

Worthy of the Kingdom

(Opening Devotional for the 2018 House Church Retreat in PA)

I. Two (Competing) Versions of the Gospel Message

- a. There are two main competing versions of the gospel in circulation, in the circles we travel in.
- b. Reformation Theology (Luther and especially Calvin), the modern popular gospel; is in contrast with the older, original version of the gospel (message of the kingdom, as understood in the church in the beginning).
- c. When my wife and I were in central Turkey earlier this year, we were shocked to see the extent to which the modern version of the gospel, so popular in the United States, was spreading there as well!
- d. Characteristics of the Reformation Theology version of the gospel:
 - i. Main tenants held by influential writers and speakers including: Charles Spurgeon, John Bunyan, R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, John Piper, J.I. Packer, Alistair Begg, Tim Keller, Rick Warren.
 - ii. Groups include Presbyterian Church USA, Baptist, and many modern mega-churches influenced by the “New Calvinist” movement.
 - iii. Reformation Theology exerts enormous influence even on “kingdom Christians”, who may be in groups such as conservative Anabaptist and Restoration Movement that tend to hold more in common with the early church.
 1. Christians who are hungry to learn more: read commentaries and books, and take courses in seminaries, all of which are highly influenced by Reformation Theology. In many places (for example, in Boston) these seminaries provide practically the only alternative to the very ‘liberal’ seminaries and books (The reformed-type seminaries are considered ‘conservative’ in the sense that at least they tend to hold to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture!)
 2. Church preachers and teachers who are looking for material to preach (lessons) and ideas for how to grow their church.
 3. People who are looking to learn more about the grace of God, how to be secure in their salvation, sovereignty of God. People coming out of groups that had an unhealthy, unbalanced focus on external things and lots of rules (do this, don’t do that).

4. People who want to listen to sermons while driving in the car or at home (they have many eloquent speakers, lots of radio and TV programs, many internet sites).
 5. It even comes in through traditional hymns and modern popular Christian music.
- iv. It is popular: mega-churches my daughter Julia saw in Virginia everywhere, and we are seeing popping up in Boston, too. They are large, well-funded, organized and growing rapidly.
 - v. Unfortunately, many “kingdom Christians” cannot readily tell the difference between these two versions. That creates all kinds of problems!
 1. For example, someone will forward an article, or link to an audio message. Or someone looking for a local church will forward me the church’s website to ask my thoughts.
 - a. After reviewing just a few minutes I will say, “they are teaching Reformation Theology” or “this speaker is teaching Calvinism”.
 - b. After giving my feedback, the others often wonder, “How were you able to come to that conclusion so quickly, and why did I miss that?”
 2. I see the influence of this teaching spreading into all kinds of churches. Examples:
 - a. In a Restoration Movement church, when trying to introduce teaching on the grace of God, a Reformation Theology explanation of grace was put forward, and very few in the church (even among the leaders) noticed.
 - b. A friend going to a conservative Anabaptist church lamented recently that some weeks the message is a solid kingdom message, but other weeks it is essentially Reformation Theology (we are totally depraved, saved by the unmerited favor of God, unconditional eternal security, etc.). Members are hearing a confused, mixed message, but most do not see the contradictions.

- e. What is the difference between the two different versions of the gospel message?
- i. The modern, popular message (popular over the past 500 years, and rapidly growing now), following Reformation Theology, rests underlying which many are simply unaware of, which lead to conclusions that would have been considered heretical in the early church (as David Bercot demonstrated in his book, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*). Let us strive to understand the logic behind Reformation Theology, which proceeds generally as follows:
 1. The fall of man and woman was total (all humans after that became totally depraved, unable to do anything good; unable even to choose to seek God).
 2. Since we can do nothing good, not even seeking God, the only reason why anyone is saved is because God chooses that person (arbitrarily) to be saved. God does not want all people to be saved; only certain selected individuals.
 3. Since we can't do anything good, our salvation has *nothing to do with any choices made on our part*. Rather, is the sole result of God's choice. We receive salvation by simply believing in Jesus. Since our salvation is all a result of God's decision, we therefore cannot lose this gift that God (arbitrarily) gave us. Therefore, we have unconditional, eternal security: "once saved, always saved".
 - ii. In contrast, the historic faith, understood from the beginning, holds the following:
 1. While the fall of man and woman into the first sin had severe consequences for all who followed (death, a tendency toward sin, etc.), man was NOT totally depraved after that. Something good remained in man.
 - a. Consider Abel (Jesus speaks of him and others being righteous in **Matthew 23:34-35**), Enoch, Noah, Lot (Peter calls him righteous in **2 Peter 2:6-9**).
 - b. Consider Job, of whom God said he was "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." (**Job 1:8**)

- c. If people who lived before the time of Jesus are called “righteous” (which the Scriptures above clearly demonstrate), then this foundational concept that *everyone became totally depraved* after the fall of Adam and Eve is complete nonsense! (And since that is the very foundation of Reformed theology, the entire structure collapses.)
 - d. As we will see shortly, the Scriptures teach the opposite. There are, and always have been, at least a few righteous people with good hearts, who love truth, love God, and are seeking Him! **Hebrews 11** is filled with examples of such men and women.
 - i. While they may not have been completely without sin, they are certainly not considered “totally depraved” by God, either!
2. God truly *wants all men to be saved*, as Paul tells us in **1 Timothy 2:4**. He wants everyone to repent, even the most wicked; He does not desire the death of *anyone* (**Ezekiel 18:23-32**). That is God’s desire; it is *not* that only a select few individuals arbitrarily chosen by Him will be saved. Yet, while God will reach out to us and help us with his grace (or favor), He will not over-ride our free choice. Instead, He rewards those who seek Him, those who choose to travel down the narrow path leading to life.
 3. Our salvation involves God as well as us. It is a *false choice* to say it must be either “all due to God’s action” or “all due to our action”. There is a third (and correct) option: *both parties* are involved in our salvation! Jesus expressed this in His teaching about the vine and the branches in **John 15**.
 - a. We must make the commitment to abide in Jesus (to become connected to and remain in Him, obeying His teaching).
 - b. Yet without Him we can do NOTHING.
 4. After we decide to follow Christ, we must also persevere to the end. God foreshadowed our spiritual journey in the story of

