

October 7, 2012

Acts 20:17-21 / Philippians 2:1-11 / Ephesians 4:1-3

Learning to Live a Life Worthy of our Calling (#1): Called to be in Christ

If someone were to come up to you and ask you what is, or what was, your "calling" in life, what would you say? Well, if you were Walt you might say, "farmer." / And if you were Chuck you might say, "CPA." / Steve would probably say, "builder." / Or if you were Paul you might say, "eye doctor."

Because our "*calling*" is usually understood to be our life-vocation or profession -- their lifework or occupation. It's the work we chose to pursue, trained for, or found ourselves specially suited for.

Yet, according to Paul, if we are Christians, we also have another calling -- a life-calling that begins the moment we come to Christ, and remains as long as we live. Unlike our secular vocation or calling, we never retire from it.

And that "calling" (according to Paul in this passage) involves a life-long responsibility, to seek (by the grace of God) to live a life worthy of the One who has "called us," by His grace, to be inheritors of the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.

Our spiritual calling, if we could put it that way, is to believe and speak and act and interact with others in a way that is fitting or appropriate for a person who bears the distinguished title: "Christian," "disciple of Christ," or "follower of Jesus."

Walt's a farmer, but his calling by God is to be a godly God-honoring farmer. Chuck's a CPA, but his calling from God is to be a godly God-honoring CPA. And the same is true for Steve and Paul and everyone else seated here today.

And as I studied vv. 1-6, I realized there are two parts to that "calling." The first involves our "calling" to be "in Christ" and thus make it our aim -- to live lives that in some way mirror His (that's vv. 1-3).

And second comes our "calling" to belong to the "one body" called the Church -- making it our aim to work for its health, growth, vitality, & unity (that's vv. 4-6).

And in that sense, our being "called by God" involves us in a dual-pronged responsibility to God: To live a godly lifestyle / and to belong to a gathered fellowship of believers (or a Church) where we can unite to use our gifts, knowledge, energies and resources to work for the advance of the plans and purposes of God.

And since this passage is divided along those two lines, I will speak this week about our calling or obligations to Christ, and then next week, on our calling or obligations to His Church -- for both are part of our life-calling.

And as I begin, the **FIRST** thing I need to do is give you a better translation of verse 1! Because although I like the NIV overall and believe it's a fairly decent translation, in the case of Eph. 4:1 it leaves a lot to be desired! So let me give you a better, or more accurate translation, of verse 1. It should read: ***"Therefore I urge you (or exhort you) -- I the prisoner in the Lord -- to live a life worthy of the calling by which (or to which) you were called."***

The word "encourage" (in the NIV) is too weak or mild, as Hoehner points out, ***"as if Paul is pleading for a favor."*** It doesn't carry the full sense of urgency or apostolic authority Paul intends. Because in light of all he's just said, this is not a *"I hope you will do this,"* type of request. It's presented more along the lines of a duty, obligation or absolute spiritual responsibility.

But that's not all. The way the NIV translates this verse, it makes it sound as if the basis of Paul's appeal to "live a life worthy of the calling to which they've been called" is the fact that he's a "prisoner for the Lord."

Thus verse 1 in the NIV, reads: ***"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you..."*** But in reality, the appeal is NOT being made on the basis of his being a prisoner at all. It's made on the basis of what he's just shared with them in chap. 1-3, about God's extravagant grace to them, in, and through, Christ.

It's made on the basis of everything he's told them about God's grace up until this point. God's grace to them in loving them / electing them / and calling them / or making them alive when they were dead in trespasses and sins... / His grace to them in saving them / and joining them to Jesus / and adopting them into His family / and giving them a hope they never would have otherwise

had. / His grace to them in making them heirs of His promises / and giving them His Holy Spirit / and empowering them with that Spirit / and blessing them with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

And it's in referring back to ALL THAT that he says: ***"Therefore, I urge you -- I the prisoner in the Lord -- to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."***

And why is that such an important distinction? Because it means that all our duties, obligations or responsibilities to God, are always (in the NT) predicated on God's prior mercy, kindness or grace to us in Jesus.

