

Philippians 2:12–18 (NKJV)

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; **13** for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. **14** Do all things without complaining and disputing, **15** that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, **16** holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. **17** Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. **18** For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

This is one of those passages that I wish I had unlimited hours to study it. To fully answer **the questions created** by this passage would require weeks of work. So I hope to mostly whet our appetites this morning.

I remember as a young person being very confused about the Christian life.

Maybe you were confused as well. Maybe you still are.

The question reduces down to this. What part do **our efforts** play in our Christian life? Another way of saying that is what part do our **efforts play in our salvation?** Salvation in scripture does not only refer to the point in time that we came to Christ. Both our regeneration (our initial coming to life in Christ) and our sanctification (our growth in our Christian walk) are both referred to as our salvation.

Our passage this morning says we should obey by **working out our salvation** with fear and trembling. Ok that is something WE are supposed to do. Good. That answers the question.

But in the next verse it says

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Oh, ok. It is God that is really doing it and I don't need to do anything because He will.

And in the next verse it says

14 Do all things without complaining and disputing,

And we wonder, well which is it? How can it be both.

Can you see what I mean? Has that ever been a dilemma to you?

We come across verses that tell us that "apart from Christ we can do nothing".

We see verses that we must "walk in the Spirit". We see verses that say that the

efforts of our flesh accomplish nothing. We see principles that efforts from our sheer will power will not deliver us from sin.

So how are we to think about this? What is our part? What is God's part.

And then as we keep thinking this through we will eventually reach the issue of what the Sovereignty of God actually means. Just how Sovereign is He?

We have covered this material before but I can't see how I can avoid it and deal with the question at hand.

There are two major ways of viewing the Sovereignty of God.

The first is that when God created human kind He created them with the ability to choose **for** Him and **against** Him, they can **choose** to love God or hate God. This view emphasizes the principle of free will. And God, in His omniscience, can still control everything, He can still be Sovereign, because He has already made all His plans knowing exactly what every human would choose at every point. This view says that God is Sovereign but has chosen a self imposed limit based upon human decision making. That is what is normally called Armenian thinking. But that is just a label that may not fit all of a person's beliefs who think this way.

The other view is that God controls everything that happens on planet earth.

There is no limitation of God's control or execution of His power. He decides who will be saved and who will be damned. That also means that God **oversees**, and at the very least, actively **decides** to allow good things and horrible things to happen to us. That is big God theology. That is Sovereign Grace theology. This view of God says that God **does a miracle to a man** before that man **can respond by faith** in Christ. And if God does not do that miracle, that person cannot respond to God for salvation.

And that leaves us with the question of all questions. How in the world can a man be held **responsible to do** that which **He cannot do** unless God actively enables it?

Do you see how this relates to our initial question? What part do **we play** and what part does **God play** in our coming **to** Christ and what part do we play and what part does God play in our **living for** Christ?

It is helpful to resolve this point first. How does God express His sovereignty?

Now let's return to the question of questions.

How in the world can a man be responsible to do that which He cannot do unless God actively enables it?

Can you guess how the Armenian mindset would answer that question?

That would be an easy one. They wouldn't even stutter. Their answer would be that the question is wrong question. God enables every human to come to him.

They have the innate built in ability to say yes to God. They would say that faith

precedes regeneration. A person decides for God and God responds by bringing them to life.

The Sovereign Grace theology however has a great deal of trouble with that question. In fact it cannot answer the question. The theologian is unqualified to answer the question.

Ok so which was Paul? How did he answer this question?

Romans 9:14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?

Certainly not! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."

16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

There is the question we were seeking to answer. So how does Paul answer it? Because we can assume he gives the right answer.

20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

There are a lot of passages that can be used to support the Armenian view and there are lots that support the Sovereign Grace view. But this one is the most **conclusive for me**. Paul took a question that would be easy to answer from an Armenian perspective and he refuses to answer it. In fact, he appeals to the fact that we cannot answer it. Not only can we not answer it, but we have no right to **ask the question**. That puts Paul, the best New Testament theologian solidly in the Sovereign Grace camp.

So in my mind, that takes care of the core question first. Christ truly is the author and perfecter of our salvation. He chooses who will come to Him and who will not. And He owes us no explanation that He chooses who will come to Him and He holds those accountable who do not come to Him.

So ultimately we see that salvation is first of **His** choice and **secondarily** of ours. Christ chooses **us** first and then we are compelled to **choose Him**. That is what scripture says. So Christ's decision is **causal** and our decision is an **effect**.

Ok that is the initial relationship of Christ's power to our power to decide. But what about **after** we come to Christ. How does it work then.

