

“Work Out as God Works In”

Philippians 2:12-18

Take your Bible and be finding your place with me in the book of Philippians, chapter 2 and verse 12. In my study this week, I read that 64 million people have memberships in their local gym, or about 20% of our nation’s population. Planet Fitness is America’s most popular gym, with 18.7 million members spread across 2,575 locations. It made \$1.1 billion in revenue last year alone. One of the reasons that it is so popular is its lower membership fees at \$10 to \$20 a month. At first glance, it appears that Planet Fitness should have an overcrowding problem, and its low prices don’t make sense. Now if you do the math, factoring in a total membership of 18.7 million across 2,575 gyms, the company averages 7,262 members for each location. Most of the gyms are open 113 hours per week. A typical gym is around 20,000 square feet, and its maximum occupancies range from 200 to 350 people.

However, Planet Fitness doesn’t have to accommodate all 18.7 million users because its business model is based on most of its members 1) not working out, while 2) continuing to pay for their memberships. There’s a ton of people who pay for a gym membership who simply don’t go to the gym. And they intentionally make it notoriously difficult to cancel your membership. If you want to cancel your membership, you either have to go to the gym, in person, or by sending a written notification by mail. Think of the irony—a gym that uses a mobile app for sign-ins requires cancellation by mail in 2024. Given the arduous cancellation policies, \$10 per month really is just cheap enough that it’s not worth your time or embarrassment to visit in-person or stop by the local post office. Low prices plus extra work to cancel have created an excellent revenue model. So that they’re laughing all the way to the bank!

People want to be in shape, but they don't always want to put in the work that being in shape requires. Having a gym membership doesn't do a thing for you if you don't ever go! With that in mind, you'll notice in our text this morning that Paul tells the believers, "Work out!" Do you see his words in verse 12? Those two little words remind us that spiritual growth isn't passive but active. Neither is it easy. But you will be greatly encouraged by the words which follow, "For it is God who works in you." Work out what God works in.

This passage explains for us how the Christian life is not theoretical—it is practical. It is not just a bunch of ideas meant to fill your head with information. Rather, it is truth meant to fill your life with transformation. We have already seen how in verses 5-11, the apostle Paul explains to the Philippian the example of Christ. He says, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." And he then shows how the Son of God is the perfect example of humility in the way that laid aside the privileges which were His from eternity past. He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a servant, and being born in human likeness. In every way, He demonstrated perfect obedience to the Father. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. So that now He is highly exalted and is given the name that is above every other name.

Well, with all that being said, notice the word 'therefore' in verse 12. In other words, in view of Christ's example which he has just explained, Paul begins to make some practical application of that example in the believer's life. I think it was Mark Twain who quipped, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." We are often impressed with the example of someone who has done something to make a name for himself. Whether than be the example of an athlete, or the biography of someone from history. I like to

read biographies because I'm often challenged by the example of someone such as Abraham Lincoln or an Adoniram Judson. But as important as those examples are, and as much as they might inspire me, in no way can they enable me. Unless that person comes into our lives and every day experience and gives us their life and ability, there's no way that we could ever attain to that same level of accomplishment.

When it comes to the Christian life, it takes more than just example on the outside. It requires energy on the inside. And while Jesus Christ is most definitely our example on the outside, you and I must understand that He is also our energy on the inside.

Galatians 2:20—“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.”

Colossians 1:27—“God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

As far as my position is concerned, the Bible says that I am in Christ. As far as my practice and power is concerned, it also says that Christ is in me. That's what Paul wants the Philippian church to know and understand.

1—The WORKS that we do (2:12-13)

“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.”

When it comes to working out our salvation, what is God's role, and what is ours? Salvation may be a gift from God, but it comes with the responsibility to actually do what He calls us to do. Works are very much a part of the Christian life. You just need to make sure that you get them on the right side of salvation.

