

Philippians 2.12-18 Sermon / COB / 10.16.16

Introduction

- † **[1: Title]** Jeremy and Gary played JV soccer this year. I enjoyed watching three of their home games, and some of the other men in the church also went out to watch. I was surprised to learn that Mark, Steve, and my neighbor Randy all played soccer in their youth. I never had the lungs for that, so my interest in soccer was limited to watching the World Cup every four years.
- I did play baseball. I could rest my lungs between pitches. Really, I lived and breathed baseball from about ages nine to eighteen. I tracked all the players, knew their stats, rooted passionately for the NY Mets, and played some form of the sport every chance I had.
 - When I was first learning, I tried different things and listened to my coaches. I also watched my favorite players to see what they did. Tom Seaver was my hero and he was the best pitcher the Mets had. So when I thought about pitching, I looked at how Tom Seaver went about it. If he used a certain kind of glove, then so did I. If he carried himself a certain way on the field or in public, then so did I. I wanted to learn from my hero, who was at the top of his field.
- † This year, when I wanted some cabinets and shelves built, I turned to Kevin, because out of the thousands of people I know, he is the best at that kind of work. I have no skills in this area, so I eagerly paid Kevin to do the work, even if I did grumble a little when it came to paying the bill.
- Suppose, however, I did want to learn how to do cabinet making or furniture making. From whom would I want to learn? Kevin! I would ask him if I could apprentice with him or if he would give me lessons. And if he were willing, would I not seek to do every aspect of that work exactly the way he showed me? Of course I would!
- † Today Paul will tell us we should take this approach in life. He has just taught the Philippians about Christ's identity and character. In our passage today, he says, if Christ is our example of perfect humanity, then we should learn to live like him. Let's take a look and we will see what you think.

Exposition

- † **[2: context]** Open your Bible to Philippians 2.12 [in the Pew Bible, that is p.1324]. The first word in Greek is ὥστε, which means "therefore" or "so then." Do you know what you should ask when you see "therefore" in your Bible? You should ask what the "therefore" is there for. It's a reminder to always check the literary context of your passage, because what it means is related to what is being said around it.
- In 2.5-11, Paul shared that Christ, the Son of God, exemplified the very characteristics Paul was instructing believers to have! Christ humbly, sacrificially, obediently was willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel mission, for the sake of our salvation. As a result, God the Father exalted Christ to be the universal judge and the eternal king, such that every person who ever lived will bow in reverence to Jesus and confess him as both God and master.

[3: 2.12-13] Based on that information, we now continue with 2.12. **Philippians 2.12-13 NET: So then [therefore], my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence but even more**

in my absence, continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence, for the one bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort— for the sake of his good pleasure— is God.

- † This is an exhortation, a command, but Paul includes three nice reminders. Do you see what is encouraging in this sentence?
- First, what does he call them? “My dear friends,” literally “my beloved,” reminding them that he loves them.
 - Second, what does he affirm they have always done? he affirms they have always obeyed, always acted like God’s people, even when Paul was away.
 - Third, he trusts that God is at work in them. So while Paul *is* giving them a command, he is doing it in an encouraging way.
- † **[4: unpacked]** As we often find in Paul’s writing, we have here a complex sentence. Let’s see if we can sort it out.
- Based on the previous passage, the Philippians know that even Christ, the Son of God, was willing to be selfless and humble, to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of the gospel mission in obedience to the will of God the Father.
 - *So then [or therefore] they* are to “continue working out” their salvation with awe and reverence. They can do that by being obedient like they were when Paul was with them.
 - This is not a call to change themselves or to change how they live in their own power, because God is doing the work in them to transform them so they are *willing* [they *desire*] to do what is right, and so they make the *effort* to do what is right, the action of obedience.
 - God does this transforming work in them, leading to character change and life change, all for his good pleasure.
- † **[5: obedience]** Let’s talk first about obedience. They were to obey God’s will, because Christ obeyed God the Father’s will even to the point of sacrificing himself for us. Christ is our hero, our example of perfect humanity, so we adopt his attitudes and actions. Paul praised the Philippians for being an obedient people, and we learned previously that they, like Christ, were sacrificing and suffering for the sake of the gospel mission.
- How do we know what to obey? how has God expressed his will for us? Scripture, primarily. Sometimes we get a direct leading from the Holy Spirit: You might see someone on the street and sense God wants you to buy him a meal or pray for him; you might sense God’s calling to go to seminary, as I did. But most of what God wants us to do is already written for us in scripture.
 - We are to walk in God’s light, walk with him through life, by responding to his revelation with faith and obedience. And not just on Sunday morning, when you are under the eye of the pastor, but always. It’s bad enough when the pastor sees something vulgar on your Facebook page, but God is seeing right into your heart and mind! You have no secrets from him.
- † **[6: working out]** As we obey, Paul says we are “working out” our salvation. That needs some explanation. The Greek word σωτηρία does not always mean “salvation,” it sometimes refers to a physical deliverance, but it does seem to mean “salvation” here. So let me explain how we could be “working out” our salvation.

