

## How To Really Count For God • II Thessalonians 1:11-12

The early settlers of our country had an interesting way of getting even with those they didn't like. Out on Cape Cod and the offshore islands of Nantucket in Martha's Vineyard, if you were to visit the cemeteries, you would find that even now after hundreds of years most of the tombstones are easily read in terms of name and dates and epitaph. Sometimes, in just a few words, you can learn a great deal about the person's life. Normally the tombstones were placed so that the inscription would face the leeward side of the Cape so that the lettering was protected from the wear and tear of salty winds and abrasive sand. But if the deceased was disliked, his tombstone was set toward the windward side of the Cape. In only a few years his name, dates and epitaph were completely erased. I have often walked those colonial cemeteries and wondered about those whose gravestones are smooth and letterless. It's almost as if they never lived, as if they counted for nothing.

It's a frightening thing to count for nothing, to be gone but never missed, to have lived life and left no mark, as if one had never been. Most of us spend much of our lives trying to leave some kind of a memory, some kind of a mark. We work hard, have children, write books, build monuments or climb mountains – anything to leave our mark.

In A.D. 51, St. Paul prayed a prayer for his Thessalonian friends that is a good prayer for all of us today, as well, who want our lives to count.

*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. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (II Thess. 1:11-12).*

Paul prays that God will “count you worthy of his calling.” Actually there's something of a com-

plicated concept that's rooted underneath here, a concept that I think is well worth learning. The concept begins with a call. The call comes from God and it is the call to salvation. God calls individuals to repent of sin, to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and to acknowledge him as Lord so they can live for him now and be with him for eternity.

We all recognize that the importance of a call depends on the caller. If you are a United States senator and you get a call from the White House asking you to speak to the president, you take the call! It doesn't matter if you are a Republican and the president is a Democrat, or vice versa, you take the call because of who the president is. Who the caller is makes an extraordinary difference.

As impressive as it is to get a call from the president, it's nothing compared to a call from God. And God is a most effective caller! He first decides who to call, then he makes the call and follows it up all the way to heaven. It's described in Romans 8:30 like this: “*And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*”

But there's a problem here. Just because someone gets a call does not mean that person deserves a call. In fact, the Bible is quite plain in saying that no one deserves a call from God to salvation.

Every call God makes is totally out of the goodness of his heart. It's just because he chooses to. It's just because he's generous and gracious. We never have a right to say God should call

me. Absolutely no one is worthy of God's list.

There's a powerful and important truth here. The reason anyone is worthy of his call is solely because God counts us as worthy — not because we are worthy in and of ourselves. “*With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling...*”

I have in my pocket two pieces of paper. One of them is a \$100 bill and the other one is a \$1 bill.

***God calls individuals to repent of sin, to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and to acknowledge him as Lord so they can live for him now and be with him for eternity.***

Now, which is worth more? Most people would rightly say it is the \$100 bill. Actually they're worth about the same in terms of paper and ink, a few cents at most. Ah, you say, but this one is worth a hundred times more than this one. Why is that so? Because our government counts this one to be worth a hundred times more — not because the paper or ink has any greater value. The difference in value is in the way it is counted.

And so it is with us. The reason we have infinite value is not because of who we are but because of the way God counts us. The truth is that we're pretty near worthless in and of ourselves. But God counts us as worthy of his Son's death, as worthy of salvation. He counts us as worthy of his call and worthy of his heaven. It's an extraordinary thing.

Paul's prayer keeps rolling and he says if we're going to be \$100 bills then we should act like \$100 bills. If we're going to be Christians then we should act like Christians. But sometimes we get confused.

Some years ago our family was driving from New England to Minnesota. We decided to take the long and scenic route over the top of the Great Lakes. It takes a lot longer to drive that way, but it's a wonderful trip. In the process of doing that we stayed one particular night in a large Canadian hotel and sent out for pizza for our family. The delivery person came and brought the pizza. Its cost was about ten dollars. When I tipped him I was confused with the different colors of Canadian cash and I tipped this guy twenty dollars for a ten dollar pizza. I thought I was giving him two dollars.

