

## Sanctification belongs to the Lord

Philippians 2:12-18

### Introduction

Aren't you relieved that it's nearly the end of the year? It's been a tough year for many of us. Whether it be political uncertainty, financial struggles, family problems, marriage problems, terminal illnesses, things not working out how we had imagined, deaths of friends or family, uncertainty about the future of the country – many of us are carrying disappointments, burdens and facing huge challenges.

In the midst of tough times it can be easy to despair, feel that you want to give up, and question where God is in all of this. How faithful is he really? Maybe you feel so overwhelmed with your circumstances that you feel that you can't finish the race, that trying to live for God is just so beyond your reach now, you can't possibly match up to his standards that you feel that you need to meet. Life is just too hectic!

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippian church in circumstances not too different from our own. The church was going through very challenging times. People were weary and discouraged in their faith. Paul, who had planted that church years earlier, writes to them to encourage them. He's in jail – himself experiencing tough times, yet he's as joyful as ever in Christ, even preaching the gospel where he is in prison.

His message to the Philippians – and to us - is that despite all your challenges and discouragements, you can finish well, you can live a life worthy of the gospel and honouring of God. You can persevere in the faith because God has done the hard work for us. As he writes in chapter 1:6, **“And I am sure of this, that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”**

The heart of what Paul is getting to here is our sanctification. What is sanctification? The process through which God makes us holy. It's living out our faith in Christ, and pursuing a life that honours God.

That can seem daunting, yet the good news for us is that we're not alone in this. It's not as if we're just saved by grace, but then have to carry on in our relationship with God in our own

strength. “In by grace and stay in by works.” The truth is that God’s saving work in our lives is all encompassing. Our salvation is from Lord, and our sanctification too is from the Lord. *It is only because God is sanctifying us by his Spirit, that we can truly live for his glory.*

We’ll unpack this in our text in chapter 2:12-18, in three ways:

- Firstly – seeing that our **sanctification is from God**
- Secondly – seeing what **sanctification looks like in action**
- And thirdly – that our **sanctification is through suffering.**

#### **A. Our Sanctification is from God, vv.12-13**

**“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”**

Are these two verses contradicting themselves? Verse 12 says, “work out your own salvation.” The Greek for “work out” means “produce” “make happen” – it’s strong and it’s an imperative – something you need to do. Then the very next verse says that it is God who is working in us to make this happen. We must work out our salvation? Or God is working it out? Is there a contradiction here? Can both be true? Do we do our bit and God does his bit – is our salvation a synergy between us and God?

Another important question here is doesn’t the rest of the Bible tell us that it is God who saves us? We don’t save ourselves or work for our salvation, right? Jonah 2:9 says that, **“Salvation belongs to the Lord.”** Jesus says in John 15:16, **“You did not chose me, but I chose you.”** Ephesians 1:4 says that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” In Romans 4:5, Paul even doubles down on this and says that God justifies *those who don’t work*, who are ungodly.”

What’s going on here? God saves those who don’t work, yet we are called here to “work out our own salvation”?

We need to understand the nature of our salvation. Our salvation encompasses three aspects. ***We have been saved*** – past tense – the moment we believed in Jesus. God justified

us at that point – made us right with him, forgave us our sins once and for all, enabled us to enter into his presence because of what Jesus has done. This is all accomplished. We can't lose it, once we're in Christ, we're his forever – pure gift of grace.

Yet there is still a sense that ***we are being saved*** – present tense – our sanctification, the ongoing work of God in our hearts. Hebrews 10:14 says that by Christ's offering on the cross, ***“he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*** So in God's sight, we're perfect in Christ – entirely accepted in him, yet at the same time still being made holy.

Then ***we will be saved*** – future tense – our glorification. Romans 8:30 promises us that those who are justified in Christ will be glorified with him – guaranteed eternity with God. This is greatly comforting to us as if we're in Christ now, we have absolute assurance that we will be with him for all eternity – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39).

So when Paul is speaking about “working out your own salvation” here in verse 12, he's not saying you need to work *for* your salvation – that's been already accomplished in Christ. We have been justified – saved in the past tense - received his gift of grace – all his work. There's nothing we can do to earn that!

