

Working Out Our Salvation

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[0 : 0 0] So, this morning we are starting a series that we're going to be in for some time. In one way or another, we're going to be focusing on this theme all the way until Easter.

And we're going to be looking this morning at Philippians chapter 2, verses 12 and 13, to launch us on a series looking at discipleship, with the aim of building a culture of discipleship at Church of the Advent. And by discipleship, I mean, as Christians, our calling to follow Jesus, to learn to love as He loved, to live as He lived. And our desire is to build a culture in our church that means that everybody in our church takes that very seriously, that everybody in our church is very committed to living that out in their lives.

Now, I recognize as I say this that there's a whole lot going on in our country right now. And there may be people who hear this and wonder, of all of the things that we could be focusing on, why in the world would we choose to focus on this? It seems like there are so many more worthy, relevant things that we could be focusing on. And so, before we jump in, I just want to give you three quick reasons why I actually believe that this needs to be our focus right now. One of them is a general reason, and then the other two actually come from our text, although we won't be looking in detail at that part of the text this morning. Reason number one why I think discipleship should be our focus right now is this. Discipleship is already happening.

You're already being discipled. But the main question is, by what or by whom are you being discipled? Social media alone exerts an almost continual influence on us every waking hour of our day.

It's a continual stream of dopamine hits that reinforce feelings and thought patterns and behavior patterns. We're constantly being formed. And so, our desire at Church of the Advent is to create a culture that ensures that Jesus and His Word is the primary focus of our formation. That's reason number one. Reason number two, there is a gap for most Christians between our beliefs and our experiences. There's a gap between belief and experience. We, as Paul says in the passage that we're going to look at this morning, the fruit of discipleship is joy. As a disciple, he is able to rejoice even in the face of likely death. He invites his hearers to rejoice with him even in the face of his imprisonment, suffering, and death. The fruit of discipleship is joy, but for many of us, that is not how we experience the Christian life at all. There's a disconnect. And the only way to bridge that gap between belief and experience is through the ancient, well-traveled pilgrimage route of discipleship.

[3 : 0 0] Third reason, Christians are God's illumination for the world. Christians are God's illumination for the world. Paul says in this passage that Christians are called to shine as lights in the world amid a crooked and twisted generation. Now, there's an Old Testament backdrop to that that we don't have time to get into, but the point I want to make is this. As we look around, there's a lot of darkness, right? On this weekend in particular, we call to mind the ongoing racial violence, division, injustice in our society.

We have seen firsthand again and again and again and again and again the ongoing reality of this brokenness. We see the political strife and unrest that has soldiers literally marching in the streets of our city right now with very real fears of violence and uprest here and in cities all around our country in the coming weeks.

Right? This world needs illumination. Christians are called to be that illumination, but all too often we get caught up in the brokenness and in the darkness. We're complicit in it.

The only way we become that kind of illumination is through discipleship. Right? So that's what we're going to be focusing on, and that's why I think it matters. And we're going to start this series by recognizing something very crucial about discipleship, and that is that it's not something that we do alone.

This is one of the things that sets it apart from the self-improvement movement. Right? Discipleship is co-participatory. In other words, discipleship involves both God's work and our work.

[4 : 42] And that's what we're going to look at in this passage. First God's work, and then our work. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for the fact that discipleship is ultimately not about us pursuing some course or following steps or even developing the right habits.

That it's ultimately about a relationship. That you're the kind of God who's invited us into a relationship with yourself, and that the focus of discipleship is that relationship. And Lord, it ultimately depends on you being present in our lives.

And so we pray that you would be with us this morning. Teach us your word as we seek to follow you. We pray this in your son's name. Amen. So the psychologist David Benner, he's a depth psychologist and writes a lot on spiritual formation.

And he often says to people he's meeting with, he says, imagine God thinking about you. Imagine God thinking about you. And then he asks them, what do you think God feels when you come into his mind?

You know what people most often say? Disappointment. Frustration. Even anger.

[6 : 00] Right? So not surprisingly, if most people think that God is disappointed with them or frustrated with them or angry at them, then when they think about discipleship, the first thing they're going to feel is what?

They're going to feel guilt. They're going to think things like this. I know I should care more. I know that I should read the Bible and pray more. I know that I should make God a higher priority in my life, but I can never seem to get there.

I start the Bible reading plan on January 1st, and by January 3rd, I'm already behind. God must be so disappointed in me.

And it's almost become fashionable in our culture to refer to yourself as the very worst disciple. Right? As a way of trying to deal with this guilt. And if that's the way you feel about discipleship, if that's the way you feel about God, then discipleship is never going to be the life-giving, joy-filled journey that it is described as being in Scripture.