- **[7: justification]** In one sense, we are saved the moment we believe in Christ as savior: in that moment, we have permanent *assurance* of our salvation, because we have been spiritually born again, written in God’s book of life, adopted into God’s family, justified [declared righteous in God’s sight], and we have received the seal [the assurance] of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In that moment of true faith, we are completely and forever saved from condemnation to Hell.
 - The problem is that the moment after we come to true faith, we still have our corrupted human nature to battle, we still have decades of wrong thinking [both wrong conclusions and wrong processes of thinking] to overcome, and thus we still have a tendency to sin. We are eternally saved from punishment and condemnation in Hell, but we are not yet experiencing salvation from sin and evil; we are *legally* righteous in God’s sight, but we are not yet *living* righteously.
 - **[8: sanctification]** We need renewal of our mind, which will lead to transformation of our character, which will lead to change of our way of life. This is a lifelong process called progressive sanctification. It really is lifelong, only completed by the glorification of our soul when we go to Heaven and the glorification of our body when Christ returns to resurrect and judge the dead.
 - So salvation is *assured* for all who believe, but it is not yet *complete*. Justification is complete, glorification is assured, but the process of progressive sanctification in between is what Paul is discussing here. So we are “working out” our salvation in the sense that we are working with God to become as righteous *experientially* as he already has declared us to be *legally*.
 - Another way of looking at it is that the concept of salvation here is not in the sense of initial saving grace, but in the sense of believers becoming what that moment of receiving saving grace makes possible: to be Christ-like; this is accomplished as we obey Christ and suffer for Christ.
 - Let me offer an illustration. Our baby girl, in the womb, is already a member of the Groben family. But even after her physical birth, she will need to grow, right? Will she know from day one how to read biblical Greek and Hebrew? Will she already appreciate the game of football and know to root for the Eagles? Will she immediately know how to walk with God? No. So she already is in our family, but she needs to grow to become what she is born to be. It is the same with us: we might be born again, but we still need to grow to become what we are saved to be. Does it excite you to know of that potentiality, of that opportunity? It should!
- † **[9: continuum]** Since growth or sanctification toward Christ-likeness is a *process*, we can think of our progress on a continuum. Think of Christ, our hero and ultimate model of perfect humanity, as being at the ceiling, and when we are first born again, we have taken our first tiny step above the floor. Even after accepting the gospel, we have a long way to grow.
- So our goal is to grow spiritually, to become progressively more like Christ, who is our hero and example of perfect humanity. We grow as we live by faith and obedience, on what we call the top-line, walking with God in his light. We grow to be more like Christ by learning to follow the example of Christ. He obeyed, so we obey; obedience led him to live a certain way – with certain priorities, values, and actions – so we adopt those priorities, values, and actions.
 - Look back in your Bible to 1.27. Paul said we were to walk or live in a manner worthy of the gospel. In 2.12, Paul says that in another way: we are to “continue working out our salvation.” We have been given righteousness, now we need to learn to live righteously. We have been given grace, love, and truth as gifts, now we need to submit and obey God. We live out the gospel in our lives and we become like Christ by faithfully obeying.

- I stress again that sanctification is a *lifelong* process. Some English translations simply say “work out your salvation,” but the Greek verb here does imply a continuous action, like in the NET: “*continue working* out your salvation.” We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit continually, all our days.

- † **[10: God]** Ok. Notice it is God who produces the growth in us. He renews our mind and transforms our character, so that we *desire* to do what is right, and thus he changes our way of life so that we *do* what is right. So we are not changing in our own power, rather God is doing a miracle in us.
 - And God does this work in us for his good pleasure. He is forming the image-bearing people he always wanted, a people who will reflect his character, represent him in daily life, reproduce his image into others, and rule as his stewards on the Earth. God in his goodness has the pleasure to heal and grow us into the amazing creatures he created and saved us to be.
 - As we become the amazing creatures he created and saved us to be, we will grow to consider ourselves as Christ’s slaves, just like Paul and Timothy identified themselves at the start of this letter. God created us and saved us for a purpose, and now we are to live that out. Because we know God is good and we know he has saved us, this redirection to his purposes instead of our own becomes acceptable to us.

