

New Year Day Service

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Well, if we turn to the passage that we read there in Philippians chapter 2. Now, any of you who were here yesterday morning may recall that as I was sharing something with the children, I was talking about my new toy. So, this thing that I've got around my wrist, my Fitbit. And after the service, I was intrigued to discover that I'm not alone.

There are a number of us who possess one of these little contraptions. And another thing that was a little bit intriguing yesterday, and I still haven't quite worked this one out, is that for some reason, this little contraption seems to think that preaching is very good exercise because it measures up this quite remarkable number of steps. Now, I really don't, I know I move about a little bit, but I really don't know how I can manage to get like 2,000 steps in the course of a half-hour sermon. But that's what it said, so it must be true. So, some people said it's because I moved my arms around a bit, but apparently earlier versions of this thing, that could have worked. You could cheat by moving your arm about. But apparently that's not meant to work with one of these. So, it remains a mystery to me that perhaps at some point will become clear.

It's also worth mentioning that this is a present that I requested, and thankfully my request was granted. And the reason why I asked for it is that I thought it might help me. Time will tell. But I thought it might help me to just be a little bit more concerned for my physical well-being, maybe shape up a little bit in this year that begins. But even though that is my intention, one thing that is certainly not on my agenda for this year is working out.

I know lots of people are keen on working out, but that's really not for me. Gyms are not for me. Sometimes, though, quite often we'll get a bit of paper through the door from David Lloyd Gyms offering some three-week membership or some big offer to join the gym. But there is no prospect of me responding to that. He's wasting his time and his publicity in putting it through my letterbox. I will continue to drive past David Lloyd on my way to Asda and Sainsbury's at Garth Day to buy my chocolate biscuits or whatever it is. And there's no prospect of me actually venturing into the establishment. But for lots of people, the new year is a time when there is a resolution to lose weight, to get fit, to work out, to join a gym or to use the gym membership that they're paying for month by month and to work out. And certainly the language of working out is language that we do find in the Bible. The Bible urges us as Christians to work out, but it's a different kind of working out.

And that's what I want to reflect on just for a brief moment this morning. In the passage that we read in Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul urges the Christians to continue to work out your salvation.

[3 : 1 6] We find that language in verse 12 of chapter 2. Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

And this challenge, this call, recognizes the fact that as Christians we've not yet arrived. We're not yet the finished article. We're a work in progress. And given that reality, the call is presented to us to work out, to continue to work out your salvation.

Let's just think about some of the aspects of this, this call that Paul directs in the first instance. He directed to the believers in Philippi, but directs this morning to us. So, some of the things that we can think about that revolve around this call are, first of all, we'll consider what the ultimate goal is. What's the ultimate goal? Where are we heading in this matter of working out our salvation? But also notice that the example and the motivation that Paul gives to us in the passage that we've read. Also think a little bit about what it involves. What does that actually mean?

You know, what practically do we have to do to work out our salvation? And then also, and it's related to that, the manner in which we are to do so. Then finally, we'll notice how Paul finishes, or at least in regard to this matter, concludes by identifying the help that is provided for us to respond as we ought to the call. So, let's think first of all then about the ultimate goal. And in order to identify the ultimate goal, we need to go back to verse 5 of this chapter. So, though our text is found in verse 12, we need to backtrack to verse 5. And notice what Paul says there as he addresses the believers. He says, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. You should be like Christ Jesus in your thinking, in your attitude. You should be like Jesus. This is the call that is being presented by Paul. And it seems to me that that really identifies what the ultimate goal is for us as we would continue to work out our salvation, that we would be like Jesus.

Now, you might say, well, are you not just randomly picking a verse that kind of fits your purposes? You're looking for an ultimate goal, and well, verse 5 seems to work, because being like Jesus, well, that's a good goal to have. But I don't think it's random, but rather it's to acknowledge that verse 12, the verse where we have our text, begins with this significant word. It begins with the word, therefore, therefore.

[6 : 14] So, what Paul is saying is, what I'm about to say relates to what I've just said. You know, in the light of what I've just said, this is what you should do. You should continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And what has come before? What is it that in the light of we are to work out our salvation? Well, what has come before is this glorious description of Christ's emptying of himself.

And the passage, of course, is rich in theological content, but it's motivated by a pastoral concern or motivation. Precisely what we have there in verse 5. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. So, this is Paul's concern. His concern is that the believers would think like Jesus, that their attitude would be the attitude of Jesus, that they would be ever more like Jesus. He then describes what Jesus is like, and then he says, right, this is how you go about it. This is what you need to do in order that you might become ever more like Jesus, that you might arrive ever more closely to that ultimate goal of being like your Savior. This is the ultimate goal then, to be like Jesus. But Paul does also, in this passage, provide for us both an example and a motivation to respond energetically to this call.

