

Becoming Worthy, a sermon in response to Luke 7:1-10 and Galatians 1:1-12 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, March 24, 2019. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

Do you ever wonder if you are worthy? I think we all do from time to time. How can you know if you are worthy of God's favor?... Worthy of grace?... Worthy of salvation?... Have you dotted all your I's and crossed all your T's, just to make sure? Would you even know how to do so? +++ +++ When I was an early teenager in North Carolina, about Middle School aged, we used to find Evangelical Christian tracts left everywhere – wherever someone thought they might get picked up by a sinner:: beside sinks in public restrooms, stuck into restaurant napkin dispensers, left behind in neat stacks on grocery-store bubble gum machines, under windshield wipers... +++ Are you familiar with these tracts? They're like little comic books, about the size of an index card. They tell graphic stories that are intended to scare you into the arms of a judgmental God. These tracts challenged our "worthiness," with cartoons that drew in our impressionable young minds. +++ They were designed to scare us into Church – not just any church, of course – but into their church. Then the back cover listed step-by-step instructions on "how to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior," including the address and phone number of their church. In fact, the little books urgently encouraged you to drop to their knees "**right where you are**" at that moment, and do so – before it's too late. Yes – right in that bathroom – in that parking lot – in the middle of that store... Our eternal lives hung in the balance, apparently, depending on OUR next move. +++ Don't mess it up.

Of all the tracts I saw, one has stuck with me. I can still vividly see the graphic artwork and the message. "Billy" had just gotten his driver's license and was ready to have a big night on the town in his car. His friend John said he'd go out with him, but he wanted to go to church first. Maybe Billy could go with him to church and be saved – it wouldn't take long – then they could hit the road together. +++ Well, Billy had no time for that, and takes off alone in the car – with a wild look in his eye and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. +++ Of course, Billy was the victim of a terrible car accident that night. The caption under the drawing of his destroyed car said, "And now Billy is in Hell forever because he died in his sin." +++++ If ONLY he had gone into that church with John, he would have been WORTHY of salvation. +++ He wouldn't be in Hell right now – and for all eternity. +++ +++ +++ Well, I'd say that little tract definitely accomplished one goal – it scared me! For months afterwards, I'd lie in bed wondering, "If I were to die right now, would I be dying 'in my sins' like Billy?"..... Those Christians were conditioning youth to FEAR:: fear our sins – to fear our failure to accept and follow Christ without question, without lapses, without doubt. When doubt did creep in, as it sometimes does for everyone, I'd wonder if my doubt meant I wasn't good enough – my faith wasn't strong enough – to win God's favor..... As though my actions actually had some control over God's next move. +++ The Lord's favor was something in my control, to win or to lose. +++ Somehow, even at that age, I knew the tracts seemed to be getting something wrong – but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Was my worthiness really based on something I could just DO? :: "Go to church with John, say the right words, and be saved??" Was it really something I had that much control over? +++++ +++++ ++++ Is that how God works? +++++ Is that how redemption works? +++++++ Is it a transaction? +++++ Are there step-by-step instructions for earning God's favor? What about grace? What about God's love? What about forgiveness?
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Luke is investigating these very questions about worthiness with us in today's gospel text. And, he does it through the most unlikely kind of person – a Roman centurion – a commander in the army that had conquered and oppressed the Jews. Yet – this Roman centurion sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to heal his slave. Did you notice something interesting about the passage? It looks like there is a contradiction.... The elders declare to Jesus that the centurion "is WORTHY of having you do this for him," but, the centurion himself says, "I am NOT WORTHY even to have you come under my roof." So – I think it begs the question:: Who's right? Is the centurion worthy or not? +++ Well, I think they are both right – and I think Luke uses this to make his larger point. Let's look at both comments to see where they take us.....

The first thing to know is, while they are both translated as "worthy," in the original Greek text Luke uses two different words – HIKANAAS. and AXIOS. Let's first look at what the centurion says about himself. In v.6, he

declares himself to be “NOT worthy,” or HIKANAAS. This word means merit or importance. The centurion is acknowledging that his competence or accomplishments in life do not mean he *DESERVES* anything from Christ. Remember this is a powerful man who has proven himself as a leader, a soldier, and a citizen. He has authority over other Roman soldiers and over a household full of slaves. He is a competent man. But he knows this gives him NO power over Jesus – his own accomplishments are irrelevant to Christ. So, the centurion is right – he IS unworthy if you just consider his worldly accomplishments – his HIKANAAS.

BUT... in verse 4, the Jewish elders say the centurion IS “worthy,” or AXIOS. Now, this word has to do with inherent worth or value. They say he “loves our people, and... built our synagogue for us.” The centurion lives out the kind of *agape* love that Jesus has been teaching – love for his neighbors and even for his slaves, who were usually ignored or abused. In just the previous chapter, Jesus said, “*love your enemies*” – clearly that’s what Jews and Romans were:: – ENEMIES – but the centurion *loves* his Jewish neighbors anyway. And beyond all of that, he also sends one of the most powerful messages of faith in Christ that we find in all the gospels::: – “**But only speak the word**,” he begs, “and let my servant be healed.” +++++++ The centurion humbly opens himself up to receive the redeeming power of Christ. So, the elders are also right – the centurion IS worthy – AXIOS.

