

We are continuing this morning in a sermon series through the New Testament book known as Philippians, which is a letter written by the Apostle Paul from a Roman prison to a church in Philippi that he had started. This morning we will be in verses 12-18 of chapter 2, which is the culmination of a section that began in v. 27 of ch. 1, so we'll begin there to set the context, and as we read through the context, I will refresh your memory on what Paul has been communicating to them.

Philippians 1:27 - 2:18 - *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel* ²⁸ *without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved-- and that by God.* ²⁹ *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also* **to suffer for him,** ³⁰ *since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.* ^{NIV}

He wants them to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, whether or not he is there. He wants their actions to match their words, specifically that they would strive for unity with selfless and sacrificial love, and that they would prioritize God's honor above their own comfort and reputation. But as we will see, these are not just commands – they are in response to the gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done for them:

Philippians 2:1 - *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,* ² *then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.* ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others* **better than yourselves.** ⁴ *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* ⁵ *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* ⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* ⁷ *but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even* **death on a cross!** ⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Jesus, who was in very nature God, the eternal Son of God, left heaven and came as a servant, sacrificing his life all the way to a humiliating death on the cross out of his love for us. Paul argues that if Jesus he was God, and no service was beneath him, then how much more should we be willing to take the lowest place in order to serve and love others. The gospel shows us that our God will take care of our needs, so that we can look out for each other's needs, and that our identity and self-worth is secure because the one who knows everything about us willingly gave His life for us because He loves us so much.

Now we are up to today's section, which brings those previous two sections to a conclusion:

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life-- in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul begins this section in 1:27 by encouraging the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, whether he comes to visit them or whether he dies in prison. He wants to know that they are united in love for each other, looking to each other's interests the way that Jesus humbled himself in order to put their needs above His own. And in the section we are focusing on this morning, he returns to this theme, encouraging them to continue their obedience to God, **working out their salvation with a holy fear and reverence towards God as God works in them to His good purpose.** I want to look closely this morning at verses 12-13, because there are two potentially confusing elements to Paul's command. First of all, seeing "work" and "salvation" in the same phrase can raise questions, because one of the consistent themes of Paul's writings and the gospel is that we are saved from our sins not by our works but by faith in Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

So if we are not saved by our works, then what does Paul mean when he tells the Philippians to work out their salvation?

Secondly, Paul tells them to work out their salvation as God works in them. What does that mean? How do we work while simultaneously allowing God to work in us? Answering these two questions will give us great insight into what our faith and discipleship should look like and where we find the power to become the men and women God has created and called us to be.

Let's handle the first question first. What does Paul mean when he encourages them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling?

In order to answer that question, the first thing we need to be clear on is meaning of the word salvation. Salvation has a past, present, and future dimension in the Bible. We have been saved from the penalty of sin. We are being saved from the power of sin. We will be saved from the presence of sin. The past dimension is that by putting our faith in Jesus, we have been saved from the penalty of our sins.

Romans 8:1-2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

And the passage we read earlier:

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

The testimony of the gospel is that we are all separated from a holy God by our sin, and no one can make themselves right with God by their own good works. But God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, so that all who trust in Him will be saved. We are justified – declared not guilty. We are adopted as God's children. We are regenerated, as He gives us His Holy Spirit. This is a gift of God's grace, and this is the past dimension of salvation.

But that is not all there is to our salvation. The present dimension is that we are being saved from the power of sin in our lives, otherwise known as sanctification. So when Paul tells the Philippians to work out their salvation, he is referring to the present dimension. For example:

1 Corinthians 1:18 - *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Notice that the gospel, the message of the cross, is the power of God for those of us who are being saved, for in the gospel we find the power to overcome the power of sin in our lives. And so there is a place for our work and effort – not in order to save us from the penalty of sin, but in order to free our lives from the power of sin.

Finally, there is also a future dimension: **we will one day be saved from the very presence of sin** when we are with God. That's **glorification**.

Romans 5:9-10 - *Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

So when Paul tells them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in them, he is referring to their sanctification, that they are to work at becoming free from the power of sin in their life, leaving behind the old life and **walking as the new creation they are in Christ**.

2 Corinthians 5:17 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

And clearly, as we have read, in order to work out our salvation, the most important work in this new life will involve loving our neighbor as Christ has loved us, humbling ourselves and putting the needs of others above our own, striving for a selfless and sacrificial unity.

