

Attain Your Salvation!

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[0 : 00] All right, well, we are going to continue with our sermon here this morning, so I would invite you to turn to Philippians chapter 2, Philippians chapter 2 in your Bible.

I'm going to, first of all, give thanks for God's Word here as I prepare to preach. Father, we thank you that your Word is faithful and true.

And that the wisdom that we gain from it often is not something that we would invent ourselves. I know that there are many times that I have opened up the Scripture and found in there things that I could never have come up with in a million years.

Things that cut against the grain of what we in our sinful nature often want you to say or want to be true. And yet, the deeper we go in, Lord, we are grateful to find that your wisdom and your truth is actually far better than we could have ever asked or imagined.

And so I pray this morning that in the time that we have, that we would have eyes to see what you're seeing, that we would have your ears to hear what you're hearing, and a heart like yours to understand you and to understand ourselves and understand the work of salvation you are doing in exactly the way that you are understanding it.

[1 : 23] Lord God, that what wisdom, what insight you've given us, may you give to us more and more. Amen. Amen. Well, I don't know if you've ever had someone, maybe you're talking with someone who is not a believer, who finds God's Word to be objectionable, who finds it to be, you know, they don't like it or they find it untrue and they say something to you like, you know that the Bible is full of contradictions, right?

That's a common sort of takedown of Scripture. And just as a little bit of a tip, if you're wondering, how do I respond to a statement like that, the best way to respond is to ask them, which ones did you have in mind?

And I think what you'll find is probably four out of five times they'll change the subject because they weren't really prepared to actually have something specific. But even if they do, then you have an opportunity, all right, well, let's take a look.

Let's take a look. Let's look for ourselves and see what the contradiction is. And I actually love that because it becomes this amazing learning experience, not just for them, but for me.

To wrestling with things that look like contradictions in God's Word is one of the best ways to learn more about God, about His way of thinking, and about the riches of wisdom and insight in His Word.

[2 : 45] And so in Philippians chapter 2 this morning, we're going to find a few ideas that seem to contradict one another or that seem to contradict some other things that Paul is writing in this very letter.

But as we dive into those apparent contradictions, what we're going to find is that God, in His wisdom and His insight, actually has some incredible riches that help us understand Him and the world He has made.

So we're going to get the context first. We're going to start in Philippians chapter 2 verse 1. If you don't have a Bible or if you're using one of the Bibles that are available in the back, that will be on page 980.

And Philippians, I'll start in chapter 2 verse 1 and I'm going to read through verse 13 and that will give us the context here. So here's what Paul writes. He says,

He says, And this is the word of the Lord.

[5 : 05]

If you had a boss, if you had a teacher who gave you an assignment, stuck and then went, stuck a finger right in your face and said, obey, you would probably not feel very beloved, would you?

Not very well loved. Because obedience comes with it. It implies subservience. It implies submission to authority.

And to obey in a Western culture is considered degrading, dehumanizing. It's fingernails running down a chalkboard. So how can Paul call these Christians, my beloved, and then in the next breath, commend them for obeying?

Second contradiction. Second contradiction comes shortly afterward when Paul writes, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

[7 : 30] And this especially becomes a problem when you find that the word that's translated in English as work out. It's actually a very common word throughout the New Testament.

And everywhere else it means to accomplish, to arrive at, to attain. So Paul is saying, attain your salvation. Now, if you've been around Christian teaching much, then you know, you've heard that we are saved by grace, by God's unmerited favor, through faith alone.

That's the only way to be saved from the wrath of God against sin, against our rebellion towards him. We have to believe that he has sent his only son into the world as that man, Jesus of Nazareth.

We must trust Jesus in his death and his resurrection that Paul writes about, only a few verses earlier. That we trust that this is the way that God has atoned for our sins.

This is the way that God has satisfied justice by providing a substitute for us. This is the way that God has won the victory over the devil. It is not our own works that save us.

[8 : 43] They can never be enough to satisfy an infinitely holy God. They cannot be the basis. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that saves us. That's what we are told.

That's what we seem to read elsewhere. In fact, Paul teaches this very same thing only a chapter later. In chapter 3, verses 8 and 9, you'll find him say, that for his sake, for Christ's sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ. The righteousness from God that depends on faith.

So, we are not saved, Paul is saying in chapter 3, on the basis of our obedience to God's law. We're not saved on the basis of our good works.

Salvation isn't something we earn. And yet, a chapter earlier, here in chapter 2, verse 12, Paul is saying, attain your salvation. And not just that, he's saying, attain your salvation with fear and trembling.

[9 : 56] Well, that does not sound like something that inspires joyful confidence, does it? These words don't sound like someone who feels secure, that his sins are forgiven, that he's been saved by God.

