

## The Letter to the Philippians

### Lesson 12: Work Out Your Own Salvation

### Philippians 2:12

**“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out you own salvation with fear and trembling.”**

**Intro:** Read Philippians 2:12-14 for context. This is a rich portion of scripture that I had originally intended to deliver to you as one message, but as I wrote, one message grew into two messages that will now consist of our morning and evening services. So right at the outset of this first message, I’m hoping that you’ll come back to hear part 2 tonight. I chose this text because of the paradox that many have found, and either avoid or conclude wrongly. The paradox is the apparent contradiction between our effort in salvation (12) and God’s effort in our salvation (13). We recognize and praise God that it is Him alone who saves. And so this passage becomes a problem for us as we consider how we could have *any* role whatsoever in our salvation.

There are others who think quite differently about the order of salvation, who place such a high value on our good works that verse 12 makes sense, but they undervalue (not deny) the necessary work of God in verse 13. Regardless of what side of the debate we stand on, we must search the scripture, and let its truth conform us into Christ’s image. Today we will let the Bible make sense of this alleged paradox. We will see how the same Bible that says in John 6:44, **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him,”** is the same Bible that says in Acts 16:31, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”** We are not saved apart from the Father’s drawing us, and we are not saved apart from believing in Him. We see God’s work, and our necessary belief, and there is no contradiction.

This isn’t the first apparent paradox in scripture. Have you ever tried to settle in your mind and explain to someone else how Jesus Christ is 100% man, and 100% God? What about the inspiration of scripture? Sinful people wrote every word of the Bible, and we can see their cultural and educational and linguistic effects on each text, yet at the same time it’s God who is the Author of every word. Or, how God eternally secures the salvation of believers, and yet we are commanded to persevere. Are we secure in the hand of God, or not?

I only bring up those apparent paradoxes up to say that the serious Bible student is no stranger to deep thinking in order to settle our minds on God’s truth. And so it is my hope to give us enough to think about in these messages, that we will no longer see Philippians 2:12-13 as another paradoxical statement, but perhaps we will finally see it as Paul’s answer to the paradox. There is a harmony between our work and God’s work, and we’ll benefit greatly I pray as we feed on God’s Word now.

1) **“Therefore”** – Our work in light of the example of Christ.

Anytime we see a “therefore” we always know that the author is linking what he is about to say with what he has just said. On the heels of the passage in verses 5-8, Paul’s **“therefore”** is drawing upon the example of the life of Christ, to give us our model for obedient living. When we study the life of Christ, we never come up with the popular slogan’s that are preached today, such as *“Let Go, and let God!”* Or, *“I can’t, but God can!”* These slogans sound humble, they sound like an admission of weakness and complete dependence upon God. And while we *are* weak and dependent upon God, many have used these slogans to excuse their disobedience. Romans 7:19 is another verse that people many times misapply to excuse their sin, **“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I**

**keep on doing.”** Are we weak? Do we battle sin? Do we fall in battle? Yes, yes and yes. But we still battle even though we fall, we still seek to obey. No Christian should be encouraged to put the sword down, to “Let Go, and let God”. As we consider the obedience that God would demand of us, our model is Jesus Christ, not the latest church slogan. Do we see Christ in His ministry “letting go and letting God”, hoping that God would open doors for ministry? Do we see Jesus downplaying the seriousness of the sins of the people because of their weakness, encouraging them to have their best life now? Or do we see Jesus carefully concerned about our complete life worship? I see quite clearly that Jesus treated obedience to God with the utmost concern. He sought the will of His Father in every decision. He always lived in perfect harmony and fellowship with His Father. He prayed without ceasing, showing His full and perfect dependence upon the Father at all times. Where we go wrong many times (and entirely miss the point of this passage in Philippians) is we explain away the perfect obedience of Christ because of His deity, and we downplay His humanity. The point of His example in verses 5 to 8 is that He became a man and obeyed perfectly to the point of death. We want to attribute His perfect obedience to His sinless nature. While it is true that Jesus Christ was born without a sin nature, and therefore by technicality could not fall into sin, we should never downplay His active obedience. This is what it means for Christ to be Second Adam. As a man He faced every temptation to sin, yet He stood at every point where Adam fell.

