

Philippians 2

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[0 : 0 0] Next, Lord's Day, we will be celebrating the Lord's Supper, and celebrating the Lord's Supper provides a very helpful opportunity for self-examination. Now, that is always a good thing to do as Christians. It's so easy to simply get into a routine, and perhaps in the busyness of life, and perhaps even of ministry and of involvement in the church, to be careless in this regard. And days can go by, and weeks and months, and indeed years, and we never seriously stop to take stock of where we are and how we are progressing as Christians. And it is good to take an honest look at ourselves and see how we are doing, see how we are progressing in our Christian walk. Have we perhaps lost focus? Are we slouching? Are we growing as we ought? Are we progressing?

Are we fruitful in our Christian life and service? And just as if we were to be involved, as occasionally we are, we have occasion to be involved in having a physical checkup, maybe at the doctors, and that physical checkup leads to the conclusion, nearly always, invariably, that we need to work out.

We need to exercise in order to recover, perhaps, the state of health that we previously had, or to improve our state of health and general well-being. So, no doubt, it will almost invariably be the case that when we have a spiritual checkup in the light of God's Word, that I'm sure is the likely conclusion that we need to exercise, that we need to work out in a spiritual sense. And this evening I want to consider an exhortation that we've read there in Philippians chapter 2 that can help serve as a tool for self-examination, and that reminds us of this need, this constant, really, this permanent need to work out as Christians.

And we'll explain what we mean by that, but for the moment we're simply taking literally the word that we find in verse 12 of Philippians chapter 2, and that is where we will be focusing our attention this evening. So, we'll read again that verse in Philippians chapter 2 and verse 12. Paul addresses this exhortation to the Christians, the saints at Philippi, 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, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. This exhortation is very clearly directed to the saints, to Christians, and it recognizes a fact that is, I think, glaringly obvious if we have even a small measure of honesty, that as Christians we have not yet arrived. We still have much to do, much to work on as Christians, and that this challenge that is laid upon us is no small matter. The terms in which it is presented, the very vocabulary used, makes it very clear that this is a serious matter. This is a solemn matter that we continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. What can we say, then, concerning this challenge to work out our salvation? I want to identify five things that I think we can find in this verse, or extending our look to the surrounding passage. No doubt other things could be said, but five things that I want to bring to your attention this evening. The first thing that we'll notice in a moment is the ultimate goal of working out our salvation. What is the ultimate goal? What are we working towards? We know that in a physical workout, somebody who has some regime, they have a goal, no doubt, of what they want to look like, perhaps, at the end of all this effort. Well, what is our ultimate goal?

As we would obey this exhortation to work out our salvation. But also, we want to notice the example and the motivation given. Now, there is considerable overlap, perhaps, in these things, because we will see, I hope, in a moment that the goal itself is a great motivation. But having recognized that, we want to just distinguish, perhaps in a small way, as we notice the second element, the example and the motivation given to work out our salvation, to obey Paul's exhortation.

[5 : 40] Then we'll also consider the nature of working out, or to put it another way, what does this involve? What does it look like? What is it we have to do that Paul is requiring of us? Fourthly, consider the manner in which we are to work out our salvation. That is stated very explicitly in the very words before us. And then finally, to notice the help provided. Indeed, this help provided isn't simply just a helping hand, maybe when we're struggling, but it's presented to us as help without which we can do nothing. We have no prospect, no hope of being able to respond adequately to what is being demanded of us without this help that is clearly identified for us here in the passage.

So, these are the aspects that we want to consider briefly this evening. But let's begin, then, with the ultimate goal. What is the ultimate goal that is in mind, that is in view as we are directed to work out our salvation with fear and trembling? Well, I would suggest that the ultimate goal we can find identified for us in verse 5 of the chapter. In verse 5, we're told your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. And then there follows this wonderful passage describing Christ Jesus and His work.

But in the words of verse 5, we are being told, we are being challenged, essentially, to be like Jesus. Your attitude should be the attitude of Jesus. In other words, be like Jesus. This is the goal that is presented to the saints at Philippi. You are to be like Jesus. Now, we might say, well, yes, it says that there, but how do we connect that with what Paul is saying in verse 12? Is it not somewhat random to go from verse 12 and, well, there in verse 5 we seem to have something interesting? Well, there we have the goal of this working out our salvation. Well, I would suggest it's not as random as it might appear.

We notice there in verse 12 at the beginning of this section, or certainly in the manner in which it's subdivided in our church Bible, this subsection begins with this word, 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. And we're familiar with a word like this one here, therefore, it is a connecting word. It gives us a clue that there is a reference to what has come before. In the light of what I have just said, in the light of these truths that I have presented to you, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. So, Paul is saying, in the light of all that I have said concerning Jesus, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. But in verse 5 we notice that all these wonderful things, these wonderful truths that we are given concerning Jesus are given with a pastoral intent. They are given to serve as an example of how we should be. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. That is what brings Paul to share with us this wonderful theology.

