

# “Qualifying the Called, Not Calling the Qualified” Colossians 1:1-14

July 11, 2010

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Those of you who have had children remember, not only the joy, but the fear in bringing your first baby home from the hospital. There’s no instruction manual that comes with a baby. There’s no one there to tell you what to do or how to do it. You slowly begin to realize that the care and well-being of this precious little child ultimately depends on you. Becoming a parent can make many people feel very inadequate.

That doesn’t change as the child grows older. When our children become teenagers we may feel even more inadequate. The issues of discipline, drug usage, premarital sex, school work, matters of faith and so on are things we would prefer to avoid – and often do – because we feel so inadequate.

We need to remember that children are gifts of God. God doesn’t call qualified people to become adequate parents. Rather, He qualifies those whom He calls and makes them qualified to serve as adequate parents. This important distinction makes all the difference in the world. We don’t have to worry about being qualified to be parents. Instead, we trust God to qualify us to serve as parents.

The same thing is true in our relationship with God. We tend to look at Christians in the New Testament, not only as adequate, but as “super Christians”. We figure that God must have called those who were spiritual enough to believe and skilled enough to serve to be Christians. We could never be like them, we think. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Today, we begin reading selections from the book of Colossians as our epistle readings for the next several Sundays. It is written by Paul. Now, if anyone had reason to be qualified, it surely would be him, whom we consider to be a super apostle since he wrote most of the New Testament. But Paul Himself had feelings of inadequacy. In writing to a young Pastor Timothy, Paul said, “Christ Jesus

came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.’ (1 Timothy 1:15). He felt himself to be the worst sinner ever. Yet, he constantly reminded himself and his readers that his calling was from God by beginning his letter with, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God.*”

The Colossian Christians struggled with the same feelings of inadequacy. Paul addressed them as “saints and faithful”, but they were beginning to doubt this. False teachers were trying to convince them that Christ alone was insufficient to guarantee salvation. His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of all our sins was not enough. They began to look to themselves and their obedience to the Law for assurance. If only they could be good enough, then they could feel that they were adequate Christians.

That’s what we instinctively do when we feel deficient – we try to make up the deficiency ourselves. We look to our own decisions, commitments, and efforts to bring about change. Jesus may have died for our sins and rose from the dead to give us new life, but we feel it is up to us to decide to believe in that forgiveness and it is up to us to live that new life. Paul, however, directs us not to ourselves and our own works but to God, who alone is sufficient for all our needs.

Paul encourages the Colossians, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.” That sounds like Paul is encouraging them and us to look to *our* faith and *our* love, but that’s not true. Where did that faith and love come from? Paul says they have this faith and love “because of the hope laid up *for you* in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which as come to you.” Note that neither they nor we have stored up this hope for ourselves in heaven – God did! We only heard of it through the Gospel – the Gospel that comes to us. We didn’t come to it. It came to us! Faith is not something we sought out. Faith comes to us as a gift through the Word of God. Forgiveness is not something we decide to get. It is a gift which God decides to give us by faith.

What about the new life and the acts of love done by us? Aren't those something for which we are responsible? Again, the answer is no. Paul doesn't give the Colossian Christians a pep talk about how they can do better in living the Christian life. Rather he prays that God would do something for them. Paul writes, "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." The knowledge of his will is the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ who alone is able to guarantee our heavenly inheritance through His life, death, and resurrection and who alone is able to produce the Christ-like life within us.

When we are filled by God with this Gospel (we don't fill ourselves), we will "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." In other words, the Christian life is not something we cause in ourselves, but something which Christ causes in us through the Gospel. As Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing....You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (John 15:5,16)

What about patiently enduring in faith and the Christian life? Is that something we do? Again, the answer is no. Paul writes, "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." It is His glorious might which empowers us to have all endurance and patience. Our only response is not to qualify ourselves but to give thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in life.

Like many things in our Christian life, our adequacy before God is something that is perhaps easy to understand in theory, but more difficult to accept and apply in our every day lives. All of us still feel inadequate on occasion. Those feelings of inadequacy usually come when we begin to compare ourselves with someone or something else.

We feel inadequate in the presence of others. We see others being successful in what they do and being praised for what they do. We can feel like failures in comparison. But what does Scripture say about the success of others? First of all, it may not even be “success” in the eyes of God but merely the world’s imitation of it. The Scripture says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Heb. 11:6) Therefore, we need not feel inadequate in the presence of anything done apart from faith. For, if it doesn’t please God, it doesn’t matter.

Secondly, when someone does something in faith and is successful, the success is not his doing! It’s God’s doing! Success is from God! If your neighbor appears adequate to you, it’s only because his adequacy is from God. He has no boast except in God who alone makes him adequate to the tasks he has been given by God. Therefore, we rejoice, rather than envy or feel inadequate, at our neighbor’s success.

The same is true for you. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent.” (2 Cor. 3:5-6) God Himself has placed you in your various callings as parent, grandparent, teacher, student, employer, or employee, not because of any ability in you by nature, but because God has called you and qualified you to serve your neighbor in whatever capacity you find yourself.

Now, if we feel inadequate before our neighbor, we also feel inadequate before a holy God. Each of us is keenly aware of our own imperfections and failures. Even if no one else knows our secret sins, we know them. That still small voice of conscience within us accuses us daily and reminds us of our moral failures.

Our instinct tells us that we need to do something to still that accusing voice within and there are plenty of false teachers around, like there were in Colossae to help us out with that feeling. These are teachers who do not view Christ and his finished work as really and truly sufficient for your salvation. There’s still some part, no matter how small, that you need to do to guarantee your place

in heaven. This involves some self-chosen works such as praying the sinner's prayer, making a personal decision for Christ, dedicating yourself fully to His service, making a "faith promise" to God, and so on. No matter how well intentioned or how pious these things may be, your adequacy before God in these situations all boils down to you and what you do. This is not the teaching of the apostles.

God's way is not faith in Christ and the works of the Law for salvation. Rather, it is Christ alone. Paul writes, "*He* has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, *in whom* we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Our adequacy before God and man is not the result of our works, but God alone. He alone brought us out of darkness into light. He alone cleansed us of all our sins.

When your conscience accuses you, hear another voice – the voice of Christ releasing you from your sins and declaring you to be right – adequate – before God. To be in Christ is to be fully qualified to serve Him now and completely adequate to share in the heavenly inheritance to come.

A simple play on words may help us to understand this whole thing. God does not call the qualified to follow Him and be in His Kingdom. Rather, God qualifies those whom He calls to follow Him and be in His Kingdom. That makes all the difference in the world. You are adequate for all that God calls you to do. You are qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. God has made these things so. Amen.