

The Fruit of Obedience

Philippians 2:12-18

The Christmas season is upon us, and this is always a fun and interesting time with a baby in the home. We put up our tree on Friday and that night while Carissa and I were picking up after the older two were down, we put Eva in her little swing and sat her in front of the Christmas tree, and she was just happy to sit there and swing and look at the lights. And of course on Christmas morning we'll watch her tear open a present only to be more interested in the wrapping paper than the actual gift, which, to be honest, is not unlike the way we sometimes treat the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

And of course that's the whole point of Christmas—that God has given us the greatest gift he can possibly give—himself. Not the stuff he gives us, but God himself—to know and enjoy the God who has made himself known to us by the Spirit in the face of Jesus Christ. This is what the gift of salvation is about—to know and love and serve God forever. To be *saved* is to be rescued from our foolish and sinful rebellion against God—from the hopelessness of life without him and the penalty of rebelling against him—and to be forgiven of our sins and reconciled with God, being adopted into his family and set apart for service to him—not because we were good enough, but because God in his love sent his eternal son, Jesus Christ, to save us. He lived a life of perfect obedience before his Father *on our behalf*, and he died *on our behalf* to exhaust God's wrath toward our sin. And he rose from the grave *on our behalf* to bring new life and peace with God. That's the Christian hope. That's the gift of salvation. And we share in that gift through *faith in Jesus Christ*—again, not by being good enough, or doing enough good works to win God's favor or make it up to him, but by placing all our hope and trust in Jesus who was good enough for us, and who took our sin on himself to free us and forgive us.

Salvation is a gift of God. But like any gift, there's always the temptation to take it for granted. To miss it through unbelief, to misunderstand it—not treasuring it as we should, or to misappropriate it and use it for some purpose other than what it's intended to do.

So what does it look like to appreciate, to treasure, and to put into practice the gift of salvation that God has given us, as opposed to just playing with the wrapping paper and pretty bow? How do we live today in light of what God has already done to save us, and in full hope of what God will yet do to save us in the end, according to his promise? How do we work out our salvation in the meantime? That's the question Paul is addressing in our passage this morning: Philippians 2:12-18 and the fruit of obedience.

The book of Philippians calls the church to live as a gospel-centered community on mission for Christ. Paul has been discussing at length what a partnership *in* and *for* the gospel looks like.

How does the message of salvation in Jesus shape our personal lives and our interaction as a community, and how does it guide and fuel our mission as God's people in the world? That's what Paul has been talking about. And some of his most direct instructions have come in the section that stretches from 1:27–2:18. Our passage this morning brings that section to a close and sheds further light on what Paul means in 1:27 when he calls us to live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ, especially in light of Christ's model of self-giving humiliation and obedience in 2:5-11. Notice how v. 12 begins with the word, "Therefore"—what Paul's saying here flows out of the pattern of Christ in the previous passage.

The question he's wrestling with is quite simple: what difference should the gospel make in our daily lives? What kind of fruit should we expect our relationship with Jesus to bear in us as a community on mission for Christ? And Paul's answer is, The same fruit that it's borne in his life, the same fruit we see modeled in Jesus' life—the fruit of obedience.

Just as Christ humbled himself and became *obedient* to the point of death (2:8), Paul tells us in vv. 12-13: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." The Philippian church has a track record of obedience, and Paul commends them for it. But the reality is, as we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at ch. 1:18-26, Paul doesn't know whether he'll be released from prison or executed there. He doesn't know whether he'll ever see them again, and be able to come along side and help them in their growth. And so it's go time. It's time for them to commit to walking with the Lord regardless of whether or not Paul, their spiritual mentor and father, will be there to walk with them. He charges them to obey, "not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence" (2:12; cf. 1:27). Their faith and obedience cannot be contingent on the presence of Paul, but rather on the presence of Christ and his Spirit.

But the way Paul describes obedience here is very interesting. He uses the phrase, "*work out* your salvation," in v. 12. There is a relationship between our salvation—the gift of God through faith in Christ—and our obedience. And it's important to understand that carefully, so that as a community on mission for the gospel, we can walk with God faithfully, and not squander the gift of God in Christ.

