**Ephesians 4:1-3, “Walk Worthy”**

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When I was an undergraduate at Georgetown University, in Washington, DC, I wrote a paper on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery. The scene is a perpetually solemn one, as a lone soldier from the 3rd Infantry Regiment, the Old Guard, pace back and forth in front of a marble sarcophagus containing the bodies of unknown soldiers from America’s wars. The regiment for that soldier is always the same, and has been unbroken since 1937: 21 steps to the left, then pause for 21 seconds, then 21 steps to the right, then pause for 21 seconds. Serving as a Tomb Guard is one of the highest honors as US serviceman can achieve, marked by receiving a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Identification Badge. Only one other badge is rarer, but this badge is unique: it is the only US military service award that can be revoked *after* a person has retired from the military. It is revoked for conduct, in one’s personal or private life, that would bring shame and dishonor upon the Tomb of the Unknowns. Therefore, from the time of the bestowal of that badge until his death, a soldier who once was a guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns is to live a life worthy of that exalted and honorable calling.

I tell this story to attempt to give some substance to what Paul might mean when he tells his Ephesian readers to “walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called” in this 4th chapter of Ephesians (Eph. 4:1). This command comes as only the second imperative Paul has given to his readers in the entirety of the book; the only one before this was “remember” (2:11). Everything else that Paul has written in Ephesians is what we might call doctrine, or to use a more modern word, theology. Sometimes that doctrine comes in the form of Paul telling to the Ephesians the story of God. Sometimes it comes in the form of a prayer. I want to spend some time this morning reflecting on the fact that Paul thinks doctrine, or theology, is so important to Christian living that he is willing to spend that much time on it before truly giving the Ephesian Christians anything practically to do. That will be the first part of the sermon. Then the second part will be to say what it means to walk worthy of this calling. The third section I will devote to the second command that Paul gives: “bear with one another.” It is going to turn out that Paul has incredibly demanding things to say to us about how the Christian life is to be lived. Paul himself thinks we cannot hope to match those demands unless we find ourselves within the story of God for the world, and unless we act in according with the power of God’s Spirit.

**So first: the role of theology in the Christian life.**

This section is the turning point in Paul’s letter here – from what we might call the ‘doctrinal’ to the ‘ethical.’ From ‘what is true about the world’ to ‘what you ought to do in the world.’ In Ephesians, the blend of these two is rather balanced: three chapters of doctrine, followed by three chapters of ethics. But Paul often follows this method of first doctrine, then ethics. In Romans, for example, he teaches doctrine for 11 chapters before turning to ethics for chapters 12-16. The greatest exception to this rule is Galatians, where Paul begins with ethics – why? Because Paul is furious at the way the Galatians are living, and at the threats their way of life pose for the true understanding of Christianity.

I think comparing Ephesians and Galatians here is very instructive for us as we consider the role of theology in the Christian life and in the Christian Church. It is common among Americans that we are a practical people; I do not know how much this is true of Asian-Americans like this church, but I suspect it is largely true here as well. We are a practical people. We are happy when you give us something to do. We are happy when we are busy. Therefore, we might take that American instinct and say to Paul: “don’t give us all this theology; just tell us what we ought to do. Tell us how to raise our kids. Tell us how to take care of our money. Tell us how to deal with injustice in the world. Tell us how to get our spouses to love us.” But Paul refuses to do this *except* when he is mad at us. If we might derive a principle from Paul’s practice here in Ephesians and Galatians, it might be this: it is a sign of Christian maturity that we act after we have determined what God says is true about the world, and it is a sign that something has gone wrong if we are just to be given rules and rules and rules immediately, without any explanation. So if we Americans are a practical people, we are also – by that same logic – a spiritually immature people. And to us Paul says: “learn first what Christianity is about. Find your story in the story of God. And only then will you act properly in the world.”

On the other hand, there are many in Christianity who have the *opposite* problem, and who say that studying doctrine or theology is for its own sake. This is the temptation to which I feel myself most prone. And to them – to me, I think Paul here also offers a rebuke; Ephesians does not end at the end of Chapter 3. Instead, Paul wants me to do something different based upon what is true of the world. You have spent your time understanding what regeneration, and election, and covenant, and faith, and unity with Christ all mean? Praise be to God! Now go walk worthy of that calling to which you have been called. Live as though what you have studied is true. Do not be content merely to understand; instead, be conformed to Christ.