Our responsibility

Notice he says something about their accountability when he writes in verse 12, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence." The words 'my beloved' ought to remind us that Paul is writing to believers. So that when he says 'work out' your own salvation, he is not addressing unbelievers. His words have nothing to do with his readers becoming Christians, for they already are. It is important that we recognize this because over the years there's been a lot of confusion on this issue. Paul is calling for an active obedience in the lives of believers. Even though he wasn't physically present to help the Philippians along in their faith as an example, he is calling on them to keep the example of Christ at the forefront of their minds.

Dwight Pentecost — *"In Paul's mind, if his presence would put pressure upon them, the example of the loving suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to put even greater pressure on them. It was Paul's greatest desire to please a Person."*

That was the motive in his personal life, and it was not necessary for that Person to be present. The love of that Person for him was the compelling, propelling force in his life so that every word he spoke, every step he took, every act that he performed was evaluated in the light of the motive, "I want to have the mind of Christ." Their obedience shouldn't be an issue of whether or not he was standing

over their shoulders watching their behavior. They were not to be like those employees who only seem to be busy when the boss comes around. Or, like children who are given instructions to clean their room should not require the direct supervision of mom or dad. He says to them, “You’ve always been obedient and submissive, not only when I’m around, but even more so in my absence.” They had great incentive.

Though he was not physically present with the Philippians, Paul wants them to know that they have a greater motive to obey, that being the example of Jesus. So that he’s saying they have greater reason to obey than simply pleasing the apostle. He’s saying, “Live in such a way that understands the ever watchful eye of the Lord Jesus is upon you.” What does He want me to do? What is pleasing to Him?

Then, Paul says something about their actions—“Work out your own salvation.” The word he uses translated as ‘work out’ was a term used for working a mine or working a field. In both situations, there were benefits that followed such a diligent action. The mine would yield its precious minerals, but it required action on the part of the miner. A field would yield a crop, but only if the farmer put in the work. No field ever planted and plowed itself, yet no farmer ever enjoyed a harvest without the grace of God. So the point that Paul is making here is this—by working out our salvation, we’re putting into action what we know to be true.

There is often a disconnect between our knowledge and our practice, what we know and what we do. Knowledge is nowhere near as much an issue as our putting into practice what we already know. We have more knowledge than any generation before us. We have access to translations of the Bible, the Bible app, Bible studies, podcasts, etc. The problem is translating what we know into our daily conduct.

And then notice what he says about their attitude in verse 13, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Accountability, action, and attitude are all equally important. Fear and trembling carries the idea of reverential worship. It is the humility that he has already called for back up in the first several verses of the chapter. We’re to work out because we have a tendency to stall and stagnate. But we are to do it with fear and trembling because we have this tendency to strut. We take a step or two forward in our spiritual development, and the enemy whispers to us, “Aint you something? God’s plan couldn’t make it without you.”

Galatians 6:3—“For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

1 Corinthians 8:1-2—“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.”

As we grow in our knowledge of God’s Word, we must also grow in humility and obedience. Because to whom much is given, much is required. This is what it means to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Our resources

Now, having said something about our responsibility, I’m glad that the apostle Paul follows it up by reminding us of our resources. We dare not stop with just the truth of verse 12—work out. Thank God for the truth of verse 13! “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” Here is the wonderful secret of Christian obedience. It is not energized by the flesh, but by the life of the indwelling Spirit of God. God put an engine in your salvation. The Christian life is not me striving in my own effort and ability. Neither is it ‘let

go and let God.’ It is the life of Christ within me that is now working through me. As I am surrendered to His plan and purpose, I am equipped with His power. God began something in you the day you got saved. We’ve already seen this emphasized back in chapter 1 where Paul writes:

Philippians 1:6—“And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

First, God plants the desire for obedience within our hearts. It is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. And then notice God provides the ability to obey through the indwelling Spirit. It is His working in us to will and to work for His good pleasure. The word translated as ‘work’ here means to fully fulfill His purpose. God works in me to fully fulfill His purpose. And what is that purpose? Well, verse 13 says that He works in me both to will and do for His good pleasure. The goal of life is His good pleasure. Living in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Seeking His glory in and above all things. I like what one person has said:

Chuck Swindoll—*“Our lives are to be lived for God’s greater glory, not our own selfish desires. Are we left to do so all alone? It is our task to gut it out, grit our teeth, and do His will? Not at all. Here’s the balance: God is at work in us! He is the One who gives us strength and empowers our diligence. As He pours His power into us, we do the things that bring Him pleasure.”*

It is His pleasure and not ours, His will and not ours, His glory and not ours—this is what makes life meaningful and filled with joy. The psalmist said, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” That is, as I live with the glory of God in mind, when I seek His will above my own will, when I live with His kingdom agenda in mind, the byproduct is a satisfied life.

2—The WORDS that we speak (2:14-15)

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 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.”

Not only does God’s power at work in us enable us to do obedient works, but notice how it also impacts the words we speak. And those words are a reflection of our inward attitude and disposition. Jesus said that it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. What is down in the well is what comes up in the bucket. Paul is saying that if you really want to know what it looks like, in a practical way, to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, it will involve both the attitude you have and the words you speak.

Our instruction

The Bible says in verse 14, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” To be perfectly honest, I would feel a whole lot better if it said, “Do some things.” But this isn’t like the hot bar down at Quincy’s. I don’t get to pick and choose those things that I am not to grumble and complain about. No matter the issues or circumstances, the Bible says that grumbling and disputing must not be my practice.

What exactly is ‘grumbling?’ The word ‘grumbling’ in verse 14 translates the Greek word ‘goggusmos’ which means to mutter under one’s breath, to murmur in a low voice as an expression of dissatisfaction. It is not a loud, in your face protest as much as it is low-toned, discontented complaint. It was this same word that the translators of the Septuagint used when referring to Israel’s grumbling in the wilderness according to Exodus 16. They grumbled because they had nothing to eat, then they grumbled because all they had to eat was

manna. They grumbled against Moses, grumbled against God, they grumbled for 40 years. Psalm 106:25 says that, “They murmured in their tents, and did not obey the voice of the Lord.”

Grumbling is far more serious than we understand because it is indicative of pride. So that Paul is contrasting such an attitude with the humility that he has just described as seen in the example of Christ. Grumbling results from a lack of humility and submission to God in our lives. It springs from the self-centered notion that we are getting something we don't deserve, or that we're not getting something we think we do deserve. We experience some discomfort. Things are not working out the way we expected. And so what do we do? We express our dissatisfaction, we grumble, and if we are not careful, it leads to a bitter spirit.

There's a certain man that I'm reminded of who upon being asked, “How are you doing?” always responds by saying, “Better than I deserve!” That's the attitude we all need.

The word ‘disputing’ is the verbal expression of discontent to someone else, an argumentative spirit, what we would call stirring the pot. It is spreading negativity through our hateful words and criticisms of situations or other people. Keep in mind that this was at the heart of the issue that is on Paul's mind as he is writing to the Philippians. They were getting stirred up over the dissension that existed between two ladies in the church.

Our integrity

Paul says in verse 14, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent.” Our integrity is at stake in this thing. Other people are watching us, observing us, listening to us. There is an influence. And when we grumble or complain our way through life, it harms our witness. God wants

us to be blameless and innocent. That means we do nothing to bring reproach upon the name of Christ. We do nothing to put a stumbling block in the pathway of another person. The thing about grumbling is that it often does not stop with just us. It spreads to the people around us so that we infect them with our negativity. The old saying is that misery loves company. Verbal pollution takes a heavy toll on everyone who is exposed to it. One person has said that “we have no more right to put our discordant states of mind into the lives of those around us and rob them of their sunshine and brightness than we have to enter their houses and steal their silverware.” In other words, we have no right to infect others with our negativity.

The fact of the matter is that all of us live here at times if we were to be completely honest. Grumbling and disputing is the easiest thing in the world to do and it comes natural to us as sinners. Negativity is a mindset. And it is one that must be uprooted from our lives and replaced with humility that looks to God and His promise. You may not be in a very positive situation today. But that doesn't mean you can't live with joy. Your joy isn't dependent upon what other people do or don't do. It isn't dependent upon your circumstances. It rests in the unchanging character of God who is for you, who wants you to have the mind of His Son.

