

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 13: God's Work in Our Salvation

Philippians 2:13

“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

We concluded our last time together by pointing to the God of our salvation. I read Ephesians 2:8-10, which pointed to a freely given salvation by God through our faith in Jesus Christ. And that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone, but as we saw this morning, our salvation is never alone. Our salvation is not a one-time transaction. We have been justified by Christ's death and resurrection, we were redeemed and reconciled by Christ's work into a right relationship with God. That transaction was a one-time, efficient, and effective transaction. But there are other stages of our salvation that are ongoing. While justification is complete, the Christians sanctification is ongoing, and our final glorification is our great hope for the future. So while it is biblically true that Christians *are* saved, there is a biblical sense in which we are still *being* saved.

Our salvation according to Ephesians 2:9 is not merited by our works, so that none of us can boast, but our salvation in verse 10 is intended *for* works, which God prepared for us to do. Even James says, **“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”** (2:14-17) James recognized the importance of works in our life. He isn't preaching another gospel of works righteousness, he's talking about the evidence of salvation.

And while it's true that all believers need to walk in good works to evidence salvation, it's equally important that all believers recognize that their new life is from Christ, and their strength to obey Him, is found in Him alone. Paul told the Corinthians, **“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”** (1 Cor. 15:10) There we see Paul working harder than any, and at the same time crediting God for his work. None of us are capable of this work in pleasing God apart from the indwelling Spirit of God at work in us. Jesus told His disciples in the Upper Room, **“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:4-5)

As much as we are commanded by Paul to 'work out' our salvation in verse 12, that is only possible because God has 'worked in' our salvation in verse 13. The two go hand-in-hand, and neither validates an authentic salvation without the other. When we think of God 'working in' our salvation, we must think of Him as the spark, the igniter, the fuel for our 'working out' our salvation. I will adopt John MacArthur's five "P's" of God in this verse that help to explain His work, they are His: Person, Power, Presence, Purpose, and Pleasure. Let's look at each in turn.

- 1) His Person - **“For it is God** who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

We must always be careful to remember that we worship a God who is a person. Yes, He is one Being, but He is also three Persons. He is not three forces, but we say persons, because He has personality. Therefore, we shouldn't think of God 'working in' us as an uninterested force or power that were

propelling us into an optional state of morality. Rather, we ought to be aware of the real presence of the third Person of the Trinity indwelling us. And we ought to commune with Him in such a way that we please, and not grieve the Spirit. There is a real comfort that should overcome us as we think of the intentional work of God in us. There is one God, and that God sees, and hears, and feels, and has a will. He has emotions. And that God has purposed to know and love and see His children grow in righteousness.

All of those attributes are in us as we are created in His image, and we see those attributes displayed perfectly in God. And to our eternal benefit, not only is God a person who knows us, and loves us perfectly, He is beyond that our adopted Father. While an entire sermon could be devoted to what I'm about to say, I'll state this briefly as it furthers the point of the text. Do you realize how special it is to be God's child? We're raised to think of everything and everyone as God's child, as though God loves His entire creation equally. But we ought to recognize from everywhere in scripture that that isn't the case. There are those whom God has chosen to love particularly, they are His elect, His chosen people, saved by His grace alone. They are those whom He 'works in', and that work is always gracious and effectual.

So, when we read that it is God who works in you, we need to ensure that we're not generalizing God's love as though He were bound to love and work in you. It takes the impact out of the verse if God must (in some impersonal way) extend some general goodwill towards you, hoping that some of His creation will respond positively. Rather, God has chosen to love you. Not because of you, but because of Him. Doesn't it make your heart swell to think that the God of eternity actually knows *you*, and has set His affection on *you*, and has purposed to change *you* into the image of His Son?

Charles Spurgeon well said, "*Parents, although you love your children much, and you know it, you do not know, and you cannot tell how deep is the unfathomable abyss of the love of God to you. Go out at midnight and consider the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars which He has ordained; and I am sure you will say, "What is man, that you should be mindful of Him?" But more than all, you will wonder, not at your loving Him, but that while He has all these treasures, He should set His heart upon so insignificant a creature as man. And the sonship that God has given us is not a mere name; there is all our Father's great heart given to us in the moment when He claims us as His sons.*"⁶² [I modernized the English for readability]

John MacArthur likewise comments, "*The omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator and Sustainer of the universe loves His children with everlasting love and kindness. God protects them according to His everlasting covenant and promises, forgives and cleanses with everlasting grace through His Son, and calls, gifts, and empowers them by His Spirit for spiritual service with everlasting impact. He sanctifies and will glorify those whom He has justified, bringing them into His heavenly kingdom to live with Him for all eternity.*"⁶³