We often consider these verses from verses 6 to 11 as this wonderful presentation of Christology, of who Jesus is, of what He has done, and it is indeed all these things. But it is very revealing and instructive to note that this wonderful theology is given with this pastoral intent, that those who read these things would understand that that is how we ought to be. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, and then what follows that is so familiar to us. And so, at the heart of Paul's concern is that the Christians in Philippi, and indeed the Christians, whatever, whoever, and wherever this letter will be read in God's providence, including ourselves, the concern is that we would be like Jesus. He then describes Jesus.

[10:14] This is the Jesus you are to be like. And in the light of this, Paul continues, I present you with this exhortation, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, that you might indeed become like Jesus. So, this is the ultimate goal. This task that we are called to, this work that we are challenged concerning, has this as its ultimate goal, that as believers we would become more and more like our Savior, more and more like Jesus. But we can notice also the example and the motivation given. And here we return to what we've been commenting on concerning what Paul shares with us from verse 5 through to verse 11 of the chapter. Because in his presentation of Christ Jesus, a presentation that evidently, given our limited time and our focus on a verse that follows, we can't even begin or even attempt to do any kind of justice to all that is in these verses from verses 6 to 11. But we can just notice some general truths that we find there that serve as an example for us.

This Jesus that we are to be like, how is he presented? This Jesus whom we are to work out our salvation with a view to becoming like him, well, what is he like? How is he presented to us in the preceding verses that allow Paul to then say, therefore, in the light of this? And so, let's consider just this example we are to work out our salvation. Well, the presentation that Paul gives there from verse 6 through to verse 11 speaks of what Jesus has done, and very particularly this reference to Jesus humbling himself in the cross. This is the example that is presented to us, that we would have that same attitude of being willing to be obedient in this radical way, what he has done. The words of

Paul also speak of where Jesus now sits. He is the one who has been exalted to the highest place. He is the one who is seated on his throne in heaven. And in the light of this, so we who are his subjects must work out our salvation with fear and trembling. The words of Paul also make very clear what Jesus is due. He is the one who in due course will receive the honor and the recognition of all. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. He is worthy of such worship. He is worthy of such recognition.

And in the light of this truth, Paul then goes on to say, therefore, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And so, Jesus is presented to us as an example, but also as a motivation.

And working out is difficult, even on the physical level. It can be very tough and very tiring, and we can be discouraged, and we can think that we want to give up. And that is true as Christians, we may have that good purpose and that good intention, and yet we struggle, and we are tempted to throw in the towel, to give up. It just seems so difficult. And so, we need an example. We need one we can look to and say, well, this is my example. This is the one who I wish to be like. We need one who will motivate us.

[14:33] And what greater motivation can we have than to consider our Savior, to consider what He has done, to consider where He now sits, to consider the worship that He is due. And so, Paul, in exhorting the saints in Philippi and ourselves this evening, he presents us with an example and a motivation.

But also, we should notice the nature of the working out. Or to put it other ways, what does it involve? What is it that Paul is asking us to do? Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

And I suspect it is necessary, if only very briefly, to clarify what is not being said, what is not being taught here in these words. Continue to work out your salvation. It may be very evident to all of us here, but probably necessary just to make very clear that what is being said here is in no way a suggestion that our salvation is something that we are to gain by our works. There is no suggestion here that this working out will procure for us salvation.

That if only we would work very hard and with great effort and discipline, then as a reward, we will enjoy this salvation. This is in no way what Paul is saying. Apart from anything else, it would so clearly contradict what he says throughout his letters. But we don't need to dismiss that possibility only because it would be contradictory, but because the very language he uses does not require that manner of understanding. Rather, the work that he is speaking of is not to secure our salvation, but rather it is an exhortation to work on that which is a present possession. This salvation is something that we already enjoy, we already possess, if you wish, but we need to work on it. Perhaps marriage could serve as a good illustration. If we are married, then we already, if you wish, possess marriage. We already own that. That is the state we are in, not something we aspire to. We've already got married, and it is our possession, if you wish. But we are, of course, and quite rightly so, encouraged to work on our marriage. That is necessary. It's important. Because if we don't work on our marriage, if we don't work at our marriage, then we won't fully enjoy all that we are intended to enjoy. We won't fully experience all that marriage can involve. Only as we work at it will we fully appreciate it and enjoy it and experience it in all its wonder. Now, if you don't work at your marriage, you're no less married. You're still married, but you don't appreciate it. You don't enjoy it.

