

PHILIPPIANS BIBLE STUDY

Philippians 2:12-13

Lesson #14

OBEDIENCE - WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION

12 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; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Phil 2:12-13 (NASB)

INTRODUCTION

For the last two weeks we've been examining those passages of scripture that discuss the attitude of Christ Jesus, and just what that attitude looked like in His day to day life here on earth. We discussed the magnitude of the act of His condescension and the reasons that He did so. The first and foremost of those reasons being to please His Father, and then to display the magnitude of His love commitment to those whom His Father has given Him to be His everlasting companions and family of worshipers.

To produce and prepare an eternal family, to whom you intend to share administrative control of an eternal kingdom of absolute perfection, there obviously must be some education and preparation process involved. It would be foolish to think that God just redeems certain ones and then thrusts them into positions of glory and responsibility without any kind of preparation process for that function. But this is exactly what the vast majority of evangelical Christianity seems to believe. The only thing of significance to most modern churches is getting as many as possible saved, and then all the rest of that stuff discussed in the scriptures, whatever it might be, is entirely up to God.

I could go on forever discussing this, but the problem stems from two major discrepancies. One, the sovereignty of God in the process of redemption and sanctification has been lost, and replaced with the idea that man is a capable free agent to accept or reject his salvation with only his own innate capabilities. And second, the absolute absence of any understanding of just why people are saved in the first place, and then, what those redeemed will be doing for the rest of their lives in eternity in God's kingdom. A study of these verses we're examining now really requires this background knowledge, or they can lead to some erroneous conclusions, which they indeed have done often in the past.

For instance, the sophists have used this verse to bolster their claim that salvation is partly an act of God and partly an act of man, because we are told to work out our own salvation. And the papist have used this verse to bolster their claims that salvation is unsure and fleeting, because we should be in fear and trembling of losing it.

Both of these positions are absurd, and are everywhere refuted in scriptures, but they are the direct result of the lack of understanding that I just pointed out about the sovereignty of God and the purposes of man in the eternal plan of God. In defense of those who have propagated these heresies, I will stipulate that without the proper background knowledge against which to interpret these scriptures, their conclusions are understandable, though none the less wrong and destructive. Good intentions do not abrogate false doctrines and heretical teachings. Ignorance of divine truth is not bliss, it is destructive, even deadly.

So now, for the sake of our study of these verses of scriptures, I am going to assume that our listeners are mature Christians who affirm the biblical doctrines of grace, and the sovereignty of God, and who have labored in the study of prophetic end time scriptures and are sufficiently knowledgeable to rightly interpret them and recognize truth from error when they hear it.

Starting with verse 12, Paul begins with the phrase "So then", which means that he is drawing a conclusion to the preceding verses about the attitude of Christ Jesus and how it was demonstrated. As was so eloquently displayed in verses 6-11 which show us by example how Christ went about the process of pleasing His Father by His life's works.

Jesus didn't glorify His Father by sitting on a cloud and singing pretty songs to Him. He glorified His Father by doing the things that His Father had sent Him to do. He did them from inside a tangible human body that was visible for everybody to see and hear. And the extent that He was willing to go to do His Father's will included His death and humiliation in full view before all mankind and angels. And it is here that Paul says;

12 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;

1. *Just as you have always obeyed*

Paul compliments them on their obedience to the teachings of Christ while he was there with them. But he knows from experience that there is often a slacking off when he, or whomever was the leader, wasn't present there with them. Obedience is unfortunately something that ebbs and flows like the tides of an ocean. Many are there who put forth a good and sincere showing when there is someone else there to motivate them on, but have a more difficult time sustaining that enthusiasm on their own when the leader isn't immediately present. Paul is exhorting them to continue on in their honorable obedience, even more so now in his absence than they did in his presence. Even more so because the effort would be theirs, and the responsibility was on their own shoulders to sustain the church and glorify God by their visible obedience. Once he left their city they had to step up to the plate themselves and be ready to answer the call and take the leadership responsibility themselves, or the church, which is intended to visibly demonstrate the glory of God, would fade into obscurity, and with it the visible testimony.

