

How to Live the Christian Life

The Glorious Gospel of Christ

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Bible Text: Philippians 2:12-18
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To Philippians 2 and I'd like to read verses 12 and 13. This is page 1,043. Philippians 2:12 and 13. "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; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Congregation, this morning we heard that we need to be a Christ-centered church and the gospel message of Christ's life, his death, and so therefore Christ's sufficiency must not only be woven into our sermons but into our lives. And for people who are deliberately gospel-centered, many of us can be suspicious of "how to" sermons, and that's for good reason. We're suspicious of "how to" sermons because we're suspicious, I hope, of moralism. We don't want to come to church week after week just to be told how we can clean up our act a little bit. We don't want 10 tips for the best life now. Just do these 10 little things and you'll have a bit more happiness in your life. That's not what we want. If we've learned the spiritual basics, then we know that we need something far more substantial. We need the gospel. We need Christ and we need him over and over again. We need him week after week. We need him day by day.

If we fall into moralism, then we are just polishing the outside of the cup while the inside stays filthy and, children, maybe you know what that's like. If you're emptying the dishwasher and it's all run, it's supposed to be clean and you pull out the cup and whoa, where did that come from, there's all this grime still caked on there. You don't want to drink out of that cup. There's an internal problem here. And that's the point for us as well. We recognize if we've learned anything spiritually, that we have internal problems and these internal problems need to be dealt with and they can only be dealt with by the gospel of Christ. However, in our zeal against moralism we must be careful that we don't actually throw out gospel truths in the process, and what I mean by that is that we can be so against "how to" teaching that we actually uproot the gospel from our everyday life, as if the gospel doesn't make a difference in our lives. If we do that, we are actually only accepting half the gospel. We accept maybe that Jesus saves, we've embraced Christ's power to forgive us, but then we stop there. How we stop short of the full gospel. This is a gospel that says nothing about Jesus changing us, a gospel that says nothing about the fact that a Christian has a distinct life. This is a gospel that is a false gospel. It's a false

gospel. Yes, though through Christ God freely justifies the sinner, he declares them righteous, he forgives them, the sinner whom God justifies he always also sanctifies. That is, he changes them. The Christian who has embraced Christ as Savior must also take him as their Lord and progressively, then, begin to live the Christian life. That then leaves the Christian with a critical question and it's a "how to" question. How do we live the Christian life? I want to embrace the whole Christ. I want Jesus as Savior. I want him as Lord. I want him as the one who forgives me and the one who transforms me, who changes me. But how do I live out of Christ? How do I live the Christian life? Does God just leave us in the dark to figure this out for ourselves, or does he give us principles to guide us?

Well, the good news is that the Lord gives us principles and in this beautiful text on sanctification, Paul holds out two foundational principles that we must grasp if we are to more and more live the Christian life, and so our title is "How to Live the Christian Life," and the first principle that the Christian must grasp is this: work out what God works in. Work out what God works in. That's our first point here and notice verse 12, Paul says, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence," and so notice how Paul begins this new section. He begins it with that word "Therefore," so that tells us he's looking back to what just has come before this and he wants us to connect his teaching now with what we've just studied. And so what's Paul looking back to? Well, he's looking back to Christ's humility. He's looking back to the fact that Christ emptied himself. He came as a servant. He became obedient unto death, even death on a shameful cross in the place of sinners. And in this, Christ, he also was raised and exalted as Lord over all.

So Paul says, "Therefore my beloved," and then he calls for obedience. Notice that. He does this by encouraging the church that since God's grace has been in their it has made a difference. They have obeyed God. But now here he's calling for more obedience. Do you see that? Paul is here raising the bar, as it were. He's saying, "In response to what you've just heard about this Christ, in all that he has done for you, there is a need to raise the bar on our obedience." And congregation, isn't that true for us? Child of God, isn't that true for you? Don't you need more of this obedience? You look at what Christ did in obedience to the Father in your place and doesn't that leave you sighing, "Lord, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that there's so little obedience in my life." That's the Christian's dilemma. They see that Jesus deserves more.

