

Union

# Worthy

Living in  
Light of the Gospel

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**



“God delights to turn things upside down. Most think a ‘worthy’ person must be someone great. Sinclair Ferguson shows that the people ‘worthy of the gospel’ are those humbled by their sins, transformed by Christ’s cross, and obsessed with knowing the Lord. Nothing less is fitting for the gospel. Highly recommended!”

**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Like conjoined twins, legalism and antinomianism share the same heart. Curved in on itself, it recoils at being justified by an alien righteousness and being sanctified by conformity to someone else’s identity. Sinclair Ferguson’s long ministry of proclaiming God’s word has always struck at both forms of heart disease. Laced with pastoral warmth, striking illustrations, and dry Scottish humor, *Worthy* sets the table richly for a feast that will nourish the hearts of believers and invite strangers to pull up a chair.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“For years, Sinclair Ferguson has helped me toward having an experiential grasp of my union with Christ. His sermons and books have been friends along the way, leading toward spiritual maturity and a life with God. Because *Worthy* is a short book, I assumed it would be a summary of ideas I’ve read or heard from Ferguson elsewhere. Instead, each chapter felt full of fresh insights and pastoral wisdom. As I was finishing this book, I kept telling others how excited I am for my congregants and even my teenage children to read it.”

**John Starke**, Lead Pastor, Apostles Church, New York City;  
author, *The Possibility of Prayer*



Worthy

Union

## **Growing Gospel Integrity**

Michael Reeves, series editor

*Worthy: Living in Light of the Gospel*, Sinclair B. Ferguson

*Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness*, Gavin Ortlund

# Worthy

Living in Light of the Gospel



**Sinclair B. Ferguson**

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*To  
Derek and Rosemary  
in gratitude  
for  
our friendship  
and  
your ministry*



*Only let your manner of life be  
worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:27

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## Series Preface

GOSPEL INTEGRITY IS, I suggest, the greatest and most vital need of the church today. More than moral behavior and orthodox beliefs, this integrity that we need is a complete alignment of our heads, our hearts, and our lives with the truths of the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul issues a call to his readers to live as people of the gospel. Spelling out what this means, Paul sets out four marks of gospel integrity.

First, he entreats, “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27a). The people of the gospel should live lives *worthy* of the gospel.

Second, this means “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27b). In other words, integrity to the gospel requires a *united* stand of faithfulness together.

Third, knowing that such a stand will mean suffering and conflict (1:29–30), Paul calls the Philippians not to be “frightened in anything” (1:28a). He describes this *courage* as “a clear sign” of our salvation (1:28b).

Fourth, Paul writes:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (2:1–3)

Paul thus makes it clear that there is no true Christian integrity without *humility*.

The simple aim of this series is to reissue Paul’s gospel-based call to an integrity that means living *worthily, unitedly, courageously*, and *humbly*. We need to recognize, however, that these four marks are not abstract moral qualities or virtues. What Paul has in mind are, quite specifically, marks and manifestations *of integrity to the gospel*. As such, the books in this series will unpack how the gospel fuels and shapes those qualities in us.

## SERIES PREFACE

Through this little series, may God be glorified, and may “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (4:23).

Michael Reeves  
Series Editor



## Introduction

THE TITLE OF THIS LITTLE BOOK—*Worthy*—cries out for explanation for one obvious reason: generations of Christians, stretching back into Bible times, have always affirmed that while God is worthy, we are not. Nevertheless, it was the apostle Paul—a man deeply conscious of both his own unworthiness and the wonder of God’s grace and mercy—who urged his fellow Christians to live in a way that is *worthy*.

So these pages are about being “worthy” of the gospel—an exhortation Paul gave to some of his favorite fellow-believers in the church at Philippi.

In writing this book I have frequently found myself asking, “Since Paul urges his correspondents to ‘live lives worthy of the gospel,’ does he explain what this means and how it happens?” If we meditate on what he says, we will discover that—sometimes in low-key ways—he explains more fully



what his exhortation means, how he experienced its fulfillment himself, and how we can as well.

So while *Worthy* is not meant to be an exposition of the letter to the Philippians, we will regularly find ourselves reflecting on what Paul says there. In fact, at the time he wrote, urging Christians to be worthy of the gospel seems to have been a special burden on his heart. He also mentioned it in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, written around the same time. And he had already emphasized it in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

So, clearly this was not an incidental or a peripheral matter to him. Perhaps he knew that being worthy had also been a burden on his Savior's heart for his disciples. For did he not say: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. . . . And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37–38)?

