

Working Out Our Salvation

Philippians 2:12–18

A couple of years ago I read the book, *Boys in the Boat*, which tells the story of the 1936 University of Washington crew team. Typically, the best crew teams were from Ivy League schools like Yale or Harvard or Princeton, not Washington. And yet this team, put together from kids who were raised on farms, or in logging towns, or who grew up near shipyards, become the American Olympic Team and won the gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Here's how the author, Daniel Brown, explains how eight individuals of varying statures, physiques, and personalities capitalize on their diversity:

Crew races are not won by clones. They are won by crews, and great crews are carefully balanced blends of both physical abilities and personality types.

And then he describes some of the ways rowers with differing physiques and statures need to work together when you have, for instance, some with longer arms and others with shorter arms, so that they can coordinate their strokes.

And then he makes the point that you don't want all the crew to have the same personality types. He says:

Good crews are good blends of personalities: someone to lead the charge, someone to hold something in reserve; someone to pick a fight, someone to make peace; someone to think things through, someone to charge ahead without thinking. Somehow all this must mesh. That's the steepest challenge. Even after the right mixture is found, each man or woman in the boat must recognize his or her place in the fabric of the crew, accept it, and accept the others as they are. It is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in just the right way.

(Boys on the Boat, 179-80)

Brown's description of a great crew team is helpful as we think about the local church. Churches that are effectively living on mission are not made up of a bunch of clones. Rather, like a great crew there is God-given diversity. By God's design, we have diversity of spiritual gifts and passions and personalities. And all this needs to mesh together. And it is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in the right way. For a crew team, when it all comes together in the right way, they win. When it all comes together in the right way in a local church, we are able to be effective in the mission that Jesus has given us.

Today we are looking at Philippians 2:12-18 where Paul addresses some things that are vital for us to be able to mesh and come together in just the right way that we might be effective in our mission of proclaiming Christ.

The passage starts with, *so then*, indicating that what Paul is going to explain, flows out of the truth of Christ's humility and His exaltation that he has just talked about. And the first thing that Paul says is that we are to:

I. Work Out Our Salvation by Preserving Our Unity (vv. 12-14)

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;*

Again, we see Paul's warm affection for the Philippians; he calls them *my beloved*. And he commends them. He affirms that they have had a track record of obedience. But he is also calling them to continue to walk in obedience and to do so whether he with them or not. He doesn't want them to be like the child who gets busy cleaning his room in ONLY when his mom is looking, but who goes back to playing with toys when she leaves his room.

Specifically, Paul urges them to *work out* [their] *salvation with fear and trembling*. Now, Paul is clear and consistent in his writings that salvation and a right standing before God is a gift of grace. We don't earn it. We can't earn it. We simply receive it by faith (e.g. Eph. 2:5, 8-9). And so what does he mean here?

Paul is saying is that we are to *work out* what is already true of us as believers. Back in 1:27, Paul said that we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. What he writes here is essentially the same idea. Live in a way that is consistent with the truth of your salvation. Work that out! Do not be passive. Apply great effort in this. This is what it means to *work out* our salvation.

And we are to do this *with fear and trembling*. He is saying that it is right and proper to have a kind of humility and submission before God. He has just talked about the exalted Christ who has been given a name that is above every name and to whom one day every knee will bow before him and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (2:9-11). When we rightly understand this about Christ, humility and submission is the only fitting response. And so with humble submission to Christ, we work out our salvation.

And we can do so because of the activity of God in our lives. Verse 13:

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

Work out your salvation, because God *is at work in you*! It is the activity of God within the individual believer, as well as in the whole church in Philippi, that would enable them to obey. Specifically, Paul says that God works at the level of our desires. He gives you the "want to," the *will* to obey. And God works at the level of empowerment as well. And so God works in us, giving us desires and ability to obey that we might do what is according to *His good pleasure*.

This is an amazing truth right? Sometimes we can feel like we can't obey and that our desires so often run contrary to God's will. And we can feel so weak. And yet, there is a deeper truth. God is at work in you. The One who created all things, works within you giving desire and power to obey! And so out of what God does in us we can work hard to work out our salvation. We can live a life that is consistent with God's good pleasure. This is secret to the Christian life – God at work within us!

Now, God doesn't just zap us with desire and ability. It's as we seek Him; as we spend time with Him that God works in our and we experience these things.

As Paul continues he moves from this more general command to the Philippians to work out their salvation, to a specific area of obedience that he is concerned about for them. He says:

¹⁴ *Do all things without grumbling or disputing;*

Though Paul clearly affirms the Philippians, he does have concerns for them. He has a concern for their unity. We saw this earlier in chapter 2 when he urged them to be of the same mind and to be united in spirit (2:2). In chapter 4, he will urge two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree in the Lord (4:2). Their unity is being threatened. And so he commands them to *do all things without grumbling or disputing*, because these things would disrupt their unity.

Grumbling has the idea of whispering complaints or talking in secret against someone. *Disputing* means to quarrel or debate in ways that are divisive.

We don't know what the source of their *grumbling or disputing* was, but it is clear that Paul wants it to stop. They are not working out their salvation if they continue to grumble or dispute. This kind of spirit and speech would create disunity and would keep them from living out their calling in the world. They wouldn't be able to mess well like a good crew. And so Paul urges them to stop doing these things so that they can live out their calling.

