

# Worthiness in Deed

Exodus 35:20-29; Psalm 37:18-29; Mark 3:20-34



Worthiness and standing is a common concern in our society as well as in our religious institutions and structures. We are often tempted to define worth according to the dictates and demands of society. We look at roles, expectations, and societal norms to gauge the worth or contribution of an individual to the status quo. Who is worthy? What makes one worthy? How do we measure ourselves before God and determine our worthiness or acceptability before the Almighty?

Being worthy of God's provision and blessing was a significant concern of the Hebrews. This was a common concern among the peoples of the time. They understood survival to depend upon their acceptance before the gods. As the Hebrews found security in their standing before *Yahweh*, however, they became lax in their responsibilities for faithful service. The prophets came before them time and again to remind the people of the need to present themselves before *Yahweh* in sincerity. The prophets had to call on them to set aside the idols of their neighbors.

We might even be tempted to reduce the Old Testament to a cycle of "sin, prophet's warning, repentance, sin, prophet's warning, repentance," over and over again. "As for me and my house, we will serve *Yahweh*" was too often replaced by "we will take pride in our standing as chosen people. Since God cares so much for us, we don't need to worry seriously about our duties as a priestly nation."

In their preoccupation with standing before *Yahweh*, the Hebrews built a caste system within their own ranks to distinguish between levels of acceptability before God. Obviously, the priests and high priests were at the top level along with the prophets. Then there were the Levites, then the males of standing among the people. They didn't write about it too much, but there were the lower levels of the unacceptable within the nation—the lepers, public sinners, deformed, and those suffering long term illnesses viewed as God's punishment upon them. Of course, women and children were not on an equal status with the men, for theirs was a male-dominated society. A male child could only truly become part of the people upon his bar-mitzvah, a woman forever must find inclusion through some male figure to whom she was accountable.

It would seem that the status distinction between men and women had forever been part of Hebrew faith. We find so many instances in which a woman's status seems to be relegated to a lesser place than that of men. We come to the Bible expecting to find women in a lesser role as though such were instituted by God from creation. Then we are surprised by texts such as Exodus 35, in which social norms of status suddenly have nothing to do with one's acceptability before God. We find rather an emphasis on one's willingness to serve. It is this attitude that looms as the factor determining one's worthiness and acceptability before God. Men and women alike prepare articles for use in the Tabernacle and by the priests in service to God. Without distinction, they were acceptable because of the attitude of submission and service.

We forget along with the Hebrews of old that the entire people was called to become a nation of priests to *Yahweh*. As one, they were called as a holy nation, set apart for service to God, mediating God's will, word, and presence among each other and before the nations of the world. Too readily they overlooked Moses' sister Miriam, who served the people as a prophet. Too readily, we allow our own

sense of classifying the worthy from the unworthy or less worthy, overriding God's definitions. We classify and distinguish between people and groups to heighten our own sense of worth and ease the discomfort we feel over our own failings.

We distinguish between clergy and laity, ordained and unordained, deacons and non-deacons, men and women, missionaries and denominational workers, preachers and musicians, members and non-members, active and inactive members, and even between categories of belief. On one level, such distinctions help identify specific roles and responsibilities. On another level, they may trap us into seeing ourselves in a distortion of our worthiness and acceptability before God.

Jesus faced this issue in the context of casting out demons. Who could have a problem with that? Who would get upset to see people being released from demonic oppression? Does it surprise us to find that it was the religious leadership of the day? Jesus' ministry and success was a threat to their structure, their status, their comparative importance among the people. Their accusations against Jesus were not well-thought out, but emotional reactions of self-protection. Jesus' message and ministry threatened to erode the basis for their standing and definitions of who was acceptable to God and how one might gain access to God's blessings and provision.

Jesus reduced the casting system down to one issue—obedient service. In grace, anyone and everyone could find acceptance before God under one condition alone. They must do the will of God. Sure, this could be broken down into several steps, categorized or organized in stages, but at heart the issue is but one—will we submit to God's will?

Jesus' mother and brothers came to call him back to sanity. They thought he was out of his mind, for this teaching caused conflict for them as well. They came to silence Jesus before he caused a tumult and brought shame on the family. Jesus' response was not what we would expect. He recast the import of familial relationships in accord with obedience to God. Nothing must interfere with our submission to God's will and claim upon our lives.

Jesus redefined family in a manner which might make us uncomfortable. He said that his family were those who do God's will. Family was no longer an issue of biology, nor of an established pattern of relationships. Family became a question of one's decision to place service to God above all else. Jesus gave obedience and submission to God the highest priority of all.

The question, then is not who is worthy to serve, nor has it ever been important. Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, and David all officiated sacrifices to God, though none of them were ordained as priests. Miriam was a prophet, as Deborah was a judge. Rahab, an idolatrous prostitute, served as messenger of *Yahweh* to the spies sent by Joshua. Per our standard definitions, these were not worthy, but they were willing. It is their submission and obedience that made them acceptable to God.

Where will we seek to find our worth before God? Will we point to standing or membership in a body who calls itself children of God? Will we contribute to the work done by others as fulfilling the demands of the gospel? Will we truly commit our lives to serve and obey the demands of faith? Will we serve the entire world as messengers of God's presence? Worth is measured by obedient service. What will be the worth of our lives in relation to eternity?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*