So I’m making the point, that when we make light of the active obedience of Christ because He was sinless, that we create a division between Christ and ourselves where unity was intended. He was made like us, Philippians 2:7 says that He took our **‘form’** and **‘likeness’**. Though Christ was 100% God and therefore sinless, He was still 100% man and is our model in every way. He lived in perfect obedience and dependence and so should we. We should mirror His humanity, not excuse our disobedience because it is impossible for us to serve like Him. We are Christians (little Christ’s), not simply admirers of Him.

But we excuse away our worldly living and optional obedience all of the time. We admire godly living when we see it in others. We many times like to assume that the Pastors are wired just a little differently than the rest of us. They have a greater zeal than us, and that’s just the way God made them. As soon as we see a new believer having a greater zeal for God, and a greater desire to obey Him than we see in ourselves, we immediately start to push them into full-time ministry, because we’re more comfortable with them on the other side of the pulpit. That’s what we do! When we see examples of active and aggressive obedience to God, we admire those people, their lives make for great biographies, but we’re not so interested in imitating them. We’re more comfortable with our casual obedience if we categorize them as ‘full-time ministers’. I must have missed the passages that allow for nominal Christianity to live in the pews.

Paul’s ‘therefore’ in verse 12 links the active obedience of Christ, not just to the Pastor, but to the lives of *every* Christian. John, in his first epistle, says that there is no such thing as a professing Christian who is not obedient. 1 John 2:3-6, **“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. Whoever says, “I know Him” but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in Him, but whoever keeps His word, in Him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked.”** Paul even warned of those in Titus 1:16 who, **“profess to know God, but deny Him by their works.”** He says, **“They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”** The writer of Hebrews warns them in 12:14 to, **“lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but**

**rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”**

Listen, and tremble at the words of Christ to the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:15-16, **“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”** Jesus Christ didn’t give this message to a wayward church member, or to even a group of lazy believers in a church, he wrote it to an entire congregation. What did Jesus mean by wishing they were cold or hot? Hot people are those who are spiritually alive and possess the fervency of a transformed life. The spiritually cold, on the other hand, are best understood as those who reject Jesus Christ. The gospel leaves them unmoved; it evokes in them no spiritual response. They have no interest in Christ, His Word, or His church. And they make no pretense about it; they are not hypocrites. The lukewarm fit into neither category. They are not genuinely saved, yet they do not openly reject the gospel. They attend church and claim to know the Lord. Like the Pharisees, they are content to practice a self-righteous religion; they are hypocrites playing games. The Lord Jesus Christ described such people in Matthew 7:22-23 this way, **“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”**

The Bible is clear from cover to cover that God is very concerned about our holy living and right conduct. So let’s take these warnings seriously, and not ignore them or treat them lightly. This call to **‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’** in Philippians 2:12 is given to every member of the church. Paul began his exhortation to the church in 1:27 by warning them, **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”** And then Paul went on to instruct them about the importance of being united as a body in mind, heart and spirit. He instructed them about the importance of humble, selfless, submissive service to one another, with Christ as our supreme example. And now Paul directly links our obedience to the fervent obedience of Christ.

2) **“As you have always obeyed”** – The Philippian Church lived in right obedience to Christ. It’s important that we note Paul’s commendation of their obedience if we’re ever going to rightly interpret the rest of verse 12. It’s also important that we note the real potential for an entire congregation of people to live in obedience to God. We all know what the word ‘obeyed’ means, but I think you’d be interested to know a little about its Greek derivative. The word in the Greek is *hupakouo*. It’s a compound verb composed of the preposition *hupo* and the verb *akouo*. The basic meaning of the compound verb is to place oneself under what you have learned, submitting and obeying that teaching. From the word *akouo* we get the word *acoustic*. It carries the modern implication of what we hear in an acoustic version of a song. If I were to take an acoustic guitar and play a song for you, I would be playing somebody else’s song as closely as I can remember it. If I strummed all the wrong cords and sang all the wrong notes, you wouldn’t recognize the song at all. In order for me to successfully play the song for you, it would require my special attention to the minor details of the song.