- † **[11: Us]** Though it is God who is at work in us, the command to “continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence” certainly implies some obligation on our part. We must avail ourselves of this grace; we must yield to the Holy Spirit, to allow the changes in our hearts and minds, we must do the things we discussed in chapter one so we learn the truth of God’s Word and become spiritually discerning – activities like Bible study, prayer, confession, participation in biblical community, taking risks in serving and reaching out to the lost – we must desire this change and be willing to obey.
 - This requires a long-term approach. There are no quick fixes to our problems; you will not become godly if you apply yourself only once in a while or half-heartedly; you have to be disciplined to do what you have to do even when you don’t want to or there are more fun options for your time.
 - Scholar Walter Hansen wrote, “Paul’s call to unflagging, Christ-like obedience will not be popular in a world that so highly values going fast and having fun and so quickly rejects enduring pain and submitting to authority. But the essential characteristic of the wise who build their community on Christ is their consistent obedience to him.”

- † **[12: fear]** To trust Christ, to obey Christ, to follow Christ, to sacrifice for Christ, this all requires humility to the point of having awe and reverence for Christ and for God the Father. Some of us men have been getting together on Thursday evenings to talk through *Knowledge of the Holy*, a short book by Tozer about the character of God. Tozer points out that while we should be in awe of Christ and we should revere Christ, in the Greek text Paul really said we should be working out our salvation with *fear* and *trembling*. Think of it as awe and reverence taken to the ultimate limit.
 - Let me give you an illustration from scholar Steven Runge. He says, “So what exactly does ‘fear and trembling’ really mean? Does it mean outright fear or just simple respect? When we bought our first house, there were some issues with the electrical panels that needed to be fixed before our loan would be approved. Being sort of a handy person and wanting to save some money, I decided to do the work myself. It involved installing a new circuit breaker box. The day of the project, the power company came to disconnect the power and said they would

come back at 4:00pm to hook it back up. The linemen explained to me the consequences of touching the 220 volt cables, wished me well, and then drove off. The cold sweat and knot in my stomach demonstrated my fear. It was not a debilitating fear, but one that drove me to pay the utmost attention to what I was doing – to make sure I did exactly what was expected of me. The fear was grounded (pun intended) in an accurate view of my limitations and what 220 volts could do to me.”

- God is the creator of the entire universe; we are just his creatures. God is the master, our owner; we are his slaves. God has all the power and authority in the universe, and the Father has designated the Son, Christ, to wield that power in his name; the authority he delegates to us is as Christ’s subordinates, not as equals.
- So we need to be humble and submissive toward Christ as our creator, redeemer, judge, and king. As Paul just said in 2.9-11, we *will* all be humble and submissive in the end, when we come before Christ for judgment. I would rather voluntarily go there now than be forced to it later!
- Our developing humility as we are sanctified to become more Christ-like does away with our selfish ambition and vain conceit which destroy our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. So as we are further sanctified, as we progress to be more like Christ, we enjoy better relationships with God and each other. Also, as we move from vanity to humility, we learn to depend on God more and experience the effects of his work in us more.

[13: 2.14-16] Philippians 2.14-16 NET: Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure [innocent], children of God without blemish though you live in a crooked and perverse society, in which you shine as lights in the world by holding on to the word of life so that on the day of Christ I will have a reason to boast that I did not run [exert myself] in vain nor labor in vain.

† Another complex sentence. Paul completes his argument by returning to exhortations that show us how to obey and reveal some results of the sanctification process.

- We know from earlier in the letter that the Philippians were facing persecution from their pagan society and deceptive teachings from a legalistic cult. This was causing internal friction in the church, as some were starting to wonder if God was angry at them for aligning with Paul’s gospel instead of the one espoused by the cult.
- In response, Paul encouraged them to find unity as they continued to stand firm for the true faith based on the gospel of Christ, continued to pursue the gospel mission, and refused to be intimidated by those who were against them.
- **[14: grumbling]** Now he says do everything without grumbling or arguing. Be willing to suffer for Christ, whether by opposition or by enduring the daily grind. Do not get angry at God for letting us suffer or making us sacrifice for his purposes.
- Earlier, Paul taught that we should be humble enough to sacrifice so as to get along with each other and to stand unified for the true faith, the gospel, and the gospel mission. If we do that humbly, we will avoid disputes.
- Jesus sacrificed and suffered without complaint, as had Paul, thus so should the Philippians and so should we, now that we understand what Paul has taught.
- In the Greek text, there is emphasis on Πάντα [everything]: we are to do *everything* without grumbling or arguing. Are we successful at this? If we are somewhat spiritually mature [or sanctified], if we are obedient, then we will find ways to work through our problems and

disagreements, rather than grumble or argue among ourselves. Part of obeying and following Christ is to have unity in the church and a positive attitude about the work of the ministry.