2) His Power - "For it is God **who works** in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Having laid the foundation for the source, being the person of God, we will now move to the power of God. The Greek word that Paul uses for 'work' is the word *energeo* which we obviously get the English

⁶² Spurgeon, Charles H., *Spurgeon's Sermons: Volumes 5-6 "The Fatherhood of God"* Hendrickson, 2011 (p. 100)

⁶³ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 167)

word *energy*. So a simple translation could be, “For it is God who energizes you.” And expanding that translation to verse 12, it would look like this, “Seek to obey the Lord above all else all the days of your life, and know that it is God who energizes you.” IOW, God gives us the command to be obedient, and then He enables us to do so. And we all recognize that we couldn’t be righteous apart from Him. In Romans 3, Paul quotes Psalm 14:1-3 which says, “**None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.**” (3:9) Then Paul goes on to say in verse 20, “**For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight.**” Paul told the Galatians in 3:3, “**Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?**” Paul recognized his sinfulness, he understood the total depravity of his nature. That’s why he rebuked the Galatians for depending upon their own righteousness after trusting in the gospel of Christ, such foolishness. Even Paul said of himself in Romans 7:18, “**For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.**”

God has energized us, He is the power behind our holiness. Quite the opposite of ‘let go and let God’, the message is ‘Get busy in the power of God to good works’. (Not quite as catchy of a slogan, but it’s biblical) G. Walter Hansen says about verse 13, “*God is named here as the One who works: He is the Infinite Worker. When our finite work is empowered by God’s work, then our work is an expression of God’s work. The priority of God’s work does not vitiate [make our work ineffective] our responsibility to work. We are not puppet’s on God’s strings; we are fully responsible human beings obligated to continue to work out our salvation. God’s total sovereignty is the air we breathe and the ground we walk on to fulfill our human responsibility to work. God’s indicative—God works—makes it possible to fulfill the imperative given to us—work! Without God’s prior work directing and empowering our work, all our work is meaningless and in vain.*”⁶⁴ Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:5 “**Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.**” Paul knew that our sufficiency came from God, yet he still worked for the gospel, “**For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.**” (Colossians 1:29)

It is God who works in us, that is how and why we can ‘work out our own salvation’. Our work is only possible because He has begun His work in us. And as Paul told the Philippians in 1:6, “**He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**” Listen to the promise of Jesus in John 6:40, “**For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day.**” The confidence of our salvation lies solely in the God who saves. The sovereign God who is stronger than all has purposed to save us, and He always starts what He finishes. There is not one who could overturn the plan and will of God to save. That is the confidence of this beautiful passage in Romans 8:31-39. Let’s close our second point of God’s power by reading that text:

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth,

⁶⁴ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 178)

nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

3) His Presence - “For it is God who works **in you**, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

While we have already spoken at length concerned God’s specific working in us, as opposed to a generic, universal, open invitation to all sinners. It seems to fit well that we consider briefly, and formally, what it means to have God present and working *in us*.

God being ‘in’ us signifies the reconciliation that Christ has made between us and God. As those who were once God’s enemies (Rom. 5:10), we have been reconciled and adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. (Eph. 1:5) There is now unity where there once was disunity. Christ is now *in us*, and for us. We are now members of the body of Christ, of which He is the head. (Col. 1:18) These are the privileges of being chosen of God (John 15:16). There is a real presence of God at work in us, to bring about everything in our lives for our good and His glory. (Rom. 8:28) Romans 8:28 is not a promise for the world, but for those whom God has set His saving affection on.

Listen to the language of Christ in His High Priestly prayer in John 17, “**I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world *but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.*” (9) Jesus prays specifically for His people, the ones that are ‘in’ Him. He goes on to say in verses 22-23, “**The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me.**”**

Listen to the causality of our salvation, dependent upon the indwelling Holy Spirit in John 14:16-17, “**And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, *for He dwells with you and will be IN you.*” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “**Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?**” (1 Cor. 3:16) And in 2 Corinthians Paul said, “**For we are the temple of the living God, as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”****

4) His Purpose - “For it is God who works in you, **both to will and to work** for His good pleasure.”

