BE WORTHY OF GOD’S CALLING

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12
Key Verse: 1:11

“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.”

Through our study of 1st Thessalonians, we learned that St. Paul became like a mother and then a father to help the Thessalonian believers live a holy life as they waited for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was hard work for the Thessalonians to continue to live by faith in the midst of severe persecutions. So Paul encouraged them in chapter 5:16-18, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” In a fallen world, sinful men have no real joy. But Christians have a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who restores joy to mankind through his sacrifice of atonement for our sins. Therefore, we can have real joy in our souls when we believe that it is God’s absolute will and command for mankind to be joyful, prayerful and thankful through faith in Jesus. May God take away the burden of your heart, and give you joy and thanksgiving as you begin the new semester. In this second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul returns to the main theme of his first letter, that is, how Christians should act until Jesus comes again, and what they should expect when Jesus comes. Mainly, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they must not look for an easy way into the kingdom of God, but should expect to work hard and suffer much in the face of the growing evil of the world. However, they can expect to have a glorious future in Jesus who comes again to judge all mankind and to gather his elect to be with him forever in his kingdom. In chapter 1, Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers to be worthy of God’s calling to them. It is not easy to know how we can live up to God’s high calling for us as Americans. When we see our nation from God’s point of view, we realize that this nation was established to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In short, God established and blessed this nation so that we could be a shepherd nation for all peoples on earth. How can America become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in this wicked generation? How can I live up to God’s high calling for me to be a shepherd and Bible teacher for American young people? Let’s learn from St. Paul how we can be one of those whom God considers worthy of the kingdom of God.

FIRST, “More and more”. In all likelihood, this letter to the church of the Thessalonians was written no more than a year after the first one, while Paul was still in Corinth, and just a year and a half after Paul had first planted the gospel there. As we have studied, Paul and his companions had to leave Thessalonica after only three Sunday worship services, when some Jews from Philippi came and stirred up opposition against them. Nonetheless, disciples were established from among the Jews and Gentiles of Thessalonica who heard Paul’s message and believed. According to Paul’s first letter, they firmly decided to imitate their shepherd Paul and their Lord Jesus Christ. They loved one another in Jesus. They bore up under intense persecutions from their countrymen. They dedicated themselves to declaring the message of the gospel, and supported Paul throughout the rest of his ministry in Macedonia and Achaia. Still, they were baby Christians. They had no vision for themselves or for their nation in God’s history. Paul could not be with the Thessalonians to help them day by day in their struggles to overcome persecutions. But Paul could participate in their spiritual struggling through his letter-writing ministry. In particular, Paul could plant in the Thessalonians a vision of their glorious hope in the second coming
of Jesus Christ. Paul could encourage them to live holy lives as the children of God. Paul was prayerful and mindful of the Thessalonians’ spiritual condition for the sake of their everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of God. Here we can see Paul’s shepherd heart for the Gentile believers of Thessalonica.

St. Paul had been a member of the Pharisees, a religious sect of the Jews that emphasized a legalistic interpretation of the Scriptures, and close adherence to the traditions of the elders. In order to achieve recognition among his fellow pharisees, Paul, then called Saul, determined to wipe out the cult of Christianity which had just sprung up after Jesus of Nazareth’s death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. He led the mob that stoned Stephen to death. He jailed and tortured countless Christians in Jerusalem. He obtained letters from the chief priests to pursue Christians in far away Damascus. He was largely responsible for the first persecution that drove many Christians out of Judea and into the surrounding nations. Saul was a disaster for the early Christians.

But the Risen Jesus visited Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul was accompanied by a large number of troops. But he was knocked down from his horse and blinded by the light of the Risen Christ, who came to him there. The Risen Jesus commanded Saul to go into Damascus and wait there. He sent Ananias to him, who healed Saul’s eyes and baptized him as one of Jesus’ disciples. It was an amazing grace to Saul. He changed his name from Saul, meaning “great one” to Paul, meaning “humble one”. Saul had been a religious bigot who had condemned hundreds if not thousands of people out of his arrogant pride. But Paul received grace from God to become a light to the Gentiles. Acts 26:17 says, “I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Paul was chosen by God to include the Gentile believers among those who would be saved through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. To the Jews, Gentiles were like dogs because of their unclean bodies and lives. But Paul was not disobedient to Jesus’ command (Acts 26:19). Acts 26:20 says, “First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.” In order to obey this command, Paul had come to Thessalonica and worked night and day to share the gospel message with the Thessalonians without burdening them in the least. Still, Paul was not satisfied with himself. He followed up on the Thessalonians with letter after letter. Still, Paul was compelled to do more until, according to tradition, he visited ancient Spain before finally being executed in Rome in AD 68. Paul experienced the deep grace of Jesus that changed him into an apostle of light to a dark world. Paul desired to prove his repentance more and more through his life of mission and shepherding God’s flock of sheep. Through Paul’s shepherd life, we can learn the guiding principle of a life of discipleship and apostleship in Jesus. In a word, it is “more and more.”