It's always going to feel like drudgery. And if this is how you feel, it probably means that you have some misconceptions about the gospel and about God's love.

[7 : 17] So let me ask you some questions just to get at this in your own heart. When good things happen in your life, do you assume that God is blessing you because you have been faithful?

Is that where it's coming from? When bad things happen in your life, do you assume that God must be teaching you a lesson? That's why it's happening. God must be teaching you a lesson.

When God blesses you, do you ever worry that if you don't appreciate the blessing enough, that God might take the blessing away just to teach you to appreciate it more?

Do you ever make deals with God? You know, you're sick or somebody you know is sick and you want them to get better, or there's something that you really want, and so you pray to God and you say things like, look, I promise I'm going to pray every day, I'm going to read scripture every day, I'm going to make you the top priority of my life if you just do this for me.

Or when God doesn't answer your prayer, who do you blame? Do you blame God? Do you say, how dare you? I have prayed every day for a month for this.

[8 : 31] How could you ignore me? How dare you? I did everything for you. Or do you blame yourself? You say, well, maybe it's because I didn't pray hard enough. Maybe it's because my faith isn't strong enough.

Apparently faith should be able to move mountains. Maybe I don't have that kind of faith. And so maybe God's not going to answer my prayer because of my insufficient faith. Right? If you answered yes to any of these questions, it probably means that you don't fully grasp how God's love works.

The sociologist Christian Smith interviewed people all around the country, and what he was trying to get at is what are our real religious beliefs? We have our labels that we put on census forms, but what do we actually believe?

And one of the things that he found among many Christians is that when you actually look at the beliefs of many Christians in our country, they actually believe that God blesses people because they're good.

That good people get blessed and go to heaven because they're good. Bad people get punished. In other words, what he found is very interesting. Most Christians in our country tend to believe, when you get right down to it, that Christianity works like every other religion out there.

[9 : 43] Do good things, be a good person, and God will bless you, and God will save you. In other words, it's a paradigm that assumes that we must work for our salvation.

Do good things, and God will save you. But the gospel makes this remarkable claim, as Paul says, just before our passage, just earlier in Philippians chapter 2, verse 8, he's talking about Jesus, and he says, Jesus, being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And what he's talking about there is the gospel, and he's making this point. Salvation is something that God has accomplished. It's already done, once and for all, through the death of Jesus on the cross.

When he talks about salvation, which is rooted in our justification, he's talking about something that God did in history. It's a completed event, a death on the cross. Therefore, as Paul says in verse 12, disciples of Jesus don't work for our salvation.

God worked for the salvation. God accomplished the salvation. We don't work for the salvation. Our calling is to work out our salvation. Work out our salvation.

[11 : 00] Now, we're going to talk about that more in just a minute, but here's the point I want to make first. God did this for one simple reason, because he loves you and delights in you far more than you could possibly imagine.

He loves you and delights in you more than you would ever dare hope. This is one of the differences between Christianity and all other religions. Right?

All other religions, in one way or another, say, I obey, therefore I'm loved and accepted. Right? But Christianity says the exact opposite. It says, I am loved and accepted, therefore I obey.

It begins with God's embrace. Right? And all that we do in our lives is a response to that. So discipleship flows out of the absolute assurance that God loves and delights in us and has already accomplished everything necessary for our salvation.

You say, okay, well, that's the justification part. That's our salvation. It's not salvation, but what about God's blessing? What about the fact that God sometimes answers prayers and other times it doesn't? Is God messing with us?

[12 : 06] Does God want us to learn lessons? When it comes to God's blessing, what we need to understand is God doesn't dole out blessings sparingly, like you might throw scraps to a hungry dog.

But I think we often operate that way. But look at what it says in Ephesians 1.3, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Right? That's not ambiguous. That's not scraps to a dog. And it's past tense. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. 2 Peter 1.3, His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

Not some things, not the bare minimum, but all things. Everything that you need, you already have. This means that the moment you come to God, the moment you ask for forgiveness, the moment you put your faith in Jesus, you receive every spiritual blessing available.

God holds nothing back. He gives you the keys to the vault. And He throws the door wide open, and He says, Help yourself. This is all available to you.

[13 : 22] And that includes, first and foremost, the blessing of the Holy Spirit. And this is why Paul says, Work out your salvation. Why? For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work, for His good pleasure.