We see this over and over and over again in the NT: Jesus commands us to, ***"Love one another..."*** / But it was predicated on His own prior gracious action: ***"as I have loved you."*** / John says: ***"Dear friends, since God has so loved us, we ought also to love one another."*** That is, we are asked to love, because God has first shown His love to us.

And Peter likewise says: ***"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness..."***, leading him a little further on to say, ***"For this reason, make every effort..."*** and again, ***"Be all the more eager..."***

Why are we to make "every effort"? So that God will accept us? No! It's because God has already given us all we need to be godly / and obey Him / and serve Him as we should by giving us His grace / and His promises / and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to live within us.

In fact, Paul uses this exact phrase in Rom. 12:1. There, after spending 11 chapters sharing with them all the gracious things God has done for them through the Gospel, he transitions into his 4 chapter section on what their response to all that should be, by saying: ***"Therefore I urge you, brothers, IN LIGHT OF GOD'S MERCY (in light of all the Gospel truths I've just shared) to offer your bodies as living sacrifices..."***

Before he ever gets to any of the commands or imperatives of the Christian life in any of his epistles, he first shares about God's abundant grace to them. If he

didn't -- if he started out with our duties and obligations -- we'd be led to think that it's our obedience that earns us His grace / instead of His grace that makes our obedience possible.

Listen closely: ***We DON'T strive to obey so that we can get God's Spirit and receive His grace, He gives us His Spirit and the gifts of His grace so that we can obey! / As believers we work FROM God's acceptance, and NEVER FOR His acceptance! We work EMPOWERED BY His grace, & NOT FOR His grace! / And we reverse those only to our own spiritual peril.***

THAT'S Paul's point in our text today. ***"Therefore"*** (because you are the recipients of the rich, free and extravagant grace I've just told you about) ***"I urge you -- I the prisoner for the Lord -- to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."*** We are to do it because God has ALREADY blessed us so richly, and NOT in order to try and gain a blessing.

Or again, as the NIV seems to imply, we are not to do it because Paul is a ***"prisoner for the Lord,"*** and is trying to move us to obedience by feeling sorry for him. That wouldn't move us any more than it would have moved them. Rather, what is meant to move us to obey is God's immense and unfathomable grace to us in Jesus.

Think of it: Look back and consider all the ways that God has graced and blessed you throughout your life. / Consider, as Paul says in I Cor. 1:30, that, ***"It's because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus."***

Consider that if you are saved, it's because He loved you / and set His affections upon you from eternity past -- choosing you and predestining you and calling you and justifying you and doing it all by applying to your life the righteous merits of Jesus, even though you deserved none of it.

Consider that He has forgiven all your sins / and graciously chosen not to remember them against you -- not to treat you as your sins deserve / or repay you according to your iniquities. Remember that He's constantly supplied you with food / and shelter / and health / and well-being / and comforts / and joy and friends / and family / and protection / and provision.

And it's in light of ALL THAT that Paul exhorts or urges you to **"live a life worthy of that calling to which you've been called."** Do it because He's so richly graced you.

Then, **SECONDLY**, what's he asking you to do? Three things. **FIRST**, he's asking you, in light of God's rich mercy, to be, "completely humble." It's one of the primary virtues of the Christian faith / and one of the most frequently repeated characteristics of the persona of Jesus.

Christ, we are told, was "gentle and humble of heart"(Mt. 11:29). / He **"humbled Himself,"** says Paul in Phil. 2, by **"taking on the form of a servant and being born in human likeness"** -- even though He was, says Paul, **"in very nature God."** Though divine, He **"made Himself nothing,"** and even submitted, as the second person of the Godhead, to being crucified on a cross by mere puny human beings -- the ultimate act of humility.

We see His humility in His coming to serve, rather than be served and in **"laying down His life as a ransom for many."** And we see it when He, as Master and Lord, washed His disciples feet. And because He humbled Himself in all those ways, **"God exalted Him to the highest place."** For the divine edict has always been: **"God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble."**

And you know what I did not discover until this week? The Greek word translated "humility" here (*tapeinothrosune*) **"did not occur before NT times"** (Hoehner). / It may even have been a word made up by the early Christians to describe a virtue exemplified by Christ / and thus expected of those who received His Spirit and are called to "imitate Him."

