

“OUR WORK AND GOD’S WORK”

I. Introduction

- A. The point that Paul is focusing upon in these verses is a further development of the teaching that he began back in 1:27, where he urged the Philippians to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”
1. All throughout his writings, Paul makes it clear that being a Christian is not merely a matter of having your sins forgiven and being set free from condemnation.
 2. It also involves living a new life.
 3. While Christians still have to deal with indwelling sin, we are no longer under the domination of sin, because we are indwelt by the Spirit of God.
- B. The teaching expressed in tonight’s text protects us from two opposite errors into which we can easily fall.
1. First, this teaching shows us that the life of faith is not morally lax.
 2. Jesus did not die for us so that we could keep on wallowing in the filth of sin.
 3. He died so that we could be set free from our slavery to sin and serve God instead.
 4. Second, these verses make it equally clear that Christian obedience is not something that we can produce by our own power.
 5. Our effort is essential, as verse 12 makes clear.

6. At the same time, both the desire and the ability to live a holy life comes from God, as verse 13 makes clear.

II. Work Out Your Own Salvation

- A. Our passage begins with Paul telling the Philippians that they should not strive to obey God only when Paul is present with them, but also in his absence.
 1. This reminds us that the proper motivation for Christian obedience is not to please people or to win their respect.
 2. People sometimes put up a front, making themselves look good in front of others and then being spiritually careless when no one else is watching.
 3. You should never be content with that kind of practice of the Christian faith.
 4. Always remember that your life is lived before the face of God.
 5. Everything you do, everything you say, everything you think, everything you look at — it is all laid bare before the eyes of the living God.
- B. The next thing that Paul says in verse 12 is something that we might find surprising.
 1. He tells the Philippian Christians, “*work out* your own salvation.”
 2. We might wonder how Paul, the man who so adamantly insisted that we are not justified by works of the law but by faith in Christ, could tell people to *work out* their salvation.
 3. What does he mean by this?
 4. The context makes it clear that he is talking about obeying God.

5. As we have already noted, this is a continuation of what was expressed earlier in terms of living in a manner worthy of the gospel.
 6. A life worthy of the gospel is a life that is characterized by obedience to God's commands.
 7. A Christian's life should not be marked by persistent and habitual disobedience.
 8. As the apostle John put it in his first epistle, "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning." (1 Jn. 3:9)
 9. Your life should not be characterized by sinning, but by striving to please God.
- C. Paul speaks of this by saying that salvation is something that needs to be worked out by the believer.
1. Your salvation is given on the basis of God's grace alone and is received by faith alone.
 2. But you need to make that salvation fruitful in your day-to-day living.
 3. You are responsible for the care of your soul and for your spiritual growth.
 4. Paul does not say work *for* your salvation, but rather work *out* your salvation.
 5. This is entirely consistent with what he said in 1:28-29 about salvation being a gift that is freely given by God.
 6. We cannot merit salvation by our efforts.
 7. We cannot work *for* it.

8. But the working *out* of our salvation has to do with living out the salvation that we have already received by God's free grace.
- D. Another way to summarize what Paul is talking about in verse 12 is to use the term 'sanctification.'
1. 'Sanctification' describes the life transformation that is brought about by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ.
 2. It is the aspect of salvation in which we are progressively made more and more holy.
 3. We always need to remember that sanctification is distinct from justification.
 4. Justification is the aspect of salvation in which God pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight because of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us and received by faith alone.
 5. But it is also important to remember that sanctification cannot be separated from justification.
 6. You cannot say, 'I'm happy to be declared righteous, but I'm going to pass on the process of actually being made righteous.'
 7. Salvation is a package deal.
 8. Everyone who has been justified in Christ is being sanctified in Christ and will one day be glorified in Christ.
 9. Every Christian is called to the practice and pursuit of godliness.
- E. In describing this, Paul says that we are to work out our salvation "with fear and trembling."
1. This is another thing that might seem odd to us.

2. After all, other passages tell us that the gospel sets us free from being afraid of God.
 3. For example, John the Baptist's father Zechariah prophesied that through the gospel God's people would be enabled to "serve him without fear." (Lk. 1:74)
 4. And 1 John 4:18 says "whoever fears has not been perfected in love."
 5. It is certainly true that, in one sense, the gospel sets us free from fear of God.
- F. However, the fact that Paul speaks of a kind of fear that should characterize the Christian life tells us that there is a different kind of fear of the Lord.
1. This is not the craven, slavish fear that sinners have toward God before they are reconciled to him in Christ.
 2. Instead, this is similar to the fear and respect that a child has towards a responsible and loving father.
 3. It has to do with being afraid of the grief that we would bring to our heavenly Father if we were to sin against him.
 4. This fear is characterized by humility and submission, a fear that is aware that we cannot fool God.
 5. It is the fear that all creatures have before God when they are truly conscious of his majesty and power.
 6. The meaning of this "fear and trembling" is captured in these lines from one of Charles Spurgeon's sermons: "Did you never, in the silence of the night, look up and view the stars...? Have you never thought of those great worlds, far, far away, divided from us by almost illimitable leagues of space? Did you never, [while] musing on the starry heavens, lose yourself in thoughts of God...? Have

you never seen the craggy hills lift their summits to the skies? Have you never marked the tempests sailing o'er them, and seen the thundercloud burst upon the mountain, and heard the heavens shake beneath the tramp of the Most High, and seen the skies all glaring red with fire, when God hath sent his thunderbolts abroad; and have you not trembled that God was there, and in other happier seasons have you not in your chamber been so wrapt in devotion, have you not so manifestly known the presence of God that you were filled with trembling? Fear took hold upon you and made your bones to shake, not because you dreaded God, but because you then saw some of his greatness.... God is so great a being that the rightly constituted mind must always fear when it approaches into his presence." [*New Park Street Pulpit*, iii, 331-332]

7. That is the kind of fear that Paul has in mind in our text.
8. It is a matter of being aware of how great God is, how precious your salvation is, and how dreadful it would be to offend your heavenly Father in any way.

