

Sanctification: The Honorable Obsession

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1

Code: 49-14

This morning I know we're beginning a new year, but we're not beginning a new book. We really find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Ephesians, and there is no reason to interrupt that study today. In fact, there is every reason to lay a foundation for this entire year and for all of our lives by sticking to the very text that is next in our study of Ephesians, and that's chapter 4. So open your Bible to Ephesians chapter 4, and I want to read the opening six verses, and then to give you kind of an overview of what's going on in this very, very important transitional portion of Scripture.

Ephesians 4:1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

This is a very loaded portion of Scripture, and we'll spend, no doubt, several Sunday mornings digging down into the riches of its depth and the rest of what is ahead of us in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this great epistle. But for this morning, I want you to look at verse 1 and the statement there that the apostle Paul, "the prisoner of the Lord," implores us to: "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." Now this is going to be a very, very important introduction to the rest of this epistle because so much of what is about to come relates to walking in a worthy way.

What do we mean by walking? Well that's a term used in the epistles to refer to daily conduct, daily life, living your Christian life one day at a time, step by step. But what about the word *worthy*? *Worthy* is a very interesting Greek word. It's *axiōs* in Greek, and it really means "equivalent." Another way to basically define that word would be to say that something has to balance out—that which balances the scales. *Axiōs* is something that's in balance, that's found equilibrium.

And how does that relate to walking as a believer? It is simply this: Here is the command to live a life that is in balance, in perfect harmony with your position in Christ. It should be in perfect balance with all the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ that began to be laid out in chapter 1, verse 3, and really took us all the way through the first three chapters. We have been given union with Christ. We are in Christ. All the privileges that come with that, all the honors, all the blessings, all the promises, and all the power that comes with that should be matched up with how we live our lives. Our lives should be a true reflection of our condition and our union with Jesus Christ. This is the essential reality of Christian living.

This is also the definition of sanctification. What does it mean to be sanctified? It means to live a life that is consistent with your spiritual union with Christ, and embraces all that is in that union by way of privilege, honor, blessing, promise, and power. That's why "therefore" is here, because in consequence of what we've learned in chapters 1 to 3, this is how we are to live. We saw the doctrine in chapters 1 to 3—everything that is ours in Christ, all the spiritual blessings laid out. And

based on that doctrine, we have duty to follow up and live in a way that is in balance with our privileges. This is a very common theme in the New Testament epistles.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, for example, you see an illustration of it where the apostle Paul says, verse 3, “This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.” This is consequence to what is in verse 1: “We request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God.” This is how you ought to live, and you have the responsibility to live that way. Doctrine lays out the standards, lays out the commands, lays out the divine expectations; and we are to respond to those in obedience.

In 2 Corinthians 6 Paul talks about the fact that we have been made children of God, we have been adopted by God, God has become our Father; and having become sons of God, we are really the recipients of everything in the divine treasury; it is all ours. And as a response to that, at the end of chapter 6, in verse 1 of chapter 7, he says, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh . . . perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

So basically the reality of sanctification is the consequent expectation of every believer, from having received all spiritual blessings. In that you have been granted all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, this is how you are to live. Now this is a constant theme, and I'll try to unpack it for you at least in this opening message this morning: that duty is always built on doctrine, that practice is always built on position, that behavior is always built on truth, that you only live a life to the glory of God when you understand of the glory of God. That is to say, when you understand the fullness of God's glory revealed in redemptive blessing, you then have the foundation to live the way God wants you to live.

Peter expresses this in 1 Peter chapter 1, verse 14: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; [understand] that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from the futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” Given that you were redeemed by the blood of Christ, given that you were called by the Holy One, given that you were granted impartially everything that God's mercies could distribute to you, behave yourself in this way. “Be holy; for I am holy.”

Now, sanctification should be your preoccupation. As a believer, the election is done, justification is done, glorification is coming. And you're living in the middle between justification and glorification, and the preoccupation of every believer must be sanctification. That is the separation from sin, becoming increasingly holy. The kind of evangelicalism that we see so popular today has, in my judgment, a very low view of sanctification. It doesn't seem to be particularly preoccupied with sanctification at all. It's perfectly content to accept divine, sovereign election. It's very happy about the doctrine of justification. It looks forward to glorification, but has a very nominal, minimal, indifferent attitude toward sanctification.