- † **[15: blameless]** We are to live like this so as to live up to the gospel, so as to be working out our salvation. As we humbly find unity through caring about others more than ourselves, as we purify our attitudes and our relationships with each other, we will begin to live like children of God, blameless and pure.
- Do you see what a miracle of God this would be? Paul says they were living in a crooked and perverse society. I say we still do. Both our presidential candidates pay lip service to Jesus but do not live like they have real faith. Our society is pushing us to choose our own gender identity, to have coed bathrooms and dormitories in schools, to accept homosexuality as normal and even desirable. It has judged Christians for teaching scriptural truth, for living by our biblical ethics, and for believing in the gospel that says you need Jesus to be saved.
 - But despite being in a crooked and perverse society, we can be blameless and pure, because we have our spiritual rebirth from Christ, we have scripture to teach us how to live, we have the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to resist sin, and we have the Holy Spirit working the miracle of renewal in our minds, transformation in our characters, and thus change in our lives, as part of the process we call progressive sanctification. Against the odds and contrary to how we walked before, we now can live for God.
- † **[16: lights]** Why is this important? why are they not to act in disunity and as a bunch of grumpuses? So they can be God's lights in the world! Everything in this letter comes back to the gospel mission! They were in pagan Philippi; we are in a culture that despite considering itself Christian really is only about one third evangelical; many who consider themselves Christian in our country really are pagan!
- We are not to grumble and dispute, and thus we will show ourselves blameless children of God above reproach [living up the righteousness we have been given, living up to the gospel], which will make us appear as lights in a corrupt and dark world.
 - It is the miracle of our transformation – it is the testimony we can give about how Christ has changed us! – that proves the gospel is real and true! When people see our thinking, our ethics, and our life has changed, they want to know why, and they begin to wonder about Christ, and sometimes they decide they want him too.
 - Scholar Gordon Fee wrote, "...by their attitudes and behavior they [the Philippians] are to be clearly distinguishable from, and in opposition to, the world around them, while they are also to be God's messengers, bringing the word of life [the gospel] to the [spiritually] dying."
 - Obeying not only draws us closer to God and helps us experience his blessing, it accomplishes God's purpose. If we are not distinct, if we complain and argue just like people in the world, then we are as crooked and perverse as the world, and we cannot shine God's light effectively.
 - We can be lights for Christ, shining in the spiritual darkness of this world... but only if we hold fast to the gospel [the "word of life"], if we continue to believe it, defend it, and live it out.
- † **[17: boast]** Paul, in prison for the gospel, was working for the Philippians even as he wrote. He was blameless and innocent by the gospel, and sought to shine God's light himself and multiply his discipleship into them so that they could shine too.

- If the Philippians did as he asked, they would prove to Paul when Christ returns that he has not worked in vain. His boast when Christ returned would not be based on selfish ambition or vanity, it would be about the fruit Christ brought through his ministry done in Christ's name.

[18: 2.17-18] Philippians 2.17-18 NET: But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad [literally, I rejoice] and rejoice together with all of you. And in the same way you also should be glad [rejoice] and rejoice together with me.

- † In Israel, Jews poured out an offering of wine on top of a sacrifice or at the base of the alter on which the sacrifice lay. The drink offering symbolized full dedication to God.
 - Paul views the Philippians as an offering to God – something holy, meaning pure, set apart for God's purposes – and he sees himself as the symbolic drink poured out. For the gospel mission of Christ, Paul has been giving everything of himself, willing to be persecuted, beaten, homeless, without assets, and now imprisoned under threat of death. Just as Christ poured himself out for us, so had Paul poured himself out as he followed Christ and shared in his sufferings.
 - Because of God working in Paul, such that Paul ministered to them, God was now working in the Philippians, such that they also were sacrificing and serving for the faith, including their continued support of Paul and his mission while he was in prison.
- † **[19: rejoice]** Showing his faith was genuine, Paul rejoiced – not just *despite* his suffering, but – *because* he was allowed to suffer for the cause of Christ.
 - Paul says, "I rejoice, and rejoice together with all of you." He rejoiced at his own identification with Christ in suffering for the gospel, and he rejoiced with the Philippians at their identification with Christ in suffering for the gospel.
 - Then he said, "And in the same way, you also should rejoice and rejoice together with me." Like Paul, they were to rejoice regardless of their difficult circumstances. They were to rejoice in their own suffering, their own sacrificial service for Christ, and rejoice with Paul as he suffered for Christ.
 - For those who were concerned that their suffering and Paul's imprisonment might indicate God's displeasure, in this letter Paul is offering a completely contrary view: that the Christian life is one of sacrifice and service, even suffering if that is what it takes, to live like Christ and pursue the gospel mission of making disciples.
 - If Paul's ministry was not in vain, if the Philippians proved to be true believers who were willing to suffer for Christ and hold fast to the gospel, then they also would shine for God and thus have reason to rejoice.
 - As with Paul, success for the Philippians or for us does not require comfort or even continued physical life. Success is allowing God to accomplish his purposes through our lives. In our hardships, will we allow this to happen, and thus have reason to rejoice?