Our obedience is similar to this. As Christians we don’t walk to the beat of our own drum, we walk in step to the drum of Another. Our obedience is only made possible when we have learned well what is required of our lives. Only then can we be used as His instruments for His glory, and obeying together, we will make a beautiful symphony of music. Paul warns the Ephesians in 5:15 to **“look carefully then how you walk (obedience), not as unwise but as wise.”** Paul wants Titus in 3:8 to, **“insist on these things, so that those who believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.”** The writer of

Hebrews warns us again in 4:11 to **“strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”** And who could overlook the Great Commission given by our Lord in Matthew 28:19-20, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (how many stop here, but we cannot) teaching them to observe ALL that I have commanded you.”**

Keeping those verses in mind, it's important that we remember that Paul has commended their obedience, but he still moves from commending to commanding. In one verse Paul moves from **“as you have always”** to **“work out your”**. And while I'm not ready to speak on “working out” yet, it should force us to ask the question why? Why does Paul commend right behaviour and then command right behavior? If the Philippians were lazy, disobedient people, the command to ‘work out’ would make sense! The answer to our question lies in the implicit ‘continuing’ behaviour of the Philippians. IOW, Paul is not discouraging them with the command by pointing out something lacking in their lives, he's actually encouraging them to continue with the successful, right living and obedience that they presently have. It's similar to what Paul said to encourage the Corinthians 1 Cor. 9:24, **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.”** It's as if Paul were commending the Philippians for running well in this race, but then reminding them that their in a marathon, not a sprint. They were obeying well, but they needed to keep on obeying well to the end.

G. Walter Hansen offers us some helpful words, *“It is this long obedience in the same direction which the mood of the world does so much to discourage. When the path of obedience to Christ becomes steep and dangerous, pleasure seekers look for an easier way. Religious tourists hunting for sensational entertainment, instantaneous enlightenment, and emotional excitement will jump on the newest rides and take quick shortcuts, but they will not be found with pilgrims on the long, hard road following in the footsteps of Christ, who was obedient to death—even death on a cross. 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.”*<sup>59</sup>

### **3) Not only as in my presence but much more in my absence – Our Faithfulness to Christ**

There is a God designed beauty and function to the church. Believers are intended to live and breathe together as one body, with Christ as the Head. Practically, the church instructs and upholds the whole of scripture. It is the duty of the leadership of the church to fully equip the members, so that they mature into those whose “manner of life is worthy of the gospel of Christ.” But even beyond the scope of the leadership, it is right that every member of the body give the proper attention and care to any weaker part of the body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:24-27, **“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually member of it.”**

So when we think about obedience, we should not only think of obedience in terms of our individual walk with God, but also in terms of the health and strength and testimony of the body at large. Being an active member of the church therefore will give us the opportunity to encourage the necessary growth and fruit of obedience in our body, as well as giving our body the opportunity to encourage and strengthen us.

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<sup>59</sup> Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 172)

Every Christian needs this encouragement, and needs to be giving this encouragement to someone else. This is part of the plan of God for the functioning of His Church for His glory. We need the accountability of our Pastor, and Deacons, and fellow mature saints. We also need to be accountable to those new believers who watch our every step and imitate us, even if they wouldn't tell us.

And Paul is encouraging the Philippians here in verse 12 to keep on obeying as they had been while in His presence. Surely they were immensely blessed to be under the teaching and preaching of the man who wrote a large portion of the later canonized New Testament. You could imagine the impact it would have been to be under the teaching of the greatest man (save Christ) to ever take on the task. The clarity of teaching they would have received, as well as the love of Paul and his prayers for them would have been such a blessing. It would have been so easy to be obedient in Paul's presence, wouldn't it? Let's be honest: Think of the time(s) this week where you've messed up. Would you have handled that moment any differently if your Pastor were right beside you? I bet you would! And that's because we're encouraged to greater obedience when we are tied closely together.

