

# Who Done It?

Humble Unity Part 9  
Philippians 2:12-13 4-17-2016

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Summary: God works inside us to cause us to desire and decide good things and to do good things. When he does so, it really is our willing and doing, even though it was caused by God. And because God is working in us, and because it is for the sake of his pleasure, it is with fear and trembling that we must carry out our salvation (live a life of obedience).

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**Philippians 2:12** 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, **13** for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. **14** Do everything without complaining or arguing, **15** 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 **16** as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. **17** But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. **18** So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

## Introduction

### Stop Trying or Start Striving?

**2 Corinthians 5:9** So we make it our goal to please [Christ].

That is the goal of the Christian life.

**Ephesians 5:10** find out what pleases the Lord.

**1 Thessalonians 4:1** ...we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

So that's our goal – pleasing God; but how do you reach that goal? Back in Philippians 2:5 it said **Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.** Right now my attitude falls way short of that in many ways. So how do I get from where I am now to where I need to be? We know we are supposed to grow and change and become more like Christ, we want to defeat sin in our lives and grow in godliness, but how is that done?

The most obvious method would be to just find out what pleases God and try your hardest to do it. And if you fail, try harder. If you still fail, then scold yourself, punish yourself, condemn yourself, discipline yourself, and then buckle down and get it done. There's one little piece missing from that method – God. Where is God in that? If you take that method to the extreme, you end up with what's known as Pelagianism – the idea that human beings are born with the innate ability to do good, and we don't need any special help from God. And of course, that's heresy.

**John 15:5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.**

If there is going to be any transformation at all, it is going to have to come from Christ, not me. So trying to just white-knuckle my way to holiness isn't going to work. Obviously we are not going to please God by leaving God out of the equation.

On the other hand, some teachers say the way to grow and change is the exact opposite of the “try harder” method. They say, “*Trying* is the whole problem. You need to stop *trying* and start *trusting*. Let go and let God.” They say any time you are trying or working or striving – that's of the flesh. That's all human effort, and it's doomed to fail.

This is a doctrine known as quietism – just quiet yourself and let God do the work.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it's referred to as antinomianism (that word means anti-law). These people teach that grace is the opposite of law. So if God says, “Love your neighbor,” and I put forth some effort to obey that command, that's bad because I am under law. They say what I should do instead is just realize that nothing is required of me. And the more I realize that, the more I will just automatically start doing things like loving my neighbor, because it is when I stop trying that the Holy Spirit starts producing His fruit in me. So grace is the opposite of putting forth effort to obey God. Grace, to them, means God is just as happy with you whether you are doing godly things or sinning. And the way to make progress toward sinning less is by just realizing that. Just think about how much he loves you and how unconditional that love is, and that will cause so much gratitude in your heart that you will find yourself doing what is right without even trying. And gratitude for what Christ has done is the *only* valid motive for doing good. And if you say, “But what about all my failures and sin?” they will say, “Stop thinking about how you are doing, and think more about what he has done.”

So, we've got two very different approaches. We have to decide which path to take – stop trying or start striving? People think, “I don't want to just keep trying in my own strength. I know the power has to come from God.” But on the other hand, when they hear that the solution is to stop trying so hard, that doesn't sound quite right either, because the whole reason they started trying harder was because not trying was what they were already doing before they started trying, and that didn't work either.

This fork in the road – deciding between “stop trying” or “start striving” has divided the church for centuries. And it is no different in our day. Tullian Tchividjian, Billy Graham's grandson, who took over at Corel Ridge Presbyterian Church after D James Kennedy died, decided to go down the quietism path and, as a result, in May of 2014 he was asked to resign from the Gospel Coalition.<sup>2</sup> Mike Cleveland is the founder of the Setting Captives Free program, which has helped hundreds of people break free from pornography, drinking, overeating, anorexia, gambling, and other enslaving sins. It was a wonderful program – it helped a lot of people. But recently he shut down the whole program because he decided to

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<sup>1</sup> It is also known as Keswick theology, or “higher life” theology.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospel Coalition is a coalition of evangelical leaders, including DA Carson, Tim Keller, Sam Storms, Mark Dever, Kevin DeYoung, Ligon Duncan, Kent Hughes, Erwin Lutzer, Ray Ortlund, Alistair Begg, Al Mohler, John Piper.

go down the quietism path. This is an important issue – effort or no effort? Work or don't work? Strive or don't strive?