2. *Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*

As we said in our introduction comments, this passage is often mistreated by those who have a deficient or skewed perception of scriptures. It cannot be denied that the scriptures say we are to work out our salvation. So then, doesn't that mean that our salvation is something that we can in fact work out ourselves? Isn't this passage telling us that our salvation is something that we can and must work out for ourselves and thus implying that we must obviously have the means within ourselves to do so? Some have taken this verse this way. But we ask ourselves (1) is this the only viable interpretation of this verse, and (2) is such an interpretation consistent with the rest of scriptures? The answer to both of these is an emphatic no, it is not.

First, working out our salvation suggests the implementing and use of a salvation that we already do have, to achieve its intended purpose, not the *obtaining* or *producing* of our salvation through our own efforts. We aren't being told to gain or produce our salvation, we are told to work it out by the proper use of it. By this I mean that this verse is telling us to put into use those benefits of our regeneration to work out the intended purpose of that regeneration, which is the demonstration of our salvation. It is not telling us to work out getting regenerated so that we may obtain our salvation.

It's telling us to demonstrate our salvation by obedient lives, which is the working out of that salvation in full view of fallen humanity, to the glory of God the Father. Which was the attitude of Christ Jesus and is the foundation on which these verses are based. Working out our salvation is remaining obedient to the word of God and doing it visibly in our daily lives for the purpose of demonstrating the glory of God's mercy toward His elect. This is the proper interpretation of working out our salvation, and is the only one consistent with the remainder of scriptures.

Now, concerning the portion that says "with fear and trembling" let's address the meaning of this statement while being careful to remain within the context of the thought being conveyed. The emphasis on the attitude of Christ in His subjective obedience to the will of His Father was a demonstration of humility. And it is that spirit of humility as opposed to prideful self reliance that Paul is emphasizing here, as the next verse goes on to prove in verses 14 and 15. One does not become arrogant when they have a proper view of themselves as they compare to Christ Jesus. If we start to compare ourselves with our other brothers and sisters we might start to think more highly of ourselves than we should, but when our eyes are on Christ as the model we are more likely to see ourselves as fragile, damaged, and unworthy vessels and we serve Him with fear and trembling, knowing that we stand solely on His merits and not on our own.

If Christ our Savior and our creator humbled Himself while on this earth by foregoing all His respect and recognition as king and lord, then who in the world are we to expect to be treated as someone important by either the world or the church? The fear and trembling is our recognition that we serve a perfect and holy God, all powerful and all knowing, before whom every person will eventually stand and give an account of himself.

If this thought doesn't frighten and humble you, then you are either self deceived about your own sin and righteousness, or you're a complete atheist and unbeliever. In the next verses Paul tells them to do whatever they are instructed (in the word of God) without grumbling and complaining about it, which is the demonstration of a humble spirit that knows its place and standing before a sovereign God. Even from an earthly perspective, a good employee who really appreciates his job and values it highly, and knows there are multitudes of others who would love to have it themselves, never complains or grumbles when his boss assigns him a task, no matter how important or how menial that task might appear to be.

This is the proper understanding of the fear and trembling that's being discussed in this verse. It's not a fear and trembling of losing one's salvation for not working properly as some have taken it to mean. But rather, it is a most beneficial and regulating *reverence* for the magnitude of the power and holiness of the One that we have been chosen and called to serve in our daily lives, with the full knowledge that we stand or fall not by our own merits, but entirely by His sovereign will. This understanding is essential to every believer, but even more so to all who are called to serve as leaders, pastors, teachers, or other positions of service in the body of Christ.

Now, just to keep the proper balance, the scriptures do teach that the church, on their part are to hold their leaders in high regard and treat them honorably for their diligent service, but those leaders themselves are not to seek after this honor nor demand it as something they think they are due. I hope we see the distinction and can maintain the proper balance.

