

## Philippians 2:12-18

### Working Out Salvation

...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* – v. 12

Working out! – it's a popular activity in this day and age. I joined a gym myself some time back and each time I go to the gym I see quite an assortment of people. There are young people, old people, large people, skinny people. There are some that utilize all the strength they can muster to walk about as slow as a treadmill will go. And I've seen others who go so fast on the elliptical machine that I half expect to see the machine lift off the floor.

And it's all well and good as far as it goes and it can go far physically but it doesn't necessarily do anything for you spiritually unless you have the ability to shut out things around you and meditate and pray while you're huffing and puffing. Is this why Paul says in 1Tim. 4:8 that *bodily exercise profiteth little but godliness is profitable unto all things*? The sources I checked (and I think this is probably true generally) suggest that Paul is not dealing with physical exercise so much as he's dealing with that form of monastic austerity that practiced the kind of self-denial that Luther became famous for before he was saved.

Be that as it may our text definitely brings to our attention a workout of another kind – a spiritual workout, if you will, that is suppose to be a habit of life for the Christian. *Work out your own salvation* Paul writes in v. 12. *Work out* – it's a single word in the Greek which is defined in one lexicon as performing, accomplishing, achieving, or to do something from which something results.

This is one of those verses that at first sight strikes some Christians as strange especially when they've been drilled in the truth that salvation is not by works. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. So it needs to be clarified from the start of our study that when we define this term *work out* as accomplishing or achieving something Paul is not for a moment suggesting that salvation is achieved by our works.

When you think about it for a moment you could say that this 12<sup>th</sup> verse in Phil. 2 probably provides the best commentary for us on the epistle of James. The epistle of James had many early Christians scratching their heads as to whether or not it belonged in the New Testament because of its emphasis on works. Martin Luther himself at least in his early days challenged the canonicity of James.

I think Paul's statement, however, provides the most concise means to reconciling what is only on the surface an apparent contradiction. Paul is not saying that salvation is by works but he is saying that salvation can and must be put to work. Salvation, if you will, should lead you to the consistent practice of working out spiritually.

Now we should note the connection between v. 12 with what precedes it. The fact that there is a connection is apparent by the word *wherefore*. So we recognize a connection between this statement about working out salvation with the previous verses that give us that deep and rich description of Christ in his humiliation and exaltation. It is in connection

with who Christ is and what Christ has done and where Christ is now that you should work out your own salvation. And doesn't this make for a complete picture where the life of the believer is concerned. In the verse that precedes the theological section about Christ we're told to *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*. So we've considered how the doctrine of Christ should effect the Christian's mind or the way the Christian thinks.

But Christianity is not meant to be merely a head religion. I wonder at times if some people in reformed circles appreciate this. I'm afraid that for some, reformed theology amounts to little more than brain exercise that doesn't really effect a man's life. Theology amounts to little more than a religious crossword puzzle or a brain teasing exercise.

The words of our text in v. 12 indicate to us that the doctrine of Christ not only should effect how the believer thinks but it should also effect what he does – his actions or his works. I should point out also that the text makes a very plain connection between the believer's obedience and his working out of his salvation. Do you see the connection?

Look at the text again: *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye 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*. There's a sense in which Paul is telling them to keep on doing what they have been doing. Just as you have obeyed continue in my absence to obey. But instead of using the word obey a second time he describes obedience as the working out of salvation.

And so the doctrine of Christ – his deity, his incarnation, his obedience unto death and his exaltation should lead us to have his mind and to work out our salvation with that right kind of mind. I want to focus today in particular on this idea of working out your salvation by asking the question:

## What Does it Mean to Work out Your Salvation?

Let's think first of all on:

### I. The Ways in which We Work out Salvation

There are a number of ways in which salvation is worked out. I'm going to give you three. You can and should work out your salvation in the matter of gaining assurance of salvation. Peter describes this aspect of working out your salvation this way in 2Pet. 1:10 *Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure*.