Well naturally when people try to wrap their heads around this, they are most likely to explain it in a way that is easiest for them to understand. The question is by **whose effort** do we grow spiritually? By **whose effort** do we overcome the spiritual obstacles in our lives. How do we live in Christ? And we are naturally prone to go in **one of two extremes**.

The First extreme, it is only really by God's effort.

The Second extreme, it is only really by my effort.

The first conclusion is called **quietism**. The second is called **pietism**.

The quietist takes a passage like this.

John 5:4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

The general mindset is that God will do all the things needing done in our lives if we just get out of His way. Phrases "Let go and let God" are their battle cries. This view tends to rely heavily on inner experiences and mystical thinking. There is much talk about waiting on the Lord. There is not much talk about battling the flesh.

Quaker Hannah Whithall Smith is a good example of this view. Her book *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* says this:

What can be said about man's part in this great work but that he must continually surrender himself and continually trust? But when we come to God's side of the question, what is there that may not be said as to the manifold ways in which He accomplishes the work entrusted to Him? It is here that the growing comes in. The lump of clay could never grow into a beautiful vessel if it stayed in the clay pit for thousands of years; but when it is put into the hands of a skilful potter it grows rapidly, under his fashioning, into the vessel he intends it to be. And in the same way the soul, abandoned to the working of the Heavenly Potter, is made into a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use. (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1952, 32. Italics in original.)

Her emphasis is not on constantly putting out serious human effort. No. We submit. We are passive. And we just accept God's activity to accomplish everything in our lives.

The problem is that this view does not fit passages like we are in this morning that demand us to **place great effort**.

Then the opposite logical extreme is that the only effort that really matters is **human effort**. We are going to be sanctified by being completely obedient. So we must drum up this effort continually. And if we fail it is because we did not try hard enough. So the answer is always to try harder.

MacArthur helps us here.

Pietists, are typically aggressive in their pursuit of correct doctrine and moral purity. Historically, this movement originated in seventeenth-century Germany as a reaction to the dead orthodoxy of many Protestant churches. To their credit, most pietists place strong emphasis on Bible study, holy living, self-discipline, and practical Christianity. They emphasize such passages as "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1) and "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17). Yet they often stress self-effort to the virtual exclusion of dependence on divine power. As would be expected, pietism frequently leads to legalism, moralism, self-righteousness, a judgmental spirit, pride, and hypocrisy. So one side says it is all of God's effort and our job is to not stand in His way. The other says it is all of our effort and it is our job to get the job done by our hard work.

But neither are what scripture says. The scripture is exceedingly irritating because it tells us that we are to **expend every effort** and those efforts will only be effective when God is energizing the whole process from our **motivation** to act to the **carrying out** of those acts. Sanctification is a combination of God's effort and our effort.

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Isn't that frustrating to our reason?

There is another element of theology I would like to bring out here. You have probably heard it before but I think it is important enough to bring it up again.

Justification is what Christ did for all believers by His death on the cross. What He did was **all of Him** and **none** of us. That is called Monergism, It is the work of one person.

Sanctification is the process of us becoming more Christlike. This is **not monergistic**. This is not just the work of one party. It is **synergistic**. It is shared energy. Shared work. And that is what Paul is describing in our text. Both the Quietists and the Pietists believe that sanctification is monergistic. But Paul is laying out the proper view that Sanctification is a combination of **our greatest effort** and **God's effort**.

OK That is enough for laying out the theological concepts. Let's get to the text.

12 Therefore, my beloved,

The therefore is based on what Paul told us last week. We are to put on the mind of Christ and lay aside our rights for the best of those around us.

The words, "My beloved" had to be an extremely encouraging statement. How do you feel when a fellow believer tells you that they love you and they are looking out for you and they care about you? That is what the Philippians might feel when they read this. Who will you **listen to** with the least resistance? Will it not be those who you believe **love you the most**?

That is how Paul is referring to them and it is because it is true. He does love them.

as you have always obeyed,

The word for obeyed is an interesting word. It is the Greek word that we get our word acoustics from. It means hearing and listening and conforming to what we hear.

This was a great compliment from Paul. I doubt he would have said the same to the Corinthians. The Philippians were likely to obey. But it is likely they probably were not seeing everything from the **proper perspective**. They needed to be pushed to see what they are doing from **God's** perspective. They were obeying. But that does not mean they were seeing things as they should have.

This phrase also sets us up for what is coming. Paul is essentially saying, as you have obeyed in the past now obey in the present. So it is a call to obey what He is about to say.

not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence,

Are there things in your life that you will obey when **someone** is looking but you are likely to not obey when **no one is**? How different is your life when your spouse is looking than when they are not? Or young people, how is your life different when mom or dad are looking and when they are not. This is talking to you.

