

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth; for His word is truth. Amen

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (2022)

Who Among Men Stands Worthy Before the Lord?

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“But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. “When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”” (Matthew 8:8, 10–12, ESV)

“Worthy” this is a word that is heard throughout the halls of the church. It is not uncommon to hear people who call themselves Christian, express their unworthiness by fearing to petition our Lord for the forgiveness of their sins or seek His healing power for illness, injury, or emotional distress. They say, oh pastor I am such a miserable sinner, I am not worthy to ask Jesus for anything. A true under-shepherd of Christ cannot help but be amazed at such a confession. In these cases a pastor sees a person who recognizes Jesus as being the only source and answer to their dilemma but who also consider themselves to be of such low estate they dare not come before Him and ask Him for anything. But this is contrary to the words of our Lord when He said, *“Ask, and it will be given to you.” (Matthew 7:7, ESV)* He does not say ask only if you are “worthy” and then I’ll grant your petition.

Worthiness is a topic taken up in the Gospels and typically it is the humble saint/sinner who utters the words, “I am not worthy.” This is true with two notable exceptions, when our Lord Jesus sends out the Twelve and in the parable of the Wedding Feast. In the first instance, Jesus sends out the Twelve and says, *“And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.” (Matthew 10:11–14, ESV)* In the parable of the “Wedding Feast” Jesus says of those who were invited but refused to come, *“The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.” (Matthew 22:8, ESV)* In both instances those who are declared unworthy are unbelievers, those who refuse the invitation and reject the Son of God. Here is true unworthiness, but unworthiness does not lay in the heart of a sinful believer. To the contrary, the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in the heart of the believing saint/sinner leading them to seek the Lord in prayerful repentance, seeking the forgiveness He won for them on the Altar of the Cross. Again, our Lord says to the troubled heart, *“Ask, and it will be given to you.”*

Knowing that this is the teaching of Holy Scripture, why would someone who call themselves a believer in Jesus Christ fear approaching Him because of their perceived unworthiness? Why are they driven by a belief which says they must make themselves worthy before they can approach the Lord, yet at the same time, also believe that their efforts to make themselves worthy, are truly unworthy? Truth is, this is not so confusing. Such faith is based on the belief that man can earn his way into heaven by what he does. But such faith is then challenged by the thought, they’re not sure they’ve done enough. Conclusion, I am not worthy. Yes, they say, Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins, but I must do something to make that a reality in

my life. The work of Christ on the cross can only be completed by my works righteousness and I'm not sure I am righteous enough! Such as these do not trust in the truth of the Gospel.

Yes, the centurion said to Jesus, ***“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”*** (v. 8) But is his statement of unworthiness based on his belief that he hasn't done enough to earn our Lord's attention? Not at all. In the centurion we do not find someone who is reluctant to seek help, but rather we see a man who understands that although he is unworthy, he can faithfully rely on the goodness of the One to whom he must go, believing with full confidence that his problem will be solved. This is so much more different from the one who knows that Jesus can resolve their problem, yet because of their perceived unworthiness, are afraid to ask Him for help. Which brings us to the question, ***“Who Among Men Stands Worthy Before the Lord?”***

The answer to this question is revealed in Holy Scripture, but all too often, Scripture is not consulted to find the answer. Instead, men supply their own answers, answers primarily predicated on Law and works-righteousness.

The Law says, do this and you shall live. So men begin to believe that worthiness is a result of following the Law, of doing good works. Without question the Pharisees and teachers of the Law thought they were ***“worthy.”*** Jesus told us about such men when He said, ***“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”*** (Matthew 23:5–7, ESV) Only the worthiest could demand the best seats and expect glowing appreciation from the people. But the most condemning description of such men by Jesus is when He said, ***“they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”*** (Matthew 23:3–4, ESV)

Such preaching is heard throughout the church today. You can earn your way into heaven by what you do. You can make yourself ***“worthy”*** by what you do. The Pharisees thought they were made ***“worthy”*** by their works. They believed they obeyed the Commandments, that is until Jesus added to their understanding of the Commandments in His Sermon on the Mount. No longer was the sin of murder or adultery restricted to the physical act, but our Lord Jesus expanded it to thought and desire, to anger and lust. These words angered the Pharisees, challenging their understanding of works-righteousness, of their worthiness earned by following the Law. But the Pharisee of Pharisees, St. Paul, reiterates our Lord's teaching, when he said, ***“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*** (Romans 3:20, ESV) Oh, wow! The Law has the purpose of showing us our sin, which does not make us ***“worthy,”*** but manifests our unrighteousness, our unworthiness instead.

Searching for the answer to our question, ***“Who Among Men Stands Worthy Before the Lord?”*** we turn to the revelation of Holy Scripture, and search for the two doctrines that are of utmost importance to men: justification and sanctification. Both states of the believer are gifts from God. One state makes us worthy, and the other state enhances our worthiness.

What makes a person ***“worthy”*** in the eyes of God? Only faith in the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God can make us ***“worthy.”*** This is the faith that Jesus speaks of when describing the centurion who believed that Jesus could heal his servant from where He was, saying ***“Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.”*** (v. 10) Yet in the minds of men, faith can be an elusive word. This raises the questions, what is faith and where does it come from?

Faith is not a result of the Law, it is not predicated on the goodness of man, nor is it merely an emotional feeling. Moreover, anyone who denies the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus won for sinful man on the Altar of the Cross cannot say they have faith. But true faith, saving faith is that blessed gift given to men to believe in their heart the promises of God's grace as revealed in the Gospel. But such faith does not come through the effort of men, it only comes from hearing the Word of the Gospel. St. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Romans, ***“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17, ESV)***

Turning now to those two doctrines I spoke of earlier, justification and sanctification, the central doctrine of Holy Scripture is *Justification by Faith without the Deeds of the Law*. When the sinner comes to faith in Christ Jesus, they are at once justified before God. But this faith is not a result of human effort, rather it is solely the result of a gracious and merciful God who gave His Son in death on the Altar of the Cross and thereby justified all men before Himself. When we are given the gift of faith by God, He declares us “justified.” Scripture makes it clear, this is not our work, but the work of the Son of God. St. Paul confirms this, saying, ***“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16, ESV)***

The other doctrine of which I spoke is the doctrine of sanctification. This doctrine is constantly misunderstood by man. Sanctification is solely the purview of the Holy Spirit, and it includes His bringing you to faith through hearing the Gospel. Sanctification, as it is applied to the believer's life, designates their internal spiritual transformation, or their growth in holy living which follows justification. But again, this is not solely the work of man, but man guided by the Holy Spirit who produces man's Good Works. Luther tells us in his Large Catechism, *“As Christians, we confess that the Holy Spirit has made us new creatures by bringing us to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith is “granted to our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel.” And in his Small Catechism we were taught, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.”*

Therefore, as we can see, everything given and offered to a child of God is given and offered by God. It is never the result of man working out his own salvation.

So I asked earlier, *“Who Among Men Stands Worthy Before the Lord?”* and God's answer is all who have been given the gift of true saving faith to believe in the Atoning Sacrifice of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who believe in the vicarious satisfaction won by Christ's suffering and death upon the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of all men's sin., who believe in and trust in the righteousness of Christ, who trust in God's grace and mercy given them through Christ, and who disregard their own worthiness and unworthiness boldly relying on the worthiness of the Son of God for the forgiveness of their sins and life eternal. These are those who *“Stand Worthy Before the Lord.”* In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.