3—The WITNESS that we have (2:16-18)

“Holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run or labor in vain. 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. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”

Working out our salvation in the power that God supplies impacts the works that we do, the words that we speak, and then finally it involves the witness that we have. You and I have a witness in the eyes of the world. You have a testimony if you are in Christ. And the power that you and I need to be an effective witness is supplied by the Spirit of God who is at work in us. A lot of times, we fret over our stumbling attempts to share Christ with others. But here me when I say that you and I cannot fail when it comes to witnessing. The only failure is to not be a witness. When our lives are compromised so that the message of what we say is eclipsed by the hypocrisy of what we are. Listen to what Paul says about our witness in these verses.

We shine forth in the world

Paul says in verse 15 that a believer stands out in the midst of a dark world. We live in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. I mean can you think of a more appropriate way to describe the world in which we live? We live in a time where right is wrong and wrong is right. The popular mantra of our times is 'live your own truth. If it feels right, do it. Go with your gut.' Ours is a day of moral relativism which says that truth is a matter of individual preference. And it is against that dark backdrop that the Bible says you as a Christian shine as a light in the world.

We hold fast to the Word

We can make a difference inasmuch as we hold fast to the Word of God. We refuse to compromise with the world and will not surrender our convictions, even if it costs us. And it shouldn't take us by surprise when we face opposition and difficulty from the world. Jesus said that His disciples could expect to be hated and persecuted for His sake.

John 15:18-19—“If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

In the face of cultural opposition, we hold fast to the Word of Christ. Despite getting pushback from unbelieving family members, we hold fast to the Word of Christ. When our job is in jeopardy, we hold fast to the Word of Christ. And the strength we need in order to make our stand comes from God who is working in us! We shine bright in the world, we hold fast to the Word, and then notice:

We pour out in worship

This section closes with Paul referring to the way that he is proud of what God has done in their lives. He knows that his sacrificial efforts and all his ministry labors will not have been in vain. Even though he was facing execution for his faith, he knows that his race will not have been in vain.

John Phillips — *“Paul saw his beloved Philippian converts as consecrated believers who had presented themselves to God as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2). As an offering to God, they were being consumed on the altar of sacrifice and service.”*

He sees his own life being poured out as a drink offering on top of the sacrificial offering of their faith. The imagery that he uses comes from the Old Testament sacrifices that were offered in the temple. Whenever the worshiper brought a sacrifice to be offered, he also brought wine which was to be poured out as a picture of joy that the offering was being received by God. The more impressive sacrifices required larger amounts of wine. So that the greater the sacrifice, the greater the joy. It was an illustration of the truth that the way of sacrifice is the

way of joy. We tend to think that joy is found in receiving. But the Scripture teaches that joy is found through giving. This is something that Jesus taught and modeled to His disciples. There is far more joy to be found in giving than there is in receiving.

Acts 20:35—“Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

“Blessed” — word is ‘makarios’ and means happy; it is the same word used in the Beatitudes

There is a joy which can only be experienced as one pours his or her life out in sacrificial worship of God. Paul was completely willing to surrender his own life as a sacrifice to God. Should that happen, he would consider it a joy. And he calls on the Philippians to mourn over the prospect of it but to rejoice. Because for him, every drop of blood, every ounce of sweat, and every tear shed for the sake of Christ was well worth the investment.

Now, doesn't it encourage you to know that as you 'work out' your own salvation, God is at the same time working in you! So that you are only working out what He has first of all worked in. Are you growing? My friend, the Christian life is not about our striving. God hasn't simply given us an impossible target and then frowns whenever we fail to hit the bullseye. You and I are not saved through imitating the example of Jesus. No, we are saved by possessing His life. His righteousness is now yours through faith. When you believe the gospel, His Spirit comes to live within you so that you are not just inspired, but are enabled.