

Worthless People

I became interested in a phrase that is used in Judges to refer to three different people: Abimelech's followers, the associates of Jephthah, and the homosexual rapists of Gibeah are all referred to as "worthless fellows." I found another usage of this designation in our daily Bible reading in Deut. 13:13, which refers to those who encourage others to worship false gods. Later, Eli's sons (1 Sam. 2:12), certain men who rejected Saul as king (1 Sam. 10:27), and even some of David's traveling companions are all called worthless (1 Sam. 30:22). In all, the designation is used 15 times in the Old Testament.

Let's look at some technical stuff. You might notice in a marginal note, or in a study Bible that our English phrase "worthless fellows" comes from the Hebrew "son of Belial." The word, Belial, is a compound word made up of *beli-* (without) and *ya'al* (value). Between the time of the Old and New Testaments, Jewish writers began to refer to Belial as the chief of the demons, or Satan, which is why it is capitalized above. This is how the word is used the one time it is found in the New Testament when Paul says, "What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial" (2 Cor. 6:14-15)?

What caused me to be interested in this designation is that it seems to go against everything I think about God's love for humanity. Is there really such a thing in this world as a soul that is without worth or value? How, then, does this language (which is God's, by the way) fit into what Jesus said in Matt. 5:21-22, "²¹ You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Jesus said that referring to people as "good-for-nothing" and as "fools" (literally *mōros*, the word from which we derive our "moron") is on par with hatred and even murder in one's heart. How does God refer to both individuals and groups 15 times in the Old Testament as worthless?

There are two options as far as I can tell. The first is that they are without worth insofar as God's estimation of them is contrary to their estimation of themselves. In almost all of the 15 times people are called worthless the reference is to somebody of notable status. Abimelech was the son of a man who acted like a king. Say what you will about Jephthah's morality, but the man knew how to lead people. The sons of Eli thought they were pretty important. Almost every time people are called worthless it refers to people who thought that they were really something special. Perhaps the designation, worthless, is intended as a reminder that none of us are as cool as we may be tempted to think.

Let us remember where Jesus placed real value. When he overheard his disciples arguing about who was the greatest among them he said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk. 9:35). Haughty eyes are the first of the seven things God hates in Prov. 6:16; and the Beatitudes, which are generally thought to be the cornerstone of Christ's practical teaching, are dominated by humility. True worth is attained only when we recognize our spiritual bankruptcy, or worthlessness. When arrogance finds its way into human hearts God begins to use humbling designations like "worthless" to remind us that there is no place for haughtiness in the kingdom of God.

A second option is that the phrase is not really a literal comment about a person's value as much as it is an idiom describing those who like to "stir the pot." The NRSV translates "son of Belial" as "scoundrel" and the NLT treats

the phrase as “worthless rabble.” According to this option, the meaning is not so much that there is a soul without value as it is a reference to a rabble rouser. This is someone who makes it his or her business to create trouble and stir up the crowd. Let us remember that one of Jesus’ Beatitudes is that the peacemakers will be blessed. James says, “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” Paul encouraged the Romans, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Don’t be a scoundrel and a rabble rouser. Don’t stir the pot just to have something to do. Don’t be a worthless person. Don’t be a son of Belial.

Ryan Boyer, Preacher

Ellisville Church of Christ

www.SimplyChristians.com

62 Henry Ave. | Ellisville, MO 63021

Office: (636) 207-0789

Email: EllisvilleCofC@att.net