Paul is telling the Philippians, live the same way when I am **not** there as when I **am there**. Live in a way that shows you know that God is looking on. Pour

yourself into your sanctification for all the right reasons. Live for Christ because Christ is watching.

Don't let there be any difference in your life from when I am watching and when I am not.

Have you ever considered that the good behavior you exhibit only because someone is watching does not count? If we are doing it because someone is watching, all that proves is that when they stop watching we will stop doing the behavior. And what that proves is that we are not **doing it for Christ**. It does not count.

What you will do when no one is watching and you have open opportunity to do a thing is what is **really true** about you.

Are there things in your life like that? Are there wrong things you will not do if someone is watching that you will do in private? We need to do business with those attitudes. We get no credit for environmental obedience.

Paul is encouraging the Philippians to something better than that. He wants obedience to Christ from the heart.

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Now this command is couched in the phrase "As you have always obeyed."

So we know what it is talking about. It is talking about obedience to Christ. He is saying obey in this way. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

The idea of "work out" is, "Keep on working out to completion, to ultimate fulfillment."

The biggest surprise I had in studying this passage is that this passage is not primarily to individuals. The "your own salvation" was written to the salvation of the Philippi church. The you is plural. It is a shared salvation. First and foremost it is a call to the Philippian church to work out the mutual salvation they shared in Christ.

Now **how** will that work out? Obviously each individual is going to need to do business with their own souls. But they are not doing it in a vacuum. They are doing it in the context of a local body of believers.

We can never get the idea that our Christian life is only about me and Jesus. It is always about Jesus and the body of Christ and me. When we lose that perspective we fail to understand what our Christian life is all about.

Now what does it mean to work out your own salvation? This is not an appeal to work hard enough to **gain** your salvation. That would oppose all kinds of biblical concepts. No. It is telling us to **work** for sure. But it is talking about the work we pour into becoming more and more conformed to that which we are called to be.

Every time you **repent of a sin** you are working out your own salvation. Every time you chose to **obey a command of Christ** you are working out your salvation. Every time you **resist a sin** you are working out your salvation.

The two things to notice is that this is **our work to do**. And it is **work**. We should not be surprised that it is not easy. Work is, well, work. If you want an **easy** Christian life you don't want a **real** Christian life.

Now, what about **fear and trembling**? We have covered this topic in the past. This word for fear is a difficult word. It means shaking in fear and it also means a great reverential respect. So which is it? And our prior study showed us that it is both. It is the fear of God that quivers in its boots when it even seriously considers sinning. A real fear of God is a tool of grace that God uses when our higher motivations are not sufficient to keep us from sinning. Sometimes if our love for God will not keep us from sinning, our fear of God should.

Then there is the reverential fear of God that compels us, like the prophet Isaiah, that said Lord send me to do those things that are core to your will.

Both are in play.

And what might cause us to tremble? The first thing that comes to my mind is our sin and our weakness. Do you not tremble sometimes when you think about tomorrow? What makes us think we **will not fail** in the future? What makes us think we **will not give in** to our weakness? Why should God not discipline us? Paul is calling upon us to work our salvation realistically, taking into consideration just how **likely** we are to fail and let our Lord down. We may fluctuate between obedience motivated by our deepest devotion to our loving savior or motivated by our fear of letting our Savior down and facing the discipline of God. Both were good when we lived under the authority of loving mothers or fathers and they are equally useful when living under the authority of Christ.

OK. Why should we pour ourselves into the pursuit of God, of bringing every thought and action under the captivity of Christ? Why should we think that we will have any success at all? Why should we not give up based on our records of failure?

Why not give up. Why not quit?

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

For it is God.

That is why not to give up.

We are to work. But we are not to **work alone**. This is not a Quietism where God does all the work. This is not Pietism where we do all the work. No the reasoning is **we work hard BECAUSE God is working hard**.

Now this work that God does to help us. Just how deep does it go? How far does it go? Does God just give us the word of God and then we are to do the rest? No. Not at all.

We are told this help is focused on two things. There may be more but we have this at the very least.

God helps us **to will**.

God helps us **to do**.

Have you ever been really upset with yourself for committing a sin that appears to have no consequences? You aren't upset that you got caught. You aren't upset because the sin carries with it an immediate consequence. But you are upset because you sinned against God. You offended your Savior.

Who do you think put that there? Who put that **will** in you to please God? Who put that **will** in you to follow God? One thing is for sure. **We** did not put it there. It is **God** who gave us a new heart at salvation. It is the Holy Spirit that keeps using the **will of God** to shape our attitudes and thoughts. For it is God who works in you to will. It is God who works in you to want to.

