

Work Out Your Salvation

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[0:00] Now, as we jump into this passage, we look at the very first word and we see a therefore. So you've probably heard before, if you see the therefore, you need to ask, what is the therefore, therefore?

Right? So there's obviously something that Paul is building on here. He's trying to connect what he said before with what is coming ahead. So you may remember, those of us who were with us last week, we looked at verses 5 through 11, where we discussed the mind of Christ.

We know that Paul began chapter 2 by encouraging the church to be united with one another. And that happens first and foremost through personal humility. But then he turns to the work of Christ and to consider who Christ is.

And we saw last week that Christ not only serves as our example, he is our Savior. And so we saw how Jesus condescended, he came down, lo, being born of a man.

He's experiencing the miseries of this life, suffering the wrath of God on the cross. But yet he did not stay in the grave. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven. And now we await his glorious return when he will be eternally and infinitely exalted.

[1:11] And so we see how that proclamation of who Christ is and what he has done, that is the essence of the gospel. That God, Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, came to save sinners like you and me.

And so that's our backdrop. Therefore, Paul says, he moves on with his instruction to the church to work out your salvation.

And so you may have heard of oxymorons before, right? What's an oxymoron? It's these two statements that seem to contradict each other that form a figure of speech.

Like deafening silence or an unbiased opinion. Well, we see in this text and we may think, what Paul is saying here, it kind of seems like a theological oxymoron here.

Because what in the world would Paul be saying this after we know what Paul has just said about salvation that doesn't come by our works but comes through Christ's works.

[2:12] And now he says to us to work out your salvation. What in the world is he talking about? You may know Philippians 2, verses 8 and 9. For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast.

So how does Paul say that to the church in Ephesians and then here in Philippians say we have to work out our salvation? What in the world does that mean? Well, we're going to consider that today and really be able to answer that question in two parts.

By first considering the work of man and secondly to consider the work of God. And so let's start with that first part, to consider our work, the work of man.

Now, I think initially when those of us understand the grace of God, we may think, okay, we're not saved by works, so does that give us a free pass? Does that suspend our need to do any work at all?

Well, Paul addresses this elsewhere in the New Testament. It was a temptation that the church was creeping into their mindset and how they practiced. Look, if I have grace then I can do whatever I want.

[3:15] Paul responds in Romans 6, he says, are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means, Paul says. And so we have to ask the question, do works matter?

Do works matter? And it really depends, when we answer that question, it depends on what we mean by the question. Do works matter with regards to our justification? We've seen over and over again, absolutely not.

Paul says, when he says to work out your salvation, he's not saying to work for your salvation. We know that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

So there is nothing that we can do to earn our salvation. There is nothing we can do to lose our salvation. Our salvation depends solely on the work of Christ. And so what do we think then about, when we ask this question, do works matter?

What about from a spiritual life perspective? Because the thing is that even though we are Christians saved by grace, does that mean that we are passive in our lives?

[4 : 21] And we see Paul address this here. We need to recognize that, yes, even though Christ has worked in our lives, we are not relying on our own power for our salvation out of a heart of recognition and appreciation for what Christ has done for us.

That should be the motivating factor toward our obedience. So to work out your salvation then, what is Paul saying? If you look at the Greek, that word work out, it's translated elsewhere in the New Testament as produce, to bring about, to prepare.

And so when we think about working out our salvation, it's this continuous, sustained, strenuous effort that we make when we recognize what Christ has done in our lives, that our lives may be transformed by the reality of this gospel.

And so then what does Paul mean by salvation? Oftentimes when we think of salvation, we think of something that might have occurred in the past if we are believers. Christ has saved us. What is he talking about? Is salvation now?

How do we work it out if it's complete? Well, John Calvin in his commentary, he says that this, in this context, he says salvation is taken to mean the entire course of our calling.

[5 : 32] Meaning everything that God will use to accomplish his purpose in our lives. So Paul makes this clear too. Even though we may think of salvation as something in the past, Paul oftentimes in his letters talks about salvation as something that's ongoing in nature.

1 Corinthians 1.18. 1 Corinthians 1.18. Paul says, For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Romans 13.11. Salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. And so we see this even in Philippians, earlier in chapter 1. In verse 6, Paul said, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

So Paul acknowledges, yes, we have been saved by the blood of Jesus, but we also look forward to when Christ will return. When we will be able to experience the full blessing of our salvation.

And so we live in eager anticipation of that day. We live convinced of the truth that Christ will come again. And so this command to work out your salvation, it's not really any different from the commands that Paul is giving and repeating in Philippians.