There are two possibilities of interpretation at this point of the verse. Paul is either speaking of *God’s willing* and working for His own pleasure, or he’s referring to *our willing* and working for God’s pleasure. I think it’s the better interpretation to read that it is God’s work which culminates in our willing and working, which brings about His pleasure. The Greek word for ‘will’ is *thelo*, which refers to thoughtful, purposeful choice, not to mere whim or emotional desire. One work that God is after in our lives is a changed will. God’s will is to change our will, so that it’s conformed to His will. He does this by giving us a new heart, the Lord said in Ezekiel 36:26-28, “**I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.**” So again we see God at work effecting a new heart that obeys Him. We see the indwelling Spirit within them as the cause of their obedience: God works in, and they work out. The working out of our salvation, having our wills aligned with our Lord’s will, is a necessary element of our salvation. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through**

Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:17) IOW, a radically new life is the mark of a Christian, and that radically new life has totally come from God!

As Christians, we should forever long for our wills to be aligned with God’s. I become frustrated many times at Christians who are quite comfortable with what I call ‘lowest common denominator’ Christianity. We should never be content to put forth the bare minimum effort in our lives. We should forever be putting that old man behind us, and striving forward in our new man to glorify God. And all the while, we should be petitioning our God to purify our hearts, so that we would serve Him better. The Psalmist prayed in 119:36, **“Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!”** Even David prayed in Psalm 51:10, **“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”** There is a heart that ought to be in a Christian whose will is turned away from the dark and filthy world of sin where we live. Our hearts’ desire ought to be Heavenward. Paul said to the Romans in 12:2, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

One way that God works in us to change our will towards His is in our holy discontent. God does us the favor of not allowing His children to rest in the lie that they are ‘basically good people’. So long as we believe the cultural teaching that we are morally neutral people, we will be lazy Christians who are quite content with their state in life. But when we examine just the examples of Isaiah and Paul, do we get the impression that they were motivated by their character? Isaiah was the holiest man in the land, yet watch the grace of God give Isaiah a perspective of his holiness compared to God. His will and heart was changed before the throne in Isaiah 6:1, 4-5 **“I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple...And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of Him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”** Isaiah certainly had an understanding of his sin, and the ugliness of it, but he had never seen the magnitude and severity of his sin until he saw perfect holiness with his own eyes. God has a way of aligning our will to His by causing us to be dissatisfied with our present level of holiness. Even Paul, who wrote most of our New Testament said about himself in Romans 7:24, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”**

God uses our holy discontentment to change our wills. As negative as that might sound, it is healthy for us to get a right perspective on how much farther we have to go in our commitment and obedience to Christ. But there is another way that God works in us to change our will, and that is by giving us a holy aspiration. First, I said that He works in us to create a holy hatred for our sin, and now I’m saying that He also works in us positively to love and strive for righteousness. For Christians, God always effects within them a love for righteousness. If you don’t see righteousness in someone who professes Christ, you don’t see a Christian. Romans 8:29, part of the golden chain of redemption says, **“For those whom He foreknew [all Christians] He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.”** That’s an example of God’s working in us positively, so that we might be changed to be like Christ, to look like His character!

In chapter 3 of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he combined both elements of God’s work in changing our will (both by holy discontentment and holy aspiration) in 3:12-14, **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect [holy discontentment], but I press on to make it my own [holy aspiration], because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own [discontentment]. 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 [aspiration].”**

But there is a production that God is after in the shaping of our will after His, and that is our work. God is at work in us, to shape both our will and our work for His good pleasure. It should also be noted that apart from God's work, we would never attain that godly will or work. It is God alone who gives us the right desires and the strength to carry forward those desires, to bring those desires to fruition. This is precisely what James had in mind when he wrote in 1:17-18, **“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.”** Everything that we have comes from Him, and it has been granted to us so that we would bear fruit and bear it abundantly! Even the author of Hebrews at the benediction portion of the letters says, **“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”** The God who has bought us and sealed us, has equipped us to do EVERY good work, and all of that being for the praise and the glory of His name!

It should make sense to us that we ought to live and breathe and move for His glory alone. We glory in our redeemer, we praise God for His work. But do we meditate on the cost of our redemption? How much greater would our zeal for God be, if we meditated on how God sacrificed His Son so we might live! Peter tells us in 1Peter 1:18-19, **“Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”** 1 Corinthians 6:20 reminds us that we **“were bought with a price, so [we should] glorify God in our bodies.”** God cares a great deal about how we work, that is why He has worked in us, and the ultimate purpose of our work is to make Him look great! God doesn't need us to make Him look great, He is great, but God wants us to display His greatness, that is how He is glorified. This is His good pleasure.

5) His Pleasure - “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work **for His good pleasure.**”

The word for ‘good pleasure’ is the Greek word *eudokias*, which expresses a great enjoyment and satisfaction. And of course, as our text makes plain, it is God who finds this great enjoyment and satisfaction in our righteous will and good works that He has worked in us. It is mind-boggling to me, how a sinful human being could possibly bring a satisfying joy to God. It reminds me of Psalm 8, but specifically verses 3 and 4, **“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”** It's so easy to understand how God can be justly angry at individual sinners, but to think that this same God is so gracious as to take notice of my wretched life, and to transform it in such a way that I actually please Him, amazes me! It's a truth that I would never believe unless I read it in the inspired scripture.

