

Communion Preparatory

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[0 : 00] This is our communion weekend, as we well know, and on Sunday morning we will be gathering around the Lord's table.

Now, the Lord's table, the Lord's Supper, provides us an opportunity, among other things, for self-examination. We know that we are encouraged, indeed exhorted, to examine ourselves as we would participate.

And to examine ourselves is another language to take a good, hard, and honest look at ourselves to see how we are doing, how we are progressing in our Christian walk, in our Christian discipleship, to ask questions of ourselves.

Have we perhaps lost focus? Have we maybe grown cold, as we thought a little bit about on Sunday morning? Are we slouching in our service?

Or perhaps we're able, thankfully and humbly, to recognize that in a measure we are growing. There is some progress. God is enabling us in a measure to be fruitful.

[1 : 17] And maybe we find a mixture of these things. Things that we can be grateful for, and perhaps also things that we should be concerned about, and yes, even ashamed of.

To examine ourselves. And just as a physical examination, or a physical check-up, might identify the need for exercise, or working out, so a similar conclusion is the likely outcome of a spiritual check-up.

And this evening I want us to briefly consider an exhortation that can serve as a tool for self-examination, and remind us of the continuing need for us to work out, to use that language as Christians.

If we turn to verse 12 of Philippians chapter 2, the passage that we read, we'll find that language. So we can read the verse again.

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.

[2 : 29] For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. Now this exhortation to work out our salvation is very evidently directed to Christians.

Paul here is writing to the Christians in Philippi. It is to Christians that he challenges them to work out their salvation.

And the language certainly makes clear that though we are Christians, we certainly haven't arrived in the full sense of our Christian identity or discipleship.

We are saved, and yet we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And the challenge that we are given is a serious one.

The language that Paul uses is serious language. It's grave language. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. So what can we say of this challenge to work out, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling?

[3 : 44] I want to think of a few aspects of this that are present in the text and in the surrounding chapter. First of all, and I'll just mention what they are and then we can think of them in turn.

The first thing we want to notice is what the ultimate goal of this working out is. What is the ultimate goal? We'll also notice the example and the motivation that we are given.

We'll think a little bit also of the nature of this working out. Or to put it another way, what does it involve? What does this look like, this working out our salvation?

Very briefly, notice that Paul also touches on the question of the manner in which we are to work out. And then finally, but I think importantly, the help provided.

The task is a difficult one, a challenging one, but there is help that is provided. And we'll notice what that help is. So let's think of these different aspects of working out our salvation.

[4 : 55] The first thing then, what is the ultimate goal? To identify what the ultimate goal of this working out our salvation is, we need to go back to verse 5 of this chapter, Philippians chapter 2.

In verse 5, we have these words, Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. That is the ultimate goal of working out our salvation.

Now, the question could be asked, well, is this not a rather random selecting of this verse? Maybe because it suits my purpose.

And say, well, this looks like a good goal, so we'll just randomly pick on verse 5. It's not a random identifying of verse 5, but rather we can work out or can explain why it's reasonable to go back to verse 5 to find the ultimate goal.

Notice that verse 12, which is our principal concern, begins with the word, therefore. Therefore, my dear friends. So Paul is very explicitly making reference to what has gone before.

[6 : 07] Put it another way. In the light of this, work out your salvation. So Paul is saying, what I'm asking you to do now, what I'm challenging you to do now, is connected with what has come before.

Well, what is it that has come before? Well, what has come before is this glorious description of Christ's emptying of himself. And the verses, verses 6 to 11, as we know, are rich in theological content.

But they are also motivated by a pastoral concern and exhortation. Namely, the words that introduce them, which are the words of verse 5.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. So Paul isn't simply saying, well, here is some wonderful theology about who Jesus is and what he's done. And he's saying, I wanted to tell you all this in order that you might be like him.

That you would have the mind of Christ, which is the actual language that he uses there in verse 5. And so when in verse 12 he then says, therefore work out your salvation. He's saying in the light of this, in the light of who Jesus is and what he has done.

[7 : 20] In the light of this ultimate goal, that you should be like Jesus. That you should have the mind of Jesus. Then I urge you, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

So this description of Jesus in verses 6 to 11 is given to explain what is involved in being like Jesus. Paul doesn't simply say, be like Jesus.

He says, and this is what Jesus is like. This is the Jesus you are to be like. That you are to have the mind of. And then having been given this description, Paul says, therefore work out your salvation. So the ultimate goal of this spiritual discipline, of this spiritual work, working out our salvation, is that we might be like Jesus.

But the second thing I mentioned that we would comment on is the example and the motivation that is given. And here we return once again to that first word in verse 12.

[8 : 31] Therefore, and that word points us to the preceding description of Jesus. And there we find Jesus serving as both our example and our motivation.