You don't understand all that God intends for that married state. And so, you miss out. You're still married, but you're missing out on so much that God has intended for you. And it's the same idea in the language used here by Paul. Work out your salvation. You are saved. You are already part of God's family. You already enjoy so many of the privileges of salvation, but this is something you must work on. You must work on in order to better appreciate and experience all of the aspects and blessings and demands and duties of salvation. This is what Paul has in mind when he encourages, exhorts the saints at Philippi to work out your salvation. But what does it involve? It's not with the purpose of gaining salvation. It's not that we might merit the salvation we already enjoy. It is, as we've suggested, rather to better appreciate and experience all that salvation involves very well.

[19 : 07] But what is this work? What does the work actually involve? Perhaps if we had to reduce it, if indeed it is a reduction, perhaps it's not even a reduction. But if we had to summarize it in one single word, the only adequate word to answer the question, well, what is this work, would be the word obedience.

Obedience is what is involved in working out our salvation. And the clue there is the verb continue. At the beginning of the exhortation itself, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Now, that continue must refer to something that has gone before. The very verb demands that it's a reference to what is already happening. And now the Philippians are being told to continue.

Well, what is it that they're already doing that they must continue? Well, the verse makes it very clear. Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation.

So this working out your salvation at its heart involves obedience. Paul is saying, you are already obedient. And I encourage you, I congratulate you, I celebrate your obedience.

[20 : 21] Now, I urge you, continue to work out your salvation. Continue to be characterized by obedience. What kind of obedience is required of us as saints, as Christians? Well, perhaps if we had to describe it in one way, we could describe it in this way. And it's perhaps something that's already been hinted at or suggested already this evening. This obedience is Jesus-like obedience. Jesus-like obedience. Hence, what has gone before to aid us and to guide us and to illustrate for us the kind of obedience that is required of us. Jesus-like obedience. We already have noted the reference to his obedience in the preceding verses. Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. That's the kind of obedience that we are to work on. That is the kind of obedience we are to demonstrate as we would work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Obedient to death. Radical obedience. Obedient in all things, the big things and the seemingly small things. Obedience as with Jesus, motivated by a loyalty to God. The obedience of the Son was driven by his loyalty to the Father. He had come to do the Father's will, and he could consider no other possibility than doing the Father's will. Such was his loyalty and love to the Father. So our obedience is to be driven by that loyalty to God. He is due our obedience. He is worthy of our obedience. He has every right to demand our obedience. But we know that the Son was motivated not only by loyalty to the Father, but by love for us. He went, yes, even to Calvary, driven by his loyalty to the Father, but also driven by his love for us. And so our obedience, if it is to be Jesus-like, will be driven by loyalty to God, by a sense of duty and a proper sense of duty to God, but also by love for others, as we would seek to serve them and bless them because we love them. Jesus-like obedience is what is required if we are to work out our salvation. And Jesus-like obedience, not surprisingly, will in turn make us like Jesus. It may seem almost a truism or a bit of a tongue twister, but it's worth pondering on that. Jesus-like obedience will in turn make us like Jesus. This is the product, if you wish, the result of Jesus-like obedience, that we would become like Jesus. And that becomes quite clear,

I think visibly so, in what follows in what Paul says. Notice in verse 15 there is a reference to what we will become as we work out our salvation. What will we become? Well, we're told, 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. This is a wonderful description of what we are to become as Christians. And yet, if we consider who that describes, is it not fair to say that not only does it describe what we will become if we are true to the exhortation before us, but it describes Jesus. Is this not a wonderful description of what Jesus was like? Blameless and pure, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, shining like a star in the universe, holding out the word of life. Is this not what Jesus was like? And so Paul says to the saints at Philippi, if your obedience is Jesus-like, then you will become like Jesus. And is this not the ultimate goal that we've identified at the very beginning? This is what it's all about, that we should become alike at Jesus.

But then we can also notice in the fourth place, not only the nature of what this working out involves, this obedience that is Jesus-like, but also fourthly notice the manner in which we are to work out, the manner in which we are to work out our salvation. And while that is very clearly and explicitly laid out for us in the verse, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

With fear and trembling, this concerns the manner in which we are to work out, the manner in which we are to obey. We have identified obedience as being at the heart of this working out our salvation. Well, in what manner are we to obey? Well, in this manner, with fear and trembling. And these words suggest at least a couple of things, perhaps more, but two things that I would notice. First of all, they do remind us of the gravity of the matter. What we are dealing with here is no insignificant matter.

[26 : 09] This challenge, this exhortation to become more like Jesus, to work out our salvation is a serious matter. It is a somber matter. It is a grave matter, hence the need to do so with fear and trembling.

Perhaps if you're concerned to work out physically, to get fit, that is a good thing. It is a good thing to be as healthy as we can be. It's a good thing to exercise. But it is not a matter of grave importance.

