**Continue to Work out Your Salvation**

January 19, 2014

Philippians 2:12-30

Key Verse 12b-13 “...continue to 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.”

Last week we learned that we are on the same team, the church. We are supposed to work together as a team in one spirit and purpose. The sign of true maturity is being able to work together with others. Those who are spiritually young complain and argue constantly like little children, insisting on their ways. But those who are spiritually mature know how to thank God and how to work with others, deeply appreciating others’ gifts and contributions. Today’s passage is very important in understanding salvation because there are a lot of confusions. Some people errantly teach that lost sinners must try really hard to stop sinning to be saved. That kind of false teaching makes many people live under frustration and sense of condemnation.

When we receive Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we instantly become children of God and our name is written in Heaven. But now the lifelong process of growing in the Lord begins. Just as a baby is physically born into the world and grows for the rest of his or her life, so does a spiritually born (i.e., born again) person grow throughout the remainder of their life. Sadly, many believers are midgets, suffering from stunted growth. Every Christian needs the milk of God’s word to grow into a healthy mature believer. Just as we don’t like babies’ crying and constant demands, we are sick and tired of so-called Christians who are as phony as can be. But we need to remember that they too are on the same team, and we need to help them grow in Jesus Christ. In today’s passage we learn what we need to do after we believe. St. Paul said, “Continue to work out your salvation.” We need the milk of God’s word and exercise to grow. Someone jokingly said, “The only exercise we do is jumping to conclusions, running down friends, sidestepping responsibility, pushing our luck.” We need real work out. May God help us to grow mature by working out our salvation.

Look at verse 12. “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....” This verse has been misunderstood by many people. Note that Paul says “work out your salvation” not “work for your salvation.” The word that Paul uses for “work out” is the Greek verb “katergazethai,” which means bringing to completion, to a full and complete perfect accomplishment and conclusion. If we take that idea and apply it to the rest of the passage, we get this idea that Paul is telling the Philippians to continue to seek God, to find out more about God, to become more like God, to not be satisfied with where they are at spiritually, but to work on their salvation.

Here we need to think about the concept of “salvation.” Salvation is more than being saved. Many people, after believing in Jesus Christ, ignore spiritual growth. So they become complacent in their spiritual lives, believing that they have a one-way ticket to heaven, regardless of how they live. But the Bible tells us that being born again as a new creation is just the beginning. After that we must grow into the likeness of Jesus. When we are born again, God’s seed is planted in our hearts. It grows and transforms us until our whole being is changed into the likeness of Christ. If we ignore our own spiritual growth, then we lose joy, vitality and saltiness - our Christian influence. We cannot glorify God. God’s name is blasphemed among non-believers. Let’s think about what it means “to work out salvation” in two ways.

First, we are in a marathon race. When we are born again, God simply puts us in a marathon race to eternal life. Hebrews 12:1 says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance ***the race marked out for us***.” Those who do not work out their salvation are those who jump for joy right after they start their race without realizing that the race is far from over. There will be many uphills to climb where we are tempted to give up. We have to run the race by ourselves. Jesus is not going to run the race for us. But he will be there running with us, cheering up.

Second, we need to work out our relationship with Jesus. Salvation is having eternal life. Eternal life is knowing Jesus. John 17:3 says, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Therefore we need to make an effort to know Jesus. Think about the process of meeting a new friend. When you first meet him, you might find out that his name is Joe and that he has two kids, a minivan and a wife. However, you do not know that he likes to watch a football. Probably you do not know that he hates wearing a blue jean. There could be so much more about him that you don’t know. If you like the person, you spend time with him. You find out more about him, and the two of you become closer. It is certainly true between a husband and wife. They need to work out their relationship. It is the same with Jesus Christ. We need to spend time with God, get to know him, work out our salvation.

We should emphasize again that Paul is not saying “work for your salvation.” Our good works cannot save us. Nowhere does Paul advocate working for/earning our salvation. It is impossible. We are saved by faith. We prove our faith by our works. Faith without works is dead. And the irony is, we can’t even do good works without God’s help. Look at verse 13. “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Just in case someone questioned verse 12, Paul refutes salvation by works. He says, “work out your salvation, but in reality, it’s God working through you.” We can only work it out when God works through us. The only way we can follow Christ’s example is by allowing him to work in/through us. We can’t exercise our faith unless God, our Personal Trainer, is there working through us.