[6 : 46] You may remember from a few weeks ago, looking at Philippians chapter 127, he says, Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. We looked at that word worthy.

It means to demonstrate. We demonstrate our salvation by how we live. We display it. We prove it through our actions. And so that's why Paul can say our actions are a clear sign of our salvation. And that from Christ. And so recognizing this, though, there's a component also to recognize this takes effort. Yes, we recognize that we're saved by grace, but there is an element of effort in our Christian lives.

Because the reality is that we do not naturally drift toward godliness. Any more than we drift toward fitness. You know, if you thought about running the Edinburgh Marathon next year, the act of signing up for that marathon does not ensure that you will be able to cross that finish line after 26.2 miles.

We know this. You have to train. You have to log those miles. You have to do those workouts. Change that diet in order to be able to finish that race.

[7 : 58] And so the same goes for godliness here. Although we are declared as holy before God, morally speaking, we still have our sin nature. And so we have to fight that sin nature.

We need to continually pursue Christ. This is what's known as sanctification. It's this process that we go on as believers. A never-ending process as we live this life of progressive transformation. That we strive to become more and more like Jesus. And so Paul tells us, well, what's our mindset then when we work out our salvation?

He says to do so with fear and trembling. Well, what in the world does fear and trembling mean? You know, I use the example of running a marathon. I've mentioned before how I like to run.

I've run most of my lives. When I was in high school, I ran track and field. And I love running track, but those track meets that could last for four and five hours long were some of the most nerve-wracking times that I can remember.

[8 : 56] Because though you may run two or three events, you have to always be ready. You're always wondering when, how much time do I have till my next race? And so you're not just sitting down and relaxing.

You're thinking, okay, I'm probably an hour out from my next race. I need to drink a little bit, maybe eat a little bit, do a little stretching. Okay, there's two events till my event. So I'm going to go on a little jog and make sure I'm at the field on time so I don't miss my heat.

Even during the race, you think about, okay, what are my splits going to be when I'm running? I want to make sure I don't get boxed in on this corner. I want to make sure that I have a little bit left in the tank to run to the finish line. All this takes vigilance.

It takes a level of seriousness and discipline. And so that's what Paul is talking about here. Not that we're, fear and trembling means to be terrified of God. But to recognize the task that he has called us to.

You may think, this sounds like a little too intense if I'm supposed to live my whole life like this. But consider what the psalmist says in Psalm 2, 11. He says, serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

[10 : 00] And so our fear and trembling does not prevent our joy. Though those track meets took a lot out of me, took a lot of discipline. I loved running track.

And so the same is true here. As we rejoice, we can rejoice with our trembling. Knowing that our work is being carried out in the presence of the Almighty God who loves you and cares for you and is for you.

And as we'll see in a minute, our work is not only done in the presence of God. It is the work of God in us. And so one of the side effects, or the positive effects really, when we think about fear and trembling is that it keeps our own pride in check.

When there's a level of fear and trembling, we're not going to be elevating ourselves. Rather, we're going to recognize our need for humility because it's not us that works, but Christ in us. St. Augustine said this about this passage.

He says, we are to work with fear and trembling so that we will not be elated by the good works as if they were. We're our own. And so fear and trembling helps us to remember that it is Christ in us.

[11 : 09] And so then practically, what does this look like? Paul goes on in verse 14. Just like he started this chapter with practical advice, we turn again and he says in verse 14, 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.

Now, if you're familiar with the Bible, you know the Old Testament story of God's people, the people of Israel who lived under Egyptian rule as slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

Until God raised up a leader, Moses, to lead them out of Egypt was to lead them into the promised land. But we recognize that the people of Israel, because of their rebellion, because of their sin, ended up wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years.

And it's recorded over and over again how the people of God grumbled against God. God, we don't have any food. Or we don't have the kind of food we want. Or you haven't given us water.

Or look at our enemies, how big and strong they are. I wish I was back in Egypt. I'd rather just be a slave there and die. Why have you brought us out here? And so this is what Paul is alluding to here.

[12 : 16] Certainly, the New Testament church would recognize the heritage of the people of Israel. And so he points out this grumbling and disputing that kept this first generation from the promised land.

It's something that we as a church today, this complaining against God, this conflict that we see within the body of Christ, it keeps us from spiritual progress as well. It prevents us from appearing different from the world, this crooked and twisted generation.

And I thought a lot about those words. When I read them, you think about a crooked and twisted generation, automatically my mind goes to outside the church. We think about our city. Think about the Fringe Festival going on right now with all the people in our city, all the advertisements and the posters for shows that are being displayed, some of them so vile I don't even want to walk past them with my kids, much less attend the events.