In fact, Epictetus (the Greek philosopher who lived between 50 and 130 A.D.), when commenting upon this word when it came into vogue through Christian circles, **"listed this word first among the qualities NOT to be commended"** (Hoehner). / The last thing one should want to be, according to Epictetus, is humble. For in Greece humility was not considered a virtue -- which is interesting since for Paul, it's the character trait he lists first!

Thus, according to Paul, we live a life, **"worthy of the calling to which we have been called,"** when we, like Jesus, seek to be **"completely humble."**

And what exactly is humility? The Greek word itself means "low-minded." That is, it means having a sober, accurate, or truthful estimation of yourself / instead of an overly-inflated, exaggerated or puffed up one.

It's not thinking self-despising or self-loathing thoughts about yourself, but honest and realistic ones. In fact, C. S. Lewis put it well when he said that a humble person: ***"will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy (weak and sniveling) person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is a nobody. Probably all you will think of that person [when you meet him] is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap, who took a real interest in what you said to him. In fact, if you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility, he will not be thinking of himself at all."***

I believe he's right. Humility is not thinking self-abasing thoughts of your-self, it is not thinking of yourself at all. It's refusing to be self-focused.

That's why humility, though terribly attractive when actually witnessed (as in Jesus) is so rejected as a virtue at large. Because our culture encourages us to be proud. And "pride" is not just having a overly-inflated view of your own importance, it's being almost entirely self-focused.

Proud people are "proud" because they are always focused on themselves -- another expression of their overly inflated sense of their own importance.

That's why they also tend to dwell on what others did to frustrate them / upset them / offend them / hurt them / irritate them / or get in their way. / What others did to ruin their plans / upset their routine / infringe upon their space / inconvenience them / or make them change their schedule / and so forth. The fact that proud people self-focused, means they are easily offended, easily angered, easily hurt and easily provoked.

Hoehner even suggests that's probably why Paul listed humility first. Because humility (being selfless or others-focused) engenders unity in the church / while pride (or being self-absorbed and self-focused) always leads to conflict and disunity.

So, what's the first step toward becoming humble? Listen: It's not to try and focus on being humble! That would be to focus on yourself and that exactly what you don't want to do!

No, you begin by admitting you are not humble. As Lewis again states: ***"If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize one is proud. And it's a biggish step too... If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited."*** The person who cannot admit he is proud is the proudest of all.

And again, I think he's right. The first step toward humility is to confess we're not humble, repent for being proud and self-centered, confess our need for grace, and then get our focus off us and on to Christ and others.

For as Paul says in Phil. 2:3-4, where he defines humility: ***"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility of mind consider others better than yourself. Each of you should look, not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."***

Thus we see, humility is not found in belittling ourselves or denying our needs and interests -- that's a false understanding of humility. Rather, humility is seen in acknowledging the truth about ourselves and realizing that the needs and interests of others are just as important -- and sometimes, more important than our own -- something the proud person would never admit.

Then **SECONDLY**, Paul says that "living a life that is worthy of the calling to which we've been called" involves being "gentle." Or, in carrying over the word "completely" (as we must, since it modifies both words) we are told to be ***"completely gentle."***

The Greek word is "prautes" and it means "mild," "meek," or "the opposite of rough." That's why Paul, when dealing with the false apostles in II Cor. 10-11 -- who pushed people around and slapped them in the face -- appealed to them (and I quote): ***"By the meekness and gentleness of Christ."*** Because Christ was BOTH humble and gentle. That's why Paul calls us to be as well. In fact, we are to be completely gentle, which means, ***"gentle to the fullest degree possible."***

And what does the word "gentle" mean? LISTEN: Aristotle tells us that gentleness was the middle ground between being angry with everything and everyone, and never being angry at all. It was a moderated response.

That's why some versions translate Phil. 4:5: **"Let you gentleness be known to all men..."**, and others say, **"Let your moderation be known to all men."** At first I thought one translation must be wrong if the other was right, because I was thinking in terms of how we today define the word gentle and not what it originally meant -- which is "moderation."

Yet we do see the biblical understanding everywhere in the Bible. God the Father, we are told, is not devoid of anger, but rather, He is **"slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."** That is, He chooses to graciously restrain His anger, and exercise it only when evil has gone too far.

