

Greek Words for Meriting Or Deserving Things From God

One legalistic view interprets the usages of the words “*worthy*” or “*worthily*” or related phrases in Matthew 10:11, 10:13, 10:37 (twice), 10:38, 22:8, Acts 5:41, Romans 16:2, Ephesians 4:1, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 1:11 and Revelation 3:4 to mean believers can through God-empowered good works deserve or merit eternal life and other aspects of salvation.

In the original Greek, the word “*worthy*” in Matthew 10:11, 10:13, 10:37 (twice), 10:38, 22:8 and Revelation 3:4 are the adjective “*axios*” or forms of it. In Greek, the word “*worthily*” in Romans 16:2, Ephesians 4:1, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:10 and 1 Thessalonians 2:12 is the adverb “*axios*”. In Greek, the phrase “*they were counted worthy*” in Acts 5:41, the phrase “*counted worthy*” in Luke 20:35 and the expression “*that you may be counted worthy*” in 2 Thessalonians 1:5 are forms of the word “*kataxioo*”. In the original Greek, the expression “*would count worthy*” in 2 Thessalonians 1:11 is a form of the word “*axioo*”.

In Matthew 10:37 and 38, Jesus refers to those who are “*not worthy of Me*”. Acts 5:41 mentions being “*counted worthy to suffer shame for His name*”. Other like expressions are “*in a manner worthy of the saints*” (Romans 16:2), “*walk worthy of the calling*” (Ephesians 4:1) and “*let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ*” (Philippians 1:27), “*walk worthy of the Lord*” (Colossians 1:10), “*walk worthy of God*” (1 Thessalonians 2:12) and “*be counted worthy of the kingdom of God*” (2 Thessalonians 1:5). There are a number of reasons why the above words and phrases cannot mean believers can through God-empowered good works merit or deserve eternal life and other features of salvation:

- A form of the word “*axios*” is used in Romans 1:32 when it records the thing those who have sinned deserve or are worthy of is *death*. Acts 13:25 uses “*axios*” when it says John the Baptist insisted he was not worthy enough to tie Jesus’ sandals. John the Baptist was an extremely godly believer who was saved by God’s grace. So for him to say this shows again we are not worthy to merit eternal life or salvation from God. Matthew 3:11, 8:8, Luke 3:16, 7:7 and John 1:27 confirm we are not worthy to merit these things from God in even the slightest way. Luke 7:7 uses a form of the verb “*axioo*” when it says the Roman centurion said to Jesus, “*...I did not even think myself worthy to come to you...*” Also Luke 12:48 uses a form of “*axios*” to mean “*deserving*” or “*meriting*” punishment.
- There are two better alternative explanations of the usages of the word “*worthy*” used in Matthew 10:37, 38 and so on. These two alternatives are explained in the next two sections.

The first alternative

In some contexts, the word “worthy” or “axios” in Greek means “befitting”.¹ A form of “axios” is translated “fitting” in 1 Corinthians 16:4: “***But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me***” and 2 Thessalonians 1:3: “***We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting...***” So “axios” can mean “befitting” or “suitable” or “appropriate”. Forms of the word “axios” are used in Matthew 3:8 and Acts 26:20 in relation to actions which are suitable or appropriate or befitting of repentance.²

Bauer says the Greek word “axioo” can mean “consider suitable, fitting”³ and the adverb “axios” can mean “suitably”.⁴ In his comments on the Greek adverb “axios”, Vine says the phrase “***worthy of God***” used in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 means “of the Christian walk as it should be” and “***worthy of the gospel of Christ***” in Philippians 1:27 means “of a manner of life in accordance with what the gospel declares”.⁵ Vine also states “***in a manner worthy of the saints***” in Romans 16:2 refers to “in such a manner as befits those who bear the name of ‘saints’.”⁶

In 1 Timothy 6:1, Paul uses a form of the word “axios” in the context of Christian slaves *counting* or *considering* their human masters as being suitable or fitting of all honor: “***Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.***” In the above, the phrase “***Let (them) count***” is a form of the word “hegeomai” which in this context means “think, consider, regard”.⁷ Also note that some of the human masters to whom Paul was referring were wicked people who deserved or merited nothing from God except punishment.

So in 1 Timothy 6:1, Paul was using a form of the word “axios” *not in the sense of merit* but instead of what is suitable or appropriate. Paul was telling Christian slaves to honor their sinful undeserving masters because it is fitting for them to do this so God’s Name and the Gospel would not be criticized. Paul’s usage of a form of “axios” in 1 Timothy 6:1 is a clear example that he does not always use this word in the sense of merit.

