

Series: To Live is Christ

Title: Growing in Christ

Text: Philippians 2:12-13

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Verse 12

In Philippians 2:12, Paul transitioned the focus of his writing in order to encourage sanctification amongst his readers. He said, “Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). The first word in the verse — “therefore” — was significant. The original language employed an inferential conjugation. The apostle’s intent was to draw a logical conclusion from what he had previously said about Christ in Philippians 2:5-10. Because of the way Jesus had humbled Himself in obedience to the Father’s will, believers in Philippi should have been compelled to humble themselves for the purpose of spiritual growth and maturity. As Paul did in Romans 12:1-2, he revealed that glorious gospel realities should motivate believers to the pursuit of holiness and godliness.

It is important to identify the exact recipients of Paul’s words. The apostle referred to them as “dear friends.” In the Koine Greek, he used a word that literally meant “beloved ones.” The term was a famous one within the New Testament. It was often used of born-again believers (Romans 12:19; 16:5, 8, 9, 12; 1 Corinthians 4:14; 2 Corinthians 12:19; Ephesians 5:1; 6:21; Colossians 1:7; 1 Timothy 6:2; Philemon 16). Paul would use the word in reference to the true believers in Philippi later in Philippians 4:1, saying, “So then, my *dearly loved* and longed for brothers and sisters, my joy and crown, in this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.” As it appeared in our current verse, the word rendered “dear friends” revealed that Paul’s instruction was directed toward believers. His focus in verse 12 was not salvation. His readers were already saved. His concern was with sanctification. Such clarity is important, since many confuse the words of Philippians 2:12 with an appeal regarding salvation.

Paul’s concern was for the believers in Philippi to embrace their responsibility toward spiritual growth. Notice the reference he made to obedience — “just as you have always obeyed.” The original language employed a compound Greek word that literally meant “to hear under.” The term painted a picture of what’s involved with Christian obedience. Those who obey God are ones who submit themselves to the reality of God’s truth. They hear and take heed to what God says. In light of Divine revelation, they chose to live under the Lord’s truth. A cursory reading of the New Testament reveals that such obedience is integral to Christian living. The term is used of the obedience of Abraham (Hebrews 11:8) and Sarah (1 Peter 3:6). Paul used it in reference to Christian sanctification in Romans 6:12, saying, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you *obey* its desires.”

The apostle knew the church at Philippi had been obedient in the past. Such is evidenced by his words, “...just as you have always obeyed.” Paul had a track record with the church. He had been used by the Lord as its founding pastor. Acts 16:11-40 gives detail of the apostles missionary journey to the city. It tells of how he led a demon-possessed girl, a Roman soldier, and a wealthy businesswoman to the Lord. Through such conversions, a Christian congregation was established in Philippi. From the first days of the gospel in the city (Philippians 1:5), the founding members of the church had shown a willingness to obey the Lord (Acts 16:33-34, 40).

Despite positive beginnings, Paul had heard reports of friction in the church. Ungodly attitudes were present (Philippians 4:2-3). In addition, Paul knew that gnostic doctrines concerning perfectionism were making inroads into the congregation (Philippians 3:13). Because of false doctrine, some were neglecting their responsibility to battle sin and pursue sanctification. Consequently, Paul reminded the congregation of its need for continued obedience to the Lord.

The phrase “even more in my absence” referenced the fact that he wasn’t personally present with the Philippians. At the time of his writing, he was imprisoned in Rome. Though he couldn’t be with his beloved congregation, he was sending his protégé Timothy. The young preacher would deliver Paul’s letter and gather a report about the church (Philippians 2:19-24). Upon Timothy’s return, Paul wanted to hear of continued obedience amongst the congregation.

For Paul, a certain sort of “work” was critical for Christian obedience and growth. Some have an aversion to any mention of “work” within the context of Christian salvation and sanctification. Such concern seems valid when one considers verses like Ephesians 2:8-9 — “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.” It is important to clarify that Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12 do not contradict the reality that salvation is not of works. Good works in the life of a believer do not contradict the reality of salvation by grace and faith. In fact, the passage cited above — Ephesians 2:8-9 — was followed by the following verse — “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Thoughtful believers understand that salvation isn’t earned by works, but they also understand that there is a place for good works in the life of the Christian. Scripture rightfully says, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Though works aren’t the *requirement* of salvation, they are the *result* of salvation. They don’t *earn* God’s grace, but they are *evidence* of God’s grace in one’s life. The reformer John Calvin understood these things. In responding to the Council of Trent’s assertions concerning a works-based salvation, he said, “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.” Real faith results in good works. It is for this reason that the Lord will be perfectly justified in judging unbelievers on the basis of their works at the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:12).