The sense of salvation that Paul is talking about here is salvation present tense, our sanctification. He is saying that we should live like we're saved. We need to take our salvation seriously. God's given us this amazing gift of salvation – our sins forgiven, new life in Christ, his Spirit working in us, promise of eternity – hold dear to this, work it out in fear and trembling, don't take this gift lightly! In chapter 1:27 he says something similar, ***“let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...”***

The nature of the gospel is that it transforms us. Our belief and trust in Jesus Christ is not a purely academic thing where we just affirm a theological statement and then carry on with our lives just as before. If we're truly in Christ, we're being changed by his Holy Spirit every day. He is showing up sin in our lives and he empowers us to obey him and live differently from how we used to.

We have to understand these verses in the light of the previous verses which speak about the humility of Jesus as our example. Familiar verses (vv. 5-8) – Though Jesus was God, he

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born as man, humbling himself and being obedient to the point of death on the cross. Jesus' obedience to his Father, obedience that led him to the cross, his obedience is an example for us. As Jesus was obedient to his Father's will, so are we to be obedient to the Father's will. This is why Jesus says in John 14:15, **"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."**

Obedying God in our lives is evidence that he's working in us. This is the "working out of our salvation." But if there is no change in our lives, if we are continuing to pursue sinful patterns and lifestyles with not even a desire to want to stop or change, we have to ask ourselves if we have truly received Christ and his gospel of grace.

Verse 13 goes on to say that, **"it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."** Does this then cancel out our obedience in "working out our salvation"? I don't think so. In Christ, we do consciously try and live lives that are pleasing to God. We battle against temptation, we seek God's will in his Word and try to live according to that, we flee from sin in our lives, we confess our sins when we stumble, we forgive others who sin against us – all our actions.

Yet, verse 13 shows us that our working out our salvation through our obedience is only possible because of God's grace. It is God who is doing the working. The will and work and desire in us to live for God is only there because the Holy Spirit is at work in us. It's for "his good pleasure" – meaning that it's entirely dependent on his sovereign will.

So then, is this a matter of God doing his bit and we doing our bit in our salvation – some sort of synergy? No. God works and we also work. Yet every bit of our working out our salvation is just the effect of God working in us. The more we live for God, the more we obey him and honour him with our lives, the more we can be encouraged that God's power through his Spirit is working in our lives. Our salvation, including our sanctification is ultimately all from him!

#### **B. Sanctification in action vv.14-16**

**"Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 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, 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 labour in vain.”**

We've seen that the origin of sanctification is with God. Now what does it look like when the rubber hits the road? What then does sanctification look like in action? What does it look like when God makes us more holy?

Look to Jesus! That's the context of this text. As we saw earlier, the first half of chapter 2 describes how Jesus, who was God eternal, humbled himself by coming to earth as man, as a servant, being obedient to the Father to the point of dying on the cross. Then God exalted him and has given him **“the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”** (2:9-11).

Then follows our text with, *“Therefore...work out your salvation with fear and trembling...”* So the life of Jesus is our example of what we're becoming. Not becoming gods. But becoming more like Christ! Let's look at four things from the text that show us what sanctification looks like and how they are rooted in Christ's example to us:

### **1. Don't grumble!**

Verse 14 - **Do all things without grumbling or disputing.** I hate being told what to do. If someone tells me to do something, especially when I haven't planned to do it or thought it through, I end up doing it but doing it grudgingly.

True obedience is from the heart. It's really no use if we obey Christ outwardly, but inwardly we are grumbling. That kind of outward obedience does not usually last very long, as we usually end up reverting to doing what is really in our hearts. Contrast this to the obedience of Christ. We've already seen that in 2:8 he willingly obeyed his Father to the point of death. Hebrews 12:2 says, *“for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross...”* Jesus obeyed from the heart, with joy, to endure the most painful and terrible event in human history.

When we find ourselves grumbling and disputing we need to ask God to change our hearts. Our obedience is not a matter of going through the motions begrudgingly. Instead we need God's Spirit to mould our hearts according to his will.

## 2. Be Blameless and Innocent

Verse 15 – God’s will for us here is that we would be **“blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish...”** This is our end goal in our sanctification – that on the day we meet Jesus, we will be made completely perfect in the Lord. Chapter 1:10 says that we will be **“pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”** Only then will we be sinless and completely holy in ourselves, ready to live for eternity in the new creation with our Lord.

But between now and then we are still becoming blameless and innocent. We’re still struggling with sin, yet God is renewing our hearts every day by his Spirit and putting to death the old man of sin in us. We’re sinning saints.

We’ve seen that Phil 2:8 says that Jesus became obedient – to the point of death. His obedience includes his submitting to the Father’s will to die on the cross, but his obedience was not limited to that. It was only Jesus who managed to live a completely perfect and holy life – obeying the entire law of God. As a result, he is righteous in himself, he is the only Righteous One.

