

VIII. Lesson 8 Working out Salvation/Let Your Light Shine – Phil. 2:12-18

January 3/4, 2007

Aim: To understand what it means to ‘work out’ our salvation.

A. Working out Salvation (Phil. 2:12-13)

1. Obedience – Genuine or Superficial (2:12a)

There is a logical connection between the work of Christ and the life of the Christian. Christ obeyed. He was obedient to His Father even although that meant going to the cross. Paul underlines the obvious implication: *therefore*, those who are in Christ and belong to Him must also be obedient. No Christian ever reaches perfection in this life. Paul, for one, failed to do so, although he continued to grow in grace (3:12). He did not trivialize disobedience.

Are we models of faithfulness in order to please those who lead us, and perhaps ingratiate ourselves with them? Does our zeal falter when they are absent? Do we display different degrees of obedience depending on the identity of our leaders or the public nature of the service we share with them? What a subtle temptation this is, and how clearly Paul recognized it!

2. Working It Out (2:12b-13)

Paul normally sets ‘works’ and ‘working’ over against salvation by grace through Christ. We are not justified by works but by grace. Is he contradicting himself here by saying that salvation is something for which we have to *work*?

The apostle is not asking the Philippians to work for their salvation. He will soon give details of his own futile efforts to earn the favor of God (3:1-11). Paul did not mean that any of their good deeds would save them from their sins, or earn them good marks in God’s book of merit. Salvation is God’s work. We cannot save ourselves. The very faith with which we receive His work of salvation is not something we can produce. It is rather God’s gift to us. He gives us both the salvation to receive by faith and the faith to receive the salvation (Eph. 2:8-9).

We are prone to think either: 1) If I am to work hard in relationship to salvation then I contribute my part to it; or 2) If God works in me, then I do not need to work hard at following Christ. Paul gives us the correct balance...

a) Application to the Church Rather than Individuals (per Martin)

The situation of discord and fearfulness at Philippi controls the exegesis of this section. These verses are best understood if their reference is to the attitude of the Philippians towards one another in the fellowship of the church. The readers are being encouraged to concentrate upon reforming their church life, ‘working at’ this matter until the spiritual health of the community, diseased by strife and bad feeling, is restored. ‘Salvation’ (*soteria*) can have the meaning of spiritual health (*cf.* Acts 27:34), and the verb ‘work out’ (*katargazesthe*) is better rendered ‘work at.’ ‘Your own’ (*heauton*), can hardly be taken in a personal sense since the apostle is urging the Philippians to have their eyes fixed on the interests of others (2:4) and not to be preoccupied with their own concerns. The reference here must look back to 1:28, where the salvation of the Christian community as a whole is in view.

Philippians – Lesson 8

b) Work out Your Own Salvation (2:12b)

Paul is not thinking here of any ‘good works’ we may contribute to our salvation, but about how we are to respond to the salvation which is ours already in Christ. We are not to work *for* it or work it *up* but work it *out*, that is, to make sure that its influence and implications permeate the whole of our lives. Paul was calling them to work out what God had worked in. They were to live in such a way as to manifest that God had done His saving work within them. They were to show outwardly what God had done inwardly. Thus, the words in verse 12 could be rendered *continue to work out your salvation*. It is a life-long process of obedience.

Salvation is, of course, a free gift; those who receive it are *God’s* workmanship (see Eph. 2:8-10). But ultimately salvation means the transformation of our lives into the likeness of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:29). Although our good works cannot gain us salvation from sin, we are still required to do good. These good deeds are both an evidence of our salvation and a sign of our spiritual development (cf. 2 Pe. 3:18). While we must not believe in salvation by works, we must most certainly believe in a salvation that works (cf. James 2:17-20). The fact that we are in a right relationship with God demands that we live out the practical implications of that relationship. Paul expresses the idea of working at something until it is finished or ready. He wants to see salvation transforming every aspect of our lives.

c) With Fear and Trembling (2:12b)

The outworking of salvation must be done in ‘fear and trembling’ (see 1 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5; cf. Ps. 2:11). Paul is thinking of the way in which the Christian should always be conscious that he or she lives before the face of God. We don’t approach Him in ‘fear and trembling’ because He is a tyrant and we are afraid that He might change His mind and send us to hell after all. Instead, we must have an awesome and highly respectful attitude towards our holy, gracious, and blessed God.