Paul’s instruction for the Philippians to “work out” their “own salvation” provides insight concerning what’s involved with spiritual growth. The Greek word translated “work out” (*katergázomai*) is one that depicted the act of working something toward a finish. It gave the idea of linear progress toward a goal.¹ Though Christians are saved by grace and through faith, they have personal responsibility for their spiritual development. Each is called to employ God’s means of grace for the purpose of growth in godliness. One has commented, “The Scriptures prove again and again that salvation is monergic, that is, the work of one being. God is the author and agent of our salvation, and we are the objects of his saving work. However, the scriptures also teach with equal force that our growth in sanctification is synergistic, that is, the collective work of two or more people.”² No Christian is to be a passive entity, waiting for God to override the will and instill Christian character. Instead, each is to exert effort in pursuing sanctification. Yes, the Spirit of God ultimately accomplishes all spiritual growth, but that fact does not negate the place of human effort, obedience, and responsibility.

As Paul encouraged spiritual effort in the sanctification process, he upheld a particular soul attitude as being important. He told his readers to work out their salvation “with fear and trembling.” Although “fear” is often viewed as a negative emotion, Paul had something different in mind. One has said his focus was “not slavish terror, but wholesome, serious caution.”³ The apostle wanted his readers to pursue sanctification out of a healthy respect and reverence for God. The “trembling” of which he spoke was the common physical result of

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 452.

² Washer, Paul. *Les Moyens de Grâce Essentials*. Translated from French. (Québec, Canada: Publications Chrétiennes, Inc., 2021), [epub].

³ Robertson, 446.

“fear.” Thus, the apostle’s meaning was that a true fear of God would result in an outward display of zeal for sanctification. His teaching was in alignment with a famous Jewish proverb — “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Proverbs 1:7). When believers are gripped by a reverential regard for the Lord, they will be compelled to do the soul work required for sanctification. On the inverse, those who don’t pursue sanctification show that they are lacking in reverential respect for the Lord.

Verse 13

All of our efforts at Christian progress are empty apart from the help of the Holy Spirit. Yes, man has a part in sanctification, but it is ultimately the grace of God that produces the virtue of God in one’s life. Paul gave witness to this in his letter, saying, “For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). Paul called his readers both to personal responsibility and a trust in divine agency in the sanctification process. The Greek scholar A.T. Robertson has commented on the apostle’s words, saying, “He exhorts as if he were an Arminian in addressing men. He prays as if he were a Calvinist in addressing God and feels no inconsistency in the two attitudes. Paul makes no attempt to reconcile divine sovereignty and human free agency, but boldly proclaims both.”⁴ In short, man has a part to play in the sanctification process and God has a part to play as well.

Philippians 2:13 highlighted God’s role in sanctification. Paul spoke of the Lord “working in” his readers. The original language of the New Testament used a term from which we get our English word “energy.” It meant “to energize.”⁵ Paul used the term to depict the Holy Spirit working energetically in the souls of believers within the sanctification process. While the spirit of the world works in the lives of unbelievers (Ephesians 2:2), the Spirit of the Lord possesses believers (Ephesians 3:20). He inhabits Christians at the moment of salvation (Galatians 3:2) through an event Jesus called being “born again” (John 3:3). With His indwelling, He brings divine capacity for divine character and virtue (Romans 5:5). When believers commit to “work out” their salvation by abiding in Christ (John 15:5) and walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16), the Spirit of God produces the fruit of Christian virtue (Galatians 5:22). Throughout the Christian life, He illuminates the believer’s thinking (1 John 2:27), provides empowerment for Christian service (Romans 12:6-8), and give supernatural strength to gospel witness (Acts 1:8). Though Christians have a responsibility to “work out” their salvation through the means of grace, it is ultimately the power of God that “works in” believers to produce the character of Christ.

According to Paul, God works within the life of the believer during the process of sanctification “to will and to work according to his good purpose.” In other words, the Spirit’s inner-strengthening serves the purpose of fulfilling the utmost purpose of God for any believer’s life — sanctification. This is in keeping with other Pauline texts on sanctification. In Romans 8:29, the apostle said, “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, he proclaimed, “For this is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don’t know God.” The Lord works in our lives to accomplish His purposes for our lives. All of our growth in sanctification brings great pleasure for Him (Ephesians 1:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

⁴ Robertson, 446.

⁵ Robertson, 447.