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To Will and To Do Philippians 2:12-13

Intro: We have just spent the last few weeks looking at one of the premier passages in the entire canon of Scripture, in my opinion. [Phil 2:5-11](#) is Paul's doctrinal thesis on the Person and work of Jesus Christ, albeit in a nutshell. In this passage, Paul has covered the majority of the critical doctrines of Jesus from His pre-existence in eternity past, to His incarnation and humiliation—brought to a horrendous conclusion on the cross, to His ultimate exaltation in heaven by the Father. All of these are amazing doctrines. All speak to glory of Jesus Christ and what He means to every believer and it would do every Christian a world of good to get alone with God, study this passage on their own and contemplate the glorious extent to which the grace of God has been poured out for sinners such as we are.

But, having said that, let's remember that spending time alone with God is not necessarily the goal of the Christian life; it is a means to a goal. Let me explain that statement this way. On the one hand, no believer should ever feel that spending time alone with God is unnecessary, especially in prayer and personal Bible study. But, the Bible never allows us to think that this quiet time with God has achieved its intended purpose in our lives unless it actually results in some kind of practical application. Truth leads to action! There is no value in a mountaintop experience unless it helps us to live in the valleys.

Just look at the overall context of ch2. Paul is exhorting the Philippian believers to live and walk in Christian unity. To do this properly, they must first be willing to set aside their own selfish ambitions and then look out for the interests (benefit) of others. To illustrate his point, Paul points to the work of Christ and delivers some of the most sublime truths in the NT concerning Jesus Christ. Yet these doctrines aren't introduced here for their own sake but for a very practical purpose. They're included 1st as an example of the role of obedience and humility in living the Christian life. But, no sooner have they been presented than Paul returns once more to practical Christianity. There is no pause for reflection on the great doctrines of Christ; the immediate sequel to Paul's revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ is... that we are to be holy. We're to act in light of the work the Christ

has done with the same attitude He displayed while doing it. In short, we are to get to work (spiritually).

12 – Therefore – We should not miss the connection between the obedience Jesus showed in **v8** and the obedience Paul expected of Christians as followers of Jesus in **v12**. Notice how Paul has used therefore twice in this text—in **v9** and again in **v12**. It means because of this, and the double use points to 2 parallel results of Christ’s conduct. Jesus Christ humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross; therefore God also exalted Him (**9**). Jesus showed us the way of humility and obedience; therefore the Christian is to work out their salvation (**12**). This again shows that doctrine always leads to practical Christianity.

Now, before we get down to brass tacks, I do need to point out that **v12** has been problematic for some Christians in the past but only for those who neglect the context. Failing to take context into account leads some to assume that **v12** supports the idea of a “self-help” salvation. This is the idea that although God’s a standard of righteousness is 100%, He knows humans will never attain it and is content with something less (41%, 63%). People who think of salvation this way take v12 as a statement that salvation can be earned and we’re to work toward it. But the verse doesn’t teach that; in fact; that would contradict the entire gospel message Paul preached. What **v12** really teaches is that because you’re already saved, because God has already entered your life in the person of the Holy Spirit, because you already have His power at work within you—you’re now to strive to express this in your conduct.

This meaning should be obvious for 2 reasons. 1st, it’s the clear meaning of the sentence itself. The verse doesn’t say, “work for your salvation” or “work toward your salvation” or “work at your salvation.” It says “work out your salvation.” And no one can work his salvation out unless God has already worked it in. There is a sense in which our salvation is complete – perfect, if you will. This is in the sense that Jesus has done a complete work of salvation for us. Still, there is another sense in which our salvation is incomplete, in that the work of transformation, molding us into the image of Christ, is not yet complete.

When a person comes to the truth of the gospel he’s not much different from what he was just before he believed. He heard the gospel preached and

responded to it. Before he believed he was filled with misconceptions about God and himself. He had problems that he couldn't solve. He was doing a lot of things that were against the will of God. After he believes, things are usually exactly the same. He still has the same problems, same misconceptions, the same sins, sometimes even the same doubts. But it now begins to dawn on him that many of these things must change. He now has the Holy Spirit in his heart and as he responds to the work of the Holy Spirit, he begins to see that the salvation he already has must express itself in action. It must be seen distinctly in his conduct.

