

His Work and Ours

Philippians 2:12-18

January 27th, 2013

Pastor Dan Hoffman

[Pray]

...

If you have been with us over the last several weeks you know that we are in the middle of a book study through Paul's letter to the Philippians – a letter that is both joy-filled and convicting, especially since it was written directly to a church not so different from our own. And today we are in the second half of chapter 2.

The Philippians were a people who had partnered with Paul in the Gospel and were passionate about practically acting out their faith. And so, most of his letter is full of commendations to carry on in the faith they are exhibiting. And today's passage is one of these.

If you haven't already, please open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2 verses 12 through 18.

This morning the big idea that is going to guide us through our text is as follows:
Obediently work out your salvation as God works to transform you into His shining stars.

Look with me at verse 12.

[Read Philippians 2:12]

This verse starts with the word "Therefore". One of my professors at Trinity once commented: "Whenever you come across a "Therefore" in the text you need to ask "What it's there for?" It is a linking word that ties the current section of text to the one before it.

And if you were with us last week you will remember we unpacked the incredibly powerful, Father-exalting hymn in verses 5-11. And as we did that we saw that Jesus wasn't acting out of character when He came to earth to serve humanity; instead He was acting like God as He served.

This is probably the most scandalous and remarkable fact in Christianity – that God Himself does not view His divinity as something to be taken advantage of, but rather as something to be used to serve those around Him.

And because this is who God is, and we have been created in His image, we too are called to serve each other – not because Jesus gave us a great example, but because He is the Servant King!

If you weren't here last week you can hear that message on our website. And it is with that as our context that we move into our text today.

Obediently work out your salvation...

It is because of who Christ is – who God is – that Paul continues in verse 12 with the practical side of what it looks like to image the Servant King. And, while what he is going to give the Philippians is a strong challenge, he wants to be careful that it does not come across as a rebuke – because in the Philippian's case no rebuke is necessary.

And so the first thing he notes in verse 12 is their obedience. "Therefore... as you have always obeyed." Now, as we said last week this doesn't mean that the Philippians were perfect Christians from a perfect church – we know from other parts of this letter that they had their own struggles. And so do we.

But he chooses to encourage them because things have changed since he and the Philippians last spoke – namely now Paul is in prison in Rome and it has been a long time since they saw him in person and had their faith revived by his preaching. But his absence must not be the death of their faith.

As Corinthians says:

We live by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

It is when we aren't with strongly encouraging people, when we can't see Christ clearly, that the Christian faith must flourish. And so Paul encourages them to maintain the obedience that they practiced when they were with him.

And this means (verse 12) "continuing to work out their salvation with fear and trembling."

Work out your salvation...

Is this works salvation? No. Paul says "work out" not "work for" your salvation. And the difference between these two is extreme. To work for something is to earn it, while to work out something is to exercise what is already within you. When you go to the gym you aren't creating or earning muscles, you are expanding and getting the ones you already have into shape.

And Paul says Christians must not be content to be spiritually flabby, they need to work out. In fact, if you are content with being spiritually flabby the reality is that you aren't a Christian at all!

Now we are going to talk a little later about what it means to work out as Christians – it doesn't involve weights if you are concerned with that.

But before we get there we need to affirm that ours is not the responsibility to gain salvation for ourselves, but to exercise what we have been given. Yet our exercising our salvation is the evidence that we have it at all.

This is why back in chapter 1 Paul said:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... this is a sign... that you will be saved – and that by God.
(Philippians 1:27-28)

It is here that human responsibility and Divine sovereignty meet in the life of the redeemed. We join God in our salvation by conducting ourselves or working out His plans of redemption for us. God creates it, and we work it out.

And then we get some interesting words at the end of verse 12. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Fear and trembling? How can that possibly be a good thing? Isn't Christianity about love not fear?

This week I was reading in the book of Second Samuel for my devotions and I came across that troubling story about David bringing the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem after it had been captured by the Philistines.

For anyone who doesn't know, the Ark was the physical place where God dwelled with His people – the most holy thing in Israel. And the Philistines had captured it then returned it after a plague broke out among them. And now David was bringing it back to Jerusalem.

