

**Text:** Philippians 2:12-13

**Title:** The Christian's Workout

**Truth:** Working out our salvation means obeying God's Word.

**Date/Location:** Sunday January 23, 2022 at FBC (rev. from 12/1/2010)

## Introduction

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.

Recall from 2:9-11 that God exalted His Son after the humiliation portion of the incarnation. He did so by lifting Him up and assigning Him before all people the name which is above all names. The purpose of this exaltation was two-fold: that every knee should bow and that every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. All of this will result in glory to God the Father. But it should also result in our walking obediently to God *now*, for if we claim in words that He is our Lord and have bowed our knee to Him, we ought to live like it!

All of 2:5-11 sits in a context where Paul is giving the prime example of looking out for the interests of others and not just one's own interests (2:4); he is showing through Jesus' behavior that we should not do things through selfish ambition but rather should treat others better than ourselves. In short, we should be humble like Jesus—that kind of mindset should be in us too as His followers.

He returns to that theme in 2:12 by asking the believers to be obedient. We could read these verses apart from their immediate context in terms of general Christian obedience, and that is a very good application. But probably in this context, he has in mind a more specific area of obedience in terms of humility, looking out for the interests of others, etc. Remember, there was a little problem cooking in the church and it could be solved by humble selflessness.

## I. Obedience to the Word of the Apostle, v. 12a

Paul first expresses the thought that the Philippians were generally obedient to the word of the Lord in their lifestyle.

- A. The Philippians were obedient to the things that Paul taught them. That is remarkable, given human (sin) nature and the persecution that the young church faced there when its founder was jailed and then kicked out of the city. Certainly, they were not perfect, as we know from our theology from other Bible passages, but this was a decent church! Their pattern was to be obedient to the things of God. They were good people doing God's work in their community.
- B. They lived obediently when Paul was present. Now that Paul was away, the Philippian Christians were continuing the pattern of obedience to Paul's apostolic teaching—even moreso. They did not obey as "men pleasers" but rather from the heart (Eph. 6:5-6).

It is like "when the cat's away, the mice will play." That is, when Paul mentions obedience when he is present and then talks about being absent, we easily tend to think that people will naturally be more circumspect when he is present. It is bad if the kids disobey when the parents are out on an errand. But it is especially bad when the children misbehave in the presence of the parents and think they can get away with it!

And that is something we ought to think about. Obedience is something we tend to want to do when in the presence of other sound Christians or our pastor. What if we truly practiced our belief that God is omnipresent? Or even more compelling than that: the Lord is *always present in our lives* by His indwelling—ouch!?! Think about obedience when no one else is around. That takes more diligence and stronger Christian character.

In the lives of the Philippians, they were diligent in obedience even when the "pastor was not around." They were not on extra good behavior just because Santa Claus was coming to town!

- C. At the end of v. 12, Paul exhorts them to continue the pattern that they have begun—"Just as you have always obeyed...but now much more in my absence..." See Philippians 1:27 on this same idea. Needing someone's presence to induce your good behavior is

one thing (discussed above). But what if you have moved past that immature mindset and are wondering not “do I have to obey?” but “how can I obey if I do not have help?” The Philippians might have felt inadequate once Paul left town. In other words, some believers may think that they cannot get along in the Christian life unless they have a pastor or priest or teacher or bishop or even an institutional church to guide them in the details. Perhaps you have the idea that you simply cannot understand the Bible or the ways of God unless there is a specialist who tells you what it says.

Nope. You *can* indeed understand Scripture, and obey without an apostle present. That’s not at all to dispense with gifted pastors and teachers who can be a great help in learning godliness, but it is to say that each of us has an individual responsibility to develop in holiness and knowledge of the holy one. Sunday is not the only day for spiritual development! Every day, whether other Christians are around or not, is ripe time to grow in Christ.

This “in Paul’s absence” idea is connected to the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. Each one is privileged and responsible to maintain his or her relationship with God. No special group of priests or other ministers is elevated above another. The Christian family is “flat” in terms of hierarchy. See 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9; Revelation 5:10.