But yet they are praised as art, as part of culture, and they are celebrated. And we think, yeah, our culture is crooked and twisted. But the more I thought about this text to recognize my focus may be in the wrong place.

Because this phrase, crooked and twisted generation, that Paul uses, he didn't come up with these words. These are the words from the Old Testament, from Deuteronomy 32, the song of Moses.

[13:35] This is the song that God gave to Moses to teach to the people of Israel. That would remind them of God's faithfulness in the midst of their unfaithfulness. And so this crooked and twisted generation, it's not describing the enemies of God.

It's not describing the Egyptians. It's not describing the Canaanites. It's describing the people of Israel. Because even after God has given them an inheritance and brought them out of the land of Egypt and cared for them in the wilderness, they have still turned from God.

And it says they forsook the God who made them and scoffed at the rock of their salvation. And so while it's so easy, so easy for me to judge the outside world as being crooked and twisted, I hope we can recognize our own susceptibility here.

That just like the people of Israel, our sin and our rebellion can lead us from Christ. And so may this move us to fear and trembling.

May we be motivated, as Paul says here, to hold fast to the word of life. That we may hunger after God's word, not only to read it or to hear it, but also to put it in practice.

[14:48] To follow it. That we may live lives of self-sacrifice. This is what Paul is talking about in this chapter. That we may seek not only our own interests, but the interests of others. That we may live lives of humility.

That we can be united as the body of Christ, but also be united to Christ, our Savior. And it's when that happens that we may shine like lights in the world.

And so this is the work that Paul is talking about. This is our responsibility as believers. And so you may say, okay, I get it. We're not saved by works. Our works have nothing to do with our justification.

But, talking about sanctification, this sounds pretty tough. If this is how we're supposed to live as Christians, this sounds like it's just unattainable goal for me. But this leads us to the second point of this text.

The work of God. And so look back at verse 12 and 13. Paul says, And so although we've talked about our own need to work out our salvation, Paul makes clear that our work is not of our own efforts.

[16:04] Our work is God's work. And so again, it's worth clearing up any misconceptions here. Just like we talked about, what does it mean to work out your salvation? It doesn't mean we work for our salvation.

What is the relationship between our work and God's work then? I think we can be confused oftentimes to think that we work in cooperation with God. You may have heard the phrase, God helps those who help themselves, right?

Rubbish. It's not in the Bible. The Bible says instead that we do not work in cooperation with God. We don't work in coordination with God.

There's not somehow that we combine our works with Christ in order to achieve some attainable goal. No, it is Christ alone who works in our lives. If we think back to what Duncan read for us in 1 Corinthians 15, what Paul says in verse 10, And so as a believer, Paul sees the need to work really, really hard.

But he takes no pride in his effort because he sees it is Christ working in him. It is not Paul that's the initiator of his work. It's not Paul that's the sustainer of his work.

[17:27] It is God. And so when Paul says God works in us, it means that God is the one who energizes us. God is the one who enables us.

God is the one who empowers us to follow him. And we see this happen in two ways. What Paul points out, God gives us first the will to obey, and he also produces the good works of our obedience.

And so I mentioned earlier that the construction for our renovation of this building is going to start at the end of September. And so there's going to be need for help in order to prepare that building for the construction that's to happen.

We already have plans in place, and we're thinking through that in the days ahead. And we know that we have our church administrator, Sarah, who's going to be coordinating a lot of this. And so think about the fact that if she planned a moving day for us and needed the church to come together, what would happen if that day showed up and none of us are here?

Sarah shows up, and she's all by herself. It would prove a couple points. One, that Sarah has the will to get this work done, but she doesn't have the ability to complete it on her own. Secondly, for us as a congregation, it would show us we have the ability, but we don't have the will to help.

[18 : 41] And so when we think about this work, we may often think of ourselves in either one camp or the other here. We may think, well, you know, I have the ability to follow after God, but I just need God to give me some motivation sometimes.

Or we may think the opposite, recognize, I really want to do what is right, God, but I just don't have the ability. I need your help. Paul is saying here we're being way too generous to ourselves if we're putting ourselves in either one of these camps because we possess neither the will nor the ability to follow after Christ.

Jesus himself says to his disciples in John 15, I am the vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. So you may know the hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, an old hymn from the 1700s, one of my favorites. And in there is a stanza that says, Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, O take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above.

And so the hymn writer highlights here our natural tendency to wander from God. It's not that we want to do good and don't have the ability. It's that we do not even have the desire to do what is right apart from the work of God.