Our work is contingent on God's work. Discipleship begins with the work of God, the finished work of Christ on the cross, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So there is no sense in which God ever feels disappointment with His children. There is no sense in which God ever feels disappointment or frustration with us.

If you start the Bible reading plan, and you don't follow through. If you devote yourself to a habit of prayer, and you fail. If you promise that you're going to prioritize God, and then you immediately prioritize something else.

God isn't sitting there with His arms crossed saying, I did so much for you. And you don't even appreciate me. Right? I think we often can turn God into a kind of nagging mother in our minds.

[14 : 30] You know, I do your laundry, and I cook, and I clean, and you can't even do this one thing for me. And that's not how God works. That's not how God's love works. God loves you.

God delights in you. And I'm just going to push this a little further. Whenever you assume that God is disappointed in you, you are mocking the cross. And you're denying its power.

Our role when it comes to discipleship is to work out what we have already been given in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

That's the first point. And we can't talk about discipleship if we don't get that clear. Right? But what does that mean? How do we work out our salvation?

This is the second point. We'll spend the rest of our time on this. Our role is to work the gospel out into every area of our lives. To apply the gospel, the grace and the love and the power of God to every aspect of our lives.

[15 : 34] Now, maybe that sounds easy to you. It's not. And the reason is this. Most human beings tend to live fairly compartmentalized lives. People don't naturally have a unified, seamless, coherent self.

In fact, our self is more like a collection of selves that are like watertight containers. They are self-contained compartments that may or may not interact with one another.

Right? So you have your religious beliefs box. You have your love life box. You have your politics, your family, your friends, your finances, your career, the way you think about your neighbors, the way you think about your enemies.

And all of those are separate boxes that are sealed off from one another. And so our self, or rather ourselves, are largely determined by context. Which box you are operating out of at any given time.

And what this means is that most of us are full of contradictions. Our society loves to point out the hypocrites. We love to call out the hypocrites. But the bad news is, we are all hypocrites. We are all walking contradictions in one way or another.

[16 : 44] And this is something that has been affirmed by everyone, from psychologists to poets. You might really care about the environment and recycle in your home, but you still drive cars and take planes everywhere.

You know, you may care so much about being healthy and even have a really great exercise plan, but when you get stressed out, you eat sugary, fatty foods. And you're sort of, it's sort of, it doesn't count in those times.

Right? Some people are super sweet and gentle and wonderful and peaceful in person, but online, they are vicious and mean. Some people are respected leaders in their workplace, and nobody messes with them, and everybody sort of fears them in the workplace.

But in their love life, with the people they're dating, they let people disrespect them, mistreat them, walk all over them. Right? We're all walking contradictions because we're all compartmentalized.

And this can be especially true when it comes to our faith. You know, there are many Christians out there who truly believe in Jesus, and they've been baptized, and they understand the gospel, and maybe they go to church, and they can quote the Bible, but their faith stays in the religion box.

[18 : 04] They never work out the implications of the gospel for their job. That's a separate box. They never think about it in terms of their marriage, or their family, or their neighbors across the street, or their politics, or their money.

Right? You know, you have people who believe in the gospel, but if somebody crosses me, they're dead to me. Right? It's a separate compartment. Right? So this helps us understand many of the things that we see when we look around.

Right? This helps us understand how some Christians over here have fully embraced a nationalist political ideology, which is incompatible with Christianity.

It helps us understand how some Christians over there have embraced a fully postmodern redefinition of human identity and gender and sexuality, which is incompatible with historic Christian teaching.

Right? It helps us understand how some Christians in the white church have tacitly supported racist ideas and practices and policies for generations. It helps us understand how some Christians in the West have become highly consumeristic and materialistic and seen no problem in their faith.

[19 : 17] Right? So our culture loves to look at people like this and say, hypocrite! You're not a real Christian. Well, what a Christian would say is, in fact, that's what a real human being is like.

That's what all human beings are like. It's more pronounced, maybe, when you actually claim to believe something. Then the contradiction is a little more clear. But it's true for everybody. And they're all due to the fact that we tend to compartmentalize our faith as Christians.

And so discipleship means working out our salvation, which means decompartmentalizing our faith, which means applying the gospel to every aspect of our lives.

And this is not the kind of thing that you can do over a retreat weekend in the mountains. This is a lifelong commitment to decompartmentalizing ourselves. It means continually asking, how does the truth of Jesus as my Savior and my Lord, how does the truth of God's unlimited grace being poured into my life, even before I asked for it, how does that truth completely transform the way I think about my identity?