So, on the one hand, Paul rebukes those practical, self-help Christians who believe that the Christian life is just about right living, without any concern for theology. And on the other hand, he rebukes those who are content to live only in their theology books, but whose lives bear witness against the truth of what they proclaim.

What might we learn from Paul’s method here for the life of this church, and the individual Christian life? I think it is just this mixture of doctrine and right living. I think what Paul’s model offers to us here is an opportunity to take account individually to see where we find ourselves most inclined to err – toward practicing our faith without understanding it, or toward thinking deeply about the world but not acting Christianly in it? And once you have recognized which one you incline toward, take practical steps toward strengthening that weakness. Are you practical? Buy some theology books! Are you a theologian? Scheme to figure out what acts of love and service you might use as excuses to put the books down.

I want to say something very practically about the role of a church elder as well. I know this church is currently undergoing a pastoral search, and those are often longer, and more frustrating, processes than a church realizes when it begins them. I want you to know that I pray for your search process, and I hope you as individuals are also praying for it. As you search, and as the temptation might grow to find someone to manage a church rather than pastor a church, remember Paul’s method here: the messenger of God tells the story of God. He teaches doctrine, and then he instructs in right living. He knows the story of redemption inside and out. Please do not waver on this when you find someone to lead your church. If it is true, as Paul’s method implies here, that we can only act rightly once we have rightly found ourselves inside the story of God’s redemption, then those who cannot week by week proclaim to us the story of God’s redemption cannot help us live rightly either. So find someone who knows and loves doctrine to lead your church. And you yourselves become people who know and love Christian doctrine, so that you can find your lives inside the story of God’s redemption.

We cannot answer the question “how ought I to live?” before we answer the question “Of what story am I a part?” I will continue to pray for you while you search for someone who will teach you the story of which you are a part.

**2. Paul tells us that in view of the calling that God has placed upon our lives, we are to walk worthy of it.**

In theological terms, this is called sanctification – the daily, slow, halting process of being conformed into the image of God. We Protestants do not believe, nor does Paul ever suggest, that we earn our salvation in this way. No, instead, the life of the Christian is one in which we live ever closer and closer to reality. What gives us access to this reality? The Christian story, Christian doctrine, the reflection upon the mighty acts of God that prophets, apostles, teachers, and theologians have received, reflected upon, and passed down to us. Doctrine teaches us what is true about the world. And to walk worthy of the calling is to walk in accordance with what is true.

The great Czech dissident Vaclav Havel coined this term “living in the truth” in an essay in 1978 called *The Power of the Powerless.* This essay was intended to bolster the spirits of those resisting communist rule in the Soviet Union. In that essay, he tells a story about the Communist Soviet Union mandating that shopkeepers and grocers display in their windows the famous Communist slogan “workers of the world, unite!” When the party bureaucrat arrives at the grocery to give these instructions to the grocer, he says “look, you do not have to believe the sign, of course. You do not have to subscribe to the truth of this, you just have to put it in your window. And what, really, is the harm in that? Are you really willing to go to prison over something so very small?” The harm, says Havel, is that the grocer has stopped “living in the truth.” He has begun to say words and embody acts that he knows to be out of accord with the grain of the universe. And once he has begun this process, it is likely that eventually he will come to have very little regard for the truth at all.

May I suggest to you that Paul’s “walk worthy of the calling” can be understood in this way, as a form of living in the truth? Here is what our Lord has said: “blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.” Is that true? And if it is true, why are we to complain when men say all manner of evil against us falsely? To complain when Christ has promised blessing is to live outside of the truth; it is to walk in a manner unworthy of the calling. Our Lord says: “you know the Gentiles, when they have power, Lord it over each other. But it shall not be that way with you. Instead, whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” Jesus grounds this commandment in what is true of the world, namely: “even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25-28). So why do you seek for power over each other? Is that not a way of living outside of the truth? Is that not walking unworthy of the calling?

The way we live is an expression of what we think is true about the world. Recall the Honor Guard with which I began my sermon. They can be stripped of that honorific title by not living in the truth; you are an honor guard, and therefore you must not live dishonorably. Here we might say: you are a Christian, and therefore you must not live unchristianly. Instead, act in such a way that you vindicate what you believe is true about the world. Walk worthy of the calling.

But the examples I have used in this section are vague and general, and Paul has in mind a particular example of how we ought to walk worthy, and it is to this command that we now turn.