John MacArthur says

To will is from the \bar{o} , which refers to thoughtful, purposeful choice, not to mere whim or emotional desire.

It is the Spirit of God that is working to get us to make thoughtful, purposeful choices.

God does not **just** give us a will to **come to Him**. He provides influences on our wills to **want to** keep obeying God all through our Christian life. We can quench the spirit. We can ignore the influence for a while. But the Holy Spirit is nothing if not persistent.

You see, unregenerate humans **do** have free will. They can decide to do anything BUT to love God. They cannot see the beauty of Christ. They cannot see how following Christ is the best thing in life. But they are free to choose anything else. But a believer is free to both **serve God** and to **disobey God**. We have a desire in us to serve God that was given at our regeneration and is actively fostered by the Holy Spirit as we live. We were given faith at our rebirth. And that faith is an **active trust in the Character of God** to the place we **believe what He says** and we **do what He tells us**. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Everything we do should be by faith. Anything not of faith is Sin. Faith is the thing that allows us to have anything count spiritually. It is the thing that allows our **human effort** turn into **spiritual fruit**. It is only by acting according to this core attitude that what we do is translated into Kingdom work.

But along with this faith, we have the freedom to say **no**. We have the freedom to temporarily rebel. We can choose to give into flesh. We have probably all had times in our lives where we ignored God's influence on our lives in our selfishness and stubbornness.

But believers are prone to love Christ. And God is using His energy to spur that on.

So it is God who works in us **to will**, to want to, to decide deliberately for God. God is working on both our **wanter** and our **thinker**. He drives us on to want the right things, and to think the right things.

And then it is God who works in us to **DO** the right things.

What this means is that every one of your faithful acts of obedience has Jesus's fingerprints all over it. Did you decide to do the right thing for the right reason? Yes. Praise God that you did. But did you cause it? Ultimately no. You would never have done it if God was not pouring His energy into you to want it and to do it. God does not stop His influence on us at regeneration. This passage is telling us that He keeps working in us. Isn't that comforting? God is never done helping His children.

So how does this relate to us obeying? Well it means we should **work** because our work **is empowered**. It is not futile. When our works are motivated by faith in God, and we pour our effort into doing what we believe God wants us to do, that work is not **just** a work of the flesh. It is not **just** human effort. It is human effort. But it is not JUST human effort. No, it is more. It is human effort energized by the Holy Spirit. Does it feel that way? Can we tell that is what is happening? Probably not. But we can know it is happening because this passage is telling us it is.

Do you struggle with issues that you feel you just cannot beat? Are you hesitant to try because you have failed so many times in the past? This morning this passage is screaming out to us **"Don't give up. I am energizing the process. I am helping you want it and I am helping you do it. So whatever you do, do not give up. You have every reason to keep trying."**

There is also another implication.

It is never God's fault when we disobey. We should never think that when we fail it is because "God did not give us **enough help**. God set us up with something too hard for us to bear. God did not take into account my weaknesses and how I am made". No. The very opposite is true even though we may not at all feel it. God is **working for our success**. God is **always** working for our spiritual success. He is working for our victory. The energy and efforts of God are directed toward our

overcoming. He will not **make** us overcome. But He will cause us to want it and He will **enable** our overcoming and He will keep empowering it until we arrive victorious.

And why does God do all this?

You know why?

Because God likes it when you win. God likes it when you overcome. God is pleased when your life gives Him glory. God is pleased when you make choices that are also best for your life. He loves you that much.

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

We see the same thing in Hebrews.

Heb 13:20 Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Sometimes I think we lose sight of this and it is a shame. Our decisions can give **pleasure to God.** We actually can please Christ with our faithful decisions. Do you see God that way? Do you really think you have the capacity to do something that would have Christ look **at you** like when **you** look at your child or a child you care about when they do the right thing for the right reason? Think of something a child you love did that just really pleased you. Do you ever consider that this is similar to the way **God feels toward us** when **we live faithfully?** That is how scripture describes it. One of the motivators in serving God is that we can **please God.** That is not some kind of myth or positive thinking. It is a promise. It is the truth. God has given us relationship in such a way that He has granted us the **capacity to please Him.** How wonderful is that?

So why should we obey? Why should we put serious work into living a life obedient to Christ?

Because he gives energy to what we want.

He gives energy to what we do.

And it gives Him pleasure when we do it.

What reasons do we have NOT to obey Him that begins to compare to the reasons we have TO obey Him. I think we will be hard pressed to find a single one.