

Working Out Our Christian Life

Based on Philippians 2:12-13

Additional readings: 1 Peter 1:13-16 and Leviticus 20:7-8

I would encourage you to open your Bibles to Paul's letter to the Philippians—chapter 2. We are going to look this morning at one of those difficult passages that often cause people confusion as they try and interpret it. This morning, I hope that we will see that it is not so difficult at all to understand. More importantly though, it is a powerful message from God's word to us that we all must hear. Let's take a look—Philippians 2:12-13. It says:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13 ESV).

Here the Apostle Paul is telling us to do something! He says we are to “work out our salvation.” We are going to discover what God intended by stating we are to “work out our salvation.” Those words at first glance may sound wrong—don't they? Well, this morning we need to take a little time to study these two short verses in depth, because they've been a great source of confusion. Some might think they mean we are to earn our salvation. But we can't earn what God has granted to us by his sovereign grace—for it is a gift (Eph. 2:8-10). We will see that *these* words to us are a gift as well.

This morning's text is one of those extraordinary passages that straddle the twin difficulties of theology and practice (Christian living). And so today we are going to learn a little about what it really means to take seriously God's greatest gift to you—your salvation. What Paul here is doing as we will see is challenging us to do something in light of that wonderful gift and he promises us we won't have to do it alone.

It was in late elementary school that my parents first sent me to summer camp for a week. The camp was sponsored and supported by our church, along number of other churches within our state. I had never been to camp before and I had never before heard a clear presentation of the gospel. As we lay in bed that first night – right before lights

went out, one of the older boys asked us, “If you were to die tonight, would God let any of you into Heaven?” When we all pretty much agreed that we would go to Heaven, he asked us how sure we were that we were going to Heaven? One boy said that he had been pretty good and hadn’t killed anyone, so he figured that God would let him in. Another boy said that he didn’t know because he fought with his brother a lot. Not one was sure, at that moment, if God would let us into Heaven – not 100% sure.

I can still remember the uneasy feeling that I had as I did my best to go to sleep that night – I was haunted by every sin that I had committed that week, that month, that year. For the first time in my life, I was no longer sure that I would go to Heaven.

You may have heard that question before. It was made popular in the 1970s through a pamphlet used to share the gospel. I am confident that many of us here this morning would be able to answer that question with confidence – that God would let us into Heaven. We would explain how Christ died for our sins and how He exchanged our unrighteousness for His righteousness. We were brought from death to life and only on account of the blood of Christ would God allow us into Heaven. So for many of us Christians, when we think about our *salvation*, we think about what God has saved us “*from*” – namely from sin and Hell. He saved us from many things—our own self-destruction; our wickedness; our greed; and our pride and stubbornness. But that is not entirely what Paul is referring to here.

Today’s text reminds us to think about not only what God has saved us “from” but what God has also saved us “for.” God has saved us that we might bring him glory for his good pleasure. He has called us to be *sanctified*, to be set apart. He has called us to be lovers of *His* truth and zealous of *His* way. He has called us from a life of darkness to a life in Christ for *His service*.

When someone is saved, they are brought from death to life (Romans 6:13, 1 John 3:14a). They are a new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). As a believer, you have been transformed from an object of God’s wrath to a child of God, from being dead in our sins to being alive in Christ! (Eph 2). All of this happens

in an instant! God opens our eyes, we see Christ, we trust in Him. We are now children with an eternal inheritance.

But you may have noticed that there were some things that did not seem to change in an instant. If you struggled with anger before you were saved, my guess is that you were not cured of all your anger issues the moment that you were saved. Whether it's pride, legalism, anxiety, fear, or the need of approval from others or any addiction you can think of. Those things do not typically disappear the moment you are redeemed.

As believers, God continues our salvation through what we call theologically "sanctification." It means to be set apart or to be made holy. In our salvation, we are being set apart to do something with our lives for Christ. God has saved us that we might bring him glory for his good pleasure. He has called us to a life in Christ for His *service*.