Well, congregation, the Lord is here this afternoon and he is coming to us and he is saying let's raise the bar of obedience in your life. He's coming to us, having shown us who Christ is, he's saying, "There's more obedience that I want to see." Much more now, much more now let's pursue this God. And this takes us, then, to the first thing: our work. Paul says, "much more work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." This is our work. Notice he says "work out." Paul is calling to the Christian and he's calling for work. He's calling for effort. He's calling for sweat, for diligence. If we're an employer, maybe we have to say this, "Okay, coffee break's over. Time to work. Let's go." And that's what Paul's doing to us here. He's saying, "Christian, it's time to work. It's time to work."

In terms of sanctification, there's no place for letting go and letting God. Maybe that's a phrase you've heard before, just let go and let God. Well, that can be good advice in terms of our worries and cares. Yes, let go of our cares, cast your cares upon God and trust God for he cares for you. But in terms of growth in holiness, that has no place in Paul's mind. We do not let go and let God in this sense of sanctification. No, Paul says, work out your own salvation. Notice there's personal responsibility. We need to do this and this is something that others can't do for us. Our parents can't do this for us. Our pastor can't do this for us. We are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

Now to be clear, when Paul says work out your own salvation, he specifically, when he uses that word salvation, he's specifically thinking of sanctification. So growth in likeness to Christ, or you might say the pursuit of holiness. He is absolutely not saying work for your salvation. He's not saying try to earn your justification. Try to do things that somehow make God pleased with you that he then declares you righteous. He is not saying that. Jesus has done that work and we are to look to him, rest in him, receive him and we have it. But in terms of sanctification, in terms of the Christian life, there is this call to work.

And notice the two terms that Paul uses to describe the Christian's attitude as they go about this work. They are very surprising terms. He says "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Now I don't know about you, but I would expect him to say work out your own salvation with joy, right? This is the letter of joy. So work out your own salvation with joy in the Lord. That's what I would expect him to write and yet he says with fear and trembling. And so we need to ask, "Well, why? Why fear and trembling?" Should the Christian be scared of God? Is that what Paul is saying? Should we be motivated by this dread of God? Is that what's the power that's moving the Christian forward? Well, absolutely, absolutely not. I think if you were to ask Paul this question, "Why did you say fear and trembling," he would say, "Well, just turn with me to Psalm 2:11," and I would encourage you to do that. Turn to Psalm 2:11, and I think you see the answer there for yourself. In Psalm 2:11, notice this strange and delightful combination of words that come together. There psalmist says, "Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling." And so do you see that? There's fear and there's trembling and sandwiched in the middle is that joy that Paul keeps telling us to find, and so this is reminding us that Paul is talking about the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord, this loving awe and reverence that God's people have for God. This is not the fear of a lost sinner before a holy God, but this is a fear of a child before the most loving Father in the universe. Yes, one who's holy but one who has adopted me and made me his child. All of his grace. It's the humble attitude that remembers that all of life is lived before the face of this good God. And so Paul is saying, "Christian, work out your own salvation in the fear of the Lord," you could put there, or in joy by enjoying God, this holy God by serving him with fear and rejoicing with trembling.

The Christian is to be moved and motivated by the fact that they know that the King of heaven is for them. The holy God is my God. And so I'm to tremble with amazement that God has visited me personally in such grace, that he has chosen me from before the

foundations of the earth when I was nothing but a rebel dead in my sins. This God in his grace reached out and grabbed me and then at such cost to himself to send his Son to suffer such heights and such depths. And so the Christian is to be astounded at what God has done for him. And child of God, is that your life right now? Are you working out your salvation with fear and trembling, with this awesome sense of the grace of God that you have tasted? "He has done this for me." That's the motivating power in the Christian's life, not this scared fear that drives us away from God but this sense of awe for what he has done for us. Well, if you've lost that, I recommend you'd pick up Michael Reeves's new book titled "Rejoice and Tremble." It comes from Psalm 2, that language rejoice and tremble. It's a great little book on the fear of the Lord.