It sounds, to our ears, more like a, you know, maybe a terrified religious adherent who is cowering before a demanding God.

It has that feeling to us when a lot of times we hear it. And then, just for fun, we've got two contradictions already. Let then, Paul adds in verse 13, it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

So, he has just said, it's up to you to attain your salvation, to do work. And now he says, actually, it's God doing the work. He's working inside every Christian to change their minds, to change their actions.

So, which is it? Is it you? Is it God? Make up your mind, Paul. He can't even hold a single thought in his head for two verses, can he? That's what it seems like at first.

[10 : 58] So, we're left with those three apparent contradictions, which means we have three opportunities to know God in a new way in these verses. And we're going to tackle them by first focusing on that command that Paul gives in verse 12.

And then, we're going to look at the promise he gives in verse 13. So, first, the command. Here's what Paul writes in verse 12. Now, that's a bit of a complex sentence.

You can count the commas there, right? Let's boil it down. Let's make it simple with a question. The core of the sentence is an imperative or a command that Paul is giving.

What is it? What's the command? Well, if there are any grammar nuts here, you know the answer to that. The imperative there is work out or attain.

The heart of this verse is the phrase, attain your salvation. So, that's going to be the first key point of the sermon. Attain your salvation. You know, no need to improve on what's already here.

[12:21] We saw before this that that seems to contradict something else Paul says later in this letter. That we're saved not by our own righteousness, but by the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

But this can be resolved. Paul doesn't have to be contradicting himself. We've got to give him the benefit of the doubt that this guy knows what he's talking about, and he's not all addled and confused.

We let Paul be his own interpreter. That's one of the most important principles that you must have when reading the Bible, is let Scripture interpret Scripture. And especially when it's the same human author.

The best interpreter of Paul is Paul. And so, we see verse 12 is not the only time Paul talks about attaining our final salvation.

He writes about it in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10, where he says, It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

[13:27] Referring to that day when Christ returns. And then he writes about it again in chapter 3, verses 10 and 11, when he says, That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

And that last quote in particular, it helps us understand what Paul is getting at. When Paul is telling the Philippians to attain their salvation, he is not saying that they're somehow earning their way to heaven by doing enough good works, finally doing enough to keep God happy.

He's saying that their salvation, it isn't on the basis of their good works, but that their salvation still requires their good works.

Now, maybe you're thinking, What are you talking about? What is the distinction there? So I'll give an illustration, and hopefully this helps us understand what he means. Imagine that you go to the counter of a movie theater, and you hand over \$15 to buy a ticket.

It's been a little bit since I've been in movies. What are the tickets going for these days? Maybe I should say \$40. I don't know. That \$15, let's just say it is. Let's say it's the base. That \$15 is the basis on which you get to see the movie.

[14:55] That \$15, that is the basis. That's the earning. You earn the movie that way. And that in order to demonstrate that you have earned the right to see the movie by handing over \$15, you are given a ticket.

That ticket lets you claim the right. The theater employees, you know, you pay up front, and then you go back to the screen, and there's an employee there who is collecting tickets.

He, this employee, he or she will not let you into the movie. Unless you're carrying your ticket. Now for the Christian, we don't earn the right to see the movie with our \$15 of good works.

Because you don't have \$15 of good works. Jesus pays it for us. With his own righteousness. That's the point Paul is making in chapter 3.

That Paul who, if anyone could point to his own life and say, look at all the good I've done. Look at all the works I have to boast in. Paul says, I'm the guy you could, I'm the guy who could do that.

[16:05] But he says he counts them as nothing. In his eyes, his own good works are so much pocket lint. They won't earn him the right to see the movie. And so Paul turns to Jesus Christ to pay it all.

Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. And he pays it for us with his own perfect life and death on the cross. He pays it all by being the man we could never be.

But we must show up with a ticket that demonstrates that we are the recipients of that payment. We must show up with a ticket to demonstrate that Jesus has paid it on our behalf.

And the good works that we do are like that ticket. They demonstrate a life that is changed by our union with Christ. They demonstrate that we really have been united with him by faith.

They demonstrate that with that union comes, that union always comes with a transformed heart that has received the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives to us.

[17:13] So our good works are not the basis on which we will be saved, but they are the ticket that demonstrates our salvation. Now boy, people, having that distinction is really important.

And unfortunately, also making this distinction can really mess a lot of people up. If you don't make this distinction, you'll have false teachers who will tell you you don't need a ticket. I've talked with a number of people who are convinced because they prayed a prayer one time when they were a kid, because their parents are believers, because they grew up in the church and they generally kind of believe in God.