[20 : 02] And so just like our own conversion, just like our own election, it's not us that chose God. It is God that chose us. Likewise, in this life of sanctification, it is not us that pursues Christ, but Christ that pursues us, that gives us the ability and the desire to follow after him.

And so then we see what happens when God works in our hearts and in our wills. If we look back in the Old Testament again, Ezekiel 36, it's this prophecy of spiritual renewal for God's people.

And this is what God says to his people. He says, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. And so we see it is solely through the work of the Holy Spirit that we have a heart for Christ, that we have the desire to follow, to walk in his statutes and to obey his laws.

And so not only does God then give us the will and the desire to follow after him, he gives us the ability to work for his good pleasure, it says. And so again, one of those phrases that we hear often, maybe within the church, we know, we should know that aren't true.

[21 : 17] God doesn't give us more than we can handle. Again, rubbish. rubbish. The phrase is assuming that we can handle some amount of work on our own before we need God's help to step in to intervene.

But we see here that we fully rely on God to bring about obedience in our lives. It's not of ourselves. And so my family and I, we've been in Scotland for two years now. One of the things I had to adjust to most was the electrical outlets and the switches on outlets.

In the States, we don't have switches on outlets. So countless times I'd plug something in thinking I'm charging something or doing something and realize there's no power. Multiple times in the kitchen, I'm trying, Rachel asked me to cook some rice.

I put rice in the rice cooker, click the switch, walk away, come back 30 minutes later, rice hasn't cooked because power's not on. And so we can see ourselves, we can view ourselves as these electrical appliance.

We are only useful when we are connected to the power source. That of course is Christ. Without Christ, we are completely useless on our own. And so perhaps a better phrase than saying God doesn't give us more than we can handle, is God doesn't call us to do something without supplying for us his ability to do it.

[22 : 31] Not quite as catchy of a ring, but that's the gospel truth. Paul says himself, Philippians 4.13, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. And so I hope this is an encouragement to us that we cannot take credit for anything that we do.

We serve in the strength that God alone supplies for us. And so think about this, rather than a God coming to us and saying, you need to follow me in and of your own ability, we have a God, the omnipotent Lord of the universe coming and saying, I will work in you and through you and for you. It is God who transforms us into the likeness of his son by his sanctifying grace. And so what a freeing reality this is. And though we, and though, even though we are encouraged to work and to work hard, we recognize that our work is not a burden to us because we do not have to rely on our own exertion.

But instead we trust in the blessing of God who is solely responsible, both for the origin of our work and for the outcome of our work. And so when we get caught up in patterns of sin in our life and we feel like we're trapped and we can't get out on our own, we turn to Christ.

When we feel like relationships with our spouse or our children, our brothers and sisters within the church, our falling apart, we turn to Christ. When we are tempted to seek our own comforts rather than caring for the needs of others, we turn to Christ.

[24 : 05] And if those here that aren't believers, that think it's all about your hard work in order for God to give you his good pleasure, no, it is Christ.

We turn to Christ for our salvation. We turn to Christ for our sanctification. And so we do this because we keep our eyes focused on the goal.

We see how Paul concludes this passage. These verse 13, he says, God works in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure. So Paul comes right back to where he started.

We saw last week how God receives the glory for our salvation through the work of Christ. And now we see again that God receives the glory for our sanctification that comes through his spirit.

And so when we see this happen, it's something really wonderful. That's really a miracle of God to see God align our wills with his.

[25 : 07] Because we see that we are not only invited to follow Christ's obedience, but we're also allowed to delight in God's joy. And ultimately, we will share in the glory of God at the day of Christ.

And that's good news. Let's pray. God, we thank you for the work of your son, Jesus, not only in saving us from our sins, but empowering us towards sanctification.

God, may it be our desire to grow more and more like you, not relying on our own strength, on our own ability, on the power of God to change our wills, to change our hearts, and to give us the ability to follow after you.

Lord, we pray that this message may be something that sinks in deep into our heart and that may be practical for us as a church family to know how to love one another well and serve one another well, that we may cling to the word of life, that we may be different from the crooked and twisted generation.

O God, by your power and through your spirit, may we shine like a light in this world, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, now we have the opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Supper together, so I'm going to ask Daniel Slatt to come forward, who's going to be leading us in the sacrament.

[26 : 53] coming back in from the Sunday school, so we'll wait just a moment as they return to the church. nothing.

I have the opportunity to step forward, so we'll walk to the house now.

Thank you.

Thank you.