That is a core sin. I mean, that is a monumental failure in the evangelical world, and it is precisely the reason why the evangelical world is so full of disappointment and sin and defection—because there

is little, if any, interest in sanctification. People are interested in self-fulfillment, social issues. They're happy to embrace the sovereignty of God and know that they're saved and on their way to heaven. But very little is expected of people with regard to sanctification. I want to make that, perhaps, vivid to you by having you go back with me in history.

In 1759, a man was born by the name of William Wilberforce; you will probably recognize the name. He died in 1833. Everybody who knows anything about English history knows about him because he had a long career in the English Parliament. He was a Christian man, but he is very famous for his commitment to the abolition of slavery; and that was his contribution, politically, to the world. In fact, he waged essentially a 40-year battle in the English Parliament to get the Parliament to pass a law to abolish human slavery. His first speech—he was so concerned about this—his first speech was May 12, 1789, and he gave a defense of the call to abolish slavery. And his first speech lasted three and a half hours, three and a half hours. He laid out his case.

Over the duration of the next number of years, he proposed laws in the English Parliament six times. All six times, the abolitionists laws were rejected. And finally they passed abolition days before his death, long after he had left Parliament. But that was not his obsession. And I think historically people assume it was, because it's a noble cause. Obviously human slavery—abolishing that is a noble cause. But that is not what his obsession was. Historically, people think of him as obsessed with abolition. He had a lot of enemies who thought that was the most important thing in his life, and they wanted to make sure he never got what he wanted. But that was not his true obsession.

I know what his true obsession was. How do I know that? Because recently his journals have been discovered. He wrote journals so that there is a mass of his first-person writings that reflect his obsession. And I could tell you what his obsession was: He was obsessed with his own sanctification. This was what obsessed him. This is what drove him day after day after day, was the sense that he was not the man that Christ wanted him to be, he was not worthy.

At the age of 20, Wilberforce started making resolutions and writing them down, as many in the 1700s did—perhaps most notably, Jonathan Edwards. And his first one was something simple like, “Go to bed by 11:00, and get up by 6:00.” And from there he wrote all kinds of resolutions. Here's a quote: “I fully hope to write down every night whether I have been faithful to my Lord or whether in the course of that day I have in any instance clearly transgressed.” Every day? You're going to write down whether you have been faithful to the Lord or whether you have transgressed, and you're going to do that every day? You're going to keep that kind of intense inventory on your life? You are an obsessed person. That's like OCD to do that every day of your life. But that was the obsession of William Wilberforce.

He made many, many resolutions. And he says, “I made many resolutions and broke them almost as soon as I made them.” One of the familiar words that shows up in his resolutions—which have now been collected and published, and I've been going through them for a couple of weeks—one of the words that appears is a classical Greek word: *oy moi*. It's onomatopoeic—*oy moi*. It was a classical Greek word used to describe the mourning of women who are hired to mourn at a funeral. He uses that word over and over again. There was this constant sense of unworthiness; there was this constant cry of sadness at the lack of sanctification in his life.

He kept lists. And these are the things he wrote in his lists: “I wrote down the chief mercies of God that day, the chief operations of His divine providence.” And then he listed the day's troubles, the

day's failures, the day's evils, the day's suffering, his main defects, temptations, and sins. And after he had listed all of that, he would write down the behaviors from that day that glorified God, advanced the gospel, and then—in his own words—cultivated a taste for heaven.

Imagine doing that every day. You would really come to grips with your spiritual condition. And he knew that because he was not obsessed with slavery—he saw it as an evil, and he wanted to make a difference. But he was obsessed with his sanctification.

