

A Working Salvation

A Study of Philippians: Philippians 2:12-18

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.
Philippians 2:12-16

How good do you have to be to get into heaven?

This is a common question that I ask many people who think that they can work their way into heaven.

How would you answer?

I know, it's a hard question. It puts the focus on the person and their ability to do "good," but we know that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). The truth is, we cannot do enough to get into heaven. It is by grace alone, but many of us still believe that good works should count for something.

Why is it that we try to "get in good" with God through our works?

It may be remnants of our old nature that believes we can "do" something for God. I am sure you can relate with the feelings of good works verses bad works. Here is what I mean. Sometimes when we sin and ask forgiveness, our gut response is to go out and do something good so that it outweighs the bad.

Like maybe you lied to your spouse and because you feel bad, you go out to get a gift for him or her to "make up" for it. It is the replacement principle – I replace my bad action with a good action.

Describe a time when you have practiced the "replacement principle"?

It would seem Paul is encouraging this behavior in his letter to the church at Philippi. He has just talked about the perfect example for humility and how we need to have that kind of humility and then he comes back to a conversation about their testimony and the need to "work out" their salvation.

Read Philippians 2:12-18.

We cannot get away from this theme of integrity even when no one is looking because you really never know who is looking. Paul again commends them on their obedience and faithfulness to the gospel. He continues to encourage them.

Paul seems like he goes to great lengths to encourage. Why is that? How do you encourage others?

Encouragement can be a powerful tool. It can lift someone up and give them strength to carry on. Paul encourages and then he commands. Here is our imperative – work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

It could probably be said that the number one thing that keeps people from ac-

cepting Christ is Christians. We have a way of turning people off to Christ. It might be our lack of love, our hypocrisy, or our downright meanness. In other words, Christians do not often look too different from the world. It is unfortunate, but true.

This is the very thing that Paul is addressing in this command. He calls the believers at Philippi to live out life in a manner that is consistent with the gospel. It is obedience, but not for the sake of the world, but for the glory of God. The fear and trembling is a God-inspired awe of the Creator of life. The focus then again is directed to God.

Why does our focus make such a difference?

Deuteronomy 4:4-9 might shed some light on God. As Moses recounts what God has done with the nation of Israel, he reminds them of the purpose behind it all. Those who have "held fast" to God and live in obedience to Him will be a testimony to the world. Nations will see how God intimately involves Himself with his chosen people, with the church.

Here is a rhetorical question, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?"

Just take a moment and ponder the thought that God is so near. How does that hit you?

Way back in Deuteronomy, God was intent on having an intimate relationship with His people. Moses reminds the people to diligently keep this passion and focus on God. He calls them to pass it on to their sons and grandsons.

Paul continues to draw analogy from the Israelites. They were sentenced to wander in the wilderness for grumbling. They constantly complained and grumbled to Moses. Deuteronomy 1:26-27 explains how they grumbled in their tents and were not willing to be used of God. Paul calls the church to not grumble or create controversies. In fact, he claims just the opposite. He says we are to be blameless, which is our observable conduct, and innocent, which is our inward purity.

As we keep our focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be working out our salvation in such a way as to live righteously. The righteousness through Christ will then become a light that calls out the darkness and shines His light. It is God that works in us to shine the light to a crooked and perverse generation.

But just in case you missed a little phrase, there are a few words that bring body to the light – "in the midst of." We cannot escape Paul's emphasis on living out the Christian life while living in the world. We are to hold fast (Deuteronomy 4:4) to the word of life while we live out the reality of being saved and being a new creation (Romans 12:1-2) in this dying world.

The ramifications of this are earth shattering. We are so fixed on working everything out. We try to plan and organize everything. We make an attempt to "help" God with things that our going on in our lives. We are a works-centered people. It is all about what you do, but it is not supposed to be. It is not a works based salvation, but a salvation that works out of us and into the world.

*"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship, and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
Romans 12:1-2*

*"But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me."
Philippians 2:17-18*

Jesus clearly stated it, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Our focus is on the eternal kingdom and its King.

How might this focus affect your life? Is there something that you need to surrender?

I am not saying it is easy, but I can tell you what the response will be. Paul concludes this thought of working out our salvation with the response of joy. In fact, the word joy is used four times in verses 17-18. Joy comes to those who seek His kingdom first. Joy comes to those who allow salvation to work out of them and into the lives of others.

A casual look around you will tell you the world needs more joy.

It is a call not to just say we are saved, but to live like it. Work on it.

What do you need to do in response to this lesson?

