

Christian Crusaders

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Living the Jesus Life: Working Out

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TEXT: Philippians 2:12-18 (ESV)

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.

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, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain 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.

Dear Friends,

I commented to someone recently “You look like you're in pretty good shape these days.” Their response was “Well, I've been working out a lot. It's helped me to drop some pounds and get more fit. I even have a coach helping me. It was hard at first, but I kept at it and now I feel great.” Studies have shown working out has some other positive benefits as well. It helps relieve stress. It actually can help one's immune system. It can help your brain. I've heard people say that working out at home and taking walks outside is what's keeping them sane during this outbreak of Covid-19 and the social distancing that's going on. Working out can be a very good thing.

That's what the apostle Paul tells us today in our reading. He loves these Philippian Christians to whom he's writing. He actually started the congregation on one of his missionary journeys. After a while, though, he moved on to take the gospel to other communities. But they continued to stay in contact and to support his work. It was a very special relationship. Now Paul can't be with them presently because he's sitting in a Roman prison, awaiting trial for his evangelistic work. But he's still looking out for their spiritual welfare, he's like a pastor to them – he wants to see them grow and flourish in their faith as followers of Jesus. So that's a major reason for his writing a letter. We've seen him giving them (and us) some excellent instruction in living the Jesus life.

Our text that we read earlier continues to offer us more insight and help. It starts out with the word "therefore". I remember I was told once that when we come across this word we need ask "what's it there-for?" There's a context. Well Paul has just laid out the obedient, humble, servant pattern of Christ Jesus for us to live by in the words before this. "Therefore," he says "in light of all that I have laid out for you in describing Jesus and what He did for you, as you've always obeyed," he goes on to say, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Now people stumble a bit over this statement of Paul's. "Wait a minute: what's this 'working out your own salvation' businesses? Isn't Paul contradicting himself? I thought we were saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ?" You're right: we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus did it all for us. We were lost in sin and death, and Jesus went to the cross and rose again so that we might have salvation – a restored eternal relationship with our Heavenly Father. Paul would be "appalled" if we believed otherwise.

Notice, though, that Paul is not saying "work FOR your own salvation" as if we are to earn it. No, he doesn't say that, he says "work OUT your own salvation," and working out your salvation is more about living the new life in Christ. It's coming to experience all of the aspects and benefits and blessings of salvation; it's about bearing fruit that gives God glory. The word "work out" that he's using here is actually a term that was used back in those days for mining. You worked the mine for its treasures. It's also used as an agricultural term in farming – the farmer works the field to get the greatest harvest possible. "Working out", then, is about developing something; bringing it to fullness of what, in its nature, it's meant to be. I think of the relationship of marriage, for instance. After you've said the vows at the altar and move on with life, it's time to do the diligent, joyful, faithful work of growing relationship into something beautiful and strong. I found this illustration from writer Chuck Swindoll helpful with this verse. He says:

When a musician has a fine composition placed before her, that music is not the musician's masterpiece, it's the composer's gift to the musician. But then it

becomes the task of the musician to work it out, to give it sound and expression and beauty as she applies her skills to the composition. When she does that, the composition reaches its completed purpose and thrills the hearts of her listeners.

Notice he says “your own,” “your own salvation.” It's reminding us that we are to take personal responsibility for our faith life. We're meant to grow in it, to be fruitful for the kingdom of God. The relationship is like a baby that needs tending and nurturing. There's no spiritual passivity on our part in the Christian faith. You don't say “yes” to Jesus and then sit around until it's time for Him to take you to Heaven. That's what I would call a “couch potato faith”, which yields very little in one's relationship with God and bringing God glory. Dallas Willard, in his book *Divine Conspiracy*, has written:

We have received the life of the kingdom through the word of the gospel and the person of Jesus. That life we have is a gift. But once we have it, there's something for us to do. The person we become cannot be the effect of what someone else does. Therefore, we work out the salvation we have.

And Paul says “As you do that, you do so with fear and trembling.” Fear and trembling before God. Now again, remember our context: Paul has just related the inspiring story of redemption in the servant hymn about Jesus. So “fear and trembling” is a description of our attitude as we work out our response – we stand before God in awe and wonder, astonished at His grace and the privileged calling He's placed on our lives to serve His great purposes in the world. There's an awe; we're honored. We live before an audience of One: our God. And we live it with reverence and awe for what He's done for us, wanting to delight in grateful response. It's a privilege.