**3. We are to “bear up with one another.”**

What follows for the rest of the chapter specifies what it means to walk worthy of the calling. And the first instruction is that we bear up with one another. Now, maybe this is just my fault of overthinking things, but I find this hard to understand. At many other times in his letters, Paul writes to his readers that they are to be reconciled to each other, that they are to forgive each other, that they are to walk in unity with each other, but this instruction is somewhat different: bear up with one another, which seems to be a different kind of command. So what we do whenever we encounter a perplexity in scripture, we look to the context to determine the meaning of a difficult section.

The full command is this: “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (vv.2-3). There are four virtues that empower this work: humility, gentleness, patience, and love. All of these have in common a kind of limiting of the self for the sake of the other. Humility is that we not think ourselves greater than we ought; we recognize our own fragility, rather than our indomitable strength. Gentleness is an eagerness to consider the neighbor an object of our careful attention, rather than our brusque disregard. Patience is a willingness to endure the long process of our neighbor’s sanctification. And love is a desire for the good of the neighbor, and a desire for a proper degree of union with the beloved.

And what we can find from other passages of scripture is that these are precisely the virtues that God exercises toward us. The Son *humbled* himself (Phil. 2). Jesus in his ministry says “take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle” (Matt 11:29). Peter teaches us concerning the Lord’s return that “God is patient” (2 Peter 3:9). And we can quote for an hour all of the scriptural passages that say God loves us. Humility, gentleness, patience, love. These are among the virtues that God employs to work us toward salvation. With the exception of humility, all of these are listed in Galatians 5 among the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, what the Spirit does when giving these gifts to Christians is he conforms them into the image of God. To exercise these virtues toward each other is to be Christ to each other.

Paul also provides us with an goal of this practice: “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Peace is also among the fruit of the Spirit. And this “unity of the Spirit” is explained in the verses that follow, so we will leave a detailed consideration of that until next time. What we can say here is simply that if we are forbearing with each other, it will be more likely that the social reality of the church’s life together will match the theological reality that God says is true of us: “there is one body and one Spirit.” In less technical terms, it means that it is easier for us to imagine living happily ever after with those who sit in church with us (as it is promised we will do in heaven) because we do not harbor bitterness, resentments, and hostilities toward each other.

So then, we have the virtues that empower this action of forbearing. And we have the goal at which it is aimed. And now, in light of those things, I think we can say something more clearly about what it is: to forebear with your neighbor is to recognize her as one in the middle of an uncompleted process of sanctification – as you yourself are; to recognize her as a recipient of God’s slow grace – as you yourself are; to resolve to be eager in overlooking her offenses against you instead of attributing them to her character – as God does toward you; and to resolve not to break fellowship with her over the slowness of her sanctification – just as God does with you. If there is a valence of condescension on top of this description – as if the one who practices forbearance can only do so if he believes himself morally superior to the one he puts up with – I think that can be removed by remembering two things: this is how God acts toward us. He puts up with us. And this is how other people act toward us. We will be helping in putting up with others when we remember the degree to which others are actively putting up with us.

I myself am very skeptical of the temptations to reduce Christianity to the therapeutic, by which I mean the temptation to explain away sin and behavior simply by reference to psychology. But here I think it is made easier to put up with one another if we can get to know each other’s story a bit more. Because it is true that many of our vices come from attempts to protect ourselves, or vindicate ourselves, to validate ourselves, or express ourselves, or assert ourselves against the hurts and wounds and scars that we accumulate through the long process of living in a fallen and sinful world. That fact does not excuse those sins and those failures; but it does help to explain them. What I have learned through experiencing depression and caring for others who are depressed. through hearing stories of childhood hurt and personal loss and experiencing those myself, is this: we are fragile creatures. The great Jean Vanier, who passed away this past week, and who spent much of his life caring for and living with the mentally disabled, teaches us this: how can we learn to embrace the vulnerability and weakness of another if we do not first recognize the vulnerability and weakness of ourselves? And refusal to embrace another’s vulnerability, failings, and weakness is most often an attempt to hide from our own.” I have learned that we are strangers to ourselves, as Augustine and Paul say: “the things I want to do, I do not do. And the things I desire not to do, those I do.”

We are fragile, and we are strangers to ourselves. And the great story of Christianity, which Paul has articulated over the previous three chapters, is that God did not leave us there. Instead, in love and in patience and in humility and in gentleness, he bore with us. He bears with us now. And he gives us the calling to do for our brothers and sisters what he has done for us. Let us walk worthy of this calling.