The second alternative

Another alternative interpretation of these previously mentioned verses using the Greek adjective “axios” and adverb “axios” in relation to believers walking worthily is as follows: Revelation 5:2-12 reveals *no human except Christ* is totally worthy in God’s eyes of meriting or deserving anything from God. Revelation 5:2-4 and 8-9 states: “***Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?’ And***

¹ Vine, page 401.

² A similar Greek word to “axios” is “hikanos” which means “sufficient” (Vine, page 687) or “being adequate for something” (Louw and Nida, page 679) in 2 Corinthians 2:16 or “worthy” in Matthew 3:11, 8:8, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16 and 7:6 (Vine, page 687). In 1 Corinthians 15:9, the New King James Version translates “hikanos” as “***worthy***” but the New American Standard Bible translates it as “***fit***”.

³ Bauer, page 78.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vine, page 687.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bauer, page 343.

no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it...Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation'." In Greek, the word "worthy" in Revelation 5:2, 4 and 9 is "axios".

Revelation 5:12 reveals that multitudes in heaven said loudly: "...**Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!**" The word "worthy" above is also "axios". Revelation 5:9 and 5:12 shows Christ *totally merited* or *deserved* many things from God.

Revelation 4:9-11 reveals that other beings in heaven recognize God is absolutely worthy. Revelation 4:11 records their words: "**You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.**" The above verse expresses that God totally deserves or merits all glory, honour and power.

Because only God and Christ are completely worthy or totally deserve anything and no other human beside Christ totally merits anything from God, Romans 16:2, Ephesians 4:1, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:12 and Revelation 3:4 are referring to believers in Christ after conversion walking by God's grace in agreement with the nature and character of God and Christ. Because God and Christ's nature and character are infinitely deserving and worthy and believers are in Him, the more believers walk in Christ and are ruled by Him, the more they will be *walking in agreement with His worthiness*. This does not, however, mean believers merit eternal life through God-empowered good works done by His grace.

In Luke 17:7-10, Jesus said that as God's servants, we *do not totally deserve* or *merit* anything from Him in relation to obeying His commandments. In verse 10, Christ said we should regard ourselves as "**unprofitable servants**" even after obeying His commands. The word "**unprofitable**" here in Greek is a form of the word "achreios" which means "*unworthy...worthless*"⁸ or "*unmeritorious*".⁹

These words only mean "worthy" or "worthily" in some contexts

Here is more proof that we must be very careful to examine the contexts of Greek words, which can sometimes be interpreted as "**worthy**" or "**worthily**", to see if this really is their meaning in the specific situation under consideration: The Greek word "hikanos" means: "**worthy**" in the sense of deserving or meriting in Matthew 3:11, 8:8, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16 and 7:6. But in other contexts, the word "hikanos" does not mean "worthy" or "deserving". Instead in other contexts, it means:

- *enough* or *sufficient*.¹⁰ An example of this occurs in 2 Corinthians 2:6.
- *bright*¹¹ in Acts 22:6.

⁸ Bauer, page 128.

⁹ Perschbacher, page 64.

¹⁰ Louw and Nida, pages 599 and 692.

¹¹ Ibid, page 686.

- *being adequate* for something ¹² or *competent* or *qualified* ¹³ in 2 Corinthians 2:16.
- a *considerable number* or *many* ¹⁴ in Acts 12:12, 14:21 and 19:19.
- a *relatively large number*. ¹⁵ Examples of this are in Matthew 28:12, Mark 10:46 and Luke 8:27.
- *to satisfy* in Mark 15:15.
- *security* or *pledge* ¹⁶ in Acts 17:9.

Similarly the Greek words “axios” and “axioo” mean “**worthy**” or “**worthily**” only in some contexts.

Being accounted or credited as worthy

Luke 20:35, Acts 5:41 and 2 Thessalonians 1:5 refer to being “accounted” or “credited” as being worthy by God through His undeserved grace. In these verses, the words “**are counted worthy**” or “**they were counted worthy**” or “**may be counted worthy**” are forms of the Greek word “kataxioo” which means “to *account* worthy, to *judge* worthy”. ¹⁷ The usage of the forms of “kataxioo” in the three verses mentioned above does not relate to being worthy in nature, character or actions.