So how does our salvation relate to our obedience? First, *obedience responds to God's saving work*. Paul says "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." The word "work out," as it's used here, means to put into practice. God's people have a responsibility to respond to God's saving work by putting his gift of salvation into practice in our daily lives.

Notice that Paul does not say *work for* your salvation. He's not calling us to obey in order to be saved. We obey because we *are* saved; not to be saved. Obedience is a *response* to the gospel. Neither is Paul saying, "God has done his part and now the rest is up to you," or "God helps those who help themselves." One author clarifies, "This is not a matter of synergism between me and God, in which he did his part and I did mine, and together we saved me! . . . everything was and is from God."¹ Salvation is his work from beginning to end (as v. 13 will clarify in a minute).

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 98.

Rather, working out our salvation, putting it into practice, is about responding to God's saving work in *worship*. That's the imagery Paul uses in v. 17 to describe their obedience. He says, "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on *the sacrifice and service coming from your faith . . .*" (that's the OT imagery of an offering). To obey God is about worship—bowing before him in humble submission—that's what the language of "fear and trembling" expresses: humble submission before God. Following Christ's pattern of self-denial and obedience in 2:5-11.

Paul's life also supplies an example of working out your salvation in 1:18-26. As Paul labored to make much of Christ, whether by his life or his death, he was confident that his situation would turn out for his deliverance or *salvation* (same word, 1:19)—which as we saw a couple weeks ago was not just about getting out of prison. It was the future joy of being vindicated before God's throne in heaven with the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (cf. Matt. 25:21, 23). Paul was working out his salvation, laboring for Jesus in the present, on the basis of what Christ had done in the past, with an eye toward what Christ will do in the future when he returns (cf. 3:20-21). And so he tells the Philippians in 2:12 to work out their own salvation too—to respond to God in worshipful obedience, with an eye on the promise. This was their responsibility as the people of God in Christ.

It's very easy to make salvation in Jesus about me. To miss the whole point of the cross and think that God's waiting for me to get my life together. He's done his part in sending Jesus and now I need to do my part and start getting back to church. I need to get off the alcohol, to kick this or that habit—then I'll be acceptable to him. Or to think that since he's done this great thing for me, I now need to do some great thing for him, to make it up to him, to show him that he didn't waste his blood on me. Or we misunderstand the point of salvation, and think that since it's a gift, it doesn't really matter what we do with it. I can be lazy about following God, because salvation didn't cost me anything. It's mine, and I can do with it what I want, and live life how I want, since I know that whenever I need him or mess up, God will be waiting to serve me, like Cosmic Butler, ready to bring me a Band-Aid or a lump of sugar for my tea.² In short, I want the all the credit for my salvation, and none of the responsibility.

But to go back to our earlier illustration (the Christmas gift): having a responsibility to respond to God's saving work with obedience doesn't mean that we've somehow chipped in on the cost of the gift, or that we're now paying God back for it with our obedience and good works. No: a gift is a gift, and salvation is a gift. But neither does it mean that we're free to do with it whatever we want, even to neglect it for something else. No, this gift has a purpose. What it means is that God is asking us to do more than play with wrapping paper. He wants us to open the gift and use it for the purposes for which he gave it: to serve him joyfully as a people on mission, with full confidence that he will make good on his promise to complete in us the good work he began when Christ returns (cf. 1:6, 10-11; 3:20-21). Obedience responds to God's saving work. It is a necessary fruit of the gospel.

Second, and equally important, *obedience requires God's enabling Spirit*. Look again at v. 13: "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*"

² See Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 163-65.

When we stop and think about it, v. 12 is calling us to do something we're incapable of doing. You and I are powerless to obey God, left to ourselves. But the reason God can place before us the responsibility to obey in v. 12, is because he provides the ability to do it in v. 13. Obedience is a necessary fruit of our salvation in Christ because God is the one who bears that fruit in us by the Holy Spirit.