What, exactly, does the Bible teach about how to grow and change, and how to please God and become more holy? What is God's role? And what is my role? And how do those two fit together exactly? How much effort should I be putting forth? And how do I gain access to the mighty power of God that is available to transform me? I don't know of any passage in the Bible that answers those questions more directly and explicitly than Philippians 2:12-13.

## Who Done It? God

And I can tell you right now, some of you aren't going to like what it says. If you are one of those people who have to have all their theology in a neat little box, and you can't stand mysteries or paradoxes, you're going to struggle with this.

**Philippians 2:12 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, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure.**

The quietists love verse 13.

“See, it's all God. It's God who works in you. It's God who makes you change and grow – it all comes from him.”

And the people who are big on free will and human responsibility love verse 12 - “See, we just need to obey. It's our responsibility to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.”

When you do something righteous – it's a classic who done it? Who is responsible? You or God?

Any time there is a doctrine that relates to the sovereignty of God and the free will of man, our tendency is to latch onto one and downplay the other. We don't understand how they could both be true, so rather than hold something that boggles the mind and that we don't fully understand, we try to simplify it down to something that we can relate to. But it's very important that we resist that temptation, because we don't want to downplay anything that the Bible says. Both sides are crucially important for us to understand if we are going to have success in spiritual growth and our fight against sin. So let's start with verse 13, and then will back up and take a look at verse 12. The reason I want to do it that way is because of the first word in verse 13 – **for**. Verse 13 is the foundation that supports verse 12, so let's start with the foundation.

## GOD at Work

**13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**

Verse 12 tells us that we are supposed to obey and work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Verse 13 says **for...** and then goes on to give us the reason for that. The reason we are supposed to obey and work out our salvation with fear and trembling is that it is God who is at work in us. So right away we see it's not either or. If you think, “Well, if it's God who does it, then it's not my efforts,” or “If it's my effort to obey, it's not God working,” those are both dead wrong. You will never understand anything in the Bible if you think that way. God has put these together – his work and our efforts. And what God has joined together, let not man tear apart. If you can't understand how it could be God and also you, don't let that keep you from accepting it. Better to believe a truth that you don't understand than to believe a falsehood that makes perfect sense to you.

Now, let's just take a moment to let this truth sink in.

God is at work in you. If we ask the questions Who? What? Why? and How?, the Who? is God and you. God is doing the work, and you are being worked on. Sometimes I'll read a book by some Christian leader who will say, “I just want to find out where God is working so that I can get in on that.” And

usually what they mean by that is they want to find something that's happening that's really big and spectacular. So they look for giant ministries or events that attract a lot of people and seem to make a big splash. But is that really the right way to discern where God is working? Didn't God tell Elijah the exact opposite – he wasn't in the wind and storm and earthquake or in all the big, spectacular, miraculous stuff. He was in the still, small voice. If you want to find out where God is at work so you can get in on that work, don't go around looking for spectacular things. If you want to know where God is at work, this verse tells you exactly where he's at work – inside you. You don't have to look very far.

Think about this. If you are a true child of God, an infinite, perfect, loving being is at work in you. A person who is perfect and infinitely holy is at work in you. A being who has infinite wisdom and who loves you enough to die for you is at work in you. Someone who is never frustrated, who carries out his perfect plan without fail is at work in you.