Too many Christians do that with life. We get confused about what we're worth. God counts us as worth a hundred bucks. He counts us as very valuable, but we spend our lives as if we were worth one dollar.

The point of the rest of verse 11 is that we act what we're worth. It's the prayer that God will make good dreams come true. Paul writes, "*...that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.*" Every good purpose. Every good act. Every good dream.

Everybody dreams. Sometimes we remember them, but most of the time we forget. The ones we

remember, I suppose, can be divided up in the categories of good or bad. We wake up from some dreams in delight, feeling great. Then there are those dreams from which we wake up frightened or panic-stricken. We have good dreams and bad dreams.

Dreams and purpose are somewhat similar — not quite synonymous, but close. Purpose is a sense of what we want to do and where we want to go, how we want to act out the resources that we have in the time that is ours. Some people have good purposes and some people have bad purposes. Even Christians counted worthy have both. I know that there are those of us who are torn between parallel dreams. On the one hand there is a dream to do good, to live right, but at the same time there is a dream to do evil and to live wrong. When we have competing dreams there's sometimes a pull for us to be self-centered and a pull to be Christ-centered. There's a competition in our lives over which dream will somehow be turned into reality.

All of which is to say that life's dreams and life's purposes are serious business and at some point we have to decide what we're going to do with life. Which of those competing dreams are we are going to seek to make come true? What will be the triumphant purpose for which we shall live?

It seems like an easy choice. It seems as if you obviously choose the good over the bad. If you are a Christian, you choose to be Christ-centered rather than self-centered. One would seek to be constructive rather than destructive. It's an obvious choice. But it isn't that simple. When we choose the good, it may be painful to leave behind the bad. Sometimes the temptation to that which is negative is extraordinary. Sometimes we have become addicted to that which we ought not do. And so there is a price to be paid to choose the good dream. There is a price that comes with the right purpose.

Paul is praying for his Thessalonian friends and all followers of Jesus Christ through all the centuries until now, that we will have God's power to make the good dreams and purposes happen and to make the bad purposes disappear. We've got to decide. Do we think that we could appropriate the power of God in such a way in our lives that the

choice is clearly made, that we'll do that which is right and good, that our dreams will conform with God's dreams and our purposes will become his purposes?

But, it's more than dreams being prayed about here. It's more than just purposes. It's more than something that we sketch out on a piece of paper as the plan for our lives. It's something that has to be turned into action. Paul adds to his prayer that this power of God be used to "*fulfill . . . every act prompted by your faith,*" assuming that we have faith in God and that faith is the instrument for doing what is right. It's not just purposing good. It's not just dreaming right. It's doing something about it.

Lets make it simple. If we are really \$100 bills, not \$1 bills, let's act like it. If we are really counted worthy by God through Jesus Christ, then let's behave that way. Are we profane? Let's clean up our speech. Are we thieves? Let's quit stealing. Are we immoral in our intent and our relationships? Let's revise our intent. Are we going the wrong direction in life? Let's pay the price and go the right direction. Let's get serious about breaking sinful habits and seek that which is moral, that which is good and that which is true. Let's behave in a way that is consistent with the faith that we have in the God who has counted us worthy of heaven itself through Jesus Christ.

A simple example comes from an article that I read in *Charisma* magazine by columnist Jamie Buckingham. He tells about going to a restaurant with a friend and how that friend was demanding and unkind, even demeaning, to the waitress. Mr. Buckingham explains he was somewhat embarrassed when, after treating the waitress in that fashion, his friend insisted when the meal arrived that they pray audibly together. At the end of the meal when the check came, he left no tip. Later the author said that he managed to slip back into the restaurant and found the waitress. He gave her a double tip and said "I'm doing this for two reasons: to pay you for putting up with my friend and to give you a blessing from God." She cried at his

generosity and sensitivity.