Well, this is the Christian's responsibility, then, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. If we want to know how to live the Christian life, we must know that there is work for us to do. But congregation, we can't stop there because we must realize that there are two workers in this text and that takes us to the second thing, there is our work but now also there is God's work and that's what we find in verse 13. Paul has just given us this big call for effort, "Come on, let's go. Let's work," but he continues his sentence into verse 13, and it's so important that we grasp the logic here, that we don't just take verse 12 out of context as if it's this isolated statement because that makes no sense then in Paul's mind. Notice verse 13, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Paul begins with that word "for" and this is telling us that he has a cause and effect relationship in mind, and the cause is coming second here, the cause is given to us in verse 13. God is the cause. God is the great divine worker. It is God who works in you and because that's true, the effect is therefore work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

So how instructive this is. Maybe you heard that first portion of our sermon and as you heard that all you can think about was me just needing to work harder and try more. It's just me and that's how I live my Christian life. It's just me and I gotta put in this effort and I don't see anything else. And Paul is telling us stop that. Stop that. Christian, stop thinking about yourself and just yourself, but realize God is there. Realize God is at work. He's at work in you. Yes, in yourself you cannot work out your own salvation but God never calls us to do that in ourselves. And so all of our efforts, they must rest upon the shoulders of this almighty God. And congregation, the maturing Christian life is the one that more and more consciously depends upon their God in their sanctification. That's the mature Christian, the one who is putting forth the effort, but doing so aware that God is at work in me.

Notice how specific Paul details this work. He says he is at work both to will and to do. Isn't that so encouraging, child of God? God is working inside of you to make you willing to do his good pleasure and also to help you do his good pleasure. God gives us our desires for holiness. Yes, sin has corrupted our desires, has twisted our desires, sin has stolen our power to keep God's law, we are unable just in ourselves, but right now in every single Christian God is undoing the effects of the fall. He is making them willing and he is enabling them to work out their own salvation.

So just to make this practical to our own lives, child of God, every time you have a desire to pray, every time you have an urge to pick up the Bible and to read it, every time you have the thought, "I should share the gospel," every time you are grieving over sin and you hate sin and you want to fight it, every time you want to promote God's righteousness, every single time that is because God is working in you. He is the one who's giving you these desires. I wonder how often do we deny God by not realizing that that's him? How we take credit for it for ourselves. How we go to pray and we think, "Well, that's just because I want to pray." Well, that's true, we want to pray but who gave us those desires? It's God. And the more we recognize that he is at work in us, the more encouraged we will be to realize he is at work in us. He hasn't left me for myself, but he is continuing to slowly, progressively change me from the inside out. So here's the point for us. The secret to living the Christian life is to know our role and God's role. God is the initiator, God is the enabler and we are called to respond in obedience. We are to work out what God works in. Doesn't that frame the Christian life in such a different way from what we're tempted to view it? Here is the Lord present in my life and he is constantly working in us, he is renovating us, and so I'm not pursuing holiness alone.

Now there's no perfect illustration, of course, but the closest I can think of to illustrating this is just to think of a child learning how to ride their bike. And children, maybe you remember the first time getting onto not a tricycle but onto a bicycle. What a moment that was. Maybe there was training wheels on it and you're all excited. You see the big kids biking and you want a bike. And so you go on the bike and you try to pedal and you realize that it's actually really hard to get those wheels to move all the way around, to spin the pedals all the way and so as you try to pedal, you're struggling to move but then all of a sudden, slowly but surely, the bike creeps forward and forward and forward, and suddenly you're going and you're going faster and you look over at mom and say, "Mom, look, I'm doing it!" And yet little did you know that it was actually dad gently pushing the back of your seat, helping you get started and pushing you on. He's not just encouraging you, but actually using his energy to propel you forward. And that, congregation, is what God is doing in every single Christian. He doesn't just encourage us to pursue holiness, but he's actually using his divine energy to propel us forward as we exert our own energy in the Christian life.

Well, all of this, what we've heard so far, points to the fact that the Christian life must be lived by faith. It must be lived by faith in our Triune God because the Christian life doesn't feel like God is working in me. If I go off of my feelings, then all I see is Romans 7 and you can just read Romans 7 and you hear the language of one who's struggling, who's waging this war and not doing what they want to do and failing to do, failing to resist those things that they don't want to do. If we go based off feelings, then all we are stuck with is Romans 7, but a Christian, Paul is saying, is to live by faith in these facts that God is at work. And even when I don't feel it, I'm to know it, to believe it and to pursue holiness as if these things are true because they are.