How I think about my family of origin, how I think about my body, how I think about my money, my time, my neighbors, my enemies, my politics. Through reading Scripture, through applying it to our lives, through prayer, through spiritual friendships, through worshiping in a church community, through habits and patterns and liturgies, over the course of our lives, we apply the gospel in ways that transform every aspect of who we are.

[20 : 55] Right, so the point of discipleship is not just reading the Bible more. It's not just praying more. It's not just worshipping in a church together. It's not just going through studies together. All that stuff is great, but we can't lose sight of the aim.

God is at work in me, and my calling is to work that out into every aspect of my life. Right, so this is the aim of discipleship.

It's not just about developing better spiritual disciplines or learning more theology. Right, you can have a lot of theology, a lot of doctrine, but it does you no good if it all stays in the same box. The goal is integration, that you become integrated.

Every part is open and connected and flowing and interacting with every other part, and at the very center of it is the gospel. So I invite you to look at your own life.

I invite you to look for those places in your life where there may be inconsistencies. Maybe you are fully devoted to racial reconciliation. Somebody says, why do you care about this so much? You say, because I believe the gospel.

[22 : 00] But at the same time, you're not even speaking to certain family members because of who they voted for in the last election. And I would say, does the gospel not apply there?

Has the gospel lost its power in your family? Right, maybe in your small group, you're the kind of person who talks about the importance of loving and serving your physical neighbors.

But then you go online and you post inflammatory content that mocks and derides some of your online neighbors. Does the gospel not apply there? Maybe you know a lot about theology and doctrine, but you are smug and condescending toward Christians that you disagree with.

Does the gospel not apply there? Maybe you strongly desire to be a faithful witness of the gospel, but you're terrified of your coworkers discovering that you're a Christian.

Does the gospel not apply there? Right, there are a lot of people who will go and do overseas missions and teach people who speak a completely different language the gospel, who won't even admit they're Christians in their workplace.

[23 : 03] Does the gospel not apply there? And you know, I include myself in this. You know, just the other week, I was feeling tired, I was feeling stressed out. I mean, no surprise, I think many of us are feeling that way.

But some new neighbors had recently moved in down the street, and my wife, because she's this kind of amazing person, really wanted to go and greet these neighbors and welcome them. And I was making up all kinds of excuses for why I, you know, why it wasn't a good time and maybe some other time, and she just kind of looked at me and said, don't you preach about this all the time?

It's one of those sort of convenient things about being a pastor. And she said, don't you preach about this all the time? And she was right, and I realized right then and there, I was compartmentalizing. I was compartmentalizing one aspect of my life from another aspect of my life.

I'm in home mode. I'm in tired mode. Therefore, the rules are different. No, they're not. That's a compartment. Those walls need to come down. And only by admitting these things to ourselves can we then begin to prayerfully preach the gospel to ourselves in all of the ways that we need to hear it.

One of the central practices of discipleship is learning to preach the gospel to you, to yourself, in ways that you need to hear it. Because of God's work, the finished work of Christ on the cross, His ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, we have absolute assurance of God's love and blessing and acceptance.

[24 : 29] So we can be brutally honest with ourselves. I mean, God already knows this stuff. We can be honest with ourselves. We can confess this to a God who delights in us as we work out our salvation and overcome these inconsistencies.

peace. And over time, the goal is for the gospel to sort of spill out of that faith box, to begin to spill out into all of the compartments inside you, to begin to fill up all of those other boxes until they just collapse under the weight.

And the gospel begins to draw all of the disparate parts of you together. You know, there's a word for this in the Bible. It's the word shalom. When God promises shalom for His people, we often translate that as being peace.

And that's a part of it. But shalom is a much bigger word. Shalom actually means wholeness, including inner wholeness, integrity, cohesion, seamlessness, every part connected to every other part.

And the aim is to merge all of those separate compartments within us into one space, one self that is filled to overflowing with the Spirit of God.

[25 : 46] Let's pray. Lord, as we acknowledged at the beginning and so will continue to acknowledge, these are mysteries in many ways above all of our pay grade.

And we absolutely require you as the initiator, the one, as Paul says earlier, in this letter, who began a good work in each of us.

And Paul is absolutely certain that he who began a good work in each of us will bring it to completion. That's our prayer for ourselves, for Christians all around the world this morning.

For the reasons that we laid out at the beginning of this sermon, Lord, we need you to complete your work in us. And part of that we know means responding to this call to work out the gospel in our own lives.

And I pray that you would give us the vision and the courage and the humility to repent, confess our inconsistencies, and come and ask to be filled by your grace. We pray this in your Son's holy name.

[26 : 50] Amen.