Here are a few things from his journals, which are now available; you can purchase a book. They have been collected by a writer named McMullen and put in a single volume. Here are some of the things he wrote; this is typical of thousands of entries. Here's one from 1809: "How should I be ashamed if others could see me just as I really am? I often think I am one grand imposter. My heart is heavy. Oh, there is nothing that can speak peace to the wounded spirit but the gospel promises and the promises sure. God is love and is able to save to the uttermost, and He will cast out none who come to Him. He it is I trust, who has excited in me a disposition to come. And I will therefore press forward, humbly indeed, but trusting to His mercy, who has promised so many blessings to them that seek Him. O Lord, yet strengthen me. And if it please Thee, fill me with all peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Here's another one: "I humbly hope that I have felt this day, and still feel somewhat of the powers of the world to come. I feel indeed the deepest sense of my own sinfulness. But blessed be God for His gracious promises. To Thee, O Lord, I humbly devote myself. Oh, confirm me to the end. Make me perfect. Establish, strengthen, settle me. What cause have I for thankfulness? Which way soever I look I am heaped up with blessings, mercies of all sorts and sizes. I wish not to spend time in writing, but oh, let me record the lovingkindness of the Lord."

Here's another one: "To Thee, O God, I fly through the Savior. Enable me to live more worthy of my holy calling, to be more useful and efficient, that my time may not be frittered away unprofitably to myself and others, but that I really may be of use in my generation and adorn the doctrine of God my Savior. I am a poor, helpless creature, Lord. Strengthen me."

Here's another one: "To Thee, O Lord, I fly. Oh, forgive and receive Your unworthy wanderer. Oh, come and dwell within me. Alas, how forgetful I am of the presence of God, and thence of my company and conversation. Yesterday I fell into the vice of evil speaking. O Lord, fill me with love, with brotherly kindness, with grateful humility. How thankful should I be for my privileges, and how candid and tender in speaking or judging or thinking of those who have been destitute of the advantages that I have enjoyed."

You might say that he was hard on himself. But he was honest; he knew he wasn't what he should be, as every honest believer knows. As Paul said, "Not as though I've already attained," right? "But I press toward the mark."

On his deathbed, as heaven was ready to receive him, Wilberforce said, "I hope no man on earth has a stronger sense of sinfulness and unworthiness before God than I do." He was, at that time, 73 years old and 11 months; and he had been obsessed with sanctification for over half a century, since he was 20. And all he could think about on the brink of heaven, almost the age of 74, was how unworthy he was to enter heaven. He died on Monday, July 29th, in 1833, just a month before his

74th birthday.

What's the point of this? This is to help you understand what a real obsession with sanctification looks like. You know, we have heroes in our culture, mostly celebrities and politicians; and if those are your heroes, you're in sad shape. We need heroes like this.

The Word of God calls us to walk worthy of our calling. It called him to the same thing. He writes down thousands of these personal inventories because he understands he's not what he should be. Very often he uses Titus 2:10 and cries out that he would be able to live a life that adorned the doctrine of God, that brought honor to God, that brought fame to Christ.

This is how every believer should live. This is both a divine expectation and a divine command. This is what walking worthy means. You are in Christ. In Him you have all spiritual blessings. You're not worthy of that, but you spend your life trying to elevate your life to some approximation of what it means to be worthy. It's not that you will sometime reach a point where you don't need mercy and you don't need grace; you will never have that experience in this world. You will never attain that. But this should be the obsession of your life.

I see that as so alien to Christianity, even today. It's this kind of obsession with sanctification that was on the heart of the apostle Paul. That's why he would say about himself, "I am the chief of sinners"—because he knew no matter how he longed to be conformed to the perfections of Christ, and no matter how worthy he was; because he said to the Corinthians, "Follow me as I follow Christ," he had reached some maturity, some level of worthiness; it was never what it could be or should be. There is a necessary and concomitant humility in the sanctified believer—that the more sanctified he or she is, the more unsanctified they feel. But the passion of our lives should be to adorn the doctrine of God, to make sure that our lives bring honor to Christ.

Now, that's what Paul is going to be confronting us with in chapter 4 and the subsequent chapters. Chapters 1 to 3, all the spiritual blessings were laid out: privileges, promises, blessings, power—all laid out. These are our possessions. These define our position in Christ, our union, our identity with Him. But then starting in chapter 4 come the expected and commanded duties in response, so that we are living worthy of our calling. That's why you have at the beginning of chapter 4 the word *therefore*. That's a very, very important word because there is a transition here of monumental significance.