And to identify the example and the motivation also, it takes us back to that first word with which verse 12 begins, therefore, my dear friends, and the preceding description of Jesus. Jesus, who is the goal in the sense of being like Him, but who is also the example and the motivation for us. In what ways is He an example, or in what ways does He serve as an example and a motivation?

Well, certainly, what He has done in the previous verses that is described for us, and very especially the way in which Paul speaks of Jesus having humbled Himself, how Jesus was obedient and obedient even to death. And so, that serves for us as an example, as we would work out our salvation with fear and trembling, that we too would seek to be like Him, to live lives marked by humility, to live lives marked by obedience, even when that obedience is costly to us. He serves as an example. But of course, it's also a motivation when we give thought to all that Jesus has done for us.

When we imagine and give some thought, and it's difficult for us to even get our heads around the enormity of it, but even as we try in some measure to give consideration to the fact that the eternal Son of God willingly left the glory of heaven to come into this sin-sick world, that He was willing to be obedient even unto death. And as we ponder on the magnitude of the love that lies behind all of that, then that surely is to serve as a motivation to us. What we are called to do, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, is in the light of what He has done, a small thing to ask. It's a great task, but in the light of what Jesus has done, it is not beyond us to say, yes, that is what I will do, that is what I want to do.

[10 : 04] I am motivated to do so, given what Jesus has done, given the example that He has set. We're also motivated, I think, by where Jesus now sits, where He now reigns from.

In that passage that precedes the call, Jesus is described as the one who has been exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name. And so, the knowledge of His current rule and reign is to motivate us to greater obedience in His service. We are His servants. We are servants of the King.

And if the King would have us work out our salvation with fear and trembling, then that is what we must do. And of course, He is due our obedience. He is due our worship. Why has God, why has the Father exalted Him to the highest place?

Well, we're told why, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Father, this reality of Jesus' worthiness to be worshipped, to be bowed down before. We sometimes think of it in terms of a future reality, and we speak about how in the future everybody, even those who today think nothing of Jesus, the day will come when they will bow before Him, and that is true.

[11 : 41] But of course, the call to us as His people is that we would bow before Him in the here and now. And responding to this call to work out our salvation with fear and trembling is one of the ways in which we grant to Jesus the honor that He is due.

Working out, any kind of working out, and working out our salvation is a tough task, and we need one who can provide an example.

We need motivation to engage in this task. Well, we are generously provided with both of these things. We can also think in the third place about what this working out involves, what's the nature of this working out that Paul calls the believers to?

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Given the vocabulary that Paul uses, it's probably important to just clarify what is not being said by Paul.

There's no suggestion here being made by Paul that we are saved by working out. There's no suggestion here that somehow what we need to do is work with sufficient energy and effort that we can secure our salvation.

[13 : 04] That's not what he is talking about at all. The work spoken of is not to secure our salvation, but to work on it as a present possession.

We are to work out or work on that which we already enjoy, that which we already possess, that which we have already been given. There may be many ways we could illustrate this, but perhaps marriage can serve as an illustration of this.

You know, those of us who are married can be encouraged to work at our marriage. You know, that's maybe a word of advice you've given to others, you've received, and it is good advice.

It is good counsel to work at your marriage. And of course, that doesn't mean that we're not already married. It doesn't mean that we don't yet possess marriage. But rather, that if that relationship is to be fully enjoyed and experienced, we need to work at it.

If you don't work at it, you're no less married. But your experience of marriage will be the poorer for the absence of effort being invested in it.

[14 : 15] And I think that is something of what Paul has in mind here. We already, by grace, possess our salvation. We have been given this gift. But it is that which we are to work on.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. So that's what it isn't. What is it? What does this involve?

We could maybe think of it as progressively coming to appreciate and experience more and more of the blessings and demands of our salvation.

But even that leaves us with the question, but what does that involve? What does this work involve? And if we needed to maybe answer that question in one word, I think the one word answer would be obedience.

The work that Paul is envisaging is the work of obedience. And I say that because we notice in the text the verb continue there.

[15 : 18] At the very start of the phrase, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And the question really is, what does the verb continue refer back to?

Obviously, if you're going to continue something, there's an acknowledgement that there's something you're already doing. And so Paul says, you're already doing this. Well, now continue. So what does the verb continue refer back to?

Well, I think we have it there at the beginning of the verse. Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation.

So the continuing is referring back to obedience. And so Paul is saying is that working out your salvation at the heart of it is this matter of obedience. Obey God's commandments.

Obey God. Live a life marked by obedience to God. That is the manner in which you will work out your salvation.

[16 : 15] And what kind of obedience are we to render to God? Well, here we can just, in a sense, step back to what we were noticing a moment ago about Jesus as our example and the obedience that Jesus rendered to His Father.