Look at verse 3. “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.” Paul thanked God for the spiritual growth that was going on among the Thessalonian believers. They continued to face fierce persecutions from ignorant and ungodly people. But in all their sufferings, they were growing in their faith more and more, and their love for each other was increasing. It was a miracle. When several coworkers here at WIU graduated and spread out across the country last year, it was hard enough for us to just maintain our faith and spirit and love in serving WIU ministry. Paul boasted to the other churches about their faith. But in fact, what the Thessalonian believers were doing
was the most natural thing as the children of God. Just as it is a parent’s delight to see his son or daughter growing in strength of heart, mind and soul, so it is our Father God’s delight to see his children growing in his holy image. And just as we as parents expect our children to grow more and more toward becoming responsible and caring adults and citizens of their nation, so God expects that his children grow in the image of Jesus as responsible and caring shepherds for the flock of God around the world. It is human nature to seek our comfort level and then coast through life. But Christians must know that our fundamental principle of discipleship to Jesus is that of Paul, “more and more.” We challenged our unbelief and fear a little bit to share the gospel with our roommates or friends. We must do so more and more in the new year. We overcame our selfishness a little bit to care about another’s needs in Jesus. We must do so more and more until we can faithfully shepherd even all WIU students with the gospel. May God bless you to grow in faith and love more and more until WIU can become a world mission center for gospel work.

SECOND, God is just. Spiritual growth is never easy. In order to grow, we must be ready to suffer. Who wants to suffer? Generally speaking, suffering is associated with punishment. Why should we, as God’s children, accept punishment? But Paul encourages the Thessalonians to see their present difficulties from God’s point of view. Look at verse 5. “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.” The Thessalonians could have expected that when they repented of their idol worship and decided to love others in Jesus, they would be honored and respected by the other people in their city. But it was not so. Instead, when they tried to love others by sharing the gospel with them, they were rejected and despised by their own people, maybe even their own family members. When they struggled hard to live a holy life, they were laughed at and even hated by the immoral and corrupt. Were they going crazy? No, it was a sign that God’s judgment of the world for the sin of the world is right. Sometimes, we wish we could live in this world forever, enjoying our family members and the things we have accumulated for ourselves. But the fact is that this world is under judgment. It is because this world cannot abide the righteous children of God. This world seeks instead to corrupt and turn the children of God aside into the darkness. And if it cannot, then this world seeks to crush them, even as it crushed Jesus by nailing him to the cross. Yes, the Thessalonians were suffering. But it was not because of their sins. It was because of their hope in the kingdom of God. The Thessalonian believers would be counted worthy of the kingdom of God when they endured all sufferings in the world because of the hatred of the world for Christ.

People are terrified at the judgment of God. Year after year, countless movies are released that speculate about the end of the world. Billions were spent to avoid the Y2K catastrophe. Look at verses 6 and 7a. “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.” Here we see that St. Paul is not afraid of God’s judgment; rather, he looks forward to God’s judgment. Why? It is because, when God’s judgment comes, justice will be done. Who will pay back for the countless lives that have been lost in Africa because of the profit-taking and greed of the Pharmaceutical Giants of the West? Who will pay back the suffering of the children of divorced parents? We cannot say who should be judged, and who should be saved. But we know that justice is in the hands of God only, who knows the hearts of men. God is God. God will judge rightly, rewarding those who belong to him, and condemning those who have condemned themselves through their refusal to accept God’s love in Jesus Christ. Look at verses 7b-10. Let’s read them together. “This
will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.” We cannot answer for anybody else when God’s judgment comes. But we must have an answer for ourselves. Are we ready for the judgment of God? The Thessalonians were ready. They were ready because they believed the gospel message. They were ready, because they were growing in the image of their Father God through practicing love for one another more and more in imitation of Jesus. When they would see the coming of Jesus, they would marvel and rejoice in anticipation of the glory they would have in eternity in him.

THIRD, worthy of God’s calling. Look at verse 11. “With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” By Paul’s own testimony, the Thessalonians were ready for the judgment day. But here, Paul prays for the Thessalonians constantly that God may find them worthy of his calling when that day comes. What does it mean? Who can truly be worthy of the kingdom of God? Look again at the second part of verse 11, “... and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” Paul knew that all human beings are good and evil. (Ro 7) Left to ourselves, we cannot fulfill the good purposes for which God made us. So Paul prays for the Thessalonians, that God himself might enable them to fulfill his good purposes for them. The Thessalonians could be worthy of God’s calling, only when they depended on God in prayer to strengthen them in doing the good he had prepared in advance for them to do. God had a good purpose for St. Paul. No one could have guessed what that was when he was still persecuting Christians. But God made that purpose known through the Risen Jesus, and enabled Paul to fulfill that purpose, to the glory of God. No one could have guessed that ignoble Thessalonians could become models of faith for the European cities of Paul’s time. But God revealed his love and purpose for them, and changed them by his grace. Then the Lord’s message rang out from them into all the world. It was to the glory of God. At one time, my heart’s desire was to be an international Romeo, enjoying girlfriends from all over the world. But God had a purpose for my life, which he revealed to me through his servants and through his word. It was to live as a shepherd for American College students, teaching them the Bible one to one and helping them to live in obedience to God. God’s calling and purpose are God’s mercy. We must not despise God’s calling for the sake of our human desires. We must be worthy of God’s calling by growing more and more in faith and love as the holy children of God. In short, we must give glory to God. Let’s read verse 12. “We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this passage, we learned the principle of discipleship in Jesus. It is “more and more”. May God bless you to grow more and more in faith and love in this new year. May God give you a holy desire to be worthy of God’s calling, by fulfilling the holy mission to which he has called us in the generation: that America may be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. May God give you peace in your heart as you labor in him until he comes with power to judge the world and bring us into his kingdom.