## **God is at WORK**

That's the Who? How about the "What?" What is God doing? Work. He is putting forth effort – expending energy toward a specified end. He is changing things, repairing things, creating things manipulating things, eliminating things, altering things, adjusting things... He is applying his intelligence and his power toward accomplishing some goal.

What goal? Sanctification. To transform you into the image of Christ. To make you more holy and righteous and pure, more loving, more humble, wiser, stronger faith, greater joy, deeper love. God is working to bring all that about in you.

## **His Work, Your Work**

Now, here is where people start to struggle. Because they think, "If I'm doing those things, then how can I say that God is doing them? But if God is doing them, doesn't that just make me a robot? If God forces me to do something by overriding my will, or if he somehow manipulates me into doing it, then it's not really me doing it." So picture some Christian doing an act of godliness. A guy is working on his computer, suddenly he's tempted to look at some impure images, but then he stops himself and says, "No, I'm not going to do that. The blessings that Christ offers if I obey him and follow his way will be more satisfying and delightful to my soul than the pleasure of the sin. And beyond that, I love him and I want to honor him, and so I'm going to prefer Christ's way over this sinful way." So he ends up doing what is right and honoring God. And if you tell him that it was God who did that, he might think, "It sure did feel like it was me. I was thinking those thoughts, I was having the battle in my heart with temptation, I'm the one who decided to shut my computer down and go for a walk and pray. It felt like it was me. And if it wasn't me, why would God be pleased with me for it? Why would he reward me for it? And if it's not me who is acting, why do I sometimes decide to obey, and other times I decide to disobey?"

## **Who Does It? You**

And the answer to all that is that it was you. Every time you do something that's godly and righteous, it's because of your will and your actions. It is because you desired the right thing, chose the right thing, and did the right thing. So if it came from your desiring and choosing and acting, how can we say that it came from God? And the answer is here in verse 13. It is your willing and acting, but it is God who works in you to bring about that willing and acting. If you obey, it's you who does it. But once you do it, you realize it was God who influenced you to do it.

How does he do that? Countless ways. He opens your eyes to understand things in the Bible. He brings particular memories to mind at the right moment. He arranges for you to walk into a situation with certain people that will have a specific effect on your thinking and feelings. He uses trials and suffering to bring about changes in the way that you think and feel, and to strengthen your faith. He will bring other people in your life who influence your attitudes. There will be times when you do something good, and

God reaches inside your soul and makes a connection between that good thing and some favorable feeling, so that that good thing is reinforced. Or maybe He makes a connection in your heart between some sin and a painful feeling to help you develop an aversion to that sin you wouldn't otherwise have. He opens your eyes to specific truths that will bring you down a certain path. He gives you a sense of discomfort with your present spiritual condition. Do you ever have tears in your eyes because you dishonored God? That is God working on your will. He generates an appetite for righteousness, virtue, and godliness. You see or read about some godly person and suddenly you are gripped with an intense desire to be like that. In 2 Chronicles 30:12 God gave the people unity of mind. In Ezra 1:5 God stirred up the people to rebuild the temple. And in chapter 7 he put it in their hearts to do some other work. It is no problem for God to work in a human heart.

Okay, so if God is doing all that work in me, what is my role? God is working in me to will and to act according to his good pleasure, therefore what? What should I do? Should I just sit back and let it happen? Or do I have some responsibility to do something? The answer to that is verse 12. Remember, verse 13 is the reason for verse 12 – that is what the word **for** means. *For* means *because of*. You should do what verse 12 says because of verse 13. Or to put it another way, verse 13 is true, therefore do verse 12. **13 It is God who is working in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure**, therefore, because of that, here is the ramification for your life: **12 just as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling**. So what's the logical conclusion? God is doing the work inside you, therefore be passive? God is doing the work inside you, therefore let go and let God? God is doing the work inside you, therefore stop trying and start trusting? No, those aren't the correct conclusions. The correct conclusion is, God is doing the work inside you, therefore *obey*.