But, while Paul is thankful for their present obedience, he is concerned that they root their obedience properly. Paul wishes for them to obey **“much more in [his] absence.”** The Philippians (and we) need to be mindful that we are obedient first and foremost and finally to our God. Paul knew that every kid acts up as soon as the teacher leaves the room. So they needed to know that the Holy Spirit is alive in them wherever they go. God is omnipresent in His full capacity and awareness. And so regardless of the circumstance, no matter the trial or tribulation, Paul commanded them to continue to obey God.

#### **4) Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling – Living with a consciousness of the weight of sin**

It is this portion of the verse that bring up the most controversy. We have Protestants who desire to stand so far away from works-righteousness, that they have no room in their theology to answer what Paul could possibly mean by “work out your own salvation.” And then we have the post-modern version of Christianity, which is Christianity light. “All the blessings, no sin.” They want nothing at all to do with anyone fearing or trembling anything. The post-modern gospel is nothing more than believing in Jesus who loves everyone and brings all people (including your dog) to Heaven. The post-modern gospel preaches that God is a God a love who would never condemn those insignificant, petty little scuffs on your record.

I'd like to deliver the fourth point by tackling this portion of the verse in the reverse order. First I'd like to address how much weight we give to this thing called 'sin'. And we'll finish our time together considering what “working out our own salvation” looks like. I'm convinced that many who consider themselves Christian by lining up under the teaching of those best-selling authors and mega-church televangelists, have no clue as to the depth and breadth of sin in their lives. And the reason why they don't know about sin is because it's never mentioned in the teaching they sit under. There is a category of Christians these days who (willfully or ignorantly) have no perspective on the biblical reality of their sin. John speaks of a category of people in 1 John 1:8 who deny the presence of sin, John says, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** Have you ever considered how often people deny sin? Our conclusions about sin and its effect stems from our definition of sin. If we define sin as things like little white lies, exaggerating the truth and occasionally using foul language, we will think of sin as common and cheap. We don't feel guilty about common sin. And then from that line of thinking we start to categorize sins into sins that are common and sins that God gets really angry at.

We define those sins as things like murder and rape and child abuse and adultery. And so we see people who have redefined sin in their own minds, they have categorized the sins that are worthy of punishment, and those which are swept under the rug. When we create our own line in the sand, we can stand quite proud of our sinless accomplishments.

I think that many people who are outside of the biblical definition of sin think this way. They feel as though they are primarily good people who do their best, and occasionally scuff themselves. We shouldn't feel guilt or shame for scuffing ourselves, because God is love, and He isn't too concerned about a few scuffs. To be clear: God *is* concerned about murder, and rape, and adultery, so steer clear of those.

But John isn't using our worldly definition of sin. He has a much weightier value. He desires that we see our sin biblically: As our cursed nature by birth, inherited by our father Adam. The Bible speaks of our sin as corrupting our entire being (mind, body, and spirit), and sin places us into a broken relationship with God. We fall completely short in our sin. Our sin kills us, and nothing short of the grace of God breathing new life into our dead hearts could ever reconcile us to Him.

We need to understand that this is our nature as sinners. We aren't sinful because we sin, we sin because we are sinful. Sin is big. It is bigger than you think. It is more dangerous than you think. It is more costly than you think. And it won't be until God has given you eyes to see that you will understand the nature of your sin, so that you will ever handle it appropriately in your life. We are to avoid sin (hence, obey God), and work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. John MacArthur says that, "*such fear involves self-distrust, a sensitive conscience, and being on guard against temptation. It necessitates opposing pride, and being constantly aware of the deceitfulness of one's heart, as well as of the subtlety and strength of one's inner corruption. It is a dread that seeks to avoid anything that would offend and dishonour God.*"<sup>60</sup>

This idea of fearing and trembling sounds harsh and unnecessary, but it's consistent with the rest of the Bible. Listen to the Lord Himself in Isaiah 66:2, "**All these things My hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word.**" There is to be a seriousness about holiness, a true and consistent effort towards obedience to God's word. Psalm 111:10 says, "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.**" We are to fear our God. Not in a 'deadly bolt of lightning striking us from the sky' kind of way, but in a worshipful way. As we consider the grace of God towards us in salvation, we should be so careful to do all that we can to please and honor Him. And we likewise should always fear doing anything that would bring shame upon us and displeasure to Him.

