

# Sanctification, a partnership with God

Philippians 2:12-18

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Have you ever been in a situation where you have tried your best to live the Christian life and you just don't have enough strength to be holy? Maybe it was with anger, pornography, over-eating, or over-shopping. Maybe it was jealousy, gossip, worry or coveting. You tried with all your power to live rightly and it did not work.

Or maybe there are others who have tried the opposite approach. By faith they sit and wait for God to deliver them from sin, but they make no effort to flee temptation, hide God's Word in their heart, watch and pray, confess sin one to another, meditate on His Word, or throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Besides waiting by faith, they disregard all of God's instructions to live a holy life. They then are also overcome by temptation and wonder why God did not deliver them.

It brings us to this question: Is our living a holy life our responsibility or God's responsibility? This passage in Philippians gives us one of the clearest answers to this question in all of scripture.

Paul begins today's portion of scripture with the word "therefore". That should always be a sign for us to look back at the previous verses. Paul had just spoken about unity through humility. Paul had exhorted those in the church of Philippi to be . . .

***<sup>2</sup>of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.***

To make the point very clear, Paul then gave the example of Christ's humility. Jesus Christ was the King of kings and Lord of lords, the perfect Son of God, who had left His rightful home in heaven and come to earth to become one of us, so He could die in our place to pay for our sin. Because of Christ's humility, in Philippians 2:9-11 we read this:

***<sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***

***<sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.***

If Christ could condescend from God to man, the Philippians could surely condescend one to another. Christ came to earth and lived and died as if His life was less significant than theirs. He died so that they could live. That is the gospel that reconciled them to God, and the gospel that now called them to do the same for others.

Now, that they had been blessed with such undeserved grace, it was supposed to compel them to do the same. That was the reason for Paul's "Therefore".

We see, in verse 12, that the Philippians had a history of obeying God when Paul had been with them. Now Paul was calling them to obey God even when he, their spiritual father, was not with them.

It is the natural sign of maturity, even for children. Many children can obey when their parents are there watching, reminding and disciplining, but only the mature children can still obey when their mother and father are not around.

Paul then describes their obedience with two phrases that seem to contradict each other: ***"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."***

Verse 12 will cause some people to ask, "Is Paul saying that we have to earn our salvation by good works?" No. The phrase "work out your own salvation" would be similar to saying, "figure out how to live out your new life of salvation".

It might be similar to a young woman who has been a victim of human trafficking since she was a little girl. She is finally freed from this life of slavery. She is now a free person, but she has no idea how to live in freedom. It will be a long journey of healing as others care for her and teach her the ways of life living as a free person.

The Christian life is similar. At the point of salvation a believer is forgiven and counted as holy. That is a praiseworthy truth, but we each are very familiar that we still sin. So, what is happening? Are we holy or are we not? The answer is "both". We are living in the midst of the "now and the not yet". We are no longer slaves to sin. We are now children of God, but we do not yet know how to live in the midst of the freedom and the spiritual riches we now possess.

Since we are in Christ, we are now counted as holy, but functionally there are areas of our lives that are, not yet, holy. As we continue through the years of our Christian life, we will grow in holiness and likeness to Christ. The holiness of our lives will gradually come more and more into agreement with our identity of holiness.

Working out our salvation is not just figuring out the beginning of the Christian life. The actual word in the original language meant to work until you reached completion. Don't settle for a salvation that just gets you into God's family and nothing more. Work towards the full benefit of salvation that transforms and ushers in the abundant life that Jesus spoke of in John 10:10. It runs parallel to God's working in our life that is referred to in chapter 1, verse 6: ***"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."***

We are working out our salvation. We are learning to live out this new life, and as we do we are becoming more like Christ. This process of learning how to live out the holiness we have in Christ is called "sanctification". As the Philippians learned more about the gospel, its beauty and their new identity in Christ, they would then be prepared to live out the gospel towards the other believers in the church.

It is a working out of salvation that is rooted in fear and trembling. Another way to say that is, "work out your salvation in awe and utter dependence on God." It is realizing that even in the midst of our working, salvation from beginning to end is a miraculous work of God in our lives.