Now, moving on to verse 13:

13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

1. For it is God who is at work in you

This statement serves to unequivocally substantiate our previous conclusion that the working out of our salvation was the practical use of that which was divine rather than something that is human in origin. Since this sentence begins with the word, "for" it can only mean that what is about to be said is the reason for that what has just been said. Which is that it is God who is at work in you. We are the tangible instrument by and through which God is accomplishing a work of His own doing, which is for us the practical working out of that work.

If you're anything like me, then you may well be asking the same question that perplexed me for a good many years. On the one hand the scriptures say that "we" are accountable for our actions, and we are exhorted to godliness, and we are even judged according to our deeds done while in this mortal body. (2 Cor 5:10) But then the scriptures turn right around and say, like this verse, that it is God who is at work in us. So the obvious question becomes - who's doing the work, me or God? **(The either/or dilemma. But does the presence of one necessarily preclude the other?)**

At my first church this problem was amplified by a faulty theology that taught the principles of a complete passive detachment. That is, they taught that we must somehow get out of the way, and then God would begin to mysteriously start doing all the right things in us by Himself. This was the "let go and let God" concept. That movement went by a couple of names and to some extent still remains. The problem was that nobody could quite explain just how to do that. How do I turn off my own consciousness and put my brain on auto pilot? Everybody in my church said that was what we had to learn to do, but nobody ever said they had successfully figured out just how to do it. I spent the first three and a half years of my Christian life trying my very best to figure out just how in the world a person could just to let go and let God start running everything. Obviously, it never happened.

If it wasn't for the fact that the Lord had put in me a tenacious appetite for the scriptures, I suppose I would still be there trying to figure out that unresolvable puzzle. Sadly, some of those ones are still there today trying their little hearts out to figure out how to let go. But, as we said earlier, good intentions do not abrogate false doctrines and teachings. Error does its damage no matter how it gets in the door. And the damage still goes on today, especially so as the church increasingly loses its tolerance for sound doctrine, which just muddies up the waters they say, and demands to be entertained instead, or they'll just take their business elsewhere.

Yes, it is God who is at work in us, but He is doing His work in a specific way, and we must understand by what means God works in the lives of His elect. The phraseology is the key to the proper understanding. The bible doesn't say that it is God that does the work for us, it says that He is at work within us. A failure to comprehend this distinction is at the root of this misunderstanding.

Let me say that much of this misconception is caused by the very high percentage of pseudo-Christians in the churches. Whether you'll agree or not I don't know, but by any logical assessment, based on behaviors and affections of the members, only about 10% of church membership show any actual signs of regeneration. Because of this, most have never received the Spirit of Christ, and therefore have no idea what it means that "God is at work in us." There's no work going on inside that they can comprehend. So they need some way to interpret and deal with all these verses.

But the true believers, who *have* experienced the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, are keenly aware of the work that's going on inside of them, even though they can't take it out and show it to someone like you would your car keys. No, it isn't a physical and tangible work that God is doing, it is a spiritual work. But because it isn't visible doesn't mean it isn't real. The air we breath isn't visible, so is air just a myth? Every genuine born again believer is fully aware of the massive work underway within them. In fact it is a complete urban renewal project of the former things of importance.

Now don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that the gift of the Spirit is progressive, because it isn't. It is complete and perfect from the inception. But we ourselves are fleshly. We have become accustomed to our fleshly ways and worldly affections. So the new Spirit, which is described as a new heart and a renewed mind is at work inside of us, reshaping our will into conformity to the will of God, which makes us *want* to do the things that He wants us to do, and make us *want* to abstain from those things that He forbids.

