—which we would expect him to do. Then, because this girl was being exploited by some men for money and now their revenue stream has dried up, they file charges against Paul and his friends. They’re brought before a kangaroo court, and subsequently, thrown into prison. It was going so well; what happened?

Do you see how this *could be* extremely disheartening for Paul and his buddies? All that hard work he’d done, all those obedient things he did out of his own zeal for God...if it was based on his righteousness, yes, you would see how this would discourage. Doing what’s right landed me in the wrong place. That is, if it was up to him. But it’s not. But do you see what happens? In verse 25, Luke tells us that Paul and his compatriots were languishing in prison...no way! They were doing just the opposite. One old preacher puts it this way:

It was midnight. Two prisoners were in jail, when Paul turned and said, “Silas, do you still have a song left in you?” “Yup, I think I do.” “Just start singing something, and I’ll follow.” And they sang that song at midnight. That song flooded the jail—all the prisoners were listening, to two men who could sing at midnight! But that song traveled, out into the street, up into the night sky, past the moon, past the stars. That song made its way all the way to heaven and reached the throne room of God, and God heard it.

And he said, “Shh shh, angels, listen, I hear singing.”

“Of course you do, God. We sing all the time up here!”

“No, I hear singing from a jail in Philippi, and I *like* it!”

And God listened, and then his foot started a-tappin’, his finger start a-snappin’, his voice start-a-hummin along and pretty soon the walls began to shake, the floor began break, and the earth began to quake, and pretty soon those walls came crumbling down.

What do you do when it’s midnight in your life? Do you sulk, or do you sing? What did Paul do when his mountaintop turned to a midnight? He sang.

Paul is certain that the Thessalonians will face midnights in their lives and in their church, just as each of you will face midnights. But Paul’s word to them in the face of that midnight of the soul: walk worthily. Let your *polis*, your *state of being*, be one in which God’s Spirit still has room to resonate.

So what does walking worthily look like for us? Walking worthily begins by knowing and living in the promise of what God has already done in you, and what God is continuing to do. It is trusting in the confidence expressed by Paul to the Philippians when he says, “I am sure that he who *began* a good work in you will bring it to *completion* at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Walking worthily also has to do with how we practice our lives and our faith with one another, how we let the mind of Christ be also in us. He uses three images in our text today that give us a sense of what walking worthily looks like.

First, the nursing mother. If there is one word that comes to mind when we think of a mother caring for and nursing a child, it is gentleness. Not only does a mother provide sustenance for her child, but she also shares her self, her touch, her looks of affection, her words of soothing care. Paul says that walking worthily means that we will nurture one another. Paul’s first quality that exemplifies our walk together is gentleness.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor of Church History by the name of Skip Sundberg—to this day, one of the most important teachers in my life. He was a man who

was remarkably effective as a teacher, as well as an incredibly stingy grader—getting an “A” out of that guy was like pulling teeth on a buffalo.

But what I remember most about Dr Sundberg was not his lectures, but the follow up sessions. Once a week, he and his wife would open up their home to seminary students and invite us to come and sit in his living room and talk about why the content of his class mattered in our lives as disciples of Jesus. He and his wife shared with us not only the gospel, but they shared themselves as well.

The second virtue Paul highlights of walking worthily is that we are not burdensome to one another. In his previous life, Paul was a Pharisee—someone who profited from the religious life of the synagogue. Pharisees made it their business to remind others of the burden of the law under which they lived. We might recognize this in our lives as shame. Whether it is the shame of unforgiven sins, or the shame of having to relive missteps and faux pas, or the shame we feel over insecurities that the society around us creates. Walking worthily, as Paul says in his great love chapter 1 Cor 13, “keeps no record of wrong doings.”

Finally, turning from the motherly image, Paul says, “Like a Father with his children we exhorted each of you and encouraged you.” They were able to do this because they themselves had done it before. It’s always easier to walk in faith and trust when we’ve got someone going on ahead of us—a Moses or a Joshua, as it were.

Yesterday, I performed the funeral for one of this church’s bonafide saints, Mary Henderson. The number of people who were impacted by her faithful walking as a mother, wife, Director of Christian Education here, Bible Study teacher to countless. But because she, nor any of the others who have led us along the way, do it perfectly, their lives become their story of God’s work in their lives. We just tell one another along the way.

Along the way our lives become a living parable, story pictures of grace, testaments to forgiveness, a foretaste of the kingdom, witness to what he says in Colossians 1 is the riches of this mysterious glory within you that is Christ Jesus. So then let us hold this precious thing before us faith, hope and love and let us walk together in a manner worthy of the one who calls us into his kingdom and glory.