From one side we, as Christians, are supposed to obey, live by faith, love one another, hide God's Word in our heart, seek God first, confess sin, forgive each other, and so many other commands that we find in scripture. We often live as if the Christian life depends on us, our discipline, our commitment, our effort and our goodness. But how many times have we tried to be holy in our own power and failed?

You would think that Christ's dying on the cross would have been enough to motivate us. That receiving a new nature would have been enough. That being forgiven would have been enough. That having God's Word would have been enough. That being loved unconditionally would have been enough for us to walk in holiness on our own, but it is not.

We are to work out our own salvation, but thank God for the next verse which brings into focus the other side of the Christian life.:

Verses 12-13 say, ***"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."***

So, do we do the sanctifying work in our lives to become more holy, or does God? Both. We have already read that the Philippians needed to obey. They needed to live out the selfless love of the gospel towards one another. Each believer clearly had spiritual responsibilities as they grew in Christ. But, verse 13 says that, ***"It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."***

The word used by Paul here for **work** is always used to describe the work of God. It also is always used to describe work that accomplishes its intended goal. That is our encouragement. God will complete the work of the gospel in the lives of those who are truly His. Nothing will keep God from finishing what He has begun in our lives.

The Bible clearly explains that God is working. In John 5:17, Jesus said that God is always working. Romans 8:28 talks of how God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. We see throughout scripture God working in people's lives to grow their

faith, humble their hearts, convict them of sin, heal their wounds, forgive their sins, provide for their needs, shine light in their darkness, give counsel to their confusion, protect them from attack, give them purpose, guide them into truth, grant them new life, use them for His glory.

It is God who is the ultimate orchestrator of our sanctification. It is God who is working in our lives to oversee the process of us working out our salvation.

In John 5:17, Jesus talks of how God the Father is always working. Two verses later, Jesus states that He only does what He sees the Father doing.

That is one of the clearest pictures that we have of the sanctifying process. Like the Philippians, we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. In addition to this, with a heart of submission, we are to humble ourselves before God's processes in our lives. Like the clay to the potter, allow God to form us into the vessel that He desires us to be.

Yes, there is a part that we are to play, but scripture states that it is God who has already promised to make us like Jesus.

May we not rage against the challenges of life, but may we receive both the good and bad that life brings our way, confident that each are a tool in God's hand to help us "work out our salvation". It is only then that we will begin to live out of the gospel, realize the gift we have been given, and humble ourselves before one another, even as Christ did for us. Paul then continues to explain.

***<sup>14</sup>Do all things without grumbling or disputing,<sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,<sup>16</sup> holding fast to the word of life,***

Paul then gave them concrete examples of what obedience should look like in their situation. They were to do all things without grumbling and disputing.

This word **grumbling** was the same word that, when translated, was used to describe, in the words of William Barclay, *"the rebellious murmurings of the children of Israel against Moses"* during their wanderings in the wilderness (Ex. 15:24; Ex. 16:2; Num. 16:41). Barclay went on to say that, *"It describes the low, threatening, discontented muttering of a mob who distrust their leaders and are on the verge of an uprising."*

Grumbling is rooted in discontentment and rebellion. We complain. We don't get our way. It is selfish. It covets. It is often judgmental and manipulative.

This was not to be the attitude of the Philippians. As they figured out how their salvation worked and all the benefits they now had in Christ, grumbling had no place, and disputes were no longer necessary. Contentment, gratitude and selflessness were to characterize the life of the Philippian Christians.

The goal was that they would be blameless and innocent, without blemish.

This word for **innocent** was also used to describe a metal that had no impurities in it. It reminds us of when Jesus saw Nathanael approaching him in John 1:47, *"Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."* This word for **without blemish** was used to describe the perfect lamb that was

required for sacrifices on the altar of God. Lambs with any sort of blemish, ailment or handicap could not be sacrificed to God. That is our goal. That God would continue to refine, heal and purify us, removing our impure motives and selfishness. That we could give our lives as a living sacrifice for His glory.

Paul is still talking about sanctification. That the Philippians would be able to live holy lives in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. The word **holy** actually means “called out or set apart for a purpose.” As they worked out their salvation and God worked in their lives, they would clearly become a set apart people. They would be different than the others in the world around them.

It is how we should be as well. As God works in us and empowers us to work out our salvation we, too, will become a set apart people. We will be different. Our desires, our goals, our attitudes, our thinking, our lives, will stand in stark contrast to those around us.

But that was Paul’s goal for them. That as the Philippians lived holy lives, in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, that their lights would shine brightly in a dark world, as they held tightly to the word of life. It was this result, this advancement of the kingdom, through these precious people, that Paul longed for. Paul concludes this section of scripture with these words:

***so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. <sup>17</sup> Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. <sup>18</sup> Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.***

Paul sought to finish well. To have served God and His people in a way that bore lasting fruit. That on that day, when Paul stood before Christ, that he would be satisfied and content of the eternal harvest that had come from his labors. That he would be able to look out over the churches that he had served and rejoice in their salvation and lasting service to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This was Paul’s hope, but this result would only be confirmed through time and test.

In the parable of the four soils found in Matthew 13, Jesus tells how it is possible for a person to claim to be in Christ, but it is the lasting effect that will make it clear if they truly belonged to Christ.

Jesus said, some ***“hear the word and receive it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”*** Others ***“hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”*** Each of these examples appeared to be in the faith, but time and test revealed that they were not in Christ at all. The seed that was ***“sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”*** This was the lasting harvest that Paul longed to see amongst the Philippians.

For this eternal fruit Paul was willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice. To lay down his life as a sacrifice for their faith if that was what was required. Even in the midst of these sobering thoughts, Paul once again arrived at the point of joy. In spite of the prison and the chains, Paul still rejoiced with His fellow believers in Philippi, who shared the good news of Jesus Christ and stood faithfully with Him. With God, Paul had worked out his salvation to the point that he now found a joy that was more precious than life itself. His joy was lasting because his focus was Christ and his desires now mirrored those of his heavenly Father.

Let us close with this picture:

Working out one's salvation is similar to a father - child relationship. In the beginning much is done by the Father and little is done by the child. Decisions, actions and choices are made by the father, and the child's only role is to obey. As the child grows he becomes more familiar with the Father's character and the Father's wisdom. It is still a joint venture, but because the Father's will has become more and more a part of the son's character and desires, the Father's will is carried out without a constant reporting to the Father or an ongoing asking for permission. The child grows to be a teen and takes more initiative, more decision making, and more action based on what the Father would do. Rebellion and impurities have been refined out, as the child has grown to walk in the ways of the Father. It is still a joint venture, but the roles have evolved. The child has now become a young adult who believes in and sees the legitimacy of the Father's ways. The direction and instruction, which once could only be known by asking the Father, now comes naturally because the Son thoroughly knows the ways of the Father.

It is the same with us when we are young in the faith. Much seeking will be needed to help us know how God wants us to live in a given situation. As we become familiar with God's character and God's ways, we begin to make godly decisions more naturally. Gradually our heart will be matured in Christ, and the confusion that once came from our selfishness and worldly ways will cease to be as much of a distraction. We will then be better prepared to recognize when to act in obedience and when to wait on God for His work in the situation. As we delight in Him, He will continue to transform our hearts and thus our desires that guide the way that we live our lives.

With this in mind, remember that God is always working and that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. In the midst of your life situations, join God in what He is doing and work out your salvation. Together with Christ we will be made holy.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. What did you find most interesting about this sermon?
2. In your own words, what does it mean to "work out your salvation"?
3. How is this similar to the new freedom of a woman who has been a victim of human trafficking?
4. When talking about holiness in the life of a Christian, what does the phrase the "now and the not yet" apply?
5. In your own words, what does it mean that "God is working in you to will and to act according to His purpose"?
6. How might these two phrases from questions number 2 and number 5 work together in one's life?
7. As Christians, we are called to live in unity with others in the church. How might a "figuring out how our salvation works" help accomplish that?
8. What do you think you are supposed to remember from this sermon?
9. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this sermon? How can we help?