So what's Paul getting at here? To sum it up, here's the bottom line: Paul's saying living the Jesus life of salvation is about obedience; obedience to God. It's about living one's faith, carrying it out correctly, obediently. Remember the opening line in this passage is “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed.” Acknowledging Jesus is Lord of one's life obligates the believer to obey Him, to submit to Him and His commands each and every day. If you're trusting in Jesus Christ for your salvation, that means you are now under new management: God's management. In the Great Commission, Jesus announced “All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” And that's what Paul is doing – he's teaching us to obey as he calls us to work on our own salvation. Work out with Christ's great commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. He's calling us to work out Christ's new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you're My disciples.” That kind of love that He describes is about making sacrifices and serving others around us. For

instance, these days with this coronavirus we see so many who need help, who are lonely and can't help themselves. I was pleased to hear my former congregation was calling the elderly and driving over things to them as needed. A call, or even a text, checking on someone has the power to pick a person up who's feeling lonely, letting them know that "you're not forgotten in all of this." Some people are having trouble making ends meet – you can financially help others in Christ's name by giving from what you have. That's the great commandment, a new commandment, He's given us the great commission: tell other people about Me, be My witnesses. There are people these days who need to hear the good news of eternal life through Jesus Christ. That death does not have to be the last word over us, but in Christ there's victory.

Paul says it's all part of holding fast to the word of life: scripture. We hang onto it, we get to know it well, we study it, we memorize it, and we work it by obeying it in everyday life, applying it. We become doers of God's word, as the book of James says. That's what Paul is going after here – we are to do all things, he says, without grumbling and complaint. Again, this is a statement about obedience and trusting that God knows what's best for you. He's really alluding to Old Testament stories of Israel when God, through Moses, was leading the people through the wilderness, out of Egypt. And you what they did? All they did was grumble and complain, the whole way.

And Paul says "Do this so that you may be blameless, innocent children of God." You see, you're a child of God through Jesus Christ, so you will be without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, in which you shine as lights in the world as you're holding fast to the word of life. God has this plan and purpose for you and for me if we're in Christ: we are to give off kingdom light in Christ's name. He has intended for us to be in public relations for Him and His kingdom in everything that we say and do. Paul had to have had the words of Jesus in mind when he wrote this. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said, "let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and give glory your Father in Heaven."

You know, each day I pray for my children and my grandchildren and for my own household, with Julie and I, in this way: "Lord, may our light shine for you today and not get in the way of people seeing how wonderful you are." I've been praying that even more fervently as of late in the dark time. "Lord, use me as a light." Friends, the world around us needs the light of Jesus and His love reflecting off of us, His followers. May that little children's chorus be our life song: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

Paul finishes this little portion of scripture off by making a personal appeal. He says "Make me proud of you, so that on the great day of Christ's return, as I stand with you, I'll know my time and effort wasn't wasted – that you really did get the gospel." You see, living the Jesus life is making the commitment, then, to work out, to obey Christ, so that you shine before others for the sake of the gospel. Working out is never easy, but I do have some good news to encourage you in your working out. Maybe you notice I skipped verse 13; it's a real gem to hang onto in all of this. Where he writes, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." You see, God's working in you as you're working out your salvation. He's working in you through His Holy Spirit, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. I like what Christian writer Warren Wiersbe said: "The Christian life is not a series of ups and downs. It's rather a process of ins and outs. God works in and we work out." See, we don't do this as if the new life is our project; that sounds grueling and joyless. It isn't that. It's God working in us. And I don't know about you, but I find it comforting and encouraging.

Finally, what's the goal of all this? According to this little statement, we live the life of obedience for God's good pleasure, that's the goal. We do it for God's good pleasure, in grateful response to the love He's shown us in Christ. Let me close with a story that's been told of Richard Bellinger, a young boy in South Carolina who was the son of a Baptist minister.

One Saturday night, young Richard decided to shine his father's shoes. The following night, his father put a silver dollar on the bureau of his son's room with a note commending him for what he'd done for him, and telling them that the dollar was his reward. The next morning, when the father put on his shoes, he felt something hard and metallic in one of them. When he took the shoes off and reached inside, he found the silver dollar he'd given his son the night before. Along with the dollar was a note that simply read, "Father, I did it for love."

Living the Jesus life involves working out and trying to do what He has called us to do not for reward, but out of loving gratitude for all that Christ has done for you. Our new aim in life is to please Him.

Amen