So Paul is giving us yet another reason to obey. In verses 6-8 we saw that we should obey Jesus because he gave us the model of obedience in his humiliation. Then in verses 9-11 we found that we should obey him because he is the ultimate Judge of mankind in his exaltation. And now in verse 13 we find that we should obey because that's what God is working for inside us for his good pleasure.

## Work Your Salvation (Obey)

So everything is pointing us to verse 12. Verse 12 starts with the word **therefore**, which points forward towards a conclusion. Verse 13 starts with the word **for**, which points backwards towards a conclusion. So the conclusion for all of this is, therefore obey, and work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Now let's talk about that concept of working out our salvation. What does that mean? There is a huge amount of discussion and debate over this phrase – **work out your salvation**. It causes a lot of consternation in people because as evangelicals, we have kind of an allergic reaction to seeing the word *work* anywhere close to the word *salvation*. And rightly so, because passages like Romans 4:5 are very clear that salvation belongs only to those who do not work for it. If you try to work to earn your salvation, you are disqualified from receiving salvation.

So what are we to make of this command, **work out your salvation**? The word "**out**" isn't actually there in the Greek – literally it's just **continue to work your salvation**. And the word **work** is just a very common word that just simply means to do something, or to carry something out.<sup>3</sup> For example, it's used

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<sup>3</sup> When the word is used of abstract concepts, it usually means to generate, produce, bring about, or cause.

Romans 4:15 law **brings** wrath

Romans 7:13 the law **produced** death in me

Romans 7:8 sin **produced** covetous desire

Romans 5:3 suffering **produces** perseverance

James 1:3 testing of your faith **develops** perseverance

2 Corinthians 4:17 troubles are **achieving** glory

2 Corinthians 7:10 sorrow **brings** repentance

2 Corinthians 7:11 what this godly sorrow has **produced** in you

2 Corinthians 9:11 generosity **will result in** thanksgiving

James 1:20 anger does not **bring about** the righteous life

of committing a sin (the word *commit*) – to carry out a sin.<sup>4</sup> It's used a few times in Romans 7, where Paul is saying, "What I want to do, I don't do, and what I don't want to do, I do." Or in verse 18, **I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out.** So it just means to do something or to carry something out. So this phrase translated **work out your salvation** simply means, "Do your salvation – carry it out." Salvation is not just something you have; it is something you do.

Does that mean you save yourself? No. He made that clear in chapter 1.

### **Philippians 1:28 ... you will be saved—and that by God.**

It is God who saves you. God gives you salvation, but once he gives it to you, your responsibility is to carry it out. Just like God *made* you a human being, but you *carry out* being a human being. It's the same way with salvation. He gave you the gift of salvation; you put it to use.

Now, in order to put the gift of salvation into use, you have to already have it. This passage has absolutely no application whatsoever for an unbeliever. A non-Christian can't do his salvation, because he doesn't even have salvation. So this verse isn't for people who haven't bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ and received the free gift of salvation yet. But for those of us who are believers and have received the gift of salvation from God, we must roll up our sleeves and put that gift to use. We are not saved by works, and we don't work to earn salvation in any way. But that doesn't mean there is no work involved. If you receive a gift and that gift calls for activity, that doesn't make it less of a gift. If your mom and dad get you a bicycle for Christmas, that calls for some activity, right? It's intended for use. And using it can be a lot of hard work - a lot of pedaling. But does that make the bike less of a gift? Not at all. And the gift of salvation is like that. It's a gift God gave you to use. So if you get a bike, ride it. If you get a piano, play it. If you get a shirt, wear it. If you get a car, drive it. If you get a game, play it. And if you get salvation, do it.