So being *worthy* turns out to be the sure mark of Jesus's disciples. True, at first sight Paul's words "*only* let your manner of life be worthy" might seem to suggest that it is incidental. But it isn't a casual afterthought in Paul's mind. In fact, as we will see, he gives it the highest priority.

I wonder if you would agree with me when I say that I don't think Christians give it the same priority today. It is just possible that you have never heard a sermon or a lesson on

## INTRODUCTION

Paul's words, and even less likely that you have read a book (even a short one like this!) on being worthy.

But that surely means it is all the more important that we hear what Paul says.

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*Worthy* is part of a short series of books devised by Michael Reeves on the basis of Paul's words in Philippians 1:27–2:3. *Worthy* both introduces and summarizes their main theme. I am grateful for the invitation to contribute to the series, and I hope this volume will serve as an encouragement to you to read the other three. More than that, I hope it will remind you of an exhortation that has too often been forgotten.



# Be Worthy

## A Forgotten Calling?

“**ONLY LET YOUR MANNER OF LIFE** be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27).

That word “only” might deceive us into thinking this is a casual statement, like “Wait for me, I’ll *only* be a minute or two.”

But, in fact, it is the reverse. There is nothing casual here. When Paul says “only,” he uses the Greek word *monon*. Even if you have no knowledge of Greek, you can probably guess its meaning. “Only” here means “one and only,” “the one thing needful.” “*Only* let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” means this is a nonnegotiable.

Yet we rarely, if ever, use this language today. When did you last hear a Christian friend’s life described as

“worthy of the gospel”? Chances are the answer is “not very often,” and more likely “never.” To “live worthy of the gospel of Christ” does not rank high on the priority lists of the twenty-first-century church. But Paul placed it high on his priority list. That is why he underlines it for the churches in Ephesus, Colossae, and Thessalonica, as well as Philippi.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why a Forgotten Calling?**

So why has Paul’s exhortation (and his way of thinking about the Christian life) dropped out of fashion when he obviously thought it was so important?

No doubt one reason is that we are (rightly) allergic to the idea that anyone could be worthy before God. We are all like the Roman centurion who said, “I am *not worthy* to have you come under my roof” (Luke 7:6), and like the prodigal son, who confessed, “I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am *no longer worthy* to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). And isn’t Paul’s whole point in Romans 1:18–3:20 to argue us into a corner, where we are forced to admit our unworthiness? Every mouth is shut in the presence of the holy God of heaven because we are all guilty,

1 Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12.

all unworthy (Rom. 3:19–20). We can only say with the dying Martin Luther: “We are beggars. This is true.” Our hymnbooks (or overhead screens, for that matter) never teach us to sing, “I am worthy, I am worthy”—only “Thou art worthy, thou art worthy, O Lord.”

So the gospel teaches us we are unworthy. We are saved by grace, not by worth.

Yet Paul prioritized our responsibility to live in a worthy manner. Why, then, are we reluctant to take his words at face value?

### **A Latent Fear of Legalism?**

Another part of the answer is the fear we have that any exhortation to be worthy of the gospel is by definition legalism, or at least likely to lead to it. But if so, why did Paul, the apostle of grace, say this?

In recent years, grace has often been given a headline role in teaching and preaching, perhaps especially among younger evangelical preachers who have come to feel that too many Christians are prone to all kinds of legalism. There is too much of the atmosphere of “do” and “don’t.”

Certainly too many Christians have suffered from a “conditional” sense of acceptance with God—as though his love for us is ultimately dependent on how well we perform.

God then becomes like a schoolmaster to be pleased by a satisfactory performance, or a policeman who makes sure we are keeping the laws, whereas the gospel is about his grace, because it comes from “the God of all grace” (1 Pet. 5:10).

There is certainly something important in this emphasis. For since Eden we have all been legalists by nature. The assumption that somehow or another we have to do something to earn our way into God’s favor is the default position of the human heart. That is why it is the characteristic most world religions have in common.

So the gospel tells us to bathe in God’s grace.

But Paul well knew that *emphasizing* God’s grace in Christ in reaction to legalism is not necessarily the same thing as *understanding* the grace of God in Christ.