They can now go off, live whatever lifestyle they want to live, and they'll still be able to stand before God unashamed. They're still good with God. I'm still good with Jesus. That's like someone who thinks that because they got pockets, someone who thinks that because they, that they can pay \$15, that Jesus paid it, but they don't need a ticket to walk into the theater.

You do need a ticket. Every Christian comes, real Christian comes with a ticket. I want to add too, that sometimes people get bent out of shape thinking that, you know, they confuse the ticket for the money.

They think, look at how good I am. This earns me the right to be saved. I can earn my way into heaven. I can point to all the good things I've done. And Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount warns against that mentality.

[18:40] He says, people who can point to, look at all the mighty things I've done in your name, Jesus, is he turns to them and says, depart from me. I never knew you. You thought you were the one earning your way into the theater, and you're not.

And then I want to add too, because sometimes I encounter this in counseling, is people get really worried. What if I don't have enough good works? What if my ticket isn't enough? What if I'm not really saved?

What if, oh no, oh no, oh no? And to them I say, first of all, I've never encountered somebody like that where I was worried about whether they were believers or not.

Because I knew their heart was they genuinely wanted to, they genuinely loved the Lord, wanted to be with the Lord. And what I would usually tell them in counseling is this, the problem is not a lack of good works on your part.

The problem is you don't know your father's heart for you. His heart of compassion for you.

Because someone who has genuinely been counted righteous by God on the basis of what Jesus has done, that person is a new creation who is being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

[19:51] And others look at their life and they can see it, even if that person sometimes can't. You attain your salvation on the day of judgment by demonstrating a life characterized by good works, by partnership in the gospel.

And Paul loves taking, he looks forward to the day that he gets to bring these Philippian believers before God on the day of judgment and point to them and say, look at their lives, look at the transformed lives.

These guys are the real deal, Lord. I bring them to you. Now what does that look like in practical terms in real life?

Well, Paul answers this question when he says in verse 12, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation.

And so it begins with, as you have always obeyed. Attaining your salvation looks like obedience. Faithful, persistent, earnest obedience. obedience. And this is where it gets hard for us, especially, for everybody in the world, but especially, I think, for Westerners, because by nature, we just don't like obedience.

[21:08] Obedience, that's for children. I'm not a child. I'm my own man. I don't need someone telling me what to do. How can these be good words? How can these be words of love?

Well, this reminds me a bit of a reality TV show I once saw called Get Out Alive with Bear Grylls. Some of you, I don't know if Bear Grylls, you see him around much, but I remember he was all the rage a number of years ago.

You know, this wilderness survival guy who always found, like, the most ridiculous ways to survive in the wilderness. And the storyline of that reality TV series is that Bear Grylls was leading several teams of people through the wilderness of New Zealand, and he would be testing them and judging whether or not they would be able to get out alive.

So it's a survival skills show. So early in the episode that I watched, Bear arrives at the campsite of his exhausted disciples, right?

And he brings them, of all things, a can of earthworms. Now, those of you who are familiar with Bear Grylls probably know where this is going. The camera zooms in to show that some of the

worms in it are still alive and wriggling.

[22 : 25] And what do you think Bear tells them to do? Yeah. Eat the worms, of course, as you do. And some of them do it.

They eat whole handfuls of the worms. Maybe not so much with gusto, but with a sense of, okay, this is what we got to do. And then there are others who cannot bring themselves to eat more than one or two worms.

And those poor souls, what happens over the course of the episode is that they spend the rest of the episode lacking in energy, moving slowly, because they don't have enough fuel in their bodies. And so at the end of the episode, Bear Grylls reprimands the people who only ate one or two earthworms. And here is, I wrote down what he says to them. He says, the person who's going to survive here is the person who listens to what I say and does it.

You're not slow because you're slow people. You're slow because you're not doing what you're told. Now, Bear did not say those words from a place of contempt to belittle the people on this show.

[23 : 37] He said it out of real concern for them. Think of it like having a father figure who loves you, who comes alongside of you, and he puts his arm around you, and he says words like that.

You need to listen to what I say and do it. The reason you're not, the reason you've been moving so slow is because you're not doing what you're told. And what if you know that he is saying that from a place of fatherly concern for you?

He loves you. He wants your good. Gospel partners who are going to attain their salvation are the ones who listen to the fatherly concern of God.

They hear his voice. The sheep know the voice of their father. They know what he sounds like.

They understand the heart behind what he says when he says obey.

And so the words of the apostle hit them differently. And then they do what God says. Because this isn't a matter of God just trying to ruin your fun.