III. For It Is God Who Works in You

- A. This brings us to verse 13, which is the logical ground upon which the command in verse 12 is based.
 1. This is made clear by the first word in verse 13, the word "for."
 2. This word tells us the logical connection between verses 12 and 13.
 3. Verse 13 tells us that the reason why we can work out our salvation, the reason why we must work out our salvation, is because it is God who is at work within us.
 4. Salvation is God's work, as Paul made clear back in chapter 1 when he encouraged the Philippians by saying, "And 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." (v. 6)

- B. Here in verse 13, Paul says that God causes us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
1. Let’s take a moment to consider these two words, ‘will’ and ‘work.’
 2. The human will is the faculty of the heart that is focused upon choosing.
 3. As Craig Troxel explains, “The heart’s will expresses itself deliberately in the thoughts we consciously entertain, in the desires we intentionally inflame, and in the direction we persistently follow.” [*With All Your Heart*, 123]
 4. As long as a person is dead in sin, his will is in bondage to sin.
 5. But when a person becomes a Christian, he is given a renewed will.
 6. He comes to see sin for what it really is.
 7. Instead of loving sin, he has a hatred and aversion towards it.
 8. Instead of seeing obedience as burdensome, he delights in what is pleasing to God.
 9. The renewed will desires to walk in righteousness because it sees the goodness and sweetness of God’s holy law.
- C. Now, let’s consider the term ‘work.’
1. This tells us that, in addition to renewing our wills, God gives us the ability to do what is pleasing to him.
 2. It is not enough for us simply to know the duties that God requires of us and to want to carry them out.
 3. We also need to be empowered to perform these duties.

4. The Puritan minister Walter Marshall speaks of this when he writes, "it is not enough for you to know the matter and reason of your duty, but that you are also to learn the powerful and effectual means of performance, before you can successfully apply yourselves to immediate practice." [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 4]
 5. Verse 13 is telling us about the means by which we can perform the duties to which God calls us.
 6. It tells us that our work of obedience is the result of God's work within us.
 7. It is produced by virtue of our connection to Christ.
 8. He is the vine and we are the branches.
 9. Apart from him, we can do nothing.
 10. But if we abide in him, we will produce good fruit.
- D. This verse also makes it clear that salvation is not a joint effort between us and God.
1. It is not a matter of a division of labor, with God doing his part and us doing our part.
 2. It is not as if God gets things started and then passes the controls over to us.
 3. As we said earlier, salvation is God's work.
 4. We are completely dependent upon him from beginning to end.
 5. The point that Paul is making in verse 13 is that the Christian life is a matter of living out the life that we receive when we receive Christ.

6. In the words of Herman Ridderbos, "What the new man manifests in new life, what he works or exhibits in fruit of the Spirit and good works, he works out of and by the strength of God, out of the power of the Spirit and by virtue of belonging to Christ." [*Paul*, 255]
- E. In light of this, we need to be confident of our reconciliation with God before we can be fruitful in the pursuit of holiness.
1. Consider how Paul has called attention to the Philippians' basis for such confidence at earlier points in this letter.
 2. He began by referring to the Philippians as 'saints' and as recipients of grace and peace from God.
 3. Then he said that he is confident that God, who began a good work in them, will carry that work to its point of completion.
 4. Then he said that God *granted* it to them to believe in Christ and to have the honor of sharing in Christ's sufferings.
 5. Paul firmly believed that the Philippian Christians had been reconciled to God.
 6. He expected them to be convinced of this as well.
- F. If we are not persuaded that we have a good standing with God, we will still be operating out of a works-mentality.
1. We will think that we have to secure God's favor by our works of obedience.
 2. And we will be discouraged by the fact that we so often fail, both in our willing and in our working.
 3. As one commentator points out, "In every action there are two aspects to be considered: the will and the deed, and one or other of these is often our downfall. Either we cannot bring ourselves to

choose what we know to be right, or else, having chosen it, we fail to do it." [Motyer, 129]

4. Our confidence before God always needs to rest upon Christ's *finished* work.
5. It should never rest upon the *yet-to-be-completed* work that God is still carrying out in our lives.
6. When our confidence resides in Christ, we will be confident that the God who began the good work of salvation within us will continue to equip us with all that is necessary for our salvation to reach its point of completion.

IV. Conclusion

- A. This passage tells you that your strength to live a holy life is not derived from anything that naturally resides within you.
 1. Your ability to walk in God's ways comes from the fact that God is at work within you.
 2. He makes you want to do what is pleasing to him, and he enables you to follow through on that desire.
 3. Your sanctification is every bit as much by grace alone as your justification is.
 4. This is why our Shorter Catechism describes sanctification as "the work of God's free grace." [Q/A 35]
- B. This passage also makes it clear that the fact that God is the one who is ultimately working out your salvation does not make your own effort superfluous.
 1. You need to work out your salvation, and you can do so with confidence because you know that God is the one who is working in you to bring his saving purposes to their appointed end.

2. Your work is a necessary part of your sanctification because God works through means.
3. He uses *your* work of obedience, work that he himself motivates and empowers, to accomplish *his* work within you.
4. Striving to be godly is not an optional aspect of being a Christian.
5. This is made clear in the fact that Jesus instructed his apostles to teach all his followers “to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Mt. 28:20)
6. Obedience is a necessary part of Christian discipleship, because holiness is part of the salvation that our God promises to all who trust in Christ.