So the example and the motivation given is the person of Jesus. Both example and both motivation. We're not going to in any detail go through what is said of him in these verses.

But these verses present for us what he has done. In verse 8, being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

So what Jesus has done for us is to serve as our motivation in working out our salvation with fear and trembling. But not only what he has done, but where he is now seated.

In verse 9 we read, Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. So we are motivated also by a recognition of where he is, seated on the throne, reigning over the universe.

[9 : 40] But also we are given indications as to what he is due. Now this follows on from what he has done and where he is seated. But given who he is, what he has done, where he is seated, what he is due, is that we would bow down before him.

That we would confess his name. 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.

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and on earth.

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and on earth and on earth and on earth. But then we have also the nature of this working out. Or to put it another way, what does it involve to work out our salvation?

Something that is important to clarify at the beginning is what is not being said here. What is not being taught by a poet, though at first glance might appear to be being said.

[11 : 09] There is nothing here in what Paul is saying, no suggestion of salvation by works. The work that Paul speaks of is not to secure our salvation, but rather to work on a present possession.

Paul recognizes that those he is speaking to are saved. That is a reality for them. It's not something that they aspire to. They are saved.

And they can be thought of in those terms. So what he is asking them to do is not to work in such a way that they might somehow procure this salvation, that they might earn it, that they might merit it, but rather that they would work on that which is already theirs, which they already possess.

Maybe one way of illustrating that, I hope helpfully, would be to think of marriage. Now, I think those of us who are married would recognize that it is right and proper that we be encouraged to work at our marriage, that that's something important to do.

We already possess our marriage, if we want to use that language, but that marriage and that relationship will only be fully enjoyed and experienced if we work at it.

[12 : 31] If we're careless, if we're lazy, if we put no effort, if we put no investment into that relationship, into that marriage, then though we remain married, we will not enjoy it and even benefit from it as intended.

Now, if you don't work at your marriage, you're no less married, but your experience of marriage will be an impoverished one. And that, perhaps in a small way, illustrates, I think, what Paul is saying here.

He's not saying you need to work in order to be saved. He's saying, no, you are saved. But in order to fully appreciate and to enjoy this salvation, then you must work on it.

Well, if this work is not in order to secure our salvation, what then is it about and what does it involve? We could describe it as progressively coming to appreciate and experience all of the aspects and blessings and demands or duties of our salvation.

But that continues to leave open the question, okay, but what does this involve, this work that we are to do? If we had to answer that question, what is this work?

[13 : 53] If we had to answer it or answer that question with one word, the word would be obedience. This work that we are being challenged to is at heart the matter of obedience.

And why do I say that? Well, in the verse in question, the word that would confirm that for us is the word continue. Then in verse 12 it says, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And then we say, well, okay, where does this word continue come from? It must be connecting with something that has come before. Well, we can notice as we read the verse what it's referring to in terms of what has passed.

In verse 12, we find it, 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.

So he's saying you are already obeying. As you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation. And they continue clearly as a reference to their obedience.

[15 : 02] And their obedience is now spoken of in a different way, in the language of working out your salvation. So it's clear, it seems that what Paul is speaking about here, when he speaks about working out your salvation, is this matter of obedience, obedience of obeying God as we obey God.

So we are working out our salvation. But what kind of obedience? Well, to think of that, we can think of what is said in what has gone before in the description of Jesus, who is our example, and who is the one that we are seeking to be like.

So when we say what kind of obedience, well, we could answer that by saying Jesus-like obedience. And it's interesting to note that in the verses that describe Jesus, there is explicit reference to his obedience.

In verse 8, And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. So when Paul says to the Christians in Philippi, you must be obedient, when he has made it very clear that the ultimate goal is to be like Jesus, then if we ask the question, what kind of obedience?

Well, this is the kind of obedience. The kind of obedience that Jesus rendered to his Father, obedient to death, even death, on a cross.

[16 : 31] And that verse, verse 8, speaks, if you wish, of the quality of this obedience. It's radical obedience, obedient even to death. But also it speaks of the motivation of that obedience.

What was it that motivated Jesus to this radical obedience? Well, it was loyalty to his Father. It was his delight to do the Father's will.

And so out of loyalty to his Father, he was obedient to death. But we also know that in parallel with that, if you wish, he was motivated by a love for others.

We maybe don't need to put these two motivations in any kind of hierarchy, although it seems reasonable to place loyalty to the Father as at the heart of his obedience.

But together with that, there was this motivation of the love that he bore to others, to those whom he had come to save very particularly.

[17 : 31] And so this obedience that we are being exhorted to in this language of working out our salvation is to be Jesus-like obedience. And Jesus-like obedience will produce disciples who are like Jesus.