"All of that makes sense until that last one. I know what it means to put a bike into use or a car or game or a shirt, but what does it mean to do my salvation?" The answer to that question is right there in the first half of the sentence. We don't have to come up with all kinds of complex theological theories to figure out what it means to carry out our salvation. All you have to do is pay attention to the structure of the sentence. You expect it to say, "Just as you have always obeyed, continue to obey." And that is what the sentence means, but he uses different wording to describe obedience in the second phrase. So instead of saying, "Just as you have always obeyed, continue to obey," he says, **Just as you have always obeyed... continue to do your salvation.** Just as you have always obeyed, continue to carry on being a Christian. What does that tell you? That doing your salvation is equivalent to obeying God. You put a car into use by driving it, you put a shirt into use by wearing it, and you put your salvation into use by obeying God. That is what it means to carry on being a Christian.

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But when it is used of people, it usually has the simple meaning of doing something or carrying something out.

Romans 1:27 Men **committed** indecent acts

Romans 2:9 human being who **does** evil

Romans 7:15 I do not understand what I **do**. ... 7:17 no longer I **doing** it

Romans 7:18 I cannot **carry it out**.

Romans 7:20 Now if I do [*poieo*] what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who **do** it

Romans 15:18 what Christ has **accomplished** through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—  
[*ergon*]

1 Corinthians 5:3 the one who **did** this

2 Corinthians 12:12 signs, wonders and miracles-- were **done**

Philippians 2:12 **work out** your salvation

1 Peter 4:3 what pagans choose to **do**

Ephesians 6:13 after you have **done** everything

<sup>4</sup> Ro.1:27.

## Salvation = Life of Obedience

There is no such thing as a Christian who is unwilling to obey Jesus Christ. Sometimes people say, “So-and-so is a believer, but they aren’t really following Christ. They aren’t really living in obedience to Christ.” That’s a contradiction in terms. If they aren’t following Christ, they aren’t believers, because believing means you trust him enough to follow him. We all disobey, but someone who is a true believer will repent when they disobey.

Salvation is a matter of obedience from beginning to end. Your initial conversion was an act of obedience, because the gospel comes to us as a command to believe and repent.<sup>5</sup> And then after that, the rest of the Christian life is a life of ongoing obedience.

**Matthew 28:17 All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.**

First, get them converted – that is the baptizing part. Then, teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded – that is the Christian living part.

So now let’s see if we can make sense of what Paul is saying in these two verses. Just as you have always obeyed, continue to obey – continue to carry on being a Christian, putting your salvation into practice. Why do that? Because it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure. Now, at that point you might be thinking, “Hmm, I still don’t quite see the connection. I should continue to obey and do my salvation because it is God who is at work within me? Is that what it’s saying?” Not quite. We’re still missing an important piece. Once we get that missing piece, then you’ll see how this all makes sense. In fact, that missing piece is actually the main point.

## Fear and Trembling

The main point of verse 12 is not that we should obey and do our salvation. In the Greek, when you want to make something emphatic, instead of underlining it or putting it in italics or bold print, they would place it at the beginning of the phrase – out of the normal, expected word order. Here’s a literal translation of verse 13: **Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence but now much more in my absence, with fear and trembling carry out your salvation.**” In the modern discussion, the working your own salvation gets all the press, but in the Greek, the main thrust is the **fear and trembling**. So if you want an accurate translation in English, underline that phrase. Just as you have always obeyed, as you continue to carry out your salvation, make sure you do it with *fear and trembling*. That’s what he is saying. Make sure you take your obedience very, very seriously.

Some things we take more seriously than other things, right? If the glove box in my car isn’t closing right, I wouldn’t hesitate to tinker with it, maybe take it apart – see if I could figure out what’s wrong. If I end up messing something up, it’s not a big deal. But if it’s a carburetor problem, I’ll be a lot slower to mess around with that. Carburetors are complicated, getting them adjusted just right is a very delicate, tricky thing, and it’s really easy to do more harm than good if you just start tinkering and you don’t know what you’re doing. People who do that spend a lot of time on the side of the road waiting for a tow truck. So it’s with some fear and trembling that I would ever make any adjustments on a carburetor. Another time I might have fear and trembling before touching something is if it’s worth a lot of money. If you loan me your bicycle, and as I’m riding away you say, “Oh, by the way, that bike is worth about \$15,000,” I’m going to ride away with fear and trembling. I’m going to be very careful with that bike. There are numerous different reasons why you might handle something with fear and trembling. Maybe because it’s delicate and you could easily mess it up, maybe because it’s especially valuable, or maybe because it’s dangerous. If you have a vial of nitroglycerin, which would cause a huge explosion if you just bumped it, you would handle that with fear and trembling. There are various reasons why we would approach