This was the weakness of the law. It has the power to command and condemn, but it doesn't have the power to change the hearts and minds of the hearers so that they will themselves want to comply. But the new covenant minds now heartily agree with the commands of God, and treasure them just as God does. This is why it is said to be a better covenant. Rather than just inform and command, it regenerates and transforms the very deepest part of the believer so that they now have the same love, the same goal, the same affections and appreciations, that God has, and therefore desire from within the deepest regions of the soul and spirit to keep His commands and do that which is pleasing to Him. Because it's also pleasing and desirable to us at the same time.

No place is it stated more clearly than right here in this verse, that the innate will, that is the desire, to obey and please God, is in fact the work *of* God and not something we generated ourselves. This willingness to obey is that work that God is doing inside His own elect. And this Godly work of innate willingness is that which is the cause of the subsequent acting out of His will by us in our daily lives.

I'm going to touch on this later but I feel the need to interject this right here. There is much discussion today of what is free will and do we or don't we have it ourselves. To answer that question we must define what we mean by free will. Do we mean that we are free to make whatever choices we want without some else forcing us?. If so then we certainly do have free will. But the real question is, do we have within ourselves the ability to control our inward desires, our likes and dislikes, what we love and what we hate. We have the freedom to choose what we do, but do we consciously chose these deepest innate feelings and desires. You see, free will is contained within the boundaries of our own innate passions and understandings. So our free will is confined and restricted within the boundaries of our own innate limitations. We cannot do something that we will not do. We cannot believe God, if we adamantly will not believe God.

But there's still much more to this verse. Just the desire to obey doesn't necessarily mean there is the ability within us to do so. We all have desires to do things that we know are beyond our capabilities, so the desire alone, without the corresponding enabling would fail to accomplish the goal. But the verse goes on to say that this work that God is doing within us has a second part. Not only does it transform our will, but it releases us from the bondage of sin that would otherwise prevent us from acting upon this new willingness to obey.

We must understand our previous condition to appreciate our new one. We, as humans were born into the human race. But the human race was spiritually dead since Adam disobeyed God and condemned the whole race of humanity.

David said that in sin did his mother conceive him. (Ps 51:5) Rightly stated that was, because even before he was born he was part of a condemned species that had sold itself into bondage to sin. Few of us seem to realize that we are already condemned just by our heritage, so we don't have to do anything to be sinners except be born of the line of Adam. If you are a descendent of Adam then you are a condemned sinner. Sold into bondage and owned by sin as a master owns a slave, from the second you are conceived. Who then can save us from this hopeless situation?

17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Romans 6:17-18 (NASB)

How beautifully these verses meld together, even though they're from different epistles of Paul. We were slaves of sin, that is we were owned by sin through its innate power over our affections and desires. Sin was the owner and driver of our will, and we then exercised that will under the direct supervision, and within the established boundaries, of our sin owner. Oh we had free will alright, but our exercise of that will was confined to choices that resided within the boundaries set by our very innate sin nature. When we dine at a restaurant we may freely choose anything we want on the menu, but our choices are limited to what's on that menu. Likewise, as slaves to sin, righteous choices just weren't available to us on the menu of options. We still had our free will, but because of our innate enslavement to the desires of sin, we just didn't have the full range of options from which to choose. We lacked the ability to *innately want* righteousness.

But the gift of salvation, beginning with redemption from the bondage and ownership of sin, through the gift of saving faith, and the impartation of the Holy Spirit into our dead human spirit, brought with it this new heart and changed mind which we are discussing now in this study.

This work of God that's going on in us, is that new covenant promise in action. The willingness, and even a desire to obey God, and the freedom from sin that is necessary to actually live a life in conformity to His commands, has been provided to us entirely by an act of God, through His sovereign grace toward us.

But, the implementing of that will, and the freedom to choose obedience has been left to us to implement by the direct hands on process of choices and actions that we make by using these precious gifts. We now have menu options that weren't even available to us before. He has given us the gifts, and has told us to use them. That is what working out our salvation is. It is the volitional use of these precious gifts by our own choices, made with a renewed mind by our own efforts. It is not a let go and let God thing, it is a grab hold and actively obey God by our own actions and choices, using these gifts He has provided. But, one must be the genuine recipient of these gifts, or it will make no sense to them at all.

