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Philippians 1:21-30  
Worthy of the Gospel  
Washington, D.C.

*For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well--since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

After picking up my kid from a play date this week I thanked our friends for having her over. The dad said, "We loved it. She's the best!" That is a nice thing to have someone say about your child unless you are from Minnesota. In Minnesota, no one is the best...at anything...ever. Best is not a word to be applied to animate object. You would certainly never tell your kid that they are the best for fear that it completely inflates their ego, immediately turning them into a full-fledged monster. Garrison Keillor, often described a fictional Minnesotan small town called Lake Wobegon in this way... "A place where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." I love that in this perfect town in Minnesota the best thing you could say about the kids is that they were above average.

Maybe this is why the passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians gives me such pause. Paul, writing to his friends from prison, tells them to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'. Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel? My Minnesotan soul wonders if I have ever lived a single day of my life in a manner worthy of the gospel. I've had good days; I've had bad days but worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ days? What does that even mean and is that only a category for the very, very best Christians in the world? Is it only for those, like Paul, who experience a total conversion, leave their past lives and jobs and relationships behind and give up everything to preach and build the church? Is that what it looks like to be worthy?

If that is the standard for membership in the Christian club, then most of us would not get a call back from the membership committee. But I don't think Paul is looking for the 'best' among us. So maybe we need to pick apart a misguided understanding of Christian perfectionism, which tries to hold people to unattainable standards and thereby leaves a wake of shame and guilt from those who fall short. We know that Paul was a pretty bad guy before his encounter with Jesus, but the reality is that probably even after his conversion, he had relapses, and made mistakes, and didn't live up to a perfect Christian ethic. Paul was totally committed to following Jesus but was likely

still rough around the edges. If that is true, then was Paul just a big hypocrite or when he told them to 'live lives worthy of the gospel' did he mean something else?

Here is an interesting thing, the word Paul uses, *politeumai*, is not a word you would ever apply to an individual person. The verb to 'live in a worthy manner' is a verb that would be connected to those who belonged to a group. Biblical scholar Paul Hooker thinks Paul chose this exact word because Paul thinks Christian behavior is not something undertaken by individuals, but as the expression of the life of the whole community. Philippians isn't a personal letter to one person telling them how to behave but a letter to the church as a whole reminding them what life could be like as the body of Christ.

As Christians, how we live matters. Being a Christian is costly, its counter cultural, but being a disciple is not about being perfect. Only God is perfect. Being a Christian is about striving to know Jesus and follow his teachings. Being a Christian is about being in community with other imperfect people who strive to do good in the world. Living a life worthy of the gospel is not about being the best but it is about creating a community that helps us be better than we might be on our own.

I will be more forgiving when I witness others forgiving.

I will be more compassionate when I understand other's experiences.

I will be more generous when I recognize how much good we can do together.

And maybe all of us together will be worthy, maybe only together can we do something that would be truly worthy of the gospel. Maybe that is why Jesus called the disciples as a group, they were not hand selected individually for each being the best in their respective areas of expertise but maybe they were called together because then they could build a community that would embody the gospel values and spread the gospel teachings.

David Brooks had a long piece the September Atlantic Magazine about why American's have become so sad, alienated, and rude. Brooks dismissed the usual theories that have been bouncing around. Basically, his thesis was that we are sad, alienated, and rude because we have no morals. And we have no morals because the institutions that used to teach them have gone away, backed away, or changed all together. He writes, "*We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein. The story I'm going to tell is about morals. In a healthy society, a web of institutions – families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces – helps form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another. We live in a society that's terrible at moral formation.*"

It is hard for me not to hear that as a critique of the church and probably rightfully so. You don't need any more evidence than the daily reports of another corrupt businessperson or political person being hauled away to jail to realize that moral formation is not a top priority these days. I don't know about you but when I see these articles in the newspaper, I am thinking to myself, who was their Sunday school teacher?!?

The Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith focuses his work on the inner lives of young people today. What he and his researchers discovered is that young people haven't been given a moral vocabulary or learned morals skills. They were living in morally very thin or spotty worlds. One

interviewee remarked “If you’re okay with it morally, as long you’re not getting caught, then it’s not really against your morals, is it?” This is very much a ‘you do you’ mindset. If you’re okay with it, then it is fine. But is it? When things fall apart, ‘you do you’ doesn’t give you anywhere to land.

‘You do you’ doesn’t give you a moral compass. It doesn’t give you guiderails. It doesn’t give you ideals to strive towards. It certainly doesn’t give you a community. Maybe ‘you do you’ morality does make us all sad, alienated and rude. Maybe that is why Paul never wrote letters to individuals but always to the church – because it was in community where the faith could be passed and the values shaped, and the hearts reformed. The church is where we can figure out what it means of living lives worthy of the gospel and then together strive to achieve it.

Today we commission a new group of confirmation students, as they formally begin their preparation to become full members of the church. This is a rite of passage for growing up and joining the community of faith. I hope that they learn this in this experience that we are not looking for them to conform to some standard of perfectionism and become ‘the best’ Christians they can be. I hope instead they learn that this is a place where they can learn what it means to be followers of Jesus. I hope they will see that we care about being kind and generous and respectful and grateful and humble. I hope they know that they can make mistakes and they can fail, and this will still be their church home. I hope they will realize that joining this church makes them part of something that is worthy of the gospel. I hope they come to have faith in a God that walks alongside them and knows them and loves them completely, always.

I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when I went through my confirmation program and at the end of it, I declared that I didn’t want to get confirmed. I said I wasn’t ready. I was certain I didn’t know enough. I wanted more time to figure things out. My parents did not let me opt out and so I was confirmed against my will! But what I didn’t know at 16 years of age was that I was ready. I was ready because I was inspired by the person of Jesus, and I wanted to follow him, and live a life of meaning. And the very best place for me to continue that journey was within the walls of a church where other people were trying to do that very same thing.

Here's the thing about Jesus – he calls us into community together not so we can be perfect, not so we can be the best – he calls us into community so we can love and be loved. Moral formation focuses on the heart and that absolutely should be the business we are in. And I hope that at the end of the day, together we might be able to offer something up to God that feels worthy. Maybe that is all Paul was trying to get the early church to do anyway, work together, love one another, share the stories of Jesus – and it will be worthy because God will have been in our midst.

Amen.