If you fail to work out properly, if you fail to achieve your optimum physical state, it's not the end of the world. It's not a matter of great import. But this is a matter of great import and gravity, to work out your salvation with fear and trembling because of how serious a matter it is. But also, we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because the Lord is watching. That in contrast to what Paul states, that he is no longer watching. He encourages the Philippians to continue obedience even though he is not present. Notice how he describes it, 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. I think what

Paul is recognizing is this natural human tendency to behave in the light of who is watching. Now, Paul was the great apostle. The Christians in Philippi had a genuine love for him, a genuine respect for him. And so, you can imagine that when Paul is present, there is this special effort made to behave and to live and to obey in a way that will be pleasing to Paul, that Paul would be pleased with them. And that, up to a point, is entirely understandable and legitimate. They want to impress Paul. That in itself isn't a bad thing. And Paul says, but I'm not always going to be there, and indeed I'm not there now. But even though I'm not there, I urge you to continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because though I am not there, be assured that the Lord is there, that the Lord is watching, that the Lord is concerned for the for the manner in which you serve Him, for the manner in which you take seriously these matters. And of course, we know that's true.

This is no novel truth that is being, that we're being reminded of. We know that God is here. We know that He sees us always. But is it not so that we seldom live in the light of that knowledge? If we were so immediately conscious of His presence, would it not make a significant difference in the manner in which we live, indeed in the manner in which we respond to a challenge such as the one before us this evening?

[29 : 18] So we have here also an instruction as to the manner in which we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But finally, we notice a further aspect, the help provided. The help provided, which as we noted at the beginning, help that is essential.

Without this help, we could do nothing. We would be incapable of responding in any way to this challenge to work out our salvation. Well, what is the help provided? Again, this is very explicitly presented for us in the following verse.

Verse 2, 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.

God Himself is the one who offers to help, who is ready to help, who is present to help us work out our salvation.

And as we remind ourselves again of the ultimate goal, this ultimate goal, which is to be like Jesus, it also highlights the need for this help.

[30 : 41] Because if we think on this matter, this challenge, this demand, this expectation of God that we, His people, would become like His Son, there are maybe two dangers.

One which I think is greater than the other. Certainly, in my own mind, I would see it as greater. The first danger is that we could be overwhelmed by the enormity of what is being asked.

We can say, well, this sounds wonderful and this sounds so utopian, but it's just not realistic. How could I become like Jesus? I am so far from being like Him. This is just beyond me. The bar is just set way too high.

You know, sometimes when we're encouraging our children to achieve something, we do them no favors by setting the bar too high. We can see if they're doing maths and we give them somebody who's in primary four, we give them problems for somebody in primary seven.

And we say, well, that's the challenge. We want you to be so good at this. Well, I don't think any parent would be so foolish because you set the bar so high that far from helping the child, you discourage him because it's just so enormous what is being asked.

[31 : 47] And is there not a danger here when we consider what God is asking of us, demanding of us that we should be like Jesus, that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus?

There is an enormity to that. And so, how necessary for Paul to say, but you are not alone. And so, for Paul to say to those who protest, but I can't do that. Paul says, you're right, you can't do that.

But remember, it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. He who demands that you be like Jesus, he himself offers to help you. He himself will be the one who works in you.

So, there is this danger of being overwhelmed by the enormity of what is being asked to be like Jesus. But perhaps there is also a danger. It seems to me one that maybe is not so obvious, but potentially could be a problem.

The danger that we might take credit for any, albeit small, progress in that direction. As we make small progress, as we take some steps in that direction, there is always that danger of taking credit for that.

[32 : 58] Of maybe very quietly, and not in some crass way, but pride beginning to be a factor in our thinking.

And so, these words of Paul would squash any such pride as he tells us, it is God who works in you to will and to act. And if you do make some progress, well, praise God.

If today you are more like Jesus than yesterday, well, praise God, because it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

The desire to be like Jesus, the actions required that we might become like Jesus, it is all of God.

And why does he do so? Well, it is according to his good purpose. According to his good purpose, because he is pleased so to do.

[34 : 11] We might say, because he wants you to be like Jesus, and so he will make sure that it happens. And of course, our great hope as Christians is that ultimately it will happen.

Ultimately, this work that is of God will be concluded, and we will become like Jesus. The invitation, the challenge is that in this life, we cooperate with God in such a way that we can become more like him in this life.

That is the challenge. That is this goal that is presented for us as, I hope, a very attractive and stirring one. But even if we are slow, and even if we are careless, and it is no excuse that we should be these things, if we are indeed his own, his work will not be frustrated.

And the day will come when we will become like his Son, Jesus Christ. So then, a number of aspects, perhaps, that we have been able to consider this evening surrounding this exhortation.

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And so, as I began, so I finish. And remind you that this coming Lord's Day, we will have the privilege of celebrating the Lord's death.

[35 : 34] And as we would prepare ourselves for that, what better way of preparing for that, that in this week, as we have begun, so we would continue listening and responding to this challenge that God lays before us.

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.