I'd like to close our time here today by providing an application which will summarize our time together in Philippians 2:12 and 13. I'd like to give us four reasons⁶⁵ to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, recognizing all the while that it is God's work in us, all-the-while seeking and satisfying His good pleasure. Here are five reasons why God hates our disobedience, and takes a great pleasure in our obedience; and I'll attempt to give them in an order that will grow in intensity and importance.

One – God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience shows a misplacement of fear.

1 Samuel 15:24, **“Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.”** We can all relate to

⁶⁵ The four reasons are adopted and condensed from John Piper's book “The Pleasures of God”, Multnomah, 2012 (p.224-229)

this fear, yet it is a great sin to fear men above God. Jesus warns us in Luke 12:4-5, **“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him!”**

There is a right and proper and reverential fear that we ought to have before our God. This is what Paul referred to in verse 12 as we work out our own salvation with ‘fear and trembling.’ It’s an unpopular message to talk about fearing God these days. But the truth of the matter is that we’re always driven by what we fear the most. If we fear death, we’ll do everything we can to stay young. If we fear letting people down, we’ll say ‘yes’ until we burn ourselves out. If we fear not fitting in with our friends, we’ll do all sorts of ungodly things. And it’s not until our fear is placed appropriately, that we will ever see God in His rightful place as our Master, and fear displeasing Him. Every time we disobey Him, we are misplacing that rightful fear of His Lordship and His law, and serving a much lesser object. He is pleased (as any Father would be) when we obey His commands and long to see Him smile.

Two – God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience shows a misplacement of pleasure.

Have you ever considered why we sin? We sin because the sin before us promises immediate, temporary pleasure! And our deceitfully wicked hearts are quite skilled at justifying the necessity of our actions in moment. *“Yes, I know I said this, but you don’t know what they said to me!” “Yes, I know I took an extra five on my break, but I needed more time off my feet.” “Yes, I know Sunday is a day of worship, but you don’t know how busy my week has been, I need to unwind.”* (If you can’t say ‘Amen’ you oughta’ say ouch! – Voddie Baucham) We make hundreds of decisions daily, and because we love the false notion that we’re in control of our lives, we live largely to please ourselves.

The devil’s lie to us, is that if we obey our Heavenly Father that somehow we’ll be bored, and stripped of all pleasure. The devil encourages us to cheapen ‘little white sins’ and to enjoy our fleeting life in the moment. Yet, it is our Heavenly Father’s greatest desire that (as John Piper has coined the phrase) He is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him. Obedience has nothing to do with shelving our pleasure for the smile of our Father, our obedience always results in the pleasure of a right relationship with God.

Three – God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience shows a misplacement of praise.

While this is closely tied to having a misplacement of pleasure, it deserves its own category. If obedience to God makes Him look big and grand and worthy of praise, then what does that say about Him when we disobey? There are times when we sin, and we’re looking more for the applause, the acceptance, the praise of others than the praise of God. We know that God wouldn’t be praised by the language we’re using and the story we’re telling, but we’re hungry for the praise of those around us.

The reason why we choose our praise over God’s praise in many situations is because of the ramifications of choosing to consistently live for Him. If we stood for Christ and sought His praise in all of our life, imagine how many people would avoid us. Imagine what they would say about us. Imagine how many people would ridicule us, and even hate us. While I’d love to tell you that people would never treat you like that, even Jesus said in John 15:18, **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”** We must seek to obey for His praise and not our own, and remember as the last point made, that our pleasure will only be intensified in His pleasure.

Four – God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience is as the sin of divination and idolatry.

Sinning is like to sin of Divination? I know that might sound odd, but consider the similarities. In the OT, when someone would go to a Diviner, they would be intentionally circumventing the authoritative and revealed Word of God, and seeking another authority. Every time we sin, we are intentionally ignoring the revealed will of God, and listening to the advice of another, or at least we are listening to our own wicked heart. Even if the object we worship is ourselves, it is still nothing more than idolatry. God is pleased with us when we consider His word to be the utmost, and final authority on every issue in our lives, and we are obedient to it.

So whether we are a faithful servant of Christ here today, or a new believer, the call is the same. Let us obediently work out the salvation that has been worked in us by God until our days on earth are through, to the praise of His glorious name, for His good pleasure.