He was, in the language of Paul, obedient to death, even death on a cross there in verse 8. Obedient to death.

The obedience of Jesus was a radical obedience. A radical obedience motivated by loyalty to His Father on the one hand. To do the Father's will was His delight.

But motivated also by love for His people, love for us. There were these two parallel motivators, if you wish, that lie behind the obedience of Messiah Jesus.

Loyalty to His Father and love for His people. And that found expression in this radical obedience. Well, this is the kind of obedience that we are being called to. Continue in this obedience.

[17 : 21] Obedience that is like that of Jesus. And the product or the outcome of that kind of obedience is described.

What will we come to look like if we obey in that manner? Well, Paul tells us in the following verses. In verse 14, or let's read from verse 14, he says, Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become.

So, he's talking about what he's asked them to do already. At the heart of it, you know, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And what will that produce? What will that kind of obedience produce?

So that you may become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe or like lights in the world as you hold out the word of life.

That's what you'll look like. That's what you'll become if you work out your salvation with fear and trembling, if you continue in this life of obedience.

[18 : 25] And who does this description look like? Blameless and pure without fault in a crooked and depraved generation shining like stars in the universe. What does that look like?

Well, that looks like Jesus. And so, as we obey like Jesus, we will become like Jesus. We will become men and women who are ever more like our Savior.

So, what does the working out involve? Well, at heart, it's a matter of faithful and disciplined and persevering obedience. Just a quick mention of the manner in which we are to work out, the manner in which we are to render this obedience to God.

Well, that is something that Paul also touches on. There in our text, he says, Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. With fear and trembling.

Why with fear and trembling? Well, surely because of the gravity and the seriousness of the matter to hand. You know, salvation is a serious matter. To be a disciple of Jesus is not a hobby that you can pick up and then leave behind.

[19 : 38] This is a serious matter. It is a grave matter. It is a matter of life and death. And when you're dealing with matters that are serious and grave, then it is fitting and appropriate that they should be dealt with with seriousness, with fear and trembling, with reverence and respect.

Of course, it's also true that as we work out our salvation, we do so in the sight of God. You know, Paul makes mention of just his circumstances, really, that he is no longer in their presence.

He's no longer with them. He's speaking to people that he knows, that he has spent time with, but he's no longer with them. He says, I'm no longer there. But even though I'm no longer there, you've got to carry on.

But though Paul is no longer there, the believers are doing all that they do in the sight of God. And of course, that's true of us also. Everything we do is in his sight.

And so as we would work out our salvation, let us do so conscious of that reality. And as we are conscious of that reality, so let us do so with fear and trembling.

[20 : 44] But then finally, Paul also identifies help for us, help without which we are unable to respond as we ought to this call to work out our salvation.

As we just think about the help that's provided, let's just quickly remind ourselves of the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal, we said a few moments ago, is to be like Jesus. And as we think of that ultimate goal, there are a couple of dangers that I can think of in the pursuit of this goal.

One danger is that we can be overwhelmed by the enormity of it. And you say, well, that's just too much. That's never going to happen. It's not possible. You're talking about that kind of costly obedience and perseverance, and I'm just not going to be able to do that.

And so we can be disheartened by the enormity of it. Maybe at the other extreme, perhaps something that we're less likely to be tempted by or to fall into error over, is that we might fall into the mistake of taking credit for or pride in any progress towards the goal.

Or maybe that is a real temptation for some. I think for many of us, it's more the danger of being overwhelmed by the enormity of what we are being asked to do and to be.

[22 : 16] Now, in the light of these dangers, how good it is to hear what Paul has to say there in verse 13. Having called on us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, he immediately goes on to say, For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

And so to those of us who protest, I can't do it. It's too much. I'm not going to be able. The answer is, you're right. You can't do it. You're not able. But God can. And it is God who provides the necessary help.

He is the one who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose or pleasure. And notice that Paul identifies God as responsible for both the desire and the action.

He places in us the desire to live such a life and he enables us to actually live that life. Why this great concern of God to so involve himself in the life of his people?

Well, it's according to his good pleasure. It's according to his good purpose. God wants you to be like Jesus. And so he'll make sure that it happens. He will do what is necessary to ensure that this outcome is secured.

[23 : 34] So as we launch into 2018, or perhaps as we take some gingerly steps into 2018, let's do so receiving and responding to the challenging call that is directed to us by God.

Therefore, my dear friends, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for our salvation. We thank you for, in the words of the psalmist, the plenteous redemption that has been secured for us and that has been given to us.

And as we thank you for so great salvation, so we pray that we would understand what is involved and be willing to respond to the call to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

To ever more appreciate the depth of it and the demands of it. We thank you for your salvation with fear and trembling.