Luke does not miss the chance to drive the point home even further::: “Jesus says, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’” Christ has been *trying* to teach his *Jewish* followers to live out the kind of faithful love we see in the centurion – instead of focusing on RULES – Rules forbidding hungry people from plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. Or, even rules against healing the sick on the Sabbath... Rules about cleanliness... Rules about what foods to eat... The Pharisees believed that WORTHINESS came from following these rules. It was HIKANAAS worthiness. You could earn it. That’s the same kind of WORTHINESS even the centurion fell short of – because you CAN’T EARN IT. You can never follow enough rules to become worthy. It’s NOT ABOUT RULES. +++ Now +++ FINALLY – *SOMEbody* gets what Christ has been trying to teach. And, it’s *SOMEbody* who was not even raised in their faith. In fact, it’s *SOMEbody* who has never even seen Jesus or heard him speak... Just from “hearing about” Jesus, this Roman officer reaches out in faithful humility +++ for the sake of his slave – not even for his own sake.

And, Christ is amazed by the centurion. Jesus is stunned to see this Gentile – someone not even considered to be one of God’s people – show this kind of love and faith. +++ He’s not part of the “IN” crowd. He’s an outsider. +++ For all anyone knows he might have taken up arms against the Jews. +++ BUT just as our accomplishments can’t make us worthy, our faults don’t make us Unworthy. +++>+> Just as our accomplishments don’t make us worthy, our faults don’t make us Unworthy. +++ Because our worthiness – our AXIOS – is a gift... of Christ’s redeeming grace. +++ And *IT* makes us fit to serve him.
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We see grace at work like this in today’s reading from Galatians – another undeserving person whom the grace of Christ had made worthy to serve.... Paul. He had been a ruthless persecutor of Christians, going from house to house dragging men and women away to prison. If anyone deserved to be blinded along the road, it was Paul.... But God had chosen him to bring the Good News of Christ to the world. When his sight is restored, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and begins his Christian ministry. +++ In today’s passage, Paul tells us he was commissioned through Jesus Christ and God the Father. Our notions of worthiness are just different from God’s – Paul writes “Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval?... If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” +++ Paul did not DESERVE anything, but he became worthy to serve because Christ made him worthy.

In recent weeks, we’ve been talking about how many of the greatest people in the Bible appeared unworthy when they were called to serve. When God called MOSES to lead Israel out of slavery, he asked, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” and he was afraid he couldn’t speak well enough for anyone to listen to him. JEREMIAH thought he was too young to be a prophet. GIDEON thought he was too weak to win a war. DAVID was a young shepherd before becoming the king of Israel. --- In each case, God MADE them worthy. +++ Their faults – their failures – their inadequacies – meant NOTHING.

When we judge ourselves to be unworthy, we are actually doubting the power of grace. Every week, we share a Prayer of Confession, remembering our faults and putting them at the feet of Christ... A parishioner once approached me after a service I had served as guest preacher. She was very upset about the Prayer of Confession. For a moment, I wondered if I had prepared a particularly harsh list of sins for us to recite that week. But no, that wasn't it – she had actually clipped out at least two months' of confessional prayers and had been carrying them around in her purse. As the coffee hour continued around us, we found a table and went through the stack together. She had highlighted AND underlined in red, phrases that upset her::: – “We fail to live out the gospel message” – “We hurt each other with harsh words and anger” – “We look the other way when we see suffering” – “We follow the ways of the world rather than the way of Christ”..... **“WHY”**, she asked, ... “Why do we have to focus on **judgment?** I thought God loves us, but then we have to be reminded every week that we aren’t **“WORTHY”** of God’s love – just judgment.” ++++++ WOW +++ I agreed that **if the story ended there**, it **would** be terrible. If our only chance to find favor with God relied on never sinning – we **would** be lost. But, the point is NOT the *fact that we sin*. The point is what Christ **does** with our sin when we turn it over to him. +++ He washes it away. +++ You see – the important moment is not the Prayer of **Confession** – it’s the **Assurance of Forgiveness** which follows it immediately and reminds us that our faults are set aside by Christ. +++ Remembering how much we consistently fall short helps us understand **how extravagant God’s generous grace is**. We **ARE** worthy... for **one** reason only::: because the grace – the forgiveness – of Jesus Christ **MAKES us worthy**. And it makes us fit to serve him – just as it did the Roman Centurion, ...and Paul, ...and Moses, ...and Jeremiah, ...and Gideon, ...and David.... and the list goes on... and on...
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It's so easy to focus on our failures and feel **UNWORTHY** – like I did as a teenager – looking at that tract and wondering if I'd be lost in my "sin"? And, it's what we do if we focus on the list of sins in our **confession** instead of on the gift of **forgiveness**. +++++

So – what about **you**? +++++ Where are **your** nagging failures? ++++++ **YOUR** regrets that creep in from time to time, trying to convince you that you are **UNWORTHY**??+ **You need to let them go**.... Christ is ready to take them away, as soon as you are ready to give them up.
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THE GOOD NEWS IS NOT about our mistakes. It's not about judgment, or punishment. The Good News is about **grace... It's about forgiveness... It's about being made whole.** +++ You become worthy by the loving grace of Jesus Christ. +++ You **don't deserve** it. You don't **earn** it... **And, You don't HAVE to.** +++ So, like the centurion, **open yourself up** to receive the redeeming power of Christ. ++++++ As you leave this place today, may you know that through grace, you ARE worthy to live in the eternal blessing of God.
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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen