



Work Out Your Salvation

Series: *Philippians – To Live Is Christ*

Philippians 2:12-13

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This text that we are looking at this morning is just an excellent text on so many levels. Paul has just gotten done giving us one of the greatest descriptions of the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ ever penned. But rather than giving us a minute to simply revel in the glory and majesty of Christ, to meditate on the awesome nature of His self-humbling and glorious exaltation, he immediately moves to call the Philippians and us to a greater degree of holiness and devotion to our Lord and Savior. This high theology is written for a very practical purpose – that the Philippians and that we would be encouraged to live a distinctly Christian life. This is explicitly a text for believers. It is not evangelistic, it is focused on the edification of the people of God. It is not a text about how to be saved, it is concerned with the growth and the application of the implications of the gospel to our everyday lives.

As we saw last week, Paul described to the Philippians the very way in which their salvation was accomplished by Jesus Christ – through His willingness to lay aside His rights as God, the way in which he took to Himself human flesh and became a servant, the way in which He lived and died for sinners to deliver them from the penalty and power of sin, how He was then exalted by the Father, given the name above all names, enthroned in majesty and glory over the entire universe to await the day in which every being would bow and **“every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:11, ESV)** These Philippians were a saved people, redeemed by the grace and mercy of God, loved by Christ, loved by the Father, and that, Paul will tell us, has some very real implications and responsibilities for how they must live.

In this text we are going to see a classic example in the Word of God regarding the relationship between God’s sovereign grace and mercy and our accountability and responsibility as His people. It is both challenging and beautiful. So let’s look at it. See with me first, Paul’s powerful and loving command.

Paul's Powerful and Loving Command (12) Paul writes: ***“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,”*** (Philippians 2:12, ESV) Now I want you to notice how this begins. Paul is going to give a very strong command to the Philippian believers but we need to see the heart with which he speaks. He calls them “my beloved.” He really loves these people; he desires their spiritual good. He wants the very best for them, but his love for them does not preclude making a strong demand of them. As he considers these Philippian believers, he knows the reality of their obedience. When he was with them they had responded with joy to his preaching and teaching of the gospel; they had applied themselves to obedience for the sake of Christ and in light of all that Jesus had done for them on the cross. When he was with them, they were a motivated bunch. A strong leader has that kind of effect on people. Imagine what it would be like to be with Paul. When you're around someone who is passionate for Christ, consumed with God's glory, deliberate in their intent to walk in the Spirit and to honor Christ with their lives, it kind of rubs off on you, doesn't it?

But Paul also knew that sometimes, when a strong leader is no longer present, the people of God could have a tendency to stray away from the principles that once guided them. They could lose focus, lose their passion for Christ and lose their intensity. He so desperately does not want that to be true of the Philippians. He wants them to own their faith in Christ. He wants them to know and experience the joy and strength that comes from living in light of Christ's Lordship. He wants them to fully enjoy every aspect of the salvation that Christ has purchased for them on the cross. In short, Paul wants them to own their faith, to be aflame for Christ, not only when he is present with them and spurring them on, but that much more in his absence. This is not confrontation, not correction as we see in his letter to the Corinthians or the Galatians, for example. This is a loving exhortation.

So Paul says in essence: “Therefore my dearly beloved brothers and sisters, loved by God and loved by me, with the reality of Christ's salvation purchased for you by His blood, the example of His humility and obedience before you, with the hope and expectation of His universal exaltation and triumph to give you strength and hope, be faithful to Christ and ***work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.***”

Now to understand what Paul is saying here, we need, first, to understand what he is not saying. He is not saying “work for your salvation,” or “work up your salvation” or “work towards acquiring your salvation.” That would be completely contrary to the gospel that Paul preached. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV) **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Romans 6:23, ESV)

Salvation from the penalty of sin, eternal death, had been accomplished by Jesus Christ on Golgotha, on the cross, when Christ saved them by enduring for them, willingly and lovingly, the wrath of the sin-hating God. Salvation is a gift from God to be received by faith in the justice and holiness upholding life and sacrificial death of Christ on your behalf, in your place, to save you from the penalty of your personal sin. They had done that.

But there is more to the word “salvation” than Christ’s death and resurrection for our forgiveness. The scriptural expression, “salvation,” as Paul uses it in all of his letters, has a much greater scope. Our salvation as the people of God has three aspects to it. Salvation can refer to our deliverance from the guilt, punishment, condemnation of sin through Christ’s work on the cross; or secondly, the ongoing process of deliverance from sin’s power in our own lives; or third, the completion of that process by the final and perfect deliverance from sin and sorrow, from death and the body, from earth and all its weariness and troubles, when we are received into heaven and finally and fully glorified in the presence of God. All these things comprise the salvation of which the Bible speaks.

Specifically, it is this second aspect of salvation that Paul is talking about here – he is talking about the practical implications of receiving Christ as Savior and Lord, the practical implication of being saved. Let me explain it like this. When you come to Christ in true repentance and faith, when you come to Him in full awareness of your sin and your desperate need for Christ as your Savior and throw all of your hope on Him for eternal life, you are glorious and wondrously saved. God forgives you. He declares you not guilty, accepted and pardoned by Him forever. When God the Father looks at you, He sees the righteousness of Christ covering you. He accepts you not because your good deeds outweigh your bad, but because Jesus Christ has died the death that sin deserves and has been raised from the dead and you have been joined to Him by faith. But more than forgiving you, God has also taken you into his family, adopted you as a son or a daughter, and made you brothers and sisters of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. You are now a

child of God.

And God does something else. He puts within you a new nature, a new heart, a new life. He regenerates you and makes you alive in your soul. He puts a new nature within us that has both the desire and ability, by the grace of God, to obey God but the old nature is not destroyed. There is still a very real sin nature in each one of us but there is also the new nature, empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit who dwells in us for this expressed purpose – that we would be made more and more into the image of Christ, that we would die to sin, having been delivered from sin’s enslaving power, to become more and more like Jesus. Charles Spurgeon explains it like this: **As many as were Redeemed by the blood of Jesus, are also in due time renewed in the spirit of their minds. The Holy Spirit, in Regeneration, descends into a man and creates in him a new Nature. He does not destroy the old, that remains still to be battled with, and to be overcome. Though the Nature which the Spirit implants is perfect in its kind and in its degree, yet it is not perfect in its development. It is a seed which needs to work itself out into a tree, it is an infant which requires to grow into the stature of a perfect man. The new Nature has in it all the elements of entire perfection, but it needs to be expanded, brought out, to use the words of the text, worked out with fear and trembling. God, having first worked it in, it becomes the business of the Christian life to work out the secret inner principle till it permeates the entire system, till it overcomes the old nature, till it in fact utterly destroys inbred corruption, and reigns supreme in the man’s every part— as it shall do when the Lord takes us to dwell with Himself forever.**

When Paul speaks of working out our salvation, He is not talking about being justified, or ransomed, or reconciled to God, or forgiven, or being clothed in the righteousness of Christ – those things are already yours through faith in Jesus. He is talking about working hard to see the salvation that is yours in Christ expressed in every area of your life. He is talking about our responsibility to work out in our lives what is true of us in Christ. The NT uses a lot of different image and pictures to describe this: becoming more Christ-like, growing in grace, imitating Jesus, putting on the new man, putting sins to death, keeping in step with the Spirit, displaying the fruit of the Spirit and more.

And I’m serious when I say that this the hardest work in the world. People work at a lot of things – getting an education; getting, keeping and succeeding at their jobs; work at finding, keeping, and nurturing relationships, work at marriage or raising kids, work at making their houses and lawns immaculate – work at a lot of things. But to work out your salvation, to work out in your life who you are in Christ – at the level of your thinking, your actions, your desires, your affections, your choices, your very body, day after day – is the hardest work that anyone has ever been called to. But over and over the Bible says it must be done. The

person who imagines that working out their salvation – progressive sanctification, becoming more and more like Jesus is not hard work is deceiving him or herself. There is no real salvation that is not accompanied by real striving to put on holiness in the fear of God. Listen to the Word of God:

“Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1, ESV)

After speaking of the way unbelievers live, Paul says: ***“But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*** (Ephesians 4:20–24, ESV)

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.” (Hebrews 12:14–17, ESV)

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.” (Romans 6:12–13, ESV)

This is hard work, why? Because sin never takes a break in us. ***“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”*** (Galatians 5:17, ESV) Satan never rests in his desire to destroy us. ***“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*** (1 Peter 5:8, ESV) It’s like those trick candles that we put on birthday cakes. The child blows them out and laughs but the next moment the candle rekindles itself again. Indwelling sin is ever rekindling itself and

we are ever quenching its flames. It is a fight that we must engage. The verb “work out” describes a very strong and consistent effort. Paul is expecting that the Philippians would continually be exerting themselves to live out a life of obedience. We cannot be comfortable with a strong effort once in a while or a half-way effort most of the time.

What does this working out look like? It includes a great deal. It means working to lay hold of your thinking, to ensure that your hope for salvation is truly grounded in Jesus Christ and what He has done and not in our own efforts. It means purposefully laying hold of all of the ways that God has given us to help us grow. We should read the Bible, pray, worship, serve, give, fast, fellowship with believers and spur one another on to godliness. It means all out war with sin in our hearts and minds. Identifying it and starving sin, not tolerating it, but confessing and repenting of it, turning away from it, asking God’s forgiveness and resolving to walk uprightly. It means working hard to put off sin and to put on **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23, ESV)** It means guarding our hearts against the influence of the world – our friendships, entertainment, how we use our time, what we watch, what we listen to, what give ourselves to. It means working hard to be consistent in every area of our lives.

How do we do this? Let me very practical. Let’s say you are fighting pride and arrogance, for instance. It can be anything – sexual immorality, dishonesty, bitterness, selfishness – but how do you fight for holiness and work out your salvation in your fight against pride? Well, if your life is characterized by pride and arrogance, are you exerting the effort to search out the scriptures for help? Are you committing those helpful passages to memory? Are you committed to examining your life carefully and prayerfully in light of what you are learning about pride and arrogance from the scriptures and taking positive corrective actions to become a more humble person? Are you feeding your soul with worship, fellowshiping with the brothers and sisters that will spur you on to godliness, starving your flesh of what leads to pride, gladly serving rather than being served? Are you making sure that if your pride and arrogance expresses itself that you ask forgiveness of God and others and do whatever necessary to correct the damage that you have done? That’s what it looks like to work out the salvation that has been working into you by Christ.

Work hard, Paul says, to make the salvation that you have been given in Christ fully enjoyed and expressed in your life, in a life of increasing holiness and faithfulness to Christ. And do it, he says, in fear and trembling. How are we to understand that? What does he mean by

that? Fear and trembling. Here, Marytn Lloyd-Jones has been so helpful to my understanding.

Paul is not talking about fear of losing our salvation. It means humility and a holy reverence. It means that as I work out my salvation, I should realize the tremendous seriousness of what I am doing and the God before whom I am doing it. “With fear and trembling” means with a holy reverence and awe of God. It is a childlike fear, a fear of offending the One who has loved me so much as to give His only Son for me. I want to walk in a way that pleases God, that honors Christ, that recognizes the great cost that was paid to save me. I want to please the Lord. So I walk carefully and seriously.

But also means this, and I’ll just quote Lloyd Jones here: **“I should have a fear of the world in the sense that I realize that the world is opposed to me, that it is there to drag me down and away from God. I should have a healthy respect for it. I should also fear myself. A man who knows his own heart is a man who cannot be light and carefree and flippant. He knows that in his flesh there 'dwelleth no good thing'. The Christian is one who works out his own salvation with fear and trembling; fear lest he should fail or falter, lest he should not discern the subtlety of the world, the power of sin and his own weakness, and the holiness of God. So he walks with gravity lest he should be unworthy of this great salvation.”**

Here is the point that Paul is making. Working out our salvation is hard work. The Bible knows nothing of just pray a prayer, or make a profession of faith and a life of ease and continuing sin. A life of careless living. The whole, “I don’t live like a Christian but I took care of that a long time ago when I was a kid and asked Jesus into my heart.” This text is the cure to apathy and laziness in Christianity. Paul is saying we are always to be laboring until the day that we see Jesus face to face, to bring our lives into conformity to the image of Christ, to work hard to work out what Christ has worked into us. That is part and parcel of what it means to truly be a Christian.

But I suspect that for most of us, the issue is not apathy but the slow progress that we see in our lives in this regard. I don’t know about you but there are times when I look at my life and still see all the sin that is there, the evidences of the old man, the times when I fail

miserably and I think to myself – “I’m never going to change. I’m hopeless.” I get discouraged by the daily fight, by the fact that sins I thought I long ago conquered will surface in my heart and life to the point that I think to myself, “Lord I know that you have accepted me not because of what I have done but because of what Jesus has done for me. I know that you have forgiven me. I know that my only hope is Christ and I hope in Him alone. I know that You say that You have justified me by faith and have adopted me as Your son, but there is so much sin in me that needs to be conquered, sins that have a hold on me, that I wonder sometimes if I really do love You and trust in You.” And it is in those times that this promise that Paul gives in verse 13 means so much to me. Look at it.

The Promise Behind the Command (13) Start in verse 12 so we get the full effect. 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, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*** (Philippians 2:12–13, ESV) Paul says, “You are not on your own in this. God is with you. He is for you. He is at work in you for this very purpose. You are not doing this in your own strength. You never could. It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

In other words, we need to be reminded that it is God’s pleasure, His joy, His delight to work in you to make you more and more like Jesus, to give you the strength and the will, the power of God Himself, to make you more and more into the image of His beloved Son. And why? Because you are a child of God and though you are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, he is not done with you yet. God is for you in your fight against sin and He enjoys refashioning you into the character of Christ.

What an encouragement to the soul that is. The truth of the matter beloved is this: When we first come to faith in Christ, when we first hear and believe the gospel, when we rise from our knees, we are still in many ways what we once were. We have believed in Christ and been forgiven, but the misconceptions about God, the wrong patterns of behavior, the ways of thinking and living before we were saved – many of them still persist. But there is one significant difference. God, in the person of the Holy Spirit now lives in us. ***“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*** (Romans 5:5, ESV)

The Spirit of God now lives in us and the love of God has been poured into our hearts. We are children of God and we have a Father who knows everything about us, all of our struggles and all of our sins, and it is as if He says, “Ok son or daughter, you are mine. I have made you a part of my family forever through the death and resurrection of my beloved Son, Jesus Christ. You are forgiven and now we are going to be about making you into His image, you and I. I accept you and now real change is possible. Let’s get to work.” If you are a believer in Christ, a true Christian, even in the face of your struggles with still indwelling sin, you stand before Him accepted in Christ, accepted in the beloved, the object of His personal love and delight. God is for you and He loves you and He is committed to empowering your change.

Do you see? We do not do this working out of our salvation in our own strength or our own willpower. Instead, just as we by faith look to Christ for our own righteous standing before God, so by faith we look to God for the enabling power to become more like Jesus. This power comes to us because of our vital union with Jesus Christ. In John 15:5, Jesus said: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5, ESV) All believers are united to Christ in such a way that our spiritual life comes from Him. We are not completely passive in this relationship. We are to actively rely on Christ, to abide in Him for the enabling power to wage war against the sin that is still in us, to have our minds and emotions renewed by the Word of God, to be truly and lastingly changed, to put on the virtues of Christlike character, and to serve Jesus effectively in all that we do. But Christ Himself gives us the power to do it.

We have a dependent responsibility. We are responsible before God to obey His word and to work out our salvation but at the same time we are totally dependent upon Christ’s power in us, the power of the Holy Spirit, to carry out that responsibility and the promise is that God is with us in this fight, active in our working out our salvation into every area of our lives.

He does it in a lot of ways. He does it through conviction of sin as He points out areas of sinfulness still present in us. He does this through the Scriptures and He does it through our consciences as they are enlightened and made sensitive by exposure to His Word. He gives us the strength and power to conquer sin. He puts us in place and situations that are

designed by Him to give us the opportunity to really deal with the particular sins, the particular weaknesses that are characteristic of our individual lives.

How This All Works Together

So how does this all work? How do I pursue real change in my life, how do I work out my salvation in the confidence that God is at work in me? Let me give you a couple of similar illustrations from the ministry of Jesus. On one occasion, Jesus met up with a man in the synagogue who had a withered hand. It was shriveled and useless. You can find the story in Matthew 12. Jesus commanded that man to stretch forth his hand. Humanly, that was an impossible command. He didn't have the strength to do it. But Jesus told him to do it and when, by faith, the man obeyed, his hand was restored. On another occasion Jesus told a man who had not been able to walk for 38 years to get up, take up his bed, and walk. You can find that in John 5. Again, humanly speaking he had no power to do that. He was an invalid. But by faith, he did just that.

In both cases, the Lord called those men to do something they could not do in their own strength. He imparted to them the supernatural power required to fulfill His command. But, by faith, they still had to do it. God worked mightily, but they had to work, too. We must believe that God will give us the power to do that which His word commands.

Now take this back to what I was saying earlier when I was talking about fighting remaining sin in us and I used pride and arrogance as an illustration. What this means is that when you or I are using the means of grace to fight sin -- searching out the committing the Word to heart, examining our lives carefully and prayerfully in light of what we are learning and taking positive corrective actions to become more Christ-like and asking forgiveness -- God's power is at work in all of those things to empower us to work out our salvation, empowering us to change. Even when it may not be immediately obvious, God is at work. Listen Paul's words at the end of Ephesians 3: ***“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do***

far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:14–21, ESV) He is able to do far more in us than we even think.

But we must have faith that this is so. That’s why Paul would say of his own life in Galatians 2: ***“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20, ESV)*** Do you see the connection? Paul says the secret of living out who we are in Christ is faith – faith in the power and the indwelling strength of Christ by the Holy Spirit – and confidence in His love.

The assurance that God really does love us, that we have indeed been delivered from the guilt of sin, that there is no therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ, that the Lord will never count our sins against us, that we are truly delivered from the reigning power of sin in our lives, and that God will strengthen us in our battle with sin and pursuit of Christ-like character – that will motivate us and keep us going, in the conflict between our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit in us.

That assurance should do a couple of things in our hearts. First, it frees us up to deal honestly and humbly with the sins that are still in our lives. I don’t have to feel like I have to hide my sin from God out of the fear that He will reject me or cast me away. He won’t. He knows my sin, he knows that I am still unfinished in my pursuit of Christlikeness, in working out my salvation and He is committed to bringing His power to bear on my behalf. God is not sitting in heaven with folded arms, looking at me and saying, “When are you going to get your act together?” He is not looking for every opportunity to pounce on every failure. Instead, God is at work in me even now to deal with remaining sin in me, not as a Judge, but as a Father. That reality encourages my soul and motivates me to pursue real godliness. Real change in me is possible. I really can live a life pleasing to God.

Second, the realization that God no longer holds my sin against me but He is for me in my struggles for godliness and Christlikeness, produces a deep sense of thankfulness and love for what He has already done for me in Christ and what He continues to do in me, day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

It is when I am convinced that God loves me in Christ, that He has forgiven me, through Christ, and that is actively at work in my life – gladly, joyfully working in me to make me more and more like Jesus that I will love Him; that I will really seek Him in prayer, convinced that he hears me and that He will gladly answer yes to every personal prayer of mine that will make me more like Christ; that I will really work out my salvation from the right motivation which is love and gratitude and not from fear of retribution or as a means to gain God’s acceptance; that I will have security in my relationship with Him and be able to fight sin effectively because I believe that God is for me and I will not be afraid to come to Him bearing my soul and my struggles with sin because I know He will not cast me away; that I will grow in faith, because I will see that He is fully trustworthy and loves me unfailingly; that I will know the joy and the peace that comes with knowing that I am God’s and He is mine.

It is this confidence in God’s love and forgiveness, His gracious power for our good, and this gratitude and love that it creates in our hearts that motivate us to seek to be in practice and in our daily living what we already are in our standing before God.

Fully convinced of God’s love for you in Christ – hear these words again: ***“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.”*** (Philippians 2:12–13, ESV)

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