[24 : 52] This isn't a matter of God just putting you in your place. That's what the serpent tried to get people to think in Genesis 3. He wanted them to hear their father's voice as though God were not having their best interest at heart.

But this is God speaking to save your life. This is a matter of life and death. This is a matter of heaven and hell. It is not just survival.

Eternal life is at stake. And God knows the best way to ensure that you and I will attain our salvation.

It's by doing what he tells you. And a heart that loves the Lord and that knows his heart will respond with obedience to the challenge.

It is a matter of grave importance because Paul says work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And he actually emphasizes that phrase fear and trembling.

[25 : 55] Why does he want his readers to be characterized by fear and trembling? I know maybe some of those earthworm eaters had a bit of fear and trembling as they were sticking their hands in the can. But that's not what Paul is getting at. He answers our question right away in verse 13.

For it is God who works in you. It is God who works in you. Christians should attain their salvation through fear and trembling because God is at work in you.

Back in chapter 1 verse 28 Paul told the Philippians that they should not be frightened in anything by your opponents. And now we see why.

Now we see the fear that delivers them from all other fears. If the Lord of all the universe, if the judge of all mankind is the one who dwells in you and is actively at work in you for your good, then there is no room to fear anyone else.

Other people start looking a little bit smaller. They start becoming human size instead of becoming little gods in our mind. It is the mighty power of God.

[27 : 13] It is his awesome work of salvation that causes you and me to have that fear for him, that awe, that wonder. To fear is to have that visceral response to whatever is bigger than us in power and significance.

You look at God and you know he is powerful. You look at him and you know he is significant.

There is no one bigger than God. David read in Exodus chapter 15 earlier in the sermon how God defeated the superpower of its day, Pharaoh and the army of Egypt.

The most mighty military force, they had chariots and God drowned them all in the sea. In Psalm 2 verse 11 it is written, serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

There it is, that fear and trembling. And as countercultural as it is, fear and trembling they are the only appropriate response when you know that this almighty God, he is at work right here, right now in you, among us and within us.

This is the God who highly exalted Jesus Christ and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[28 : 46] It is this God with the same resurrection power who works in you. And here's what Paul says that God is doing in verse 13.

It is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. God is doing what you can never do for yourself.

We don't have it in ourselves to do and be all that God has called us to do. We just don't. But rather than abandoning us to our shame God changes and empowers your will and your work.

As one commentator puts it God is working to supply both the determination to obey his own gracious purpose and the power to carry it out.

And that's good news. This great and powerful God who is at work for his glory and your good and his heart is for you.

[29 : 57] That he supplies all the power and all the ability. Every Christian every genuine believer in Jesus Christ will persevere to that day of salvation.

Not because we're so tough and we're wise and we're good and we're better than the other people who fall away. But because God is at work in us. because he doesn't let us go even when we sometimes let him go.

It is so typical of scripture that on the one hand we are told our responsibility to attain our salvation to do work and then right away told what God is taking responsibility for.

That God is doing the work. If you've read the Bible through you recognize that pattern. God affirms his divine sovereignty and our human responsibility both at the same time.

And so we've seen all three of our apparent contradictions be resolved. We are at work and God is at work behind it all. The two do not conflict with one another.

[31 : 03] We attain our salvation not by earning it but by demonstrating its genuine character. By showing up with the ticket. And that God's call to obey comes not from a place where he wants to put us in our place and degrade us.

It doesn't come from a chiding and demanding heart but it comes from a heart of fatherly concern for us for our good and for his glory. And so then what shall we do?

Listen and obey. the message of the gospel. Take heed of that command to repent of our old way of life. To believe in Jesus Christ.

And if that's something you've never done please come and see me after the worship service today. I would love to talk with you about it. And if that if you have done that if you've put your faith in Christ rejoice and tremble because God knows you and God loves you dearly.

Stay firm stay steadfast so that you will attain your salvation so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

[32 : 22] Let me pray. Father I thank you that you speak to us plainly you speak to us firmly and you speak to us affectionately and lovingly all at the same time.

This is what our heart needs. We are surrounded by so many people who assuage us with empty words of assurance who just tell us we can be whatever we want follow your heart express yourself freely losing sight of what we actually need to have eternal life.

We are surrounded by people who would shame us demand make demands of us and do it all under the cloak of religion and a false sense of righteousness. But you come alongside of us call us to obey work to transform us and bring us to your eternal glory.

You show that you are a different kind of God and you are a different kind of king. That your authority over us is good. It is exactly what we need. Lord God may our hearts be soft to respond to it.

May our ears hear your voice in just the way you have spoken it. May our eyes see look forward to the future and see the good that you have in store for us and long for that.

[33 : 54] Amen.