How should we work it out? Paul has already shown us many ways to work out our salvation; Love, unity, mercy, humility. Many other exercises are found throughout God’s Word. What are some ways we can work out our salvation? Here Paul gives us 2 more ways. Look at verse 14. “Do everything without complaining or arguing.” No complaining. No arguing; “without secret murmuring, grumbling and disputing.” We are never guilty of that, are we?

When do people complain and grumble? Usually, it is in response to hardships which call for sacrifice. At such times, people ask God, “Why do you give me a hard time? Why must I suffer like this? Why me?” Actually, Paul is referring here to the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness. Nine different times in the Bible, it says the people grumbled against Moses/God. “We want to go back to Egypt. We are hungry/thirsty/afraid. We are not happy.” Today, it is, “I don’t like Bible study. I don’t like songs in this church. I don’t like sermons. I don’t like many hypocrites here. I’m not happy.” Paul has already warned us before about complaining and arguing. In 1:15-17, he warns against envy, rivalry, selfish ambition. In 2:3, he warns again against selfish ambition and vain conceit. Apparently, grumbling and complaining is an age old problem. We all know what happens when we begin to complain or argue selfishly. It ends up destroying lives, churches, and breaking God’s heart again and again. God commands us to work out our salvation by allowing God to work through us. Not complaining or arguing are two great examples of this. On the flip side, what happens when we do complain or argue, especially in the Church? It is a clear sign that God is not working through us and it could be a sign that we have a dead faith!

What happens when we work it out? Look at verses 15-16. “...so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.”

First, we become pure in a corrupt world. It has the idea of being uncontaminated, unadulterated, unmixed in this crooked and depraved/distorted/corrupted/perverse world. As children of God, we need to stand out against this crooked world, not be part of it. When we work out our salvation (when God works through us), we become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation. Paul is not saying that by working out our salvation we might become children of God. He says by working out our salvation we might become blameless/pure children of God.

Second, we become lights in a dark world. “You shine like stars in the universe.” In this world football players and actor and actresses are called stars. But true stars in the universe are Bible teachers and shepherds who can shine the light of God’s salvation in the hearts of others through sharing the word of God with them. Matthew 5:14-15 says, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden…in the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” If we continually behave like selfish, divisive, arrogant unbelievers, not only will we NOT work out our salvation; worse yet, we will turn off/turn away other potential believers. We must think of unbelievers as stargazers. They are looking at the heavens with the hope of seeing bright beautiful stars. But when Christians can’t get along, the stars of the universe are obscured by the dark cloud cover of discord. When we work out our salvation, we shine like the stars and bring real light to the world.

Third, we bring life to a dead world. “You hold out the word of life.” There are 3 potential meanings here. Holding forth, holding onto and holding out. I believe all three could work. Holding forth gives the idea of holding out a drink to a guest at a banquet. When we work out our salvation, we hold forth living water to those in need. We also hold onto Christ, the Word of Life. We are nothing without him. We also hold out the Word of Life to others who need hope and help. When we let God work His salvation through us, we become pure in a corrupt world, light in a dark world, and we bring life to a dead world. Think of the impact that could have!
Working out their salvation doesn’t just affect the Philippians. It affects Paul, too.

How is Paul working it out? Look at verse 17. “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” In those days, drink offerings were often poured over a sacrifice. The point is, He is a living sacrifice to God. Paul considers himself and his ministry as being poured out in an act of worship to God. Paul was being poured out on their service. Together, they were an offering to God. Because of their partnership in ministry as an offering to God, Paul says, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.” Paul is working out his salvation by laboring intensely as an offering to God.

Are we working it out? Are we exercising our spiritual muscles? How? Am I working out my salvation? Physical exercise profits a little, but spiritual exercise is crucial to our spiritual health and well-being. Without it, we are dead. Faith without works is dead. We are forgiven of our sin, but we are not excused from service. If we are not working out our salvation, it is quite possible we have no salvation. We need to chew on this with fear and trembling. It is a matter of life and death. But when we do regularly exercise our faith, when we let God work through us, it can have tremendous, life-changing, world-changing results!

May God bless you to grow in the image of Jesus Christ by working out your salvation and shine like stars in this dark world.