Paul says something very similar to our text in Ephesians chapter two. You all know this passage well. Remember, Paul tells us plainly in Eph. 2:8-10 that:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So, we can easily reject the idea that Paul is telling us that we can earn our salvation. We can't. No one can. But note that after telling us that our salvation was a gift and is absolutely free—he immediately tells us we are created to do something. We are created before the foundations of the world to do "good works." And so understand this: God's divine work in our salvation "demands" a human response; or to put another way—Salvation brings with it responsibilities! That is the subject of sanctification! That is the subject of this morning's passage. God's divine initiative demands a response from you.

Let's take a look at the passage, Philippians 2:12 and 13 –

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, **13** for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

1) “Therefore, my beloved” (v. 12)

Note Paul’s opening words. He says, “Therefore, my beloved.” The first thing that we need to know to understand these verses is that they are addressed to believers and believers only.

The first point as we look at our call to live a life in Christ for his service is that only the *beloved* can work out their salvation. Only the *beloved* can work out their salvation. It’s important to recognize whom he addresses here—it’s Christians—not unbelievers. It’s the followers of Christ. Understand that what he is about to instruct us to do—*isn’t* something an unbeliever can do! In the beginning of verse 12, Paul addresses his audience directly and refers to them as beloved. If you are reading in the NIV you will see the words friends instead. What Paul is about to instruct us to do—*isn’t* something an unbeliever can do or enemy of Christ, but only his beloved; only his friends as it were—it’s only for those who have been redeemed. The spiritually dead can’t do what Paul is about to ask.

So, he calls the Philippians “his beloved.” You see – Paul addresses Christians as *someone who loves them*. This was common for Paul to do in all his writings *even* the Corinthians when they were *reckless* in their behavior. And we would do well to learn from him. *If you want to impact a person—if you want to make a difference in someone’s life, they need to know how much you love them—not through mere words, but in action.* He says it *unmistakably* in (vs. 3-4) that you are “in humility to consider others better than yourselves. [that] Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” That is a different kind of love *isn’t* it?—that’s a self-sacrificing love. That’s love of another kind! As someone once said, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care!” The Philippians knew how much Paul cared for them—so should the people around us. God is glorified; He is

pleased when we, as believers, love one another like this.

2) “as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence” (v. 12)

Second notice in (v.12) Paul says that “as *you have always obeyed*, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence.” Paul praises them for living obedient lives worthy of their calling even when he is not there to witness their obedience. It’s all too easy for many of us to put on a show—to dress up in our Sunday’s best—to clean up our language—to say the right things—respond in humility and act in an appropriate manner when we are in the presence of other Christians—especially when we are at Church or in front of our Pastor or small group leader. Isn’t that true? *But the real test of obedience—the true test of your growth is in how you act when no one is looking!*

In fact, it’s not always just a show. When we all come together as believers and there is good fellowship and worship, it’s somehow just easier to do the right thing. Maybe you find that extra measure of patience to work through your child’s disobedience and you’re able to find a teachable moment instead of just getting frustrated, maybe you find the faith to remember to pray for your neighbor who does not know Christ, maybe you find the strength to run to Christ instead of losing your patience or giving into the temptation to gossip.

But the second point I want you to be clear on from this text is that *the true test of our growth is in how we act when no one is looking*. That test is what happens on the way to church when you’re running late and someone cuts you off and now with curses under your breath you think, “Don’t these bozos know that people are trying to get to church to praise the Lord!”

When you’re all alone and you’re tired and you’re stressed out or in pain or hungry or you feel all alone in the world. This is where the true test comes. Isn’t that true? These are the moments when we are given the opportunity to shine for the only one that matters.

3) “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12)

Our third point gets us to the heart of the passage. Paul says:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, (v. 12)

The text tells us that we must “work out our own salvation.” Paul is not telling us how to get saved or be saved. Here he is telling us to do something with that extraordinary gift of salvation that we have already received. We are to do something in light of what God has done in Christ. Paul is telling us how we are to live as Christians. This does not mean that our faith in Christ is not secure, and that we must work to earn God’s favor.