Perhaps an illustration will make the point. I recall hearing a preacher expound a New Testament passage that emphasized the grace of God. But at the same time, the passage was punctuated by exhortations to holiness (as many passages are). During his exposition it became clear he thought at least some (and probably most!) of us listening to him still thought of God’s grace as “conditional.”

Maybe he was right. But instead of showing us how God’s grace energizes us to obey God’s commands and helping us to see the connections between God’s grace and our response, he

simply ignored the exhortations. All he did was warn us against “legalism” without telling us how Christians who, like their Lord, want to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4) can obey his commandments precisely *because of* God’s grace. So his sermon missed teaching us this fundamental gospel principle: the richer and fuller the exposition of the grace of God in Christ, the safer it is to expound the all-demanding commands that flow from it as a result.

But this is what the New Testament teaches constantly. It is why Paul’s letters are punctuated by words like *therefore* and *so*. For it is in the nature of God’s grace that he gives all; but the grace that gives all also seeks all to be given in return; it can be satisfied with no less. Any young man or woman who has fallen in love knows this.

So to press the mute button on the commands of the New Testament actually subverts God’s grace rather than highlighting it.

### **How Grace Relates to Obedience**

The true relationship between grace and obedience is powerfully expressed in Paul’s summary of the gospel in his letter to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared,  
bringing salvation for all people,



BE WORTHY

training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly  
passions,  
and  
to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in  
the present age,  
waiting for our blessed hope,  
the appearing of the glory of our great God and  
Savior Jesus Christ,  
who gave himself for us  
to redeem us from all lawlessness  
and  
to purify for himself a people for his own  
possession  
who are zealous for good works.  
(Titus 2:11–14 reformatted)

To which Paul adds a further exhortation to Titus himself:

Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority.  
Let no one disregard you. (Titus 2:15)

This is strong language—in its description of the wonder of grace, but also in the way it spells out its implications—not to mention what Titus is to do about it! The stronger the

foundation of a house, the bigger and stronger the building itself can be. And the richer and fuller the exposition of God's grace, the more consuming the exhortations can be.

Geerhardus Vos once commented with great insight that the essence of legalism is to divorce the law of God from the person of God. It is "a peculiar kind of submission to law, something that no longer feels the personal divine touch in the rule it submits to."<sup>2</sup> So dividing the grace of God from his commandments becomes legalism. But separating God's commandments from his grace is not the solution. It only disguises the problem; it can never dissolve it. In fact, it turns both grace and law into impersonal realities in which we lose hold of God himself. No. The God of grace is also the God of commandments; the two belong together and need to be embraced together in Christ. To put it another way, knowing Christ as Savior and knowing him as Lord can never be separated; nor can justification and sanctification. They belong together in Christ. And as John Calvin shrewdly commented with some frequency, to isolate them from each other is to "tear Christ in pieces."<sup>3</sup>

2 Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate about the Messianic Consciousness*, ed. Johannes G. Vos (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), 17.

3 For example, Calvin on 1 Cor. 1:30, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 93.

## The Meaning of “Worthy”

So what is implied in Paul’s exhortation “Only let your manner of life be worthy [*axios*] of the gospel of Christ”?

In English versions of the New Testament, the Greek word *axios* is usually translated “worthy.” But its flavor is expressed elsewhere when it is translated “in keeping with” (Matt. 3:8; Acts 26:20). Like many other words, there is a picture lying behind the origin of *axios*. It means “Properly, ‘bringing up the other beam of the scales,’ ‘bringing into equilibrium,’ and therefore ‘equivalent.’”<sup>4</sup>

The basic idea is that a life that is worthy of the gospel of Christ expresses in the form of a lifestyle what the gospel teaches in the form of a message. Such a life takes on a character that reflects the character of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was a boy, my morning chore before school was to collect some of the provisions our family would need for the meals of the day. One of my tasks was to go to the local butcher. My mother charged me to ask for a specific cut of meat and a specific weight of it. In those now far-off days our butcher used old-fashioned scales with two pans. On

4 Werner Foerster, in Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 379.

one he placed weights to the amount I asked for. On the other he measured out the meat, adding to it or subtracting from it until the central pointer indicated a perfect balance between the two pans. It was fun to watch him add or subtract the meat in order to get just the right balance. Simple but ingenious!