We have just been told at the end of chapter 3 that we have been granted the riches of glory, that we have been given strength through the power of the Spirit, that Christ has taken up residence in our hearts, that lives that live with Christ in the center are rooted and grounded in love to the degree that the love that we experience in Christ surpasses knowledge, so that we can literally be filled to the fullness of God and be able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think according to the power that works in us. This is the culminating description of what it is to be a believer. That's you, so that through you, connected to Christ, He receives "glory in the church . . . [in] generations forever and ever. Amen." The "amen" at the end of chapter 3 is the final affirmation of the doctrinal section.

Transition then, immediately, is to duty. Doctrine to duty. This is not a random move; this is critical. This is to be understood in the same sense that you would understand a flower's connection to its

stem. As closely and vitally correspondent would be the branch of a tree and the leaf of the tree, or the root and the trunk of the tree; they all derive their life from what is below them. And Paul is saying you have to have a foundation of doctrine to live a life of worthy behavior. This is very common to Paul and the other writers. We don't have time to go through all of it, but I'll give you one very dramatic illustration.

Turn back to Romans 12. It's very common; but here is a very powerful illustration, Romans 12. You have the very same word—chapter 12, verse 1: “Therefore I urge you”—same thing he said in Ephesians: “Therefore I implore you” or “I beg you” or “I plead with you.” And here's the basis on which Paul pleads in Romans 12: “by the mercies of God.” On the basis of the mercies that God has dispersed to you, you need “to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you [function within] the will of God” So the point is this: You need to present your bodies because of what God has done for you, in giving you His mercies.

What are the mercies of God? What's he talking about? Well if this were the book of Ephesians, we would say everything that he laid out in chapter 1. But this is the book of Romans. And Ephesians has, you could say, three chapters of the mercies of God to the believer, but Romans has eleven chapters of the mercies of God; the opening eleven chapters lay out all that God has given us. And let me just remind you of what's in those eleven chapters:

We have been granted the righteousness of God. We have been given an understanding that all that the Law can do is condemn and it cannot save. We have been granted salvation through the power of faith. We have been granted peace with God, standing in grace, the promise of glory, the gift of love, the indwelling Holy Spirit, adoption as God's sons, reconciliation to God, union with Christ. We are now priests offering sacrifices to God—acceptable ones. We have been given deliverance from sin, freedom from judgment, conversion, transformation, glorification, eternal security, and unfailing promises. Those are all the mercies of God, which is to say you don't deserve them. What a list.

Paul then, in chapter 12 of Romans and verse 1, says, “Therefore . . . present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.” Go down the path of sacrificial sanctification; that's your spiritual service of worship. What is God asking out of you? He gave you all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. They're laid out in eleven chapters in Romans; they're laid out in primarily chapter 1 of Ephesians and expanded in 2 and 3. And on the basis of what God has done for you, what should He expect but that you should walk in a worthy way, which is to present your body as a living and holy sacrifice. You want to live a life that's acceptable to God, and that, of course, means a holy life, a holy life.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 1, Paul writes, “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For we know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” OK, “We taught you, we gave you instruction, we gave you commandments so that you can walk pleasing to God.” Then verse 3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” “This is the will of God, your sanctification.” What should be your preoccupation? Sanctification.

Listen, back in chapter 2 of 1 Thessalonians, verse 12, “You [should] walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” What has God given you? Everything in His kingdom. What has He given you? Glory, eternal glory. What does He ask of you? That you walk in a

way that is worthy. In other words, that your life corresponds to your privileges.

In Colossians again, chapter 1, listen to the words of Paul, very much the same, verses 9 and 10, “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” “We want you to have the knowledge of sound doctrine”—why? “So that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” You can’t separate knowledge from holiness. You can’t separate doctrine from duty. You can’t separate practice from position.

And again, we read Peter: “Be holy, for I am holy.” Line up your living with your privileges. When people try to teach behaviors without doctrinal foundation, they do no service because when you try to live a Christian life without doctrinal understanding, it’s disappointing, it’s discouraging, it’s work, it’s vain, and it seems like you’re just constantly pushing yourself to do something that you’re not really that committed to doing.