In order to grasp the meaning of this passage we need a better understanding of what the word “salvation” means.

R.C. Sproul describes the many different aspects of the word salvation in this way:

“The Bible uses the term salvation not only in many senses, but in many tenses. The verb to save appears in virtually every possible tense of the Greek language. There is a sense in which we were saved (from the foundation of the world); that we were being saved (by the work of God in history); that we are saved [through justification—by being made right before God]; that we are being saved (by being sanctified or made holy); and that we will be saved (by experiencing the consummation of our redemption in heaven). The Bible speaks of salvation in terms of the past, present, and future.”

(Sproul, R.C. *The Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1998), 160.)

So please listen carefully, this is very important to understand. Salvation includes the

entire process by which we are made right before God and are being changed into his likeness. Salvation is not one simple event or one moment in time. This is critical to understand! You see, salvation is *entirely* a divine act of God. There is nothing you can do to merit it—from beginning to end! The entire process of salvation includes his calling of us to him from eternity past (that is, he *predestined* us, he chose us and he called us)—to our *justification* (where he declares us as right before him—and in an instant he pardons us of all our sin)—to our *sanctification* (whereby each day we are increasingly being formed into the image of His son)—and finally, to our ultimate glorification (whereby in the future—in a flash—in the twinkling of an eye—you and your body will be forever—eternally—and gloriously changed)—that’s salvation!

And what we are dealing with in this passage is not with the past or the future aspect of our salvation, but with its present implications. We often think of salvation in far too narrow of terms.

Paul is saying that we are to work out our own salvation, he is stating that, as believers, *we are to work out the salvation that God has worked in us. The third point here to understand is that “We are to work out what God has worked in us.”*

Once again, remember we are talking about sanctification. Look again at the end of verse 12, Paul says “*work out* your own salvation,” which means that *our* role is important. You are responsible with the grace and gifts that God has given to you—that includes your salvation which you received only by God’s grace in the past—but he tells you here to “work it out” in the present. Do you see that?

Paul says this in various ways in other parts of scripture. In Colossians 1:10, Paul encourages the believers: “to 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.” Paul is presenting an almost identical message. As believers, we are completely justified from the moment of initial saving faith, but we are not fully sanctified, and we can do things

that either please or displease God each day. He is commanding us to be obedient to the call—to the gift of our salvation—to work it out.

Paul also strengthens the command when he tells us that we are to carry out this work with “fear and trembling.” Now, when Paul says, “fear and trembling,” he is not referring to fear that is driven by anxiety. In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells the believers that they should be anxious for nothing. In 1 John 4:18, John says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” That is not what Paul is talking about.

Instead, Paul is referring to the fear of the Lord; which in numerous passages is equated with wisdom and the beginning of faith and true knowledge. This type of fear or reverence makes more sense when we realize that the God of the universe who created all things and is infinitely holy—and calls us to be holy will hold us accountable for every action and every deed that does and does not bring him glory and honor. This leaves us no room for passivity in our Christian walk. There is no room to just “let go and let God.” We are called to actively work out our sanctification with fear and trembling. We are to work out what *God* has *worked in us*.

4) “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work” (v13)

You could say that our next point really overlaps the last one. It might be more accurate to say that this 4th point makes the previous point possible. In verse 13, we see that it is “God who works in you, both to will and to work.”

This is perhaps the biggest motivating factor to our obedience and sanctification—it is certainly our greatest hope. It is God who works in us. It is God who changes our hearts, our wills, our affections, and desires. It may be our greatest hope, but it also raises some questions. Namely, “Is my sanctification my job or God’s job?” or, “How do we measure spiritual maturity?” We know we are maturing if we obey the two great commandments: if we love God and love our neighbor. But the question still remains

however, as to whose responsibility it is for us to grow this way? The text tells us clearly—that it is both God and man. It is God responsibility and it is yours! Whereas your salvation is solely the work of God—your sanctification is a joint project between us and God—but this is accomplished in a special way—always beginning through God’s provision.