2 Thessalonians 1:2-5 states: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgement of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.**” In 2 Thessalonians 1:2-5, Paul is saying that the faith and patient endurance of Thessalonian believers was *outward* or *manifested evidence* of the judgement of God in relation to Him declaring believers righteous in Christ, the latter having as one of its intended aims the accounting of believers as being worthy of being members of His Kingdom. Even though these believers are *not worthy in themselves* of being members of His Kingdom, He credits them as being worthy through Christ by unmerited grace.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:2-5, Paul was not teaching that by God’s grace believers merit being declared worthy by their endurance of suffering. Instead, he was saying that their faithful endurance of suffering was an outward *fruit* of God’s gracious righteous judgement in declaring them worthy through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Greek the expression “**that you**” in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 is “eis to” accompanied by the infinitive “**may be counted worthy**”. In his letters, Paul usually used the phrase “eis to” with an infinitive to refer to the *purpose* of someone. For example, in Romans 1:20, 3:26, 4:18, 6:12, 7:4, 1 Thessalonians 3:13 and 2 Thessalonians 2:10, Paul uses the Greek words “eis to” with an

¹² Ibid, page 679.

¹³ Perschbacher, page 208.

¹⁴ Louw and Nida, page 595.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 596.

¹⁶ Bauer, page 374.

¹⁷ Vine, page 9.

infinitive to mean “so that”.¹⁸ 2 Thessalonians 1:5 teaches that God’s righteous judgement has the purpose of counting believers worthy of His Kingdom by His unmerited grace.

The Greek word “axioo” means “to *judge* or esteem worthy or deserving, to deem fitting”¹⁹ or “consider worthy (or) deserving; consider suitable (or) fitting”.²⁰ 2 Thessalonians 1:11 uses a form of “axioo”²¹ in the sense of God judging or considering believers suitable or fitting of His calling on their lives. 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 states: **“Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Verse 12 here shows that being fitting of God’s calling on our lives is according to and empowered by God’s *totally unmerited grace*.

In Galatians 1:6 and Romans 9:11, Paul stresses that God calls believers in His undeserved grace and not because they deserve or merit it through their good works. Galatians 1:6 says: **“...Him who called you in the grace of Christ...”** Romans 9:11 declares: **“for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls.”**

In Hebrews 10:29, a form of “axioo” is used to refer to Christ’s blood being considered or judged unclean *even though it is not this in real nature or character*. This is similar to the usage of the form of “axioo” in 2 Thessalonians 1:11. In this latter verse being counted **“worthy of this calling”** means being considered worthy of God’s calling. This is even though we are not worthy by nature, character or actions. In Matthew 3:11, 8:8 and Luke 18:10-14, we see how godly believers recognize their own unworthiness in nature, character and actions.

Misunderstood verses

Someone may argue, “But in Matthew 10:11, 10:13, 10:37, 10:38 and 22:8, Jesus Christ spoke of people being worthy in the sense of meriting or deserving things from God. For example, in Matthew 10:37-38, He revealed some people *merit* being in relationship to Him. He taught they *deserve* this because they love Him more than their father or mother, and have taken up their cross and followed Him”.

But this is poor Biblical interpretation. This is because even though the word “axios” does in some contexts relate to meriting or deserving things, “axios” does not mean this in the above verses in Matthew. We see this when we study Luke’s account of the same events. In Luke 14:26-27, Jesus said: **“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”** Luke uses the expression **“he cannot be My disciple”** to be the equivalent of Matthew’s phrase **“he is not worthy of Me”** used in Matthew 10:37 and 38. In Greek, the phrase **“he cannot”** used in both Luke 14:26 and 27 is “ou dunatai”. “Oun dunatai” means **“not able”**.

¹⁸ Bauer, page 229.

¹⁹ Perschbacher, page 35.

²⁰ Bauer, page 78.

²¹ Forms of the word “axioo” are used in Acts 15:38, 28:22, Luke 7:7, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 1 Timothy 5:17, Hebrews 3:3 and 10:29. In Acts 15:38 and 28:22, “axioo” is used in the sense of “judged or considered suitable or fitting”.

Therefore as Luke 14:26-27 reveals, those who do not love others more than Jesus Christ and do not bear their cross and follow Him are not able to become His disciples. This has nothing to do with meriting a relationship to Him through good works. Therefore Matthew's expression "**he is not worthy of Me**" must mean "he is not suitable or fitting of a relationship with Me". As stated earlier, the word "axios" often means "befitting" or "suitable".

Matthew and Luke were both totally inspired by the Holy Spirit in all the verses in their Gospels. But note Luke's usage of Greek was superior to Matthew. This is an accepted fact among Bible translators. Commenting on Luke, "the Believers Study Bible – N.K.J.V." ²² states, "*His education is considerable; he writes excellent Greek, both classical and biblical...Luke writes a form of Greek superior to that of most of the New Testament*". Being such a superb writer in Greek, Luke is less likely than Matthew to use Greek expressions which can have more than one meaning. Matthew and Luke do not dispute between themselves about what Jesus said. But note it would be wrong to translate and interpret Matthew's Greek record of Jesus' words to mean things contrary to what Luke recorded about Christ's same original comments.