When you think of what's at stake for your soul it certainly makes good sense to work out your own salvation by making your calling and election sure. Christ prophesied in the sermon on the mount that the day of judgment would reveal that there would be many that would be presumptuous about their salvation on that day who would be lost when they presumed they were saved.

So we read in Mt 7:22 Christ's words: *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?* If ever there was a statement to show the importance of

perspective in salvation it is this statement by Christ. These souls that stand before Christ on the judgment day not only think they're saved but it also appears that in their own minds they had worked out their own salvation. They're presenting their case to the Lord as to why he should view them as being saved. We've done things for you, Lord. We've prophesied and we've had the power to cast out devils and we've done many wonderful works. Have we not worked out our salvation?

And yet the Lord's word to them in the end is to depart from him. They may have worked out their own salvation but they obviously didn't work it out correctly. And this is not to say that our works have no part in the working out of our salvation. It's not to say that there's a sense in which our works should convey to us evidence of grace in our lives. After all the Lord Jesus says in that same sermon just two verses earlier than the verse I've cited that *by their fruits ye shall know them*.

So our works do play a role in helping us gain assurance but the thing that must ever be kept in mind is that our works can never constitute the grounds of our acceptance with God or with Christ. The grounds for your assurance should come from what Paul has just described about Christ in the previous verses. Here is our assurance – that Christ who thought it not robbery to be equal with God made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men. Your assurance does not come from the obedience that you strive to render, it comes rather, from Christ's perfect obedience which was obedience up to and including the awful death of Calvary's cross.

This right perspective on assurance is expressed very well in the line of a hymn that says:

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name.

So the way to work out your salvation in the matter of assurance of salvation is to lean wholly on Jesus name and draw your assurance from his accomplished work and let his accomplished atonement for your sins be the foundation for all you strive to do.

And this leads to my next consideration of working out salvation under this point which is to say that we work out the holiness of salvation. If you are wholly leaning on Jesus name then it will effect what you do and what you don't do. It will effect your thoughts and your words and your actions. Look at what Paul says in v. 14 and consider this as a part of working out your salvation: *Do all things without murmurings and disputings* he writes.

Isn't it interesting in this verse how it contains a positive and negative precept. *Do all things* it says. Isn't that just another way of saying *go about your business*. Apply yourself to your calling or vocation. But do it with this negative qualifier – *without murmurings and disputings*. If you've been in the work world for any time at all then you know that the work world (no matter what kind of work you're in) is an environment of murmurings and disputings. I'm not paid enough. So and so makes more than I do and yet I've been here longer. That new person brought in to be my supervisor doesn't know near what I know and yet he's my boss when I should be his boss.

Here, really, is where Christian witness ought to be easy for the believer who is ruled by the joy of salvation. You may find it hard to witness. You may find it challenging to work up the courage to share your faith. But in the case presented by v. 14 the only question you need to ponder is – can I keep quiet? There are numerous circumstances in life where you can actually contribute to your witness for Christ by keeping quiet. Those circumstances are the ones that involve murmurings and disputings. In the midst of murmurings and disputings where we often times feel that we have so much to contribute can we instead rise above it? It's a part of working out your salvation. It's a part of your holiness or your sanctification.

It's also a part of Christ-likeness (which is what real holiness is). You know the prophet verse in Isaiah 53:7 *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.*

In v. 15 we see where the negative precept of doing all things without murmurings and disputings leads. It leads to being blameless and harmless – sons of God without rebuke or above reproach as another version translates it. And do you see where this will lead? It will lead to you standing out – standing out in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation. And not just standing out but shining as lights in the world. (remember Sunday School).

Working out salvation, then, is a practice that applies to the assurance of salvation and it applies to the holiness of salvation. Let me just mention before we leave the point (and in a sense I've already covered this by what I've said) but in addition to the assurance of salvation and the holiness of salvation we should also work out the advancement of salvation.

When, through the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness you reign in life and the joy and peace of salvation are the driving forces in your life then you will shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation. And in so shining you will be working out the advancement of salvation. Isn't that phrase *crooked and perverse nation* an accurate description of where we find ourselves today?