Illustration (Rowboat vs. Sailboat)

A great way to understand our sanctification is to think for a moment about the differences between a rowboat and a sailboat. In a rowboat I’m in control. I pick up the oars, I control the speed and the direction of where I want to go and so on—it’s entirely based on my effort—and my choosing.

But a sailboat is much different. When I’m sailing, I’m not passive, I have a role to play—of course. I hoist the sails and I steer with the rudder, but I am utterly and totally dependent upon the wind. If the wind blows hard, I can go fast, if there is only a small breeze, I can’t go quite as fast. But there is one thing that is certain—there’s no room for believing I’m in total control, because if the wind doesn’t blow, I can’t go anywhere—I’m dead in the water! *We can’t control or manufacture it. It is God who is in control of it.* But what is exciting is when the wind does blow—when that happens—amazing things can happen if we obey what God is calling us to do! So it is in our spiritual development. In a spiritual sense, God’s divine initiative in our salvation demands *our response*.

When we understand that God is the one who works in us to will and to work, then we know that when we are faint of heart, we can pray that he would strengthen our desire for His work. We know that when we lack the courage to do what is right, we can cry out to Him and He will hear us. God’s divine initiative demands *our response*.

When God works in our lives—we must respond—we must be obedient—we must be set-apart for a purpose—we must be sanctified! Your spiritual life—your spiritual health is a joint venture between God and you. You cannot do what God can only do, and God will not do what you must do! God motivates and enables our growth,

and so we are responsible and are being held accountable for our spiritual growth. Our fourth point is that God's divine initiative demands our response.

5) “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (v13)

Paul finishes chapter 13 by telling us His purpose for continuing this work in us. God does all this work for his good pleasure – for his own glory. Your salvation, your sanctification, the purpose of each of our lives is to bring glory to God. As the Westminster shorter catechism states it so well, “The chief end of man is to glorify God.” That is our 5th point – the chief end of each of our lives, why he created us, is to glorify God! God's glory is so important to Him that he sent his only son to earth, to live a sinless life and yet die a sinners death – all so that we might have salvation. These things bring him glory. Our lives, lived for his service, brings him glory.

The goal of the Christian life is not simply that we would get “saved” but that we would glorify God by growing more and more in our likeness to that of Christ—that we would each day manifest His character—His righteousness—and His love for those around us (2 Cor. 3:18). We have been called to be “conformed to the image of” His Son (Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:8-10)—that is what sanctification is all about. That is what are chief end is about. We are called to glorify God and it is by *and* for his pleasure.

Paul understood the importance of God's glory, God's work in our lives, and our obedience to Him. My prayer this morning is that each one of us would be convinced and transformed by the power of God so that He who began a good work in us would “bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.”

As we work out our salvation with fear and trembling – knowing that it is God who is at work in us, we are able to live the Christian life with boldness to the glory of God. I pray that, as a church, we would be unified in the gospel, shining as lights in a world darkened by sin, that we would hold fast to God's work, and joyfully give ourselves to the work and sacrifice of the gospel, to the glory and good pleasure of God the Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

One final point must be added to this discussion: sanctification—your spiritual development—is usually a corporate process in the New Testament—not an individual one. It is something that happens within community. We are told in Hebrews:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

The apostle Peter tells us that together we are “built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5); that together we are “a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9). And Paul says that together we are to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thes. 5:11). Paul says that “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1) is to live in an extraordinary new way in community.

You see spiritual growth always happens in the context of community. Are you willing to learn to “work out your salvation” with that kind of love for one another? A love that builds up; that encourages one another and points one another forward to Christ?

Sometimes living out the Christian life is difficult, but consider this – God loved *you* when you were hardest to love. God is sanctifying you—he is in control—he is empowering you to do what you could not do on your own and that should give you great joy and comfort. But we must act on what he has done for us and is doing in us and through us.

Are you growing in your ability and willingness to serve other people for Christ? Do you want to be used for his kingdom? Are you growing more and more in your likeness to that of Christ? If you are—then you are “working out your salvation” in the fear and reverence that only the Holy Spirit could bring about.