### Work out your own salvation

The last portion of this verse that I'd like to comment on before I make my conclusion and application, is defining what this "working out" of our own salvation looks like. The Greek word for 'work out' is *katēgazomai* which indicates to us a continual command. Therefore, our first clue as to its definition is that it is not a one-time act. Nor is it a set of steps, or a pilgrimage that all Christians must make. Rather, this command is something that every Christian should be doing all of the time, until the moment of their

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<sup>60</sup> MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 160)

death, until they are glorified before the Lord forever. There are two aspects of our salvation that we must be actively working out. The first has to do with our active, faithful obedience. And the second has to do with our perseverance. Let's look at both in turn:

1 – Our active commitment and personal effort towards holiness. Paul said in 2 Cor. 7:1, **“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”** Paul also encouraged the Colossians in 3:2 to **“set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”** He also exhorted the Christians in Rome to **“present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”** (Rom. 6:19) We have been called out of a life of slavery to sin. We have now been called to live a life of slavery to our Heavenly Master. But the calling of our Lord is high, His bar is never set at the lowest common denominator. Paul encouraged the Ephesian Christians to **“walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which they had been called.”** (4:1)

Paul had spent some time writing to Timothy about the danger of false teachers in the church. And he spoke about the character and desires of these false teachers, and then he commands Timothy to **“flee these things. [And] Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.”** (6:11-12)

MacArthur summarizes, *“If living the Christian life were merely a matter of passive yielding and surrender, of “letting go and letting God,” then such admonitions not only would be superfluous but presumptuous. But those injunctions, and countless others like them throughout God’s Word, presuppose believers’ personal responsibility for obedience. They must choose to live righteously, to work out their salvation in daily living, while at the same time realizing that all the power for that obedience comes from God’s Spirit.”*<sup>61</sup>

2 – The second aspect of ‘working out our own salvation’ is Perseverance. This point builds off of the last one, remembering to continue this obedience all of our lives. Paul had placed a collected value upon everything in this life outside of knowing Jesus Christ, he said in Philippians 3:8-14, **“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

For Paul, holiness wasn't something tacked onto his life, it was his life. Paul didn't compartmentalize his religion into small, convenient, comfortable little boxes. Rather, he swept his life clean of every box that distracted his attention away from holiness. We must be careful to be holy in all of our lives, so that **“whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God.”** (1 Cor. 10:31) This is how we work out our salvation. Our salvation is not legitimate without this relentless pursuit of holiness.

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<sup>61</sup> MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 162)

Jesus spoke about professing believers who do not pursue righteousness, He said in Matthew 7:19, **“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** Jesus isn’t referring to perfect obedience when He speaks of good fruit, but He is referring to perseverance, the pursuit of holiness. Listen to who gets eternal life according to Paul in Romans 2:7, **“To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life.”** Listen to Paul’s words in Colossians 1:22-23, **“He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”** Paul warned Timothy to, **“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”** (4:16) The writer of Hebrews even gives us this warning, **“For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”** (3:14)

From this spattering of verses we can take home one clear truth: It is not biblical to let go and let God, rather, it is our work to ensure that we are humbly, actively obedient, pursuing righteousness with our entire beings. No matter what we are doing, we are to be doing it to honor Him. This is what the apostle Paul referred when he told us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

This isn’t a light task, it isn’t something tied onto our life, it is our life. John 17:3 says, **“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”** And all the while that we are working out our salvation, we are remembering that the power for us to do so comes not from us, but from Him. Paul said to the Ephesians, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For (purpose statement) we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”** (2:8-10) He is the source of our salvation, and you’ll need to come back that beautiful truth!