There should always be a sense of awe and wonder in the life of the believer. This sense of awe produces a special quality in our obedience; it gives it direction (we are not to be men-pleasers, but God-honoring); it gives it integrity (our obedience is tested by a more discerning eye than those of our fellow-sinners); it is an obedience suffused with humility in which self-projection has given way to devotion to the Lord.

d) For It Is God Who Works in You ... (2:13)

Working out our salvation is a high calling. We are to work out our salvation, not because God has worked it into us by His grace, but because He continues to work it out in our lives! Paul had told the Philippians that he was confident that God, who had begun a good work in them, would carry it on to completion (1:6). Therefore, as the work of salvation was God’s, God would give the power and the ability needed to perform the work. The God who had done the work of salvation within them had not abandoned them. He was still at work in them, giving them both the desire and the power to work out their salvation. If we have no desire to live for the Lord, we have no right to say we know the Lord.

God is described as the one ‘who works’ (*ho energon*), a verb which denotes effective working. His action is in the matter of ‘willing’ and ‘working’ (*energein*). He produces both the will to amend the condition of His people and brings about the accomplishment of this state of ‘goodwill’ (*eudokia*), in their midst.

Philippians – Lesson 8

Martin takes ‘to His good purpose’ to mean not so much God’s goodwill expressed towards the Philippians in fulfillment of His benevolent good purpose, but rather the pattern of goodwill which His gracious activity promotes in the fellowship as He inspires the ‘will’ and energizes the achievements of amicable relationships.

B. Let Your Light Shine (Phil. 2:14-18)

1. Negatives (2:14)

Paul frequently saw important parallels between the experiences of the people of God in the events of the exodus and the life of the New Testament church. The language here suggests that the events described in Deuteronomy 31 and 32 were in his mind as he thought of the Philippians. In verse 14, Paul is thinking of the sin of the people of Israel, when, only six weeks out of Egypt, they began to murmur about their provisions and to grumble against Moses and Aaron (*cf.* Ex. 15:24; 16:7-8; Num. 11:1).

‘Arguing’ or ‘disputing’ (*dialogismoi*) may be taken in the manward, legal sense of ‘dissensions’ or ‘litigation,’ and may suggest that the Philippian church had begun to use the pagan law courts to settle internal disputes (see 1 Cor. 6:1-11). The other symptom is described as ‘complaining’ (*gongysmoi*), an evil-sounding word, used also of a plague spot in the Corinthian community (1 Cor. 10:10).

A ‘grumbling or questioning’ spirit is an expression of ingratitude to God’s providence and of lovelessness and pride towards others. It is a denial of grace; it is working against salvation rather than working salvation out in every aspect of our lives. When we complain and grumble, we are telling those around us that we believe God is doing a very poor job, and, if given the opportunity, we could do much better.

2. Positives (2:15a)

The aim of these exhortations and warnings is plain. The Philippians are called to set their own house in order so that God’s purpose for them as a witnessing community might be fulfilled. The verb ‘become’ (*genesthe*), is more precisely ‘show yourselves.’ Paul is not saying that they would become children of God by avoiding complaining and disputing. They were already children of God. His point is rather that they would become known as children of God by avoiding these things.

‘Blameless’ (*amemptoi*) means ‘irreproachable, living a life at which no finger of criticism may be pointed.’ Paul uses the same word again in 3:6, referring to his careful observance of Jewish law. ‘Pure’ (*akerairoi*) implies innocence (*cf.* Mt. 10:16; Rom. 16:19). It is employed in first-century literature of wine which is undiluted or metals which contain no weakening alloy: hence ‘unmixed, pure.’ The two words provide an apt commentary on what it means to let our conduct be ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’ (1:27). ‘Without fault’ is the Greek word *amoma*.

The negatives of the Christian life all have a positive motivation; we are children of the heavenly Father; we therefore turn away from a spirit of complaint and dissatisfaction, because it is so out-of-keeping with the spirit of His family. Christians need to remind themselves many times a day, ‘I am a child of the heavenly Father.’ Meditate on that blessing and its far-reaching implications. It will change your life; it will sweeten your spirit; it will put a touch of heaven into your soul.

Philippians – Lesson 8

3. Shining Lights (2:15b-16a)

Underlying Paul's thinking here is a principle: Christian witness is dependent not merely on what we say but on what we are. When we 'work out' the 'salvation' which is ours in union with Christ, and these negatives and positives are in place, our whole life becomes a powerful witness to those around us.

We must look to Deuteronomy 32:5 as the source of the apostle's continuing description of the calling and purpose of the church.

⁵They have corrupted themselves;
They are not His children,
Because of their blemish:
A perverse and crooked generation (Deuteronomy 32:5).

Although Paul adopts this Old Testament indictment of apostate Israel, he also adapts it. The words 'a perverse and crooked generation' are used in Deuteronomy of erring Israel (*cf.* Ps. 78:8); but Paul applies them to the surrounding world in which the church lives and witnesses.

This world needs the light of the gospel to shine out into it and dispel the spirit of the age. When Paul spoke of a 'crooked generation' (*geneas skolios*) he meant that the people were all bitter and twisted inside. They were off course and heading away from God. Paul also described the world as 'depraved' or 'perverse' (*diastrepho*). This word has more to do with the outward behavior of the people of the world.