People trying to live the Christian life without sound doctrine are very disappointed and very disillusioned, because what makes the Christian life the thing you love is your understanding of doctrine. It’s when you understand the mercies of God, the full range of those mercies, when you understand the nature of God and all the spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, then your whole life becomes a spiritual sacrifice of thanksgiving. Then you love the Lord for all that He’s done—and love motivates obedience. Where you don’t have enough theology to understand all that God has given to you, then you’re trying to push yourself into the direction of being holy, and you don’t have that profound motivation that turns your obedience from duty to love. Some preachers try to emotionally motivate people; that doesn’t last very long. Ephesians 4:23 says, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.” It’s how you think that makes your obedience joyful, because it becomes an act of gratitude and thanks and love and praise and worship.

As I read earlier in Colossians 3 and verse 10, “[You] have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.” This is a powerful verse. “[You] have put on the new self”—you’ve put on Christ, the new self; you’re a new creation who is being renewed. Let me give you an illustration of what that is.

You are constantly being renewed. Think of your cell phone. Every once in a while you get something from the cell phone company that says, “We want to give you an update on the system. We’ll do that overnight if you plug your phone in.” And what happens is the system is renewed; it’s upgraded. That is a classic illustration, and a simple one, of how God functions in the life of a believer. There’s constant renewal, constant refurbishing, constant upgrading going on in the life of a believer who is exposed to divine truth. You’re just an upgraded version of what you were—more efficient, more fruitful, more productive. And it comes through the full knowledge of God. That’s why Peter says, “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That’s my prayer for you.”

So doctrine is the foundation for conduct. Our walk is to be *axiōs*, it’s to be equivalent to our restored, renewed, transformed, converted self in Christ. You have all the spiritual blessings, you have everything; you need to live consistently with that. You can’t do that if you don’t know the mercies of the Lord, if you don’t have the doctrinal truths, because then you’re making an effort without the knowledge that catapults your effort into loving gratitude and worship. So this is a transition passage

that is really critical.

We have been studying what is our standing in first, second, and third chapter. Now we're studying our walking in the world. And we're going to learn a lot in these chapters. We're going to find that we have a unity walk, a different walk, a love walk, a light walk, a wise walk, a spirit walk, a warfare walk. But all our walking basically is motivated by our standing.

Sometimes you hear people say, "Well, doctrine is divisive. We don't want to talk about doctrine; we just talk about Jesus. We don't talk about doctrine; we just live for Jesus." That's not only foolish, that's devilish. You can't live a Christian life without a doctrinal foundation and live it with joy and love as an act of worship. And when you understand what you deserve and who you are and all that the Lord has granted you in your salvation, there's ample motivation in that to live a grateful life.

We are trophies of divine grace who are being completely updated all the time—renewed, updated. We have risen from the dead; we have risen in Christ. We are children of God, members of Christ's body, living stones and living temple, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit Himself. We need to live heavenly lives. "Set your affections on things above," as we read, "not on things on the earth."

So Paul is taking us in this fourth chapter into the category of Christian walk, Christian living, Christian behavior. Can we walk the way that we are called to walk? Yes we can, because we have been given the Word and the Spirit. And we'll see how that unfolds.

But let's look at verse 1 for a moment, back in Ephesians, verse 1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord"—let me stop there for a minute. You know, on the basis of everything that I've been saying to you, and on the basis of Paul's command to walk in a manner worthy of the calling, you might conclude that, "Well, this is the path to happiness, this is the path to prosperity." There might be the fact that you would say, "Well, look at who I am: I'm a child of God, I'm a son of God, I'm in union with Christ, Christ lives in me. All the resources of heaven are basically deposited in my account; an inheritance awaits me in heaven, eternal life, all that. I'm pretty significant, I'm pretty significant. That ought to show up in my life, right, if this is all true?" So Paul reminds us that he is the prisoner of the Lord; he is in jail. But he's never going to admit that he's a prisoner of men or any government. He's in jail because that's where the Lord put him.