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Pe.2:21, 2 Thes.1:8, 1 Pe.4:17, Ro.6:17-18.

something with fear and trembling. And what Paul is saying here is, “When you carry on being a Christian – you carry on a life of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, do that with fear and trembling.” Why? I know I need to handle nitroglycerin with fear and trembling, and I know why I have to handle really expensive things or really delicate things with fear and trembling and take them seriously, but why is it that I need to handle my obedience and the living out of my salvation with fear and trembling? And once you ask that question, now you can easily see the connection between verses 12 and 13. Verse 12 – make sure you handle your obedience and the living out of your salvation with fear and trembling. Why? Verse 13 – because it is God who is working that in you for his own good pleasure. You don’t want to be cavalier about something God is doing for his own good pleasure.

## Why? His Pleasure

Some translations say **good purpose**, others say **good pleasure**. I think **good pleasure** is the better translation. The most natural translation of the Greek is **It is God who works in you to will and to act for the sake of his good pleasure**. If your concept of God is that he’s just some kind of impersonal fog out there somewhere, that is dead wrong. The reason human beings have emotions is to reflect what God is like. God is a person with emotions, and he works for his own pleasure. So he is rolling up his sleeves and working in you to make changes that will make him happy. He’s working to bring about outcomes in your life that he strongly desires. He wants this. Jesus really wants this.

**Titus 2:13 ...our great God and Savior Jesus Christ 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.**

Jesus died on the cross to purify for himself a people eager to do what is good. Jesus didn’t just die to *pay* for our sin; he died to *prevent* it. He didn’t just die so that we could have forgiveness; he died to bring about our eagerness to do what is good. That’s how much Jesus wants this – enough to die to bring it about. The reason you need to handle the issue of your obedience with fear and trembling is because you don’t want to get in between God and something he strongly desires.

## Therefore, Tread Lightly

If this is something God really, really wants, then you don’t want to be resisting it or working in opposition against it. You see, the quietists say, “Stop thinking about how you are doing, and just think about what Christ has already done.” But that leaves an important piece out of the picture. It’s good to think about what Christ has done, but we also need to think about what Christ is currently doing. We consider what he has done on the cross, and we consider what he is currently doing in our hearts. And you can cooperate with that, or you can resist it. Your salvation, and the life of obedience that flows from your salvation, are a project that God is working on. And any time you touch one of God’s projects, you had better do it with some major fear and trembling. Fouling up a carburetor is one thing, but fouling up something that Almighty God really, really wants is something much more serious. Smashing up somebody’s \$15,000 bike is one thing, but smashing up this project that God has been working on that he really desires – that’s something you really don’t want to do. So whenever you are dealing with your obedience and the living out of your salvation, tread lightly. Be careful. Get serious. If you are a little kid, and your mom is laboring to clean the house, and she’s doing it for her pleasure – she really, really wants a clean house – if that’s going on, you would be ill advised to start throwing dirt all over right while she is doing that. If you do anything in that house while she is laboring hard to clean it, whatever you do, you’d better do it with fear and trembling. And if God is doing all this work in your heart to bring about obedience, then any time you touch that project – anytime you face a temptation and you can go in the direction of obedience or disobedience, make that decision with fear and trembling.

Earlier in the sermon I put up that sign that said Men at Work, and the word men was crossed out and God was penciled in so it says God at Work. But I don’t know if you noticed the top of that sign,

which says Caution. Caution: God at Work. If God is at work, and he is at work to bring about a result that he strongly desires, if you are going to lay your hands on that project, proceed with caution.