And everything looked so good. David and the people had built a new ox cart and loaded the Ark onto it and were celebrating before it on the way to Jerusalem and then the ox stepped in a hole and the cart began to tip. And so one of the priests reached out his hand to stop it from falling into the mud and the text tells us

The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.
(2 Samuel 6:7)

What's going on in this story! What kind of God is this? And when this happened David responded in two ways. The text tells us:

Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. (memorializing the location) David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, 'How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?' (2 Samuel 6:8-9)

At first this seems like one of those terrible Old Testament stories that we would all rather forget is in the Bible altogether – until you understand what is going on in the mind of David. And then it becomes incredibly relevant.

The text makes it clear that while David is excited about having the Ark in his capital he hasn't taken seriously what it means to bring God into your life. He thinks God is safe. He has tried to have God on his own terms. But God isn't willing to be the side show. He isn't even willing to be the half-time show in our lives. God will either have our 100% devotion or He will have nothing to do with us at all.

And so through Uzzah's death God communicates this to David. And David responds first with anger – and I love that David's heart is pictured so honestly in scripture. And David is never chastised for expressing his honest emotions to God. But more than anger, what David gained through this experience was a fear for God. He realized who God was. He realizes that God was not someone to be trifled with or controlled. He realized that God – not David – is in control and must be obeyed.

And so, after thinking on this for three months David returns and brings the Ark into Jerusalem, but this time He does it on God's terms. And so he has it carried the way God commanded, on the shoulders of the priests.

And this is a lesson that North America needs to learn. God is not content to have 10% of our lives. He wants it all. He wants us to be totally sold out for Him and His Kingdom, and He will not settle for anything less.

North America is full of church attending people who think God is happy with a tithe of our finances and a 7th of our time. And most of us don't even give Him that!

But when God actually sits on the throne in our lives He impacts everything we do. When we try to tag Him on to what we are doing and drag Him along behind us in an ox cart – when we say “I really want a little bit of God in my life, but I can't afford to be sold out” we are fooling ourselves to think He is having any part with us.

And so that is why Paul encourages us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling – because this is the God of the Universe we are talking about. And we must approach Him with the proper heart – not a heart that seeks to use Him to better ourselves, not a heart that wants to add Him to our already busy life, but a heart that seeks to worship Him.

Friends is that your heart this morning? Or are you spiritually flabbier than you should be? If that hits you between the eyes like it does me don't beat yourself up, but fall to your knees and pray "Jesus I'm not treating You the way I should. Have mercy on me and help me."

And here we get to the second part of our thesis: **Obediently work out your salvation as God works to transform you...**

Look with me at verse 13.

[Read Philippians 2:13]

This is good news! While we have a major part to play in our salvation – namely we must exercise what we have been given if we expect to possess it at all – Christians believe the work of salvation is a work wholly done by God.

And this is what we see in verse 13 – **For** it is God who works in you. The key word here is "for" which is a reason word. Work out your salvation "for" or "because" God is at work within you. This is both the reason we work as well as the power to do it.

The next words of the verse say "to will... and to act".

Are you ever filled with a desire to pursue God? To really give Him everything you've got? Do you ever catch a glimpse of His heart for your neighbours or your community or even the people sitting right beside you now and long for them to be drawn into His presence? When we are filled with this desire this is the first way that God works within us.

And second way He works is to enable us to act.

When it comes to insurance "acts of God" are always bad things. When lightning strikes a tree and it falls on your house or when the river floods insurance companies have to pay for these acts of God... as long as you checked the small print.

But in the Bible "acts of God" are presented a little differently. Certainly sometimes God does things that we don't like or don't understand, but all acts of God are things that are designed with a positive purpose. And this word "act" or other translations read "work" refers to God's powerful engagement to accomplish something specific. The power to do what could not otherwise be done.

And we get this in other texts as well. In Ephesians Paul prays for the church that:

...you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead. (Ephesians 1:18-20)

That is some incredible power – the most powerful force in the universe. And that power is at work within us to enable us to act. Or in Colossians we read:
We proclaim [The Father], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:28-29)

Here Paul says he is teaching people about God with all God's energy. It is Christ at work within him that enables him to do what he does.

Or earlier in Philippians we read:

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

In each of these texts we read about the incredible power of God doing something within us. Transforming us, re-creating us, and changing us into His image. And that is where verse 13 concludes: according to His good purpose.

The work that God is doing within us is for His glory. As we have said many times before God is concerned above all for His glory. He demands that our attention and our worship be directed towards the most worthy being in the universe and He is that being. God is not an idolater, He has no other Gods before Him. And everything He works towards is to that end – the good purpose of God is His glory.