the Exodus, explained by Paul in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, where most of those who crossed out of bondage of Egypt, were “baptized” and were sustained by the spiritual bread and drink in the desert, did not make it to the Promised Land! Only those who *persevered until the end* received the promised reward. If we do not persevere to the end, we can lose our salvation; this is not, “once saved, always saved”!

5. We are saved by faith, but Biblical saving faith (as shown in **Hebrews 11** examples) involves obedience and persevering through times of testing, to the end.

II. Worthy of the Kingdom?

- a. The popular gospel focuses on how unworthy we are (after all, they hold that we are totally depraved).
 - i. Songs typically extol the worthiness of Jesus *and unworthiness of ourselves*. For example, the message is often something along the lines of, “God is so great, we are so unworthy. Isn’t it awesome that God chose to save us despite all our depravity? Thanks, God!”.
 - ii. Similar lessons come from the pulpit in Protestant churches and are found in popular Christian books today. Martin Luther, taking **Isaiah 64:6** (“all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags”) completely out of context taught that this passage applied not only to the corrupt, hypocritical Jews of Isaiah’s day, but to all people of all time!
 1. For more on historic understanding of that passage held by the early Christians, consider David Bercot’s audio message, *Does God Really View Our Righteous Acts as Filthy Rags?*
 - iii. The result: emphasis is on gratitude (which is certainly very good), but not on *holiness and obedience* to Jesus (which is essential!). What flows from this faulty theological foundation is that God does not really insist that we lead righteous lives after turning to Christ. (See **Hebrews 12:14**: “Pursue... holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”)
- b. In one sense the Bible teaches that we *ARE* unworthy compared to Jesus.

- i. In **Revelation 5**, Jesus is held up as the only one who is worthy to open the sealed scroll. He is worthy to receive praise, honor and worship.
 1. “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” (**Revelation 5:11-12**, NKJV)
- ii. Jesus speaks about our attitude, after we have served our Master, should be that of an “unworthy servant”.
 1. “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” (**Luke 17:10**, NKJV)
- iii. Note that even John the Baptist feels unworthy in the presence of Jesus.
 1. “It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.” (**John 1:27**, NKJV)

III. We Had Better Be “Worthy of the Kingdom”

- a. Jesus told his disciples to look for “worthy people”
 - i. “Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food. “Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!” (**Matthew 10:9-15**, NKJV)
 - ii. When the disciples returned, what was their response back to Jesus?

1. Was it: “Jesus, we couldn’t find *any* worthy people out there! Why did you send us on an impossible mission”?
 2. Was it: “We had to sleep on park benches like homeless people, because we couldn’t find any worthy people to take us in.”?
 3. Or was it possibly: “For some unknown reason we couldn’t find any worthy people to stay with. Perhaps 1500 years from now some theologians (anticipating Luther or Calvin) will be able to explain the reason why we couldn’t find any worthy people.”?
 4. No, they didn’t say any of these things! In fact, it certainly appears that they were encouraged by their mission trip, and that they did find some “worthy people”.
- b. When challenged by the Sadducees regarding marriage and the resurrection, consider Jesus’ response:
- i. “Jesus answered and said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage;” **(Luke 20:34–35, NKJV)**
- c. Consider what Paul says. He urges and prays for the disciples to live lives that are truly worthy of their calling, worthy of the Lord, and worthy of the kingdom.
- i. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,” **(Ephesians 4:1, NKJV)**
 - ii. “For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;” **(Colossians 1:9–10, NKJV)**
 - iii. “You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” **(1 Thessalonians 2:10–12, NKJV)**

- iv. “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;” (2 **Thessalonians 1:3-5**, NKJV)
- d. Even in the midst of a badly compromised church where sin is rampant, the Lord is looking for those few who are living lives worthy of the Lord.
 - i. “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” (**Revelation 3:1-4**, NKJV)

IV. Conclusions

- a. It may sound humble and spiritual to say that we are totally unworthy of any good thing from God.
- b. However, Jesus speaks of people who are worthy, and those who are unworthy. He even spoke of those who would be worthy of eternal life.
- c. Paul’s great desire and prayer is that the Christians would be living lives worthy of the Lord, worthy of the kingdom.
- d. This is a high calling. The picture is not of totally depraved people who put on the imputed righteousness of Jesus: it is the call to live lives that are worthy, to follow Jesus and become like He is.
- e. The challenges for us:

- i. In evangelism: be bold, hoping to find some people with good and noble hearts, people that Jesus would recognize as being worthy of the kingdom.
- ii. If you have not been living a worthy life, find brothers or sisters you trust, who you can confess your sins to; come into the light, get help spiritually and repent.
- iii. One of the great expectations of Jesus is that we be united as Christians with one another. (See **Matthew 18:15-35, John 17:20-23**) If you are not united with a brother or sister, seek out that person, and do what it takes to forge unity.
- iv. If you have been walking in the light, embrace the calling and continue to strive to live a life worthy of the kingdom. In addition to that, please call others around you who profess to follow Christ to do the same.