## Resisting God

Why? If God is doing the work, isn't it guaranteed to happen no matter what I do or don't do? No. Not in this case. There are a lot of things God does that cannot be resisted. For example, Jesus Christ is going to come back some day and judge the living and the dead. Every human being in the world could resist that, and it would still happen. There are plenty of things like that. But when it comes to working in our hearts, there are cases where God puts a certain amount of control in our hands, so that a human being can actually resist what God is doing.<sup>6</sup>

**Acts 7:51 You stiff-necked people ... You always resist the Holy Spirit!**

**Ezekiel 24:13 ...I tried to cleanse you but you would not be cleansed from your impurity, therefore you will not be clean ...**

**Matthew 23:37 ... how often I have longed to gather your children together... but you were not willing.**

Obviously it is possible to resist the work of God in your heart – otherwise we would never sin! God is not responsible for our sin. So yes, it is possible for us to cooperate with his work and it is possible for us to resist his great, magnificent work in us. And that's why Paul is telling us here to proceed with fear and trembling. Typically, you wouldn't mess with a masterpiece. You wouldn't walk up to a Rembrandt or a Picasso while the paint was still wet, and add a few touchups on your own. But when the Master puts the brush in your hand, and gives you instructions on the touch ups he wants done, you take that very seriously.

And how do you take it seriously? By willing and acting. If God is working so hard to get you to will and to act in a way that is pleasing to him, if we fail to desire and choose and act in ways that please him, we are working against him. If we do will and act, we are cooperating with him. And that's why quietism doesn't work, because it's not just willing, but also acting.

## To Act

The New Testament is loaded with hundreds and hundreds of commands. And not only are we instructed to do things, but we are told to put forth strenuous effort in doing them.

### Make Every Effort

There is a word used 11 times in the New Testament that means “to make every effort, to put forth a concerted effort, to work hard” (*spoudaso*). If God wanted us to be passive, then it's hard to explain how that word could exist in the New Testament.

**Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.**

**2 Timothy 2:15 Make every effort to present yourself to God as one approved**

**Hebrews 4:9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest ...11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest**

**2 Peter 3:14 make every effort to be found spotless**

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<sup>6</sup> This is where some people get confused on the eternal security debate. The Bible is clear that it is God who preserves our faith and who keeps us from falling away. That preserving work is going on all the time, which is why we all don't turn away from him every single day. But that preservation is part of God's word of sanctification, and in this life, on this side of heaven, God allows his sanctifying work in our hearts to be resisted.

The Christian life is a life of strenuous effort, and without that effort, we become ineffective and unproductive.

**2 Peter 1:5 make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge.... 8For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive**

Jesus Christ took hold of you for a reason. And he wants you to strive for that very thing.

**Philippians 3:12 I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**

**1 Corinthians 9:24 ... Run in such a way as to get the prize.**

**Hebrews 6:12 We do not want you to become lazy**

## **Conclusion**

So, what is the key to overcoming sin and making spiritual progress? White knuckle it and just do it in your own strength, with your own wisdom? No. Stop trying and just hope that gratitude carries you over the finish line? No. The way to do it is to work and labor and strive – not to transform yourself, not to just modify your behavior, but work and labor and strive to draw near to Christ and to understand what he is doing in you so that you can cooperate with it instead of sabotaging it. Any time you are working with Christ, that's when you will experience divine power. And when you will tap in to his divine power, you will have success, and that success will be to his glory instead of yours.

**Benediction: 1 Thessalonians 5:23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.**

## **Application Questions (James 1:25)**

- 1) Name five or six things in your life God has brought about and that are bringing him pleasure.
- 2) What is a recent example of a feeling, impulse, desire, experience, etc. that God worked in you that he wants you to cooperate with and not resist?
- 3) Is there an area of your life that you need to take more seriously (more fear and trembling)?