The 2nd reason why this verse refers to the outward conduct of believers is that there's a clear parallel between [Phil 2:12-15](#) and [Deut 32](#). The words children and blameless and the phrase a crooked and perverse generation in [v15](#) appear in [Deut 32:4-5](#). This shows Paul was thinking of Deuteronomy as he wrote to the Philippians.

The Israelites had been delivered from Egypt by God in spite of the fact that there was nothing in them to commend them to God. They weren't mighty or wise; they weren't more numerous than other people. But God loved them; that was the sole reason for God's deliverance. If the Israelites had had their way, they would have stayed in Egypt, even as slaves. Even after they were delivered there were times when they desired to go back. But God led them out, and He didn't change His mind. He had chosen them; He had led them in the wilderness; He trained them for 40 years. Now they were again at the Jordan River, and they were about to go into the land.

Moses knew by this time that he wouldn't be allowed to enter the land with them, but before he was removed from the scene, he wanted to give a charge to the people to remind them of their past deliverance and future obligations. Moses knew that God had called them and led them through the wilderness and was with them even then. On the basis of this truth he now argues that they are to possess the land and to live in it as God's obedient children.

This is why Paul has this chapter in mind. Paul was about to be taken out of this world himself, as Moses was. He didn't know if he would be killed immediately or if he would be released for a while, but he knew this would probably be his last charge to his beloved friends at Philippi. He realized that the situation of the Philippians was similar to that of the Israelites and

his was like that of Moses. They had been dead in their sins and had loved it. They would have stayed in their sins had God not begun to teach them the Christian way of life. But God had delivered them, and now, because of this deliverance, they were to work out the salvation that God had so miraculously given. They were to strive for the realization of God's love, peace, holiness, goodness, and justice in their lives.

So are you to strive, if you are a Christian. Sure, we are given salvation by God's grace but a salvation that has no effect on human life is no salvation at all. "A gospel that doesn't change you can't save you." Salvation must be put into effect! Believers are called to become in practice what they already are in spiritual reality— to put some effort into making the status that God has graciously given to them real in their lives. And not just once in a while. In a physical sense, salvation is both a present process and a future goal. In the Greek, work is in the present tense which implies a continuous action. Paul is literally saying, "Continue to put into effect your own salvation." If you've known God's deliverance in your life, then you have entered upon a lifetime of God's training and encouragement and are to seek to express the character of God in all that you do. You are to work out this salvation in your conduct.

Your own – While Paul was with them, he was a helper, a director, a facilitator of these truths in their lives. But now, Paul is separated from them by distance and imprisonment so it is up to them to carry on with their Christian walk themselves. Thus, they are to work out their own salvation without any direct assistance from Paul. Of course, Paul is sure that they will manage this. He knows from his spent time with them that they are obedient to the Lord and he is confident that they will carry on just as they had started, as long as they do so in the right attitude. Which is?

The right attitude for any Christian effort is with fear and trembling. The idea is not that we should live our Christian lives with a constant sense of fear and terror neither is Paul referring to a fear of hell or damnation. This is not the trembling of a guilty sinner. Paul is speaking about the righteous and awe-filled reverence for God that every believer should have. This biblical phrase is often used for encounters with God and Paul's use of it here suggests that the Philippian believers were to work and live as though they were standing before the presence of God in all of His awesome power and majesty—which, of course, they were...as are we! The problem is that its all

too easy to act as though God is not constantly present in our lives.

There are times when the presence of God is an inescapable experience. God's presence may manifest itself during times of corporate worship or personal Bible study or even, thankfully, in times of great stress. At these times, there's no hesitancy in desiring to live up to His love, wonder and joy. But, for the vast majority of the time in our lives, God's presence isn't easily felt or readily recognized even though it is no less a reality. Thus, it's easy for believers to act as though God isn't watching or doesn't matter and that's when things begin to turn sour. Whatever problems existed in the Philippian church (or any church) would soon disappear if all concerned parties would honestly ask themselves the question, "What do you suppose God thinks about this?" The only fear Christians should feel is the fear of failing to see the spiritual salvation that God has given to them being demonstrated or worked out in their physical lives.