Part of the gift of salvation is what's called the "indwelling of the Holy Spirit." In other words, God sends his Holy Spirit to dwell in everyone who believes in him. He is the One who gives you new life, who opens your eyes to faith in Jesus, who enables you to relate with the Father and the Son, who strengthens you to obey, who gifts you for service. The Spirit of God is the one who changes our lives to look and live more and more like Jesus, as he applies the truth of God's Word to our hearts. So God's Spirit is the one who, as v. 13 says, gives us both the desire and the ability to follow Christ. So we have the responsibility, but God gets all the credit.

This is not some sort of magic act, where we try to manipulate the Spirit by saying just the right words or thinking just the right thoughts. Neither is this a passive obedience, where we just "let go and let God," as though we have no responsibility to think or pray or work hard at all. This is about faith: dependence on God's enabling Spirit. Which means, first, recognizing that left to ourselves we are spiritually bankrupt—we've got nothing to offer God; all of our lives are stained by sin. And so, second, it means depending on God's grace—believing that we have been forgiven in Christ and washed clean, that our standing before God is not based on our performance for him but our union with his Son. And third, it means taking God at his Word—believing that by his Spirit he will meet us with the strength that we need, guide us according to Scripture in the way we should go, and be with us every step of the way. It's saying, "I've got nothing, God. Nothing." And then stepping forward in faith to do something.

This is a gift of God's salvation. God supplies what he demands—both in Christ, with his life of obedience and sacrifice of sin for us, and in the Spirit, in the life of obedience in following him.

So what happens when I sin? If God is the one who gives the strength, why do I feel like I keep messing up? Does that mean that the Spirit of God's not in me? How many times will he put up with this before he just cuts me off? How can I enjoy coming into his presence if I know I have this responsibility and I know I keep failing over and over again. I begin to dread opening his Word, or gathering with his people, because it's just a reminder of my own guilt and shame and how far I've fallen short.

Those are hard questions. And if you are asking yourself those questions (and I know some of you are): Come with me back to the gospel. Come stand with me and look at the cross. See your sin and your shame, all of the ways you've let God down recently. See the ugliness of your words, your thoughts, see the selfishness of your actions, the bondage of your sin patterns, see on Jesus what you fear letting anyone else see or know about you. And now see it washed all away. Cleansed and forgiven. And hear his word of promise to you: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). For to live by the Spirit is to live daily in dependence on the gospel. I have nothing, Jesus is everything, God give me the faith to take you at your word and live.

Obedience responds to God's saving work. Obedience requires God's enabling Spirit. Third, *obedience reflects God's holy character*. Look with me at v. 14 (here in the ESV):

Do all things without grumbling or questioning,¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. (2:14-16)

Paul moves from the general call to obedience in vv. 12-13 to make a specific application in vv. 14-18. And he does so in contrast to ancient Israel, who grumbled and argued in the wilderness as they worked out their salvation—living between the saving event of the exodus and their future life in the Promised Land. Unlike Israel, who complained and argued, spurning the gift of salvation they had received, saying things like “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Would that we had died in the wilderness!”—take it back, I don’t want it! (Num. 14:2; cf. v. 36; Exod. 15:24; 16:2-3), Paul tells us to do all things *without* grumbling or arguing. To interact, as a community working out our salvation, with patience, trust, gratitude, and humility, which takes us back to his initial call to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel in 1:27, with unity and humility in our partnership. As our citizenship is in heaven and we are still on a journey, working out our salvation, our journey should look different than Israel’s—it should be marked by the gospel.

And the reason this is so important is not merely so that we can get along, but because God is on display in our interaction. The language of being “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish,” does not refer to a sinless perfection, but a life of consistent obedience by God’s Spirit—the “long obedience in the same direction.”³ And the purpose is not so that we look good, but so that we make our Father look good, for we were made and saved to look like him, to reflect his character. Just as Jesus, God’s eternal Son, came into the world and took on flesh as the true light of this world—as we have read and sung about in this first Sunday of Advent—so we who are in Christ are to “shine as lights in the world” (2:15) for his sake.