And Paul says we must exercise or work out our faith “for” this is what is going on inside us if we are people of Christ.

Ok, so we are commanded to work out our salvation because God is already at work within us both giving us the desire and the ability to act. But what does this working out look like?

And this brings us to the last part of our big idea: **Obediently work out your salvation as God works to transform you into His shining stars.**

Look with me at verse 14 and following

[Read Philippians 2:14-16a]

There are two things that I want to draw out for us as far as what it means to get rid of your spiritual flab, to work out your salvation. These two things will make us shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation.

First God calls us to live with a saved attitude. Verse 14 says “Do everything without complaining or arguing. Or some other translations read “without grumbling or complaining.”

Paul is drawing an obvious parallel here to the people of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. You remember the story: Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 430 years and then God, with Moses as His spokes person, brings them out of slavery with the powerful might of His outstretched arm.

They witnessed the plagues on Egypt, they walked through the Red Sea on dry land. They ate manna in the desert, they drank water from rocks. Thousands of quail crash landed in their camp so they could eat meat, and beyond all of that God's physical presence was visible in the camp both day and night for forty years! And yet dozens of times in the book of Exodus we read “and the people grumbled and complained against Moses and against God”.

They had with them an attitude of slavery. They just couldn't believe that God was looking out for them no matter how He blessed them.

And Paul says the first way to “work out your salvation” is to do everything without grumbling or arguing.

Now when Paul says everything do you think it even includes when you are shopping at Superstore at 3pm and there are 215 people in front of you in the check out line up?

What about when your husband or wife is completely unreasonable and continually forgets to make the bed or but their socks in the laundry basket on purpose?

Do you think “everything” may even include when we are at church and worshipping beside people who have different preferences to ourselves and we have to sing songs they like and we don't?

Of course it does, this is what it means to work out. Paul isn't admonishing us just to have a good attitude – because lots of people in the world have good attitudes. What Paul is calling for here is something that can only be done because God is at work within us. The attitude he is describing here comes from verse 5 where it says:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:5)

And look down at verse 17.

[Read Philippians 2:17-18]

Paul is in prison as he writes this and says even if I am poured out as a drink offering. Even if they kill me, he says, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” This is not a positive attitude! This is a God attitude that recognizes that the circumstances we encounter as we suffer for our faith are circumstances that advance the Gospel.

We certainly live in the midst of a crooked a depraved generation, does your attitude cause you to stand out amidst of it? When people look at you do they know that you don’t belong?

Work out your salvation by working on your attitude.

2.) The second way this text calls us to work out our salvation comes in verse 16 and has to do with the Word of Life – We work out our salvation by plugging into the Word and allowing it to transform us. The NIV reads “as you hold out the word of life” but the Greek here could better be translated “holding fast to the Word of Life.”

Pastor John Piper writes “one thing I know: There is a spiritual diet without which no Christian can be strong and healthy and fruitful. And that is a diet of the word of God.”¹

If God is at work within you then give yourself to His word. Work out the salvation He is working within you by putting His Word in your heart and letting it transform you.

And this is how we will shine like stars in the midst of this crooked and depraved generation. As we give ourselves to the Word, as we take time every day. Real time every day to saturate ourselves in God’s Word.

How can we expect to have Christ be the major motivator in our lives when most of our time is spent basking the media of this crooked and depraved generation. Instead of basking in that, bask in God’s word. Take time, set aside time every day to make this a priority in your life because it is impossible to shine like stars in the midst of the world we live in unless God’s Word is hid within our heart.

Listen to a couple other passages that speak to this. Paul writes:

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.
(Romans 10:17)

¹ John Piper, “Holding Fast the Word of Life” (Sermon: preached January 10th, 2010)
<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/holding-fast-the-word-of-life-in-2010>

Or listen to the Psalmist's words:

Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers. (Psalms 1:1-3)

Or listen to the words of Jesus:

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4)

Brothers and sisters, work out your salvation by giving yourself to God's word and allowing Him to use it to do His work within you.

...

We've run out of time. Friends, we are a church that is very similar to the church in Philippi. We are a group of people who love God and want His kingdom to come in our midst. And we are a church who struggles with selfishness and sin like every other church in the world.

Today I plead with you, locate the areas of spiritual flab in your lives and work out your salvation with fear and trembling because the God of the universe is at work within you.

Choose today to work out your saved attitude, never give yourself to grumbling or arguing, especially here in God's house, and second work out by putting the Word of Life in your heart every day.