We know that within ourselves we are not righteous, even though we’re in Christ, we still struggle with sin. Yet God still calls us “holy” (meaning of saints). Hebrews 10:14 says, “we’ve been perfected” and here in verse 16 we’re called “children of God”. How is this possible? In Philippians 3:9, Paul writes that as Christians we don’t have a **“righteousness of (our) own that comes from the law”** (we’re not righteous in ourselves because we all continue to break the law) – but **“we have a righteousness which comes through faith in Christ.”** – God declares us already holy, blameless and pure simply because we trust in Jesus, the only Righteous One, the only blameless and pure one, who has obeyed the law – and it’s *his* righteousness that now clothes us and through which God relates to us!

## 3. Shine as Lights of the World

It says here that we find ourselves **“in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”** As God continues to transform us, as he makes us more holy, more like Christ – the side-effect of this that we will become increasingly different from the world. We stand out, we don’t blend in any more among this “crooked and twisted generation.”

In a few weeks' time we'll all be having Christmas dinners and lunches with family and friends. Are we going to let those opportunities pass by, by flying under the radar and blending in with the pagans? Doing what they do, speaking how they speak?

Paul tells us here that we shine as lights in the world. We know that Jesus was the true light of the world who lives light to everyone (Jn 1:9). The nature of light is that when it shines in the darkness, the darkness flees. This is a great encouragement to us as we enter dark places and interact with friends and family in the darkness this Christmas, that we bring the light of Christ, the true light of the world. Because God is sanctifying us, we act differently, we speak differently and he has empowered to proclaim Christ in the darkness. Pray that God would grant us opportunities to share the gospel in these coming weeks!

#### **4. Hold fast to the Word of Life!**

Verse 16 goes on to say that we must hold fast to the word of life so we can be proud that we did not run or labour in vain. The means which God chooses to sanctify us is by his Word – the word of life. The only way we are able to know what God's will is – how we are to live a holy life and please him – is his Word. God's will is clearly revealed in the Bible – not hidden from us, or have to discern it through mystical, super-spiritual ways – it's here in black and white!

Paul says here that we must "hold fast" to it. Read it, study it, come to church and hear it! Echo Kevin from this morning – good to read & study Word individually, but God especially blesses the preached Word of God in the context of the gathered church – goes against private spirituality tendencies. Preached Word is the main way God speaks to us and gives us grace – that's why you need to be rooted in a solid Bible preaching, gospel-centred church. Your soul depends on it!

The more of God's Word we have in our hearts, the harder it is for us to fall into sin. God's Word gives us life – "word of life" and the Holy Spirit works through it and empowers us to live for God.

All of this points to the end goal – the day of Christ. Paul's desire for us, as it was for the Philippians, is that we finish well. We don't run in vain, nor do we labour in vain – we finish strong! Just as God highly exulted Jesus after the cross (2:9), so we can look forward to the

day in which God will glorify us with him in eternity. Then we will see him face to face, in all his glory, and we will be his pure and spotless Bride!

### **C. Sanctified through suffering vv. 17-18**

**“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”**

We know that Paul is writing this letter while he’s in prison (1:7, 13). He’s clearly suffering and here he hints that he could even be put to death – “poured out as a drink offering”. Yet despite these circumstances, he is glad and rejoicing. And he tells us that in the midst of our own suffering, we should be glad and rejoice to!

Why? It is especially through the tough times in our lives that God works most powerfully. Times of suffering are opportunities for God to sanctify us. That’s why James 1:2-4 says that we should **“Count it all joy... when you meet trials of various kinds, *that we may be perfect.*”**

So whatever burden, heartache, or challenge it is that we have been struggling with this year, know that God has permitted it in our lives for our own good, to sanctify us, to make us more like Christ. That’s why Paul says that we can rejoice and be glad in these times!

### **Conclusion**

*Christian* – be encouraged that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion. It’s only because God is sanctifying us that we can continue to live for his glory and become more like Christ.

Yet if you realise tonight that you are not “without blemish, blameless or an innocent child of God”, that before God you do indeed fall short miserably; there is good news for you too. There is Someone who is blameless, who is innocent and without blemish – Jesus Christ, the Spotless Lamb of God. Trust in him, believe with your heart in his name, receive his righteousness, that you would be saved and restored to your Father in heaven!

Amen