To the multitudes of church goers who have never received these gifts, it makes no sense at all when they're told that they are supposed to have an new innate desire to learn and obey the commands of God. They know they're supposed to obey God, but they surely don't really want to. They try to stay within reasonable boundaries, but not because they truly desire to, but because they feel obligated or pressured to do certain things and abstain from others.

How mysterious and foolish, and surely unbelievable it must sound to them to hear some of the saints say that they love and desire God's commands and treasure the study of His word. Surely they must think these ones who say this are just faking it so they'll appear spiritual and get attention. It is a true statement, and I can personally attest, that a true believer can actually be out of place and uncomfortable in the majority of evangelical groups today that call themselves churches. Genuine spiritual affections and desires can put you at odds with the majority of the other members.

If we've been in a church for very long we've come to realize that there are some who fake spirituality for the sake of recognition, but, every true believer knows that he or she has received a whole new set of desires and priorities, and these new attributes exert a major influence on how we think and how we act every day. Unless a person is born again they cannot see (perceive, understand) the kingdom of God says the scriptures, and once one has been born again they cannot possibly not see it. However, the work of God that is providing a new will, would be of no use if it produced no appropriate actions. The scriptures say that every good tree produces good fruit. (Mat 7:17) This is a metaphoric way of saying that every true believer responds with righteous behaviors and actions, and does so willingly and joyfully from deep within their hearts. And, conversely, if they don't show visible signs of righteous behaviors, then they aren't really part of the true tree, and are thrown into the fire. (Jn 15:5-6)

If we believe ourselves to be born again Christians, and yet we're still sitting around waiting for God to start mystically changing our lives without our own desire and affirmative actions, then we're deceived about what born again actually means. If we are believers, then it is God who is working in us, providing the willingness and capability, and it is we ourselves, with grateful hearts, joyfully working out the implementation of those gifts in our daily lives, by obeying His commands, just as Christ our model showed us. There is nothing whatsoever passive about being obedient, it means knowing what you are commanded to do and not do, and then volitionally choosing to follow those commands in every circumstance, especially those that are inconvenient, or even down right serious.

In chapter 2, from verse one through verse 17 the theme is unchanged. Paul is calling the Philippians to demonstrate a humble attitude of obedience to God, and, love and concern for one another that was exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ himself.

To avoid being haughty or pushy toward the other brothers and sisters and not seek personal recognition or position for themselves, just as Christ didn't seek special treatment or recognition for His position while here on earth. Obedience without haughtiness would be a good summation of the teaching of this group of passages, and that is exactly the attitude of Christ Jesus.

Conclusion:

To just quickly summarize the whole of these last few teachings, let me just hit the main points.

(vv. 1-4) The Goal

We're told to think the same way, to have the same love, to share the same feelings, and to have the same goal. (Discuss - Not a human consensus but a conformity to a specific standard)

(Vv.5-11) The Example

We're shown the prototype model to which we must all be conformed to achieve the commonalities to which we are exhorted in verses 1-4.

(The divine model is examined and presented as our standard to which we are all called to be conformed)

(Vv.12-14) The Power & Method

We're told what is the source of the power to implement those instructions of Christlike attitude and conformity of thinking and purpose.

And, we are told how we ourselves are to put those powers to work by our own participation, so that we may work out the details of this great salvation, to the glory and honor of God or Father. Which is voluntary humble obedience to the will of God, at whatever the cost.

(Vv.15-18) The purpose & Result

To be blameless and pure amidst a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world. And that shining is the salt that gives flavor to creation in the eyes of God and serves as a light set on a lampstand showing the glory of God's mercy toward sinful mankind, by His forgiveness and regeneration.

To Him Be The Glory Forever - Amen.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church - Miami
Robert Andrews, Pastor