On the basis of all that Paul has said about doctrine and walking a worthy walk, a worthy life, a life that is consistent with exalted doctrine, you might think you are going to end up with an exalted life. But no. He already told us he was a prisoner in chapter 3, verse 1, "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus." But why is he telling it again? Because what he wants us to understand is this: You can walk a worthy walk and end up in jail. That's what he wants us to understand.

He has been faithful to the trust given to him. He has carried out his calling. Even though he was under no illusions about spiritual perfection, he said, "I have not attained, but I press toward the mark." He said, "I'm the chief of sinners." But nonetheless, he was loyal enough to his Lord to say, "Follow me as I follow Christ. And guess what? I am a prisoner. That's what I get for walking in a worthy way." The point is this: Walk worthy even if it lands you in prison. This is asking for loyalty at all costs. And we know what happened to Paul: Eventually they chopped his head off.

Bondage to Jesus is sweet. Fulfilling your duty to the Word of God and the God of the Word is joyful

because you're a prisoner of love. And even if you end up in a jail, you are still the recipient of all the mercies of heaven. On the basis of all preceding doctrine, on the basis of all of his life lived out in a trustworthy way, he ends up as a prisoner and still says, back to verse 1, "I implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called," "and I'm saying it from the vantage point of prison—a stinking, wretched, rotten, vile prison."

He's not saying, "You know, if you walk worthy, you're going to end up in a palace. If you walk worthy, you're going to have all your desires met." No, if you walk worthy, you might end in a prison. But still, still with joy and love for the Lord, he can say, "I implore you to walk in a manner worthy," "I beg you, I exhort you, I beseech you"—*parakaleō*, strong, strong word.

This was always his goal. In Colossians 1:28 he says, "We proclaim Him"—that is Christ—"admonishing every man, teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." In other words, "My goal in ministry is to teach and admonish with all divine revelation, to present everyone complete in Christ. This is what I labor for, this is what I strive for, and this is what the power of the Holy Spirit in me works for." This is what he said in Galatians 4:19: that he was in birth pain until Christ was fully formed in the people.

This is the goal of pastoral ministry: to see the folks that God puts into your care sanctified, ever-increasingly like Christ. Paul says, "That's what I live for. That's what I minister for. That's what I seek in my own life." He cried out, "O that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection in the fellowship of His sufferings." A servant of God gives his life and his breath and all his strength and all his energy to see the sanctification of His people through the Word and the Spirit.

So Paul begs and says, "Look, I'm pleading with you, walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." What is that calling? That's a divine call to salvation; that's not an invitation. When you see "calling" in the epistles of the New Testament, it's talking about the effectual call to salvation, in which God awakens the dead person, overcomes their death, and gives them life and brings them to justification through the path of repentance. So he says, "You need to walk in a way that's worthy of this incredible calling, sovereign calling of grace and mercy from God with which you have been called." You need to walk consistently in light of that calling.

His calling to you awakened you from the dead; it gave you life. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Consider your calling," 1 Corinthians 1:26, in calling them to holiness. Philippians 3:14 it's called a high calling because it's the highest calling that any person could ever have. It's called in 2 Timothy 1:9 a holy calling. It's called in Hebrews 3:1 a heavenly calling. And Romans 8 sums it up: "Whoever He calls, He justifies; and whoever He justifies, He glorifies." So this is a calling that leads to justification, which leads to glorification. And we are called, 1 Corinthians 1:2, to be saints, holy ones.

So Paul is saying, "Look, I can't tell you there will be a happy outcome in this life, because I'm a prisoner because I have been faithful. But you need to be faithful as well and walk in a worthy way, whatever the price. And you'll gladly pay that price out of the joy and the love of obedience that comes from one who understands the depths of the mercies of God that have been deposited in his or her life."

So to close, go back to William Wilberforce. A friend by the name of Joseph John Gurney visited

Wilberforce in his final days, and this is what his friend wrote: “I came and saw him, a Christian man, reclining on a sofa with his feet wrapped in flannel and his face showing the increased age since I had seen him last.” This is days before his death. “He received me with the warmest marks of affection. I freely spoke to him of the good and glorious things which, as I believed, assuredly awaited him in the kingdom of rest and peace. In the meantime, the illuminated expression of his furrowed countenance, with his clasped and uplifted hands, were indicative of profound devotion and holy joy.

