

A WORTHY LIFE

The apostle Paul buries the statement so subtly within the passage of his letter to the church in Thessalonica that it could easily be overlooked. And yet there it is, like a hidden landmine just waiting for us to stumble across it and discover what an explosive, audacious idea it is.

We're called to live lives worthy of God.

How can we—or how can any human being, for that matter—live up to such a calling? How can we possibly live lives that are worthy of God's calling; lives that are, as Paul put it, "holy, righteous and blameless"?

We tend to think that "worthy" means deserving; but it's not what Paul was saying. Paul would never teach, or even suggest, that God's saving grace could be earned or deserved by a person's good and admirable works. Actually, the Greek word Paul used in this passage is more accurately translated "appropriate" or "fitting." Having declared that they had already been redeemed by God through Jesus, Paul was encouraging his readers to live appropriately and suitably in response; in other words, to live in a way that satisfactorily reflected their calling as God's beloved and saved people.

And what does a life worthy of God look like?

There's no one answer to that question, of course. Every "worthy life" that's lived for God will be as unique and different as the person who lives it. But isn't it true that we all know a worthy life when we see one?

Allow me to offer one example of such a life that I came across recently.

Amanda Smith was born a slave. Her mother belonged to a plantation owner, and her father was the slave of a neighboring landholder. Eventually Amanda was set free on the death bed request of her owner's daughter, but she was still a young girl when she went to work for a widow in Pennsylvania. She supported herself by scrubbing floors and doing laundry.

At the age of thirteen, Amanda became a Christian during a revival service in a Methodist church. A few years later she gathered up the courage to testify about her faith in the church she attended and worshipped at. She spoke so well that she was invited to speak at other churches. Before long she was preaching at evangelistic services whenever and wherever the opportunity

arose.

Amanda felt called to travel to the deep South, where African Americans were still being oppressed and struggled for respect as human beings. The idea of returning to the South terrified her. Not only did it bring back horrific memories of her time as a slave, but it was risky and life-threatening. Amanda knew that lynching was not uncommon there, and for some white people the chasing down and hanging of black people was considered to be a kind of recreational activity, like hunting or fishing, that was done for enjoyment and entertainment. But even so, God's call for her to go to the South was greater than her fear and strong reservations, so she went.

After spending some time there and having great success evangelizing, Amanda felt the Spirit calling her to go to England. Again she was terrified at the thought of her, a meager "Negro scrubwoman," going to England. But friends pitched in to pay her ship fare, and in 1876 she traveled there.

From England Amanda went to India, back to England, and then to West Africa for more than ten years, preaching continually and living hand to mouth.

At one point she was filled with despair when a support check from America that she was waiting for hadn't arrived; at which point she fell on her knees and prayed for God to forgive her lack of faith. She then resolved to give up all dependence on financial backing from America and trust only in God.

But this isn't some "get-rich" story where the Lord suddenly broke open the divine piggy bank and rained down money from heaven on Amanda. In 1876 she had left America without a penny, and in 1890 she returned home without a penny.

Back in the U.S. she opened an orphanage for black children, which was supported solely with donations and the income she received from a book she wrote that told her life story. She ran the orphanage for 25 years, until her death in 1915.

That was Amanda Smith: slave, scrubwoman, evangelist, caregiver to orphans in need of love and compassion, and financially impoverished. Obviously Amanda Smith never amounted to very much in the eyes of the world; but in Christ's eyes she lived a life worthy of God.

Born a slave, she lived a life of amazing freedom.

Born black in a time and place when African Americans were considered to be less than human, she commanded the respect of great crowds of people, many of whom were white.

Born a woman in a time when women had very little power, were expected to submit to men, and had few opportunities to dream and do things they wanted to do, she traveled the world and made her own way.

Without any money to her name, she always had enough to meet her needs and help others.

Without any formal education, Amanda taught the Bible to others and wrote her life story.

Without ordination, and having no title, denominational standing, commissioning or church salary, she preached the gospel on four continents.

By the world's standards, worthiness is mostly measured in dollars and cents, educational degrees, prestigious careers, power and influence, physical beauty, or an affluent and luxurious lifestyle. But according to Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures, God judges our worthiness by our service, humility, self-denial, and surrender to God. Of course, that shouldn't be surprising to us because we belong to a religion whose central symbol is the cross, and whose Lord is a crucified, homeless, penniless carpenter from an insignificant little village called Nazareth.

I want to say one more thing about living a worthy life. And that is, we can live such a life or be touched by such a life of worthiness and not really even realize it. At least not right away.

Robert Fulghum, in his well-known and once very popular book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, wrote about such a person in his life. This is what Fulghum wrote:

Hair grows at the rate of about half an inch a month. I don't know where he got his facts, but a friend whom I'll call Mr. Washington came up with that when we were comparing barbers. If it's true, that means about eight feet of hair has been cut off my head and face in the last sixteen years by my barber.

I hadn't thought much about it until I called to make my usual haircut appointment and found out that my barber had left to go into building maintenance. What? How could he do this? My barber? It felt like a death in the family. There was so much more to our relationship than sartorial statistics.

We started out as categories to each other: "barber" and "customer." Then we became "redneck ignorant barber" and "pinko egghead minister." Once a month we reviewed the world and our lives and explored our positions. We spared over civil rights and Vietnam and a lot of elections. We became mirrors, confidants, confessors, therapists and companions in an odd sort of way. We went through being thirty years old, and then forty. We discussed and argued and joked, but always with a certain thoughtful respect. After all, I was his customer. And he was standing there with a razor in his hand.

I found out that his dad was a country policeman, that he grew up poor in a tiny town and had prejudices against Indians. He found out that I had the same small-town roots and grew up with prejudices about Blacks. Our kids were

the same ages, and we suffered through the same stages of parenthood together. We shared wife stories and children stories and car troubles and lawn problems. I found out that on his day off he donated his time giving free haircuts to old men in nursing homes. He found out a few good things about me, too, I suppose.

I never saw him outside the barber shop, never met his wife or children, never sat in his home or ate a meal with him. Yet he became a terribly important fixture in my life. Perhaps a lot more important than if we had been next-door neighbors. The quality of our relationship was partly created by a peculiar distance. There's a real sense of loss in his leaving. I feel like not having my hair cut anymore, though eight feet of hair might seem strange.

Fulghum went on: Without realizing it, we fill important places in each other's lives. It's that way with a minister and congregation. Or with the guy at the corner grocery, the mechanic at the local garage, the family doctor, teachers, neighbors, co-workers. Good people, who are always "there," who can be relied upon in small, important ways. People who teach us, bless us, encourage us, support us, and uplift us in the dailyness of life. We never tell them. I don't know why, but we don't.

And, of course, we fill that role for others. There are those who depend on us, watch us, learn from us, take from us. And we may never know. So don't sell yourself short. You may never have proof of your importance, but you are more important than you think. It reminds me of an old Sufi story of a good man who was granted one wish by God. The man said he would like to go about doing good without knowing about it. God granted his wish. And then God decided that it was such a good idea, he would grant that wish to all human beings. And so it has been to this day.

In that sense, according to Robert Fulghum, hopefully we're all living lives worthy of God, at least to some degree, and we just don't realize it. I pray that we are. Or, if not, I pray that we will someday. Because it's the small, simple, ordinary, everyday acts of love and kindness, and the recognition of other people as valued and worthy children of God, added together, that in the end make a life worthy in God's eyes. Amen.