In Matthew 10:11 and 10:13, Matthew says when Christ sent out the twelve Apostles, He referred to a person and a household who were "**worthy**". In Greek, the word "**worthy**" in verse 11 is "axios" and in verse 13 a form of it. But when we cross-reference with Luke's account in Luke 10:5-6 of a similar event – the later sending out of the seventy disciples – we see Luke said Christ spoke of "**a son of peace**". Luke 10:5-6 states: "**But whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house.' And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you.**"

"**A son of peace**" was someone who was *suitable* or *fitting* to receive the peace greeting the Apostles would give. This is surely the meaning of the worthy person or household Matthew referred to in Matthew 10:11-13: "**Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.**" Matthew is not using the word "**worthy**" or "axios" in these verses in the sense of merit. Instead he is using "axios" to mean *suitable* or *fitting*. A person or household of peace is suitable to receive a peace greeting.

Evil people cannot merit being invited

In Matthew 22:8, Matthew uses a form of the word "axios" when he records Jesus saying in the Parable of the Wedding Feast that many who were invited to the wedding feast of the son were not worthy. It is wrong to interpret the form of the word "axios" used here as "**worthy**" in the sense of meriting or deserving to be invited. This is because in verse 10, Christ said the king later invited even *evil* or *bad* people to the wedding feast. If Christ was teaching in Matthew 22:1-14 that God invites only people who by their character or good works merit being invited to the marriage supper of His Son, He would not have spoken of inviting totally undeserving bad people in verse 10. Actually all humans except Jesus Christ are bad (see Romans 3:9-19). So none deserve or merit to be invited to His marriage supper.

In this Parable in Matthew 22:1-14, Christ did not intend to teach that some humans are worthy of being invited into God's Kingdom. Instead He was teaching that some humans,

²² Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1991, page 1429.

whom they or others would believe were worthy of entering God's Kingdom, would refuse Christ's invitation.

Meriting monetary rewards from God for preaching

When we compare Luke's account in Luke 10:7 of Matthew's words in Matthew 10:10, we find Luke and Matthew both refer to workers for Christ or Gospel preachers being worthy of wages or offerings. The word "**worthy**" in both of these verses is "axios" in Greek. In the context of these two verses, the word "**worthy**" is not used in relation to meriting eternal life or salvation. It is used in the more restricted sense of being worthy of monetary rewards in this earthly life for preaching the Gospel.

The attitudes of the prodigal son and his brother

In Luke 15:11-32, Jesus Christ told the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this parable, He compared the attitudes of a wicked son who later returned to his father and was blessed by grace and an obedient son who thought he merited his father's blessings. Verses 19 and 21 record the prodigal son said to his father: "***I am no longer worthy to be called your son***". In both of the verses, the word "**worthy**" is "axios" in Greek.

Luke 15:29-30 records the older brother's *legalistic meriting* attitudes: "***So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'***" In this parable, Christ revealed God is willing to receive as sons those who have lived wicked lives and deserve or merit nothing from Him. Also, this parable challenges legalists who imagine they have merited their Heavenly Father's acceptance and blessings in any way.

Works which suit repentance

In his Gospel, Luke uses the Greek word "axios" to mean deserving or meriting punishment (see Luke 12:48), death (see Luke 23:15) and offerings for preaching the Gospel (see Luke 10:7). But in Luke 3:8, he uses a form of "axios" to mean "befitting" or "suitable of" in relation to repentance and its fruits.

Jewish elders and the Roman centurion's attitude to merit before God

In Luke 7:4, 15:19 and 15:21, Luke uses "axios" in contexts which show humans are not worthy or deserving of blessings from God. Luke 7:2-8 records: "***And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, 'for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue.'*** Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to

Him, saying to Him, 'Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go', and he goes; and to another, 'Come', and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this', and he does it.'

Note the Jewish elders above tried to convince Jesus to heal the Roman centurion's servant on the basis of how supposedly deserving He was because of his good works. These Jews were sincere but legalistic in their understanding of good works and merit. Observe the word "*deserving*" in verse 4 above is "axios" in Greek.

But note the Roman centurion insisted he was not worthy of Christ's miraculous help. In verse 6, the centurion used a form of the Greek word "axioo". Note Jesus did not praise the Jewish elders' attitudes. Instead Luke 7:9 records how He was extremely pleased with the Roman centurion's response to Him: "*When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, 'I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.'*"

The Roman centurion's faith was expressed in both his attitude to Christ's spoken Word and to his own unworthiness or lack of merit in relation to deserving God's blessings. Real faith is reliance on God and not on self (see 2 Corinthians 1:9). So someone with true faith does not come to God boasting of his good works and character, but instead understands God wishes to bless him *despite his own lack of merit*.