The vocation of believers is to be found and fulfilled 'in' (literally 'in the middle of,' *meson*) such a world. Believers are redeemed out of this present evil world (Gal. 1:4), so that they no longer share its condemnation (1 Cor. 2:6; 7:31; Gal. 6:14), nor its spirit (1 Jn. 2:15-17). They do not belong to this world, to society as alienated from God, indifferent to His presence, and hostile to His rule (see Jn. 17:16); but they are still 'in' the world (Jn. 17:15) and have no mandate to withdraw as recluses and shut themselves away in some secluded place.

The church's influence as a witnessing community is described in the language of the influence of light in a dark place (*cf.* 2 Pe. 1:19; Dan. 12:3). However, here Paul's verb is *phainesthai*, normally meaning 'to appear,' not *phainein* 'to shine.' The word translated 'lights' (*phosteres*) may mean any object which bears light such as navigational beacons (*e.g.*, torch, lantern, harbor light). 'The universe' (*kosmos*) in view here is not the natural, physical order of creation, but 'the world' in its ethical and spiritual connotation, such as when we speak of 'the spirit of this world.'

Perhaps Paul is thinking not only of the brightness and beauty of stars set against the dark sky, but of the safety to which they pointed. Christians are the bright lights in an otherwise dark world; they are the stars by which others may learn to chart a course to the safety which can be found only in Jesus Christ.

The translation 'light-bearers' would be in harmony with Matthew 5:14-16. The light which we are required to hold is not our own light; it is God's light. However, we are to be like a lighthouse shining out into the darkness of this world with the truth of God, so that the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12) may shine forth.

How do we, as God's people, shine in this world? By 'holding fast the word of life' (v. 16). *Epechein* means 'to hold fast or firmly' as well as 'to hold out, offer.' The Philippian Christians

Philippians – Lesson 8

are to remain firm in their adherence to the truth of the gospel, to hold it fast as a torchbearer would grasp securely the light he carries, and to let no opposition daunt their spirits (1:27). God's people dispel the darkness of sin by spreading the gospel of Christ. But we can't 'talk up' the gospel with tongues that are usually employed in 'talking down.'

4. Unexpected Motive (2:16b-18)

When Paul remembered the Philippians, and other believers, he felt that he had something to be proud of. He was not thinking of boasting in a selfish way; these words are not those of an egocentric. Rather, he meant that he could be satisfied with which had been well done. Paul's labor (v. 16) is the fruit of God's grace (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:10). Since Paul made it his aim to boast in nothing except the cross (Gal. 6:14), ultimately what he is boasting in here should be seen as the result of his fellowship with the crucified and risen Christ (*cf.* 2 Cor. 10:13; 11:16-12:10).

Paul refers to the Old Testament practice of pouring out wine to accompany the main sacrifice (*e.g.*, Num. 15:3-12). Together they made an aroma pleasing to the Lord. Paul had been urging these Philippian believers to live sacrificial lives; now he is saying that he is ready, if necessary, to offer his own life as a drink offering, and his sacrifice would mingle with theirs and be acceptable to the Lord. Paul sees the prospect of martyrdom for Christ as a very present reality. 'I am being poured out' (*spendomai*) is in the present tense and shows that the possibility of his execution is vividly present in his own mind. The verb means 'to pour out as a drink offering' and denotes in sacrificial terms, a violent, even a bloody, death. He likens his life-blood shed in death to the libation of wine poured out with the Old Testament sacrifice. He was prepared to pour out his life-blood 'as a drink offering' to complete their sacrificial faith.

With Paul his joy is based on a confidence that death is gain because by it Christ is magnified and the gospel proclaimed (1:21). Verses 17-18 present a memorable picture of the joy which Paul was experiencing in his confinement and, at the same time, endeavoring to inculcate in the Philippians.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Note the stress on the importance of the word 'therefore' for Paul (v. 12). What is its significance? Are there other passages which underline this principle?*
- *What is the difference between working 'for' and working 'out' our salvation? In what ways can we say that 'God ... works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose' (v. 13)? Is there really a place for 'fear and trembling' in your Christian life?*
- *Using Paul's comparison between God's people after the exodus and the temptations Christians face, what would you suggest are the main reasons why Christians too often complain and argue? How can we prevent that?*
- *Consider Paul's unique description of Christians in verse 15 as a goal for your own life. What changes need to take place in order for Paul's description to be true of us? In what ways do we hold out the word of life? In what ways do we fail to do so?*
- *Trace the theme of sacrifice through Philippians 2:5-11 and 2:17. How important an element is it in the Christian life?*

For next time: Read Philippians 2:19-30 and Ferguson chapters 15-16.