And this is exactly, then, what Paul moves on to doing our text, and notice having given us this fundamental principle, he then moves to apply it in verses 14 through 18 and that takes us to our second and final point, the second key principle for how to live the

Christian life and that is this: not only work out what God works in but, second, be who you are in Christ. Be who you are in Christ. I know I've stated that point before from Paul's writings because it's all over Paul's writings. Be who you are in Christ. But before we look there, let me ask you: do you know who you are? Do you know who you are? Have you given serious thought about who am I? Have you made sure that your knowledge, your self-awareness, your self-knowledge is correct? This is critical because the Bible holds out two stark contrasts, either we are those who are in Adam dead, or we are those who are in Christ alive by his grace. So do you know who you are? Which one are you? Are you in Adam? Are you spiritually dead? Are you spiritually insensitive to your sin? Does your sin not really bother you all that much? Yes, maybe you don't like the fruit of it, the bitter fruit, the consequences, but do you actually grieve over your sin? The fact that you're sinning against God? Are you sensitive to God? Are you aware of God? Do you think of God? Does he factor into your life? Yes, you go to church but is your heart just the same as the world? Do you pursue the same dreams as the world? Do you laugh at the same jokes that the world laughs at? Are your pleasures just perfectly in line with the world's pleasures? Then what should we conclude about you? That you're still an Adam. There's been no change. There's no difference. Or has God's grace made the difference? Have you begun to learn something of your moral crookedness of your sin? And have you learned to confess it to God, to faster and faster bring it into the light to God? Say, "Lord, I've sinned again. Lord, I'm sorry. Lord, forgive me." Have you been looking to this Christ to wash away your guilt and to give you his righteousness? Have you been seeing this Christ as the one who is beautiful in his sufficiency? Has there been this desire for him, "I want him"? If those things live in you, then whatever you think of yourself you are a child of God because no dead sinner in Adam desires Christ. No dead sinner in Adam grieves over those sins, confessing it to God and pleading that there would be forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Those are the blessed works of the spirit. So yes, our faith may be weak, it is weak, it's imperfect, it's wavering, it's slow, and yet these are the signs of faith. There's faith present.

So if that's you, friend, then you are in Christ. Do you know yourself? Do you allow yourself to believe that you're in Christ? It's not a mark of spiritual maturity to downplay God's grace. And so if you are in Christ, we must know our identity. We must tell ourselves over and over and over again daily, "This is who I am. My identity is found in Christ. I'm a new creature in Christ. He's changed me all by grace. Nothing of myself." And this is how the Christian life is lived and that's what Paul is training the Philippians to do. He's saying, "Realize who you are and then live out of who you are in Christ."

And there's three pictures that Paul gives here and the first one is the picture of being children. Being children. Notice first of all, submit as children, you see that in verse 15. He calls them "children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation." What an astounding truth that is. This is not just wishful thinking but this is the result of God's grace. Paul isn't here holding out a target for them to achieve but he's saying this is the reality of who they are. You are a child of God. And Christian, do you pause to think about that, to let that truth bear its blessed effects in your heart and life when you think about that? "God is my Father." This is the language of intimacy, relationship. "He's adopted me by his grace." If you're a parent, you know what it is in

part to love your child and yet here is a far better parent, a far better father in how he loves his children. How the Christian must live with 1 John 3:1 daily ringing in their ears, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" And that truth isn't just meant to comfort us. It does, of course, what comfort. But that truth is meant to direct us as well, to tell us how we are to live. If I am a child of God because of his grace, then I am to submit as a child. I am to submit to my Father. And I use that word "submit" to mean I am to trust that my Father is for me, even in the midst of sufferings. The Philippian church is going through sufferings and yet they are to submit to their Father in the midst of those sufferings, trusting that he is for me, and responding in their trials by saying, "I need to trust Him and I need to seek to obey Him." That's what good children do.