## II. Work Out, v. 12b

- A. The notion of *work out your own salvation* is one that has tripped people up because of the immediate assumption that it has to do with a "works-based" salvation. But it does not say that! It is just that it has *work* and *salvation* in the same sentence and a simplistic “reading” of the passage jumps to a bad conclusion. The proper understanding of the verse is that believers are to work out a salvation that they have already been given, not that they are "working out" to achieve that salvation. The idea is to **put salvation into practice**. Salvation is past—including justification and regeneration. But it is also present—sanctification. And it is future—glorification. The point of working out our salvation is that those who are followers of the Lord Jesus are expected to show it.

B. What about fear and trembling? The word order of the verse is this way: "with fear and trembling your own salvation work out." The idea is that this working out is so important, so critical to our Christian life, that we ought to be reverently, and yes, on the edge of our seats, about carrying it out. Something truly is at stake in life. We fear God and do not want to fall into sin and dishonor Him. At the same time, we have joy in salvation that God has delivered us from death.

C. So what does it mean to "work out" your own salvation? This has puzzled many Christians. Before a more careful study of this portion, I generally equated "work out" with "be a good Christian." But as I thought about this passage for this message, it occurred to me that the concept of *work out* is placed, in the text, in parallel with the concept of *obedience*. That is, *obedience* and *working out* are basically explanatory of each other. To work out your salvation, simply obey God and His Word! Obedience is simply the *out working* of salvation. This boils it down so it is easy to understand.

We are talking about obedience in the areas of humility and thinking of others in addition to oneself; the areas of having a like mind accord, not doing things out of selfish ambition, and frankly all other areas of Christian obedience. See the following verses, for example, for some more specifics.

D. In concert with what we have said before, it is "your own" salvation that needs working out. It is not a group project. The community of believers can and does help and is not at all dispensable, but whether they are faithful or strong or perfect or not does not change one ounce of your responsibility.

### III. Work In, v. 13

Verse 13 offers an **explanation** as to the why and how of this obedient continuance in working out our salvation. Underlying our *working out* is God's *working in*.

A. Our obedience is not simply on our own power. John 15:1-5 makes clear that we can do nothing apart from the life-giving vine of Jesus.

B. These two verses touch on the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. God is in control of all things; we are commanded to choose holy things. Both are simultaneously true, but often they are considered opposites of one another or in tension because of philosophical concerns like "how can I have a free will if God is sovereign over *everything*?"

But to put these ideas together is far simpler than many people have made it out to be. The one (God's sovereignty) drives and underlies the other (human responsibility). **You are responsible because the sovereign God told you so.** That is it. After He saved, you, He put you in a situation in which you have the desire and ability to live for Him. And, you have the obligation to live for Him. No ability and no desire? Then you need to go back to first base and figure out if you are really a Christian.

C. We are to obey and we *can* obey because God is the One who, through His Spirit, works in believers. His work is two-fold:

1. To cause us to "will," that is, to desire obedience.
2. To cause us to "do," namely to behave according to an obedient standard. Good intentions are one thing, but here is the ability to carry out those intentions.

D. These two things are a good place for us to pause and ask ourselves, not only do we do what God wants us to do, but do we DESIRE what God wants for us? Can we sense God's influence or control upon our very innermost desires, what we want to choose and want to do and want to be? If not, obedience will not genuinely come about through some external-only compulsion. Therefore obedience "in my absence" is a really good test. It shows if we are driven by external considerations (people watching) or internal considerations (God working).

E. God does both things—working on our wills and on our behaviors—because it pleases Him to do so and it pleases Him when we willingly do His will!

F. Does it seem impossible to "have this mind in you" as it exhorts in 2:5? It is an awfully high standard. Sure it is impossible—if verse 12 were standing by itself. But, as it stands in relation to verse 13, God

is working in believers to make it happen, so we do not have to despair. We can have a continuing obedience to the things of God.

## **Conclusion**

If you are saved, God has placed in you the desire to live a holy life, and He has given you the tools you need to actually accomplish it. No “woe is me” stuff here, “I cannot live for the Lord,” “It is too hard,” “It is too dangerous,” etc. God works desire and enablement in you. Now, work them out, dear believer.

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