“He told me that the text on which he was then most prone to dwell, and from which he was deriving peculiar comfort, was a passage in Philippians: ‘Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.’”

And Gurney said, “While his frail nature was shaking and his mortal tabernacle seemed ready to be dissolved, this peace of God was his blessed and abundant portion. And then he spoke,” writes his friend. “‘How admirable,’ said Wilberforce, ‘are the harmony and variety of St. Paul’s smaller epistles: Galatians, a noble exhibition of doctrine; Colossians, a union of doctrine and precept, showing their mutual connection and dependence; and Ephesians is seraphic; and Philippians is all love.’ And then he said, ‘With regard to myself, I have nothing whatsoever to urge but the poor publican’s plea: God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’” There he is, hanging on the edge of death and knowing he needs mercy because he did not attain perfection; he was still a sinner needing mercy. Gurney wrote, “What a lesson may we derive from such an example. It may awfully remind us of the apostle’s question: ‘If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the sinner and ungodly appear?’”

A few days later, Wilberforce spoke the following words to his son: “You must all join with me in praying that the short remainder of my life may be spent in gaining that spirituality of mind which will fit me for heaven. And there I hope to meet all of you.” Amazing. Having walked with the Lord for half a century, he asked for prayer that in the short remainder of hours he had left, that he would gain greater spirituality of mind. This is the dissatisfaction of a heart that longs for sanctification.

In his will, he asked to be buried humbly with no special honors. He said, “Honor would be preposterous and unseemly.” But he couldn’t prevent the English Parliament from burying him at Westminster Abbey and placing a magnificent statue of him close to his grave. Here’s what is placed on that statue to this day as tribute: “To the memory of William Wilberforce . . . Eminent as he was in every department of public labour, and a leader in every work of charity . . . his name will ever be specially identified with those exertions which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for abolition of slavery in every colony of the empire: in the prosecution of these objects he relied, not in vain, on God; but in the progress he was called to endure great opposition: He outlived, however, all [hatred] . . . He died not unnoticed or forgotten by his country: The Peers and Commons of England, with the Lord Chancellor . . . at their head, in solemn procession from their respective houses, carried him to his fitting place among the mighty dead . . . here to repose: till, through the merits of Jesus Christ, his only Redeemer and Saviour, (whom, in this life and in his writings he had desired to glorify,) he shall rise in the resurrection of the just.” What a tribute. Even the Parliament recognized that in this life, all he wanted was to glorify his Lord.

Sanctification must be our preoccupation; and we’re going to learn the elements of that in this wonderful portion of Scripture as we continue. Let’s pray.

Father, as we think about the apostle Paul, we thank You for his faithfulness. As we think about William Wilberforce, we thank You for his, and many other stalwarts. For Paul, it meant a prison. For Wilberforce, to live this way meant that he was hated by many, and it meant that he had to live his whole life with an overwhelming sense of discontent, because the passion of his heart, the obsession of his soul was so strongly to be sanctified that the failure for that to be realized in this life left him with a kind of deep disappointment. And yet never, even in the disappointment in himself, did he indicate any disappointment in his Redeemer. His only disappointment was that he would enter into heaven less than heaven deserved. And so he asked for prayers that he would be more spiritual in the few days before he entered heaven. That's the cry of a heart obsessed with sanctification.

Lord, that should be our driving passion in this world. There's so many things that can obstruct that, so many things that can take the place of it, so many things to be preoccupied with, so many temporal things. One could hardly imagine a greater earthly cause than the abolition of slavery—maybe the abolition of abortion or any other massive kind of criminal conduct. But in the end, the obsession that must drive all of us, no matter what our temporal objectives may be, the obsession that must drive us all is to become more like You, our Savior. Sanctify us, because we know that's Your will. Give us through the Word and the Spirit the power to overcome sin and to live righteously and godly in this present age, for Your glory. Amen.

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