The same is true of Jesus. In Matt. 21:12-13, Jesus, who normally restrains His anger, vents it big time when seeing God's House changed into a shopping mall for price-gouging merchants who exploit people's earnest religious devotion for their own self-profit.

And the same was true of Moses. In much anger he smashed the tablets containing the 10 Commandments when he saw all the people engaging in idol worship, drunkenness and sexual revelry. Yet, in Num. 12:3 we are told he was *"more gentle than anyone else on the face of the earth."*

So what is gentleness? It's not weakness; it's power under control. It's the conscious choice and attending effort to restrain the power we possess when it would be easier (though wrong) to vent it.

In fact, Barclay makes puts it well when he says: **"The man who is [gentle] is the man who is always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time."**

It is not anger, but being angry at the wrong time, in the wrong way and for the wrong reason, which is sin -- as Moses discovered when he struck the rock with his staff. Breaking the tablets on which the 10 commandments were written

was actually good, righteous anger at the people's evil, idolatry, drunkenness and sexual immorality. / But striking the rock with his staff was inappropriate and sinful anger.

Gentleness, then, is not a lack of power, or the complete absence of anger, but anger and power restrained, and exhibited at only the right times and for the right reasons.

In fact, if you've seen the movie, "The Green Mile" (with Tom Hanks and the huge, muscular, Michael Clarke Duncan) it's a good illustration of the biblical concept of gentleness. For he has great power, but he keeps it under control, and uses it only when appropriate.

Which brings us to the **LAST** virtue required of us -- patience. And here, where Paul says, "**Be patient, bearing with one another in love,**" he's not talking about two virtues, he's giving us the one virtue of patience, and then defining what it is. It's bearing with people in love.

It's similar to I Cor. 13:4, where Paul describes Agape love. In the newer versions it says, "**Love is patient, love is kind.**" But in the KJV, it brings out the fuller sense of the meaning, when it says: "**Love suffers long and is kind.**"

That is, love suffers long and is kind to the one that makes it suffer!

In that sense we could say, patience is only really exercised in the face of frustration, when someone bothers us, hinders us, irritates us, or makes us suffer some type of inconvenience or pain. And instead of retaliating or seeking to lash out at them, we respond in kindness.

In fact, that's why Paul can say in Rom. 5:3, that, "**Trials (or suffering) produces patience.**" Because we will never truly have the opportunity to develop or exercise the virtue of patience so long as things always go our way, or we always get what we want, when we want it, and how we want it. That actually produces very impatient people!

In fact, the more we get used to getting what we want, rapidly and without any hindrance, the more we will see the virtue of patience disappear from our culture and our lives.

You've probably already noticed that happening, haven't you? Like looking at what happens when you get in people's way on the highway -- by driving the speed limit! Or look at what happens when you're in a room and the internet connection is slow / or at an airport when a flight is delayed / or behind a stalled car when the light turns green. Or worse yet, behind someone who doesn't realize its green because they're texting and they wait 2-3 seconds before they notice or step on the gas!

Watch people when they have to wait more than 3-4 minutes for "fast food" / or need to take a detour when they're late and a road is closed / or find themselves needing to run to the store to get a \$500 5G phone, because it gets news updates or downloads, 15 seconds faster than their 4G phone!

Folks, if any one of these virtues is disappearing faster than the others, it's this one. Because the one word that describes our culture is "fast-paced." And when one gets accustomed to always getting things fast, patience goes out the window.

Yet despite the fact that patience is such a rapidly dying virtue / made even more rare by the plethora of speedier gadgets / God does call us to, "be patient, and bear with one another in love." That is, even when they frustrate us / get in our way / slow us down / hinder our progress / or prevent us from doing what we want -- as fast as we'd like to do it.

"These words," as Hoehner points out, "do not describe an automatic response, but one that demands conscious effort on the part of the believer who relies on the Spirit."

You see, Paul was setting us up last week! Because he knew what he'd be saying next, and that all these things he calls us to exhibit in our lives are impossible apart from the Spirit's miracle working power -- especially since he calls us to exhibit them, *"to the fullest degree possible."*

Be completely humble. Be completely gentle. And patiently bear with (or respond in kindness) to people who frustrate us, get in our way, slow us down, and even make us suffer. It's no wonder we need the power of a God, ***"who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine."***