But then he went on in his column to talk about conversations with numerous waitresses who say very candidly that they would much rather have a boisterous party of half-drunk unbelievers than a group of quieter but demanding churchgoers — because church people don't tip much, if they tip at all.

That anecdote may be irrelevant to you. You probably are a twenty-five percent tipper! But it's simply saying that we as Christians are to behave in a way that is consistent with the worth that God has counted for us. Let's live morally, speak kindly, behave generously, set a Christ-like example in our behavior for all in earth and heaven to see, but not for ourselves . . . for Jesus.

In verse twelve, Paul writes, "*We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

God both gets and gives glory. To glorify means to enhance the reputation of, in this case, the name. I get a little uncomfortable sometimes when I hear myself and other

***You and I are worth a fortune because he says we're worth a fortune. And he's God!***

people pray and speak about the name of Jesus Christ, using the word name pretty much the way we use names in our society. Names meant something different when the Bible was written. We use names, at least in part, primarily as a means of identification. However, in biblical times a name meant more than a mark of identification. It represented the personality and character of the person. This verse is saying that we are to live lives in a way that enhances the reputation of Jesus Christ

Names are still important and the reputation that goes with a name is important. Companies try to identify their names with quality by using slogans like, "the quality goes in before the name goes on" or claiming that every product is signed by the artisan who made it. Putting your name on something means you're willing to stand behind it.

Do you know why the dollar is considered to be one of the hard currencies of the world? Do you know that all oil trading in the world is done in

dollars? And do you know that many currencies of the world aren't worth a thing outside of their own country? They're like the paper currency in a monopoly game. It might be worth something in the game, but it's not worth much anywhere else.

When I traveled with my wife and daughter in some eastern block countries, we were astounded to deal with people who refused to take their own currency, insisting that we pay them in U.S. dollars — even U.S. coins. In most countries, they don't want coins. But we found that in some of these countries they insisted on our coins rather than their coins. That's because they recognize the tremendous value of the U.S. dollar as a hard currency. Do you know what makes the difference? It's not the piece of paper or the ink, it's because of the name written across the face of it: "United States of America."

The name makes a difference! The name assigns value. As Christians, the name on our label is "Jesus Christ." Paul is praying that we will enhance the name of Jesus Christ, that we will behave in a way that is consistent with the one who gives us the value that we would not otherwise have. The wonderful part of it is that we then have our reputation enhanced in the process. We reflect the glory of Jesus Christ. "*Jesus Christ is glorified in you, and you in him.*"

I used to make my living driving a truck for a company that was owned by one man. The entire fleet of trucks was painted in white and had the owner's name and a picture of him, as well, on both sides of every truck. He was very concerned that we drive appropriately and not get tickets. He didn't like it when we cut people off, parked so it would inconvenience anyone or did anything that would in any way bring disrepute to his company or to his name.

The comparison here is obvious. We wear the name and the face of Jesus Christ. Everywhere we go, everyplace we park, everybody we help or everybody we cut off reflects not just upon us, but even more upon Jesus because we wear his name and face. What this verse, what this prayer, is all about is that we enhance the name and the face of Jesus Christ by the way we act.

What are you, a \$1 bill or a \$100 bill? I realize

it's a poor analogy. Let me tell you why. A \$100 bill was all I could come up with, the biggest thing I could get. To do it right I should have \$1000 or \$1,000,000 or even more because if we're really going to be consistent with the concept taught here in scripture, we are counted as invaluable by God. Invaluable. You and I are worth a fortune because he says we're worth a fortune. And he's God!

So let's live like it! Let's live like million dollar bills that have the name and face of Jesus Christ himself imprinted all over us.

Our Father, may these be more than words. May this be the reality of our lives. May we understand that we have been counted worthy because that's the way you have counted us, not because we are worth it. And may we live the way we have been counted, for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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