I suppose such a phrase could lend itself to a series of sermons if a preacher wanted to describe everything in our culture that contributes to making our nation crooked and perverse. But doesn't such an applicable phrase magnify the need for us to work out our salvation by working out the advancement of salvation? Isn't the need at this time for Christians to shine as lights?

So we see some of the ways in which we work out our salvation. You may be able to think of other ways as well. It would make for a good follow up exercise to the message this morning if you would think of very specific ways in which you can work out the assurance of salvation and the holiness of salvation and the advancement of salvation.

But let's move on and consider next not only some of the ways in which we work out salvation but:

## II. The Manner in Which We Work out Salvation

The manner in which we work out our salvation could be described by the phrase *God conscious* or *Christ conscious*. There are two things in our text that contribute to this idea of being Christ conscious. One is obvious, the other perhaps a little more subtle. Let me begin with the subtle one.

Notice how Paul makes reference in v. 12 to his presence and his absence. *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence.* The emphasis is on his absence. He's indicating that they had obeyed when Paul was among them and his desire now is that they continue in the obedience of faith even when Paul is not there with them.

It's a little bit like telling a child that it's time for him to be an adult. It's time for him to live without the immediate supervision of his parents. In the case of the Philippians it was time for them to follow Christ without the need for apostolic supervision. I should perhaps clarify that Paul is not advocating for absolute independence from everyone and everything. We saw in the very first study we conducted in this epistle that between the time Paul planted the church at Philippi and the time he wrote this epistle a very definite structure of order was instituted in the church at Philippi. The epistle is addressed in the very first verse to all the saints *with the bishops and deacons*.

So here was a church structure that included bishops and deacons. There was, then, a structure for supervision and accountability. And in spite of how popular it's become in our culture to be absolutely independent even in our Christianity it is plain and clear that in the wisdom of God he has never meant for Christians to be on their own. It's a part of our carnal nature to be free from supervision and accountability. But it's never the will of God for us to be.

Notwithstanding such an authority structure, however, it should be the Christian's practice to work out his salvation in such a way that he's not in need of constant supervision. So that the elders or bishops in the church could echo what Paul writes by their saying *not in our presence only but now much more in our absence*. It's the same thing a parent should eventually be able to say to each of his children *not in my presence only but now much more in my absence*.

And if the Christian is practicing the presence of Christ and knowing the presence of Christ then it will be the presence of Christ in his life that will enable him to be above reproach in the absence of any immediate supervision. We read earlier in the service the account of a king in Judah who did very well so long as he was under supervision. But the moment he was not under godly supervision you might say he sank like a millstone thrown into the sea.

In 2Chron. 24 we have the account of Joash. He was the lone survivor of the sons of David during that period when the wicked queen Athaliah had attempted to murder all the

sons of David. Joash was rescued and hidden by his aunt during that killing time and he came into the protective custody of Jehoida the priest.

Eventually the wicked queen, Athaliah, was overthrown and the lone surviving descendent of David began to reign when he was but a boy 7 years old. And the accounts in 2Kings and 2Chronicles both say that Joash did right in the sight of the Lord but with this qualifying phrase – he did right all the days of Jehoida the priest. So long as he was under the supervision of Jehoida the priest he did well. You might say he did very well. He oversaw the needed renovations of the temple and actually held Jehoida's feet to the fire, so to speak, when that renovation project began to lag.

But then we read those tragic verses in 2Chron. 24:17,18 *Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them. And they left the house of the LORD God of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass.*

And when prophets warned the king with regard to his idolatry Joash had one of those prophets who also happened to be the son of Jehoida the priest executed. Here then is a clear case of a man who never rose to the standard of *not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence*. The narrative makes it very plain that Joash was a weak man who was swayed more by the fear of man than by the fear of the Lord. What the actual state of his soul was would be hard to surmise but I think it would correct to say that he never worked out his own salvation. He never lived with a God consciousness.