And that is something that Paul does explicitly recognize in what he goes on to say in terms of what will happen if the Philippians work out their salvation in the manner that they're being encouraged to do.

Notice in verse 15, he speaks of an outcome. What does he say? He says you must do these things. You must work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And then he says, so that, 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 as you hold out the word of life.

And when we think of these words that Paul uses, maybe I could get across what I'm trying to get across by asking you, who is described?

How could I put it? I'm going to speak about what is being said here and ask you to imagine, well, what historical figure is being described in these words?

[18 : 52] So who does this sound like? Okay, this character being described. He's blameless. He's pure. He's without fault in a crooked and depraved generation.

He shines like a star in the universe. He holds out the word of life. Who does that sound like? Paul is speaking about what the Philippians should look like. But who does that sound like?

Well, it sounds like Jesus. It's describing Jesus. And so what Paul is saying is that if your obedience is Jesus-like, if you're obedient like Jesus was obedient, obedient to death, even death on a cross, then you will become like Jesus.

So that covers, perhaps in a measure, something of the nature of this working out. What does it involve? But Paul also, and this is the penultimate thing that we want to mention, and this very briefly, Paul also touches on the manner in which we are to work out.

The language he uses to describe the manner is there in verse 12. Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. With fear and trembling.

[20 : 08] The language certainly highlights the seriousness of this matter, the gravity of what is being asked of the believers.

It also reminds his original audience, but the application is also for us today, that though Paul is not present, he makes clear that he won't be there checking on them.

He's not physically present to know if they do or don't respond to what he is challenging them to do. And in recognizing that he won't be present, I think implicit is a reminder to them that it really doesn't matter if he's there because the Lord is there.

And he is witnessing the manner in which they respond. I may be absent, but the Lord is not absent. And so in recognition of that, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

And of course that truth just reminds us of something that it's always good to ponder on and to come and answer for ourselves the question. Do we live our Christian lives as men-pleasers or as God-pleasers?

[21 : 25] It's so easy to do what we do with a view to the opinion of men. What will others think of me? What will the other believers think of me if I do this or fail to do this?

But in these words, Paul is reminding us that that really isn't our principal concern. Our concern should be with what the Lord thinks and what it is that he sees.

We can fool others, but we certainly can't fool him. So the manner in which we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. The final thing I want us to just notice is the help that is provided and help without which we could do nothing.

If we maybe just backtrack a moment and remind ourselves that the ultimate goal is to be like Jesus. Now, though that sounds very grand, it does bring with it maybe two dangers.

I think probably the first, the more significant one. The first danger is that we could be overwhelmed by the enormity of it to such an extent that we maybe give up even before we begin.

[22 : 33] We say, yes, well, that's fine to be like Jesus, but that's just beyond me. I couldn't be like Jesus. I couldn't even come close. And so, yes, it's very grand and it sounds very wonderful and no doubt in eternity God will so work that there is this transformation that I will be like Jesus.

But here in the real world, that's just not going to happen. Maybe even more so when we think that the obedience that is required of us should be Jesus-like obedience, obedient to death.

And you say, well, that's beyond the kind of obedience I would ever be able to render. So the goal, grand though it is, does carry that danger that it could paralyze us into thinking, well, there's just no way I could ever do that.

Another danger, I think probably a less relevant one, though it could be for some of us important to think about, is that in the measure that some progress is made, of course, with God's help, as we'll notice in a moment, progress can be made.

There's always the danger of imagining that we can take some credit for that progress. So perhaps there's another danger to be aware of.

[23 : 55] In any case, both of these dangers, and particularly the first, are addressed by Paul in verse 13. And what he goes on to say immediately from exhorting the Christians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, he goes on to say, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

So to those who may protest that this challenge to be like Jesus, that our obedience would be Jesus-like obedience, and to those who would maybe, seemingly in a show of great humility, protest, even silently protest, well, I can't do that.

Of course, the answer is, no, you can't. But God can. God can do that in you, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Notice that Paul identifies God as being responsible for both the desire and the action. God works in you to will and to act. And Paul also tells us why this is so.

Why is it that God does this? Why does God work in us to will and to act? Well, according to his good purpose, or according to his good pleasure, as it is translated in other versions.

[25 : 19] In other words, it is God himself who wants you to be like Jesus. It's not simply something that you are to buy into and with great effort seek to achieve.

God has this desire for you. It is his good pleasure that you would become like his son. And for that reason, he is the one who works in you to will and to act.

He is the one who will ultimately ensure that this is what happens. So then, as we look forward to gathering around the Lord's table, as we remember that it is a suitable occasion to examine ourselves, perhaps these words can help us even in the course of these two or three days to engage in this task of examining ourselves as we listen to the exhortation to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Let's pray. Let's pray.