Notice how Paul brings this out. Go back to verse 14. He says, "Do all things without complaining and disputing." That's a child. That's what the child should look like, the one who recognizes they have a Father in heaven. They can do all things by his Spirit's blessing without complaining and disputing. This word "complaining," it means grumbling and disputing is an evil questioning of God, and it seems like Paul has Exodus 16 in mind here. Israel was called God's son in Exodus 4. God called them out of Egypt but they proved that many of them weren't true children of God. They grumbled against God in Exodus 16. They weren't trusting his provision. And then the Lord, he sends bread from heaven. He sends manna. And remember, he gives him that special instruction, "Gather for six days and rest on the Sabbath." And how did they respond? Well, they disputed with God, that is, they doubted, they argued with his word. They thought that they knew better than God's instruction and so they didn't do what he said and Paul is saying don't be like that. Don't be disobedient children but submit to your Father who's in heaven. Instead do everything without complaining and disputing that you may become blameless and harmless, not perfect, but living in integrity. Living with a sincere desire to submit to our Father. That is an important point to make here. Our translation says that you may become blameless and harmless children of God, but the New American Standard Bible actually brings it out a little better, it says that you might prove yourself to be. That's the force of what Paul is saying. You are children of God if you're a Christian and now the way that you live is evidence, it's proving who you are.

Well, that's the first thing, submit as children, second, shine as lights. Shine as lights. Verse 15, "among whom you shine as lights in the world." So notice where God has placed his children. It's the same place where he sent his divine Son. He sent Jesus the earlier verses in this chapter told us, into this world, into this dark world, and now God continues to place his children in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. That's by God's design. God wants his people in this dark, sinful, dying world. He doesn't want them retreating from it. No, he wants them in this world. He's placed us here for a purpose.

Notice he says you shine as lights. You shine his lights and, again, we must first start with who we are. Jesus said in Matthew 5, "You are the light of the world." You are the lesser lights. He is the light of the world. We are the lesser lights. We are the moon reflecting the sun. That's who we are by grace. And then from knowledge of that, Jesus

says, "So let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

So again, know who we are and then live that out, and the main focus of this picture for the Christian, what does it mean that I'm a light? Well, the main focus that's here is that of contrast, that of distinction. Yes, God has placed me in this dark world. He's placed me in this dark world but I'm like a star in the night sky. I'm surrounded by darkness but I am this bright ball of fire. That's what I'm supposed to be, a bright shining light. So yes, we're in this world, but we're not of it. Our lives, they shine as we reflect God's work in us.

And how do we do this? I want to shine. I'm a light. I want to be more true to myself, to the Lord, what he's made me to be. How do I shine? Well, Paul tells us, by holding fast the word of life. That's the only way we'll maintain our brightness. That's the only way we'll maintain our distinction between the darkness that's in the world and the light that's in the church. We shine as lights by holding fast the word of life.

"Holding fast" there has two ideas in mind. On the one hand, it's clinging to this word. I'm treasuring this word. Psalm 119 is my Psalm. It's my expression of my love for the law of God, for his instruction. But also we're holding it out. We're not just holding it fast to ourselves, but we're holding it out. The word of life, we're holding that out in the darkness. We're drawing attention not to ourselves but to the word of life. This word of life, that's about the life, the one who is life, the one who is the resurrection, and so that's what we're presenting to this world, the hope of Christ. Well, if we lose our grip on the word, we've lost everything because this is what gives us light.

So you are children, child of God, you are lights and, finally, you are priests. You are priests. So third: serve as priests. And we find this in the remaining verses 16 through 18, and Paul here presents himself as an example for the church to imitate. "Imitate me as I imitate Christ," he says elsewhere. And notice how Paul lives his life. He says, "Live this way, live consistent to who God has made you to be, Christian, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. 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."

So look at that terminology. It's priestly terminology Paul is using. He speaks of being poured out as a drink offering. This could be referring to the fact that he's in prison and maybe he's facing martyrdom. His life might literally be poured out. His blood might literally be spilt. Or this is just referring to how Paul lived his life, how he labored. He gave himself for the good of the church, for the good of others. But look at how he describes the Christian. Paul is pouring himself out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith. Speaking to the ordinary Christian, the Christian in the pew at the church, your sacrifice, your service of your faith.

And so every Christian is a priest. Paul here is speaking about priestly service. Priests were those who God called to bring others into the presence of God and so this