That is the picture the word *axios* conveys. On the one hand, here is the gospel. And on the other hand, here is your life. And Paul's exhortation is this: Live in such a way that your life "weighs the same" as the gospel! Live in a way that is "in keeping with" the gospel, that "matches" the gospel. This is what "the balanced Christian life" looks like. The gospel is the message of the good news of Jesus Christ, and our lives are to be the embodiment of that good news. Put another way, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16), and we are to live in a powerfully saved way!

For Paul this was neither a trivial nor an optional matter. It was instead a "one and only" kind of thing, an essential.

### **A Kind of Citizenship**

But "worthy" is not the only picture word Paul uses here. When he writes "*let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel,*" he uses the Greek verb *politeuomai*. It is derived from

the word for a city (*polis*, the source of our word *politics*). Literally it means “live as a citizen.”

Paul could have used the verb meaning “walk,” as he does in Ephesians (“walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called”—4:1) and Colossians (“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”—1:10). But you can probably guess why he uses citizenship language. Philippi was a Roman colony; its civic life was structured according to Roman law and the Roman way of life. Citizens of Philippi were Roman citizens. That was why the local magistrates there had been so alarmed when they discovered that the man whose garments they had torn off and whom they had beaten with rods without due process of law and then thrown into prison—this man was in fact a Roman citizen. No wonder they came to Paul eating humble pie (Acts 16:22–23, 37–40).

Paul may simply have been saying in Philippians 1:27, “As citizens in Philippi live your life in a way that reflects the gospel.” But there is almost certainly more. Was Lydia, who had first welcomed him, still there? The jailer and his family whom Paul had pointed to Christ surely were. And perhaps too the young slave girl Paul had rescued from abusive men and abusive spirits was listening. Paul was reminding them, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20).

Philippi was not in Italy but in Macedonia. But a Philippian lived there as a citizen of Rome, according to Roman law, following the patterns of life in the capital city. Paul's message, then, was that while his friends were living in Philippi, their real citizenship was heavenly; their church family was a colony of heaven here on earth. And because that was true, they were to live not according to the pattern of life of any earthly city but according to the pattern of life of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem.

In short, the Christian life is to be a version of "heaven on earth." The privilege could not be greater; and the standard could not be higher! For that reason, the summons could not be more demanding—nothing less than all-embracing. And yet, for all that, Paul's exhortation is a million miles from legalism *because he understands how the gospel works*.

The grace of God in Christ provides us with a new identity, a heavenly one; it follows that this—and not our natural identity—determines everything we do. Our identity, our citizenship, is heavenly. As Paul says elsewhere, our lives are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), and when Christ appears, to bring about our final transformation into his likeness, then our true identity will become clear (Phil. 3:20–21; Col. 3:4; 1 John 3:1–2). What, then, could be more logical,

more compelling, than to live in this world as those who are citizens of another world? Like Daniel in the Old Testament, we are called to live out the lifestyle of the Jerusalem (above) to which we belong, even when we live in the Babylon (below) where we don't really belong.

So we are to “sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land” (Ps. 137:4). That’s not a matter of legalism, for “his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Jesus tells us that being yoked to him, the meek and lowly one, brings ease, not dis-ease, and rest, not restlessness, for our souls (Matt. 11:28–30).

I have lived in three different cities in the United States. At my regular visa interviews the consular official may ask me which of these cities I have enjoyed most (yes, I have been asked that question!). Presumably, she is thinking, “If he can answer that question in my presence, then he probably is the person his papers say he is, his fingerprints guarantee he is, and his passport photo seems to suggest he is.” My answer is diplomatic. I mention things about each of the three cities I particularly appreciated. While inevitably there are similarities between them, each of them has its own distinctives. If someone asks us what life was like in city X, it is the distinctives we tend to mention—different atmospheres and styles of life, even peculiar ways people drive (!), as well

as diverse accents and regional pronunciations. We tend to take on the lifestyles and even the speech styles of the places where we live.

### **A Curious Difference**

As a Scot living in the United States, I used to enjoy riding the elevators (“lifts”) in tall buildings, stopping floor by floor and occasionally exchanging comments with other passengers. Since my accent tended to betray me, sometimes as I left, someone would say, “And where are you *from*?” As I stepped out of the elevator and the doors began to close, I always enjoyed saying with a smile to the three or four people remaining on the elevator, “Columbia, South Carolina.” The puzzled looks on their faces as the doors closed said: “You can’t be from around here with an accent like that! Where are you *really from*?” Even if I lived there, it was obvious that I really “belonged” somewhere else.