13 – Paul now gives the reason why Christians must work out their own salvation with fear and trembling – because God is working in them. Even as we work out our salvation we should know that it's actually God's Holy Spirit within us who does the working. God's working begins with our wills, for the verse says that God works in us first to will and then **to** act out His good purpose. Willing always comes before doing. God's work in our lives extends to the transformation of our will as well as bringing about a change in our actions. But this is not a passive transaction; it is something we must willingly and deliberately participate in.

This is the big difference between the work Paul has in mind here and normal human efforts to be good. The big difference is that the outworking of their salvation is not going to be done by the Philippians alone. In fact, the lion's share of the work is to be done by God Himself, through His Holy Spirit. God is at work within the believer, through His indwelling Spirit, strengthening and directing. God is the senior partner in this co-op. He not only provides the gift of salvation to the believer but also both the ability to carry out their calling and the inspiration (the will) to perform the task. Of course, it's possible for anyone to will to do good and many succeed to a greater or lesser degree. But, anyone who has ever tried to keep a New Year's resolution will know that there is a lot more to doing what is right than just wanting to. Part of the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians is to enable His people, to give the gifts and strengths necessary for the task

at hand.

But, just because God has done a great work in our lives in saving us and just because the Holy Spirit continues to do a great work in our lives sanctifying us; that doesn't get us off the hook from working ourselves. God's work in our lives presents us with a greater responsibility to work more diligently with fear and trembling concerning our own walk with the Lord. Those that use God's sovereignty and working as an excuse for inaction or lethargy are like the wicked and lazy servant of [Mt 25:24-30](#). God's work in us increases our responsibility; it doesn't lessen it in any way. Those that are truly God's servants will use their understanding of His sovereignty and omnipotence as a motivation for greater, more dedicated service. If you serve an all powerful and sovereign God and are obedient to His call, how can you fail?

If you have seen this truth, you are ready to see that the same God who works in you to will also work through that will to do according to His good pleasure. What Paul means is that the obedient outworking of the salvation that God has given us is for God's good pleasure: because He wills it. At first glance, it may seem like God's being capricious or impulsive and could just as easily have decided to do something else but that is not an accurate assessment of the truth. God wills the salvation of His lost creatures just as He wills the good works of those He saves; He wills this because that is His nature! God is pleased to do good by His creation because God Himself is good and self giving. The motivation for His work in our lives is that it gives Him pleasure to do so.

So, God is at work in our lives and we should also be working; not to earn salvation because salvation has already been granted. Remember, this exhortation is not directed to all mankind but only to the people of God, to those who are already saved through a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. No one is to work for their salvation, in the sense of accomplishing it – that would be impossible! But, believers are to work out their salvation to the extent that others can see it evident in every area of their lives. They are to activate the salvation that God has freely given them.

Let's turn to the well-known passage of [Eph 2:8-10](#) and notice that it speaks twice of our works, the things that we do. One kind of work is condemned because it comes out of ourselves and is contaminated by sin. The other

kind of work is encouraged because it comes from God as He works within the Christian. These verses are really Paul's own commentary upon **Phil 2:12-13**, for they tell us that although God can never be satisfied with any good that comes out of human beings, He is satisfied and pleased with the good that's done by Christians through the power of Jesus Christ within them. Through that power the tyranny of sin is broken and a new life of communion with God and holiness before God is made available to the Christian.

Have you had that experience? Have you felt the power of God within enabling you to do what God desires?

The power of Jesus Christ dwelling within us is a wonderful reality for Christians. Through it we have the power to act according to God's good purpose. We don't have anything to boast of in ourselves or in human attainments. But we do boast in God. In Him we possess all things and are enabled to work out our salvation. We must allow God to do what only He can do in our lives and we must do what only we can do in our lives, walk in humble obedience just as Jesus Christ was willing to do. 😊