Unity is a big deal! When we become Christians, we are placed into the ONE family of God and we are indwelt by the ONE Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13) and we share ONE Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, on his last night, prayed for our unity. In John 17, Jesus prayed:

²² *"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity,*

If unity was the thing that was on Jesus' heart in these last moments with His disciples, how important must it be? Our unity is vital, because as Jesus goes on, our mission is at stake. He prays that we would walk in unity:

so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

Unity is vital to living on mission. And this is exactly the reason why Paul is urging us to walk in unity. He says:

II. Work Out Our Salvation that We Might Shine as Lights in the World (vv. 15-16a)

¹⁵ *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,*

Paul wants us to live such distinctive lives together that we shine like lights in the midst of a dark world. By walking in deep unity, we *prove*, or reveal, what is true about us and that is that we are *children of God*.

Paul uses three terms to describe *children of God*: *blameless*, *innocent*, and *above reproach*. *Blameless* means to be free of guilt. To be *innocent* literally means pure. There is no mixing of good and bad attitudes and speech. And, *above reproach* means faultless before a watching world.

As children of God we are to have this distinctive quality that sets us apart from the world around us, which Paul calls *a crooked and perverse generation*. If a local church is made up of people who are grumbling and disputing, there is nothing distinctive about that, but if these things are put away, and a church experiences deep unity, THAT is distinctive. And that, Paul says, will allow us to *appear as lights in the world*. And how much does the world need some light?!!

Paul is giving the Philippians, and he is giving us, a vision for who we are. We are children of God. We are to be lights in this dark world. This is what Jesus said, right? *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill* (Matt. 5:14). This is our calling. This is our purpose. As children of God, we are to be so distinctively different than the culture around us that we shine like lights in a dark world helping others find their way to God. And so Paul is saying that if we don't walk in unity, we will not be distinctively different.

Paul goes on to say that we will be able to continue to shine as lights in the culture around us by:

¹⁶ *holding fast the word of life,*

The word of life is the gospel. And it is as we hold fast to it that we will be blameless, innocent and above reproach and therefore have the ability to shine as lights in the world.

As we think about our calling to shine as lights in the world and the vital role that unity has in this, how are we doing? Are we working out our salvation such that we are demonstrating to the world around us that we are distinctively different by our unity?

Faith is a unique church. We have all sorts of diversity – educational, socio-economic, theological, political, etc. Do we care about our unity, and maintaining our ability to shine as lights in a world desperate for Christ, more than we care about our theological, political, educational differences? I'm not saying that we shouldn't talk about our differences. I'm not saying they are not important. But what I am saying is that we need to be very careful to not let these differences disrupt our unity.

I would appeal to you to seek God regarding this. Are you doing anything that is disruptive to our unity for which Jesus prayed? Are you carrying heart attitudes or speaking in ways that threaten our unity? If God shows you any of this, I would encourage you to confess it and ask for God's grace to walk and speak in a different way.

We must work out our salvation in a way that preserves our unity. And we must preserve our unity because that is how we shine like lights in the world.

Now, as we come to the second part of verse 16, Paul gives a personal reason for the Philippians to work hard at what he is commanding them to do. And in this personal reason, we see we should:

III. Work Out Our Salvation that We Might Experience Joy (16b-18)

Paul wants the Philippians to strive to do what he commands them . . .

so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

Paul was deeply motivated by the *day of Christ* - the day when Jesus would return. In Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10), he talked about how on that day Christ will test the quality of each one's work. Paul's work was proclaiming Christ and seeking to present believers mature in Christ (Col. 1:28-29). He worked hard at this. He uses the metaphors of running a race and toilsome labor to depict his efforts. He did all of this so that in the day of Christ, he could present the Philippians mature in Christ. He didn't want his work to be in vain.

Paul wanted to be able *to glory*, or boast, on that day not in what he had accomplished, but in what God had accomplished in the Philippians. Again, Paul understood that it was God who was at work in the Philippians giving them the desire and the ability to obey. And so his boasting would be about God, not about himself.

Paul was willing to work hard to help the Philippian church come to maturity. And he was literally willing to give his life in this effort. He says in verse 17:

¹⁷ 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.

A *drink offering* was a sacrificial offering of wine poured out at the foot of the altar to accompany a burnt or grain offering. When it was offered it was all poured out; nothing was left (Osborne, *New Testament Commentaries*, 100). Paul says that *even if* this is what is to become of his life, in other words, if he ends up paying the ultimate sacrifice of a martyr's death, he would rejoice in that suffering if that would be what it takes to help complete their faith.

For Paul rejoicing wasn't something that could only be done when all was good in life and all suffering was absent. No, he could rejoice in the midst of deep suffering if that suffering led to progress in other's faith. And so, he doesn't want the Philippians to feel badly about his suffering. He wants them to rejoice with him.

And he wants the joy to be a mutual thing. In verse 18 he says:

¹⁸ *You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.*

This is a command to rejoice! He isn't talking about just an emotional response. He is talking about choosing to have joy and not be downcast by his situation in prison or any suffering the Philippians might be facing.

When you think about what this reveals about how Paul saw life, it is pretty challenging isn't it? We tend to measure the quality of life by comfort and ease and pleasures. This is what we tend to find joy in. But Paul's life is a demonstration of what it looks like when a person is living full on for Christ – when one's life is about partnering with what God wants to do in the world. In the midst of suffering, and sacrifice, and service, joy is a distinguishing mark of one who cares about the things that Jesus cares about. Paul's life was all about the gospel and if his suffering, if his working out his own salvation, led to the advancement of the gospel, he would rejoice.

And so we are to work out our salvation, by pursuing unity so that we can be the kind of people, the kind of church, that shines like lights in the world. And sometimes there is suffering and sacrifice that is involved in doing this, but if we care about things that really matter – the lost being found and the immature becoming mature – we can experience joy!

It is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in just the right way. May we work out our salvation and experience the unity that Jesus prayed for us, that we might shine like lights in this world that desperately needs light.