That’s the kind of thing Paul is talking about in Philip-  
pians 1:27. His Christian friends may have lived in the Roman colony of Philippi, but their real citizenship was in the kingdom of God; they should live that out—think “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle. And if they did, people in Philippi would find themselves asking: “Where are you really from? There’s something about you—I can’t quite



put my finger on it—but it’s different. You’re not really from around here.”

I sometimes wondered what happened in the elevator after the doors closed. Did people say anything to each other? Did they try to work out where I was from? If I met them in the elevator again, would they remember me and ask: “Where are you *really* from? I love your accent—are you English?” (Help! But I have been introduced as “coming from Scotland, England”!)

That’s a parable of what happened in the early church. And it contrasts with the church today. As a kind of tactic for witnessing, Christians today have often been encouraged to devise questions they can ask non-Christians. In this way perhaps a conversation about the gospel can be stimulated. It rarely strikes us how sharply this contrasts with the teaching of the New Testament. Simon Peter suggests that he expected the reverse would be the case: he expected that the quality of the lives of Christians would mean that non-Christians would be the ones asking the questions (1 Pet. 3:15): “What makes you tick?” “What is it about you? Why do you say these things and do these things?” “Tell me why you believe in God” “Who is Jesus Christ?” “Can I be forgiven?” “What does it mean to be a Christian?” Why the difference between today’s evangelistic conversation starters and the questions Peter might have expected?

There is something here so obvious that we rarely notice it: the New Testament gives us virtually no advice about how to witness to Jesus Christ. Yet who can doubt the impact of the witness of the early church—all, apparently, without books, DVDs, TV programs, the Internet, or entire organizations and seminars led by experts. What explains the difference? Why in the West do we need to devise techniques for witnessing to Christ? Perhaps the simple answer is that we have not lived in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. We have had all too little of the lifestyle, the atmosphere, or the accent of heaven, where Christ is.

C. S. Lewis has an insightful passage in which he comments on the laziness of some students who, instead of learning how to use a proof in geometry, learn it only by rote.<sup>5</sup> They don't realize that taking the easier way turns out to be the hard way and involves much more work, and in the end it doesn't work. Teachers sometimes observe this. I vividly remember the oral exam of a PhD candidate. He had already adequately completed sixteen hours of written questions in his preliminary written comprehensive exam. Yet he seemed incapable of responding to our questions. At the end of a repeat exam, a puzzled (and, like the rest

5 See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, 1955), 170–71.

of us, slightly exasperated) colleague said to him: “You did adequately on the written part; but you have done miserably in the oral part. How did you prepare for these exams?” His answer? “I memorized dictionary articles”—in fact, he had memorized around one hundred! I am sure others were thinking as I was, “It would have been easier if you had simply tried to *understand* the material!”

Living “worthy of the gospel of Christ” is not a matter of techniques. It involves the development of Christian character. It’s about who and what we become in Christ. It is a slow, all-demanding, and arduous process. The easier and quicker option seems to be to learn how to get your life together and how to do things successfully. But to live worthy is much more a matter of living the life of the heavenly world while you are still here on earth; in the oft quoted and justly famous words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, it means to become someone who knows what it means “to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”<sup>6</sup>

B. B. Warfield,<sup>7</sup> probably the most significant American evangelical theologian of the past century, illustrates this point with a wonderful story:

<sup>6</sup> Answer 1.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921) was longtime professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Among other things, he was a distant

We have the following bit of personal experience from a general officer of the United States army. He was in a great western city at a time of intense excitement and violent rioting. The streets were over-run daily by a dangerous crowd. One day he observed approaching him a man of singularly combined calmness and firmness of mien, whose very demeanor inspired confidence. So impressed was he with his bearing amid the surrounding uproar that when he had passed he turned to look back at him, only to find that the stranger had done the same. On observing his turning the stranger at once came back to him, and touching his chest with his forefinger, demanded without preface: "What is the chief end of man?" On receiving the countersign, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever" — "Ah!" said he, "I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy by your looks!" "Why, that was just what I was thinking of you," was the rejoinder.

It is worthwhile to be a Shorter Catechism boy. They grow to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God.<sup>8</sup>

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relative of Wallis Warfield Simpson, the femme fatale in the abdication of the British monarch Edward VIII.

8 B. B. Warfield, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, vol. 1 (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 383–84.