Again, Paul says this in contrast to ancient Israel. When they failed to work out their salvation with obedience in the wilderness, God said of them in Deuteronomy 32:5: “they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation.” But here in Philippians, Paul says that in Christ we are “children of God *without* blemish *in the midst* of a crooked and twisted generation”—the world around us is crooked and depraved, fallen in sin and hiding in darkness. And only the light of God can wake it up, give it hope and new life. *The light that he shines through us and our gospel-fueled, Spirit-empowered obedience*. An obedience that is only possible as we hold fast to the Word of life (v. 16)—the Scriptures that reveal to us God and his grace and the strength of his Spirit, that constantly point us back to the cross and forward to the day of Christ, when our salvation will be complete (2:16; cf. 1:9-11; 3:20-21). A Spirit-empowered obedience is a life that clings to God’s Word, pouring over it and seeking God in it, that the Spirit might apply it to our hearts and change our lives to will and to work joyfully for God.

³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980).

If they will but walk with the Lord in this way, then Paul can literally die happy—knowing that he can be proud in the day of Christ that he didn't waste his life and ministry investing in God's people (v. 16), but that God's gospel was bearing the fruit of obedience, as it should. As he says in vv. 17-18, even if he is executed in prison, and his life is poured out as libation, a drink offering, which is a kind of secondary offering added to the main offering on the altar, which is the Philippians' sacrifice and service to God, then Paul rejoices. And he wants them to rejoice with him. He wants God's people to take joy together in what God has done for us in salvation, and is doing through us for the sake of his gospel, to make much of Christ whether by life or by death.

Which reminds us that putting our salvation into practice, being a community shaped by the gospel and for the gospel, isn't always easy. The reason we're at risk of grumbling and arguing is because we don't always get our way, and life doesn't always make sense, even as God uses us for his purposes. It didn't make sense for ancient Israel to come out of Egypt only to be faced with no food, no water, and to look into their promised land and see a bunch of well-armed people already inhabiting it. But that was God's plan, to make them trust not in themselves, but in him. And sometimes the way that God works out his plan in our life or our community here doesn't make sense. Sometimes the path between our initial salvation in Christ and the glorious consummation in the end is filled with all sorts of trials—things we would never wish on ourselves or anyone else. And so we will be tempted to grumble and complain. We will be tempted to bicker. We will be tempted to say, "Take it back; it's not what I ordered," and to put our hope in something besides Jesus, because we can't see or imagine how this terrible thing can have anything to do with God's salvation.

But once again, come back with me to the gospel. Come back and see the pattern of our salvation—life through death, glory through shame, the crown through the cross. And see how brightly God's light shines in a dark world through what is weak, what is insignificant—something as small and powerless as an infant in a feeding trough, something so cursed and despised as Roman cross. See the light of his salvation break through the shame of betrayal, the pain of divorce, the hopelessness of addiction, the anger of a broken friendship, the disgrace of a secret abortion, the devastation of a loved one's death. Come back to the gospel, back to the gift of salvation, take it out of the box and put it into practice and see God at work in our weakness and shame by the power of his Spirit to change our lives and make much of Christ as we step out in faith, confident that God will complete his good work in us in the end. For even now, "it is God who works in you to will and to work according to his good pleasure" (2:13).

Discussion Questions

1. Philippians 2:12-13 suggests that there is a relationship between our salvation in Christ and our obedience: obedience is a response to God's saving work, and requires God's enabling Spirit. In your own effort to obey God, in what ways do you find yourself tempted either to abdicate your responsibility to respond to God in obedience, or to neglect the strength for obedience available in God's Spirit?

2. We suggested that depending upon God's Spirit for obedience means three things: recognizing our spiritual bankruptcy, depending on the grace of the gospel, and taking God at his word as we move forward. Which of those three things do you find most difficult to do in your own experience?
3. If the strength to obey comes from God alone, how do we avoid laziness on the one side and the constant guilt of failure on the other?
4. Why do you think Paul isolated the temptation to grumble and complain when he gave a specific application of "working out your salvation" (v. 14)? When do you find yourself most tempted to grumble at God or others?
5. What's at stake in our grumbling according to vv. 15-16? How should our obedience reflect God's holiness?
6. In your experience, how have you seen the Spirit of God change your life through the Word of God (cf. v. 16)? What passages have been significant in helping you walk with the Lord?