



A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Lesson 1 – A Christian Way of Living?

Dear friends:

We are about to begin together an extended conversation about the shape of faithful Christian life. I call it a conversation because it will involve much more than me talking to you in lectures. As important as anything I might say are the other voices you will hear, both the ones that come to us from the readings of those who have gone before us in the faith, and the ones you will hear around you from the people you are studying with. They are important because our aim is not so much to convey information, or to provide a body of ideas to be absorbed. Instead, it is to give us all the tools to think as a community about the way our lives express our faith, and the way our Christian beliefs teach us to see, and understand, and live in the world we inhabit. And one of the most basic things our faith teaches us is that we come to such insights together, or not at all.

For those of you hoping for clear directions or concise answers to what Christians ought to think or do about a range of contemporary controversies, this series will be a disappointment. Both my experience as a teacher and my own basic convictions about what makes a form of life Christian persuade me that such a discussion of issues, although it is an important aspect of moral conversation in the church, is the wrong place to begin. Before we can talk as Christians about problems—global warming or the decline of marriage, the ethics of embryonic stem cell research or the scandal of poverty—we need to stop and think about more basic matters. *What difference does what we believe make to how we live?* (And while we are at it, what do Christians believe, anyway?) Is there such a thing as a Christian form of life? How do we know what it is? Isn't it dangerous to talk about Christian conduct, as if we think we can be more righteous than other people? Is there some way to be morally serious without being self-righteous?

Such questions could be multiplied, but this is enough to make my point. Before we can make particular judgments as Christians, or make arguments about what Christians ought to do or think about controversial matters, we need to be formed in habits of thinking and talking, seeing and hearing, that allow us to judge and argue *Christianly*: as people united by a confession of faith—not faith in what we are able to figure out and to get right, but faith in what God has done for us all in common that makes us a community.

So we will begin with the most fundamental of all questions in Christian ethics, which is whether there even is such a thing as a *Christian* form of ethics. I hope you will find the material of the course engaging and thought-provoking. But more than anything else, I hope our study will invite you into the lifelong work of all Christians, which is to be so overcome by the living mercy of Christ that our lives becomes signs of his mercy to the world.

Sincerely,

Sondra