This is why Paul would have the Philippians work out their own salvation without the need for adult supervision. Work it out instead he says with fear and trembling. And here is the more obvious description of the manner in which we are to work out our salvation. The fear and trembling here makes reference to the fear of the Lord. Again we must note the connection between our text and the preceding verses that speak to us of Christ. Christ is the One before whom every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

Christ is the One who has the power not only to kill but to cast into hell. Work out your salvation, then, with an awareness of his greatness and an awareness of his absolute authority. And this is not to say that our service to Christ is a service of servile fear. Paul may very well be alluding to Psalm 2:11 which says *Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling*. Isn't that an unusual statement? Fear and trembling and yet not a fear and trembling that is void of joy but a rejoicing, rather, that is tempered by the awesomeness of the majesty of God.

Working out salvation, then, involves the consciousness that Christ is your Savior and your elder brother and your friend. And in those things we find our peace and joy. He did give himself for us. He did die for us. But let your joy be tempered with the humility of knowing that this same Jesus is also King of Kings and Lord of Lords and the ruler of all creation.

Work out your salvation, then, with the sense of his majesty as well as a sense of intimacy with him. There's a word in our text that I think brings out that intimacy. Notice

that Paul says *work out your own salvation*. Your salvation is something that you personally possess. It belongs to you which is tantamount to saying as the hymn-writer does *I am His, and He is mine*.

So we've seen a few of the ways in which we're to work out our salvation. Work out the assurance of your salvation by focusing on Christ and what he's done for you. Work out the holiness of your salvation by living in gratitude for salvation. And work out the advancement of your salvation by striving to keep the kind of communion with Christ that will enable you to shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation.

And work out your salvation in the consciousness of the greatness of the Savior who loves you and gave himself for you before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Rise above the need for constant supervision and walk in the fear of the Lord.

Let me just mention finally and briefly:

### III. The Constancy of Working Out Our Salvation

Notice Paul's remark in our text regarding the Philippians that they had always obeyed. *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence...*

You've always obeyed – continue to obey by working out your salvation. You obeyed when I was present with you, continue to obey when I'm absent from you. Work out your own salvation just as you have done up till now.

Don't these words indicate to us that the practice of working out our salvation is a practice that is with us so long as we're in this world? Don't ever harbor the notion that you've arrived. Don't ever harbor the notion that there's nothing more to work out. I like the analogy that is sometimes drawn between our salvation and that generation of Israelites that conquered the promised land under Joshua.

In Jos 13:1 we read: *Now Joshua was old [and] stricken in years; and the LORD said unto him, Thou art old [and] stricken in years, and there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed*. Couldn't the same thing be said of you and me spiritually speaking? There is more of Christ to be gained – you haven't come close to exhausting your knowledge of him.

And there is more holiness to be obtained and there is more sin to be overcome and there is more work to be done for the advancement of Christ's kingdom. I have a dreadful fear for those Christians that live as if there's nothing more for them. There's no more of Christ to be experienced. There's no service for me yet to render. There's no more progress that I can make.

When you stop and think about it you'll agree that there's really no such thing as stagnant Christianity. In the power of the gospel you advance against the current the world. But the moment you stop – the moment you think you can cease from working out

spiritually – at that same moment you go with the current and you become the product of worldliness. You can test yourself to see where you stand in this respect. Do you find yourself given more to murmuring and disputing than you find yourself given to Christ? Do you find yourself given to prayer in which you thank God for so great salvation or do you find yourself given more to complaining and feeling sorry for yourself? Chances are if that is the case that you're given more to complaining then it's very likely that you're not living in the reality of salvation. Somewhere along the way you've ceased thinking that you need to work out your own salvation.

May the Lord himself arrest you. May the reality of his love sweep over you and may his fear be renewed in your heart again. Isn't there yet very much land to be possessed? Isn't there great need in this crooked and perverse nation for the people of God to shine brightly? May you hear the words of the text not as words that an apostle spoke centuries ago to a people that he loved but may you hear them communicated to your soul by Christ himself.

*Wherefore my beloved* – that's what you are to Christ you know. You are his beloved – you are married to him. *Wherefore my beloved as ye 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.*