Galatians 5:13-14 - *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Romans 13:9-10 - *The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

So, to the question of what Paul means when he tells them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling and whether he is contradicting the Bible's

message of salvation by grace, the answer is that he is referring to our sanctification, to the lifelong journey of becoming free from the power of sin. Evidently, we have an important role to play in that by our works. But he also makes it clear that God has a part as well, that He is at work in us. So how do we understand that tension? ([show slide](#))

Because on the one hand, Paul exhorts the Philippians to work out their salvation – be responsible for your life and faith. He has exhorted them to do many things so far in this letter: to be united, to strive together for the gospel, to look to the needs of others above themselves, to consider others better than themselves. Clearly there are a lot of things that seem to define what it means to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. But He is also clear that God is at work in them and that they need to rely on God’s sovereign work in them. Remember that in [Philippians 1:6](#) he tells them that He who began a good work in them will bring it to completion. God began the work, God is at work, and God will complete the work. So how does this dynamic work?

When you try to understand concepts like this, it can often be helpful to think on a continuum, in this case from our work to God’s work. What happens when you emphasize one over the other in an unbalanced manner? If you emphasize God’s work while downplaying your own work, you get an approach that was historically known as [quietism](#). It’s the “let go and let God” approach, the “Jesus take the wheel” outlook on discipleship. It’s the belief that our work is to trust God, and that He will do the work. Pray for the job and wait for Him to provide. Pray for Him to take away your desire for your addiction and wait for Him to work. God, I am not going to leave this room until you tell me what to do. It may sound spiritual, but something is missing with this approach, and when you’re imbalanced, you end up in error. One historical example would be that in the 18th century, overseas missions had pretty much stopped because of the belief that if God wanted to save people, he would do it. But a man named William Carey argued that God’s sovereignty did not take away the need for human responsibility, and he started the modern mission movement by going to India to share the gospel.

On the other end of the spectrum is the belief that God has saved us, and now our sanctification is up to us, that we need to work in order to grow in our faith. The historical name for this approach is [pietism](#), stressing Bible study, self-discipline, and personal effort. But this approach is also imbalanced, because we can make ourselves holy through our own effort. And we will end up either with pride or despair, depending upon whether we feel that our efforts are succeeding or failing. If you emphasize your work while downplaying God’s work, if you do all you can

but in the end don't pray and don't trust God and rely on His Spirit and power, then you end up carrying a much heavier burden than you were meant to, and what you do probably won't be of lasting spiritual significance. If you feel everything depends upon you, it can lead to great anxiety and fear, and, if you screw up, it leads to great despair, because you believe that your bad choices can screw up your life and God's plan.

But there is something missing in both the quietist and the pietist approach. The reality is that God does not work through passive people who just pray and don't put in effort, nor does He work through people who try to shoulder the whole burden themselves without praying and depending upon His power. We are to work with all our might while depending entirely upon Him. (slide) We are to work out our salvation because God is at work in us.

No one has put this better than Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th century English preacher, who said: *"In God's word, the car of truth runs on two rails of parallel statements. A great many people want to pull up one of the rails. They will not accept two sets of truth. Predestination and free agency do not agree, so the modern Solomons assert. Who said? They do not agree? They do agree, as fully as two rails on a tram line. But some narrow spirits must set aside the one or the other. They can not accept both. This has long been a puzzle on paper, but in practice it is ease itself.* So here, the practical action of the believer, throwing his whole might into his master's service, perfectly well agrees with his falling back upon the working of God and knowing that it is God who works all things for him. David's slaying of the lion and the bear and the Philistine is clear, but God's delivering him out of the jaw of the lion and the paw of the bear and the hand of the Philistine is equally clear. Make it plain to **your own self**. I believe that when I preach, I ought to prepare and study my sermon as if it's success altogether depended on me, but that when I am thus thoroughly furnished, I have to trust in God as much as if I had done nothing at all. The same view should be taken of your view and your service for God. Work as if you were to be saved by your works, and then trust Christ only, because it is only by him that you are capable of **a single good work**. Work for God with all your might as if you did it all, but then always remember that it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure. How is it that the Philistine be killed? By God, says one. True, but not without David. By David, says another. Yes, but not without God. Put the Lord on the march with David and you put the Philistines into untimely graves. When David moves to fight, God being with him, off comes **Goliath's head**. Nor champion's heads, nor demon's helmets can stand against the man of God."

In our discipleship, we need both responsibility and dependence, fervent effort and work while trusting in the one who works in and through us. Listen to a few more verses that emphasize this dynamic:

Colossians 1:28-29 - *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*

1 Corinthians 15:10 - *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them-- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

Psalms 127:1 - *Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.*

Nehemiah 4:8-9 - *They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹ But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*

Look at the Nehemiah example. See how they prayed AND they posted a guard. Both are necessary. **Think back to the quietists and the pietists.** One camp would hold an all-night prayer meeting, believing that posting a guard would be a lack of faith and a reliance upon human effort. The other camp would get busy organizing the guard, but would be too busy to pray. But Nehemiah and his men did both. Do you need a job? Pray for God to provide a job, but pray while you are going out and applying for jobs. Are you looking for a romantic partner? Pray for God to provide that romantic partner, but do it while going out to meet people. Is a relationship in your life strained or broken? Pray for God to restore that relationship, but do that while doing all you can to bring peace. Are you stuck in an addiction or pattern of sin in your life? Pray that God would break that addiction or sin pattern in your life, but do that while fighting against it and seeking accountability and confessing your sin to others. Pray and work. Work with all your might while praying to and depending upon the God who is at work in you by His Holy Spirit. As Jerry Bridges said, **“God’s work does not make our effort unnecessary, but rather makes it effective.”**

And as John Owen, the Puritan pastor and author wrote, “If holiness be our duty, they would say, there is no room for grace; and if it be the result of grace there is no place for duty. But our duty and God’s grace are nowhere opposed in the matter of sanctification; for the one absolutely supposes the other. We cannot perform our

duty without the grace of God; nor does God give his grace for any other purpose than that we may perform our duty.”

So, once again: work as if your sanctification depends upon you:

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

But depend upon God to empower you as your work, believing that you can accomplish nothing of lasting value apart from Him:

John 15:5 - "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Let me bring you back again to the past, present, and future dimensions of salvation. Praise God that by Jesus' death on the cross, you have been saved from the penalty of sin. And praise God that one day you will be saved from the presence of sin when you are with Him. But while you are here, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, with reverence towards God, so that your life will match your message, so that by your life you might display the glory of God and the beauty of the gospel. Let me finish this section by highlighting one specific Paul tells them to live this out:

¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life-- in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

There is a lot of crookedness and depravity - another word for moral corruption - all around us, not only in Paul's day but in ours. But rather than get bogged down in complaining and arguing, Paul encourages them to get busy doing the good works that God has given them to do, loving their neighbor as Christ loved them, with a humble and sacrificial love, without complaining or arguing.

Think about it: if you have been saved from the penalty of sin, then you know that the life and future that you have is far greater than what you deserve! You know

that everything good in your life is an undeserved gift of God's grace. Every breath that you breathe is an undeserved gift of God's grace. And you have an eternity of joy and love to look forward to! If you believe the gospel, then don't complain about what you don't have, but praise God for what you do. Do everything He calls you to do without complaining. Trust me, you will never have to give up or sacrifice more than He did.

As it says in the prayer "God and Myself" from *The Valley of Vision: Whatever cross I am required to bear, let me see him carrying a heavier*. What a remedy for bitterness and complaining is found in that line and in that outlook.

Do everything without complaining. And do everything without arguing. If you have been saved by the grace and sacrificial death of Jesus despite the penalty that you deserved because of your sin, then show the same grace to each other. If Jesus gave His life for you, then lay down your life for your brothers and sisters. After all, Paul says, I rejoice that I have been able to pour out my life like a drink offering for your faith. He wants to be able to stand proudly before God on judgment day, boasting in their faithfulness, like a proud parent showing off his children. No sacrifice is too great for the people that God has called Him to love, because no sacrifice was too great for Jesus to make for him.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you might be blameless and pure, shining like stars in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation. As Jesus put it:

Matthew 5:14-16 - *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is working in you. Give yourselves fully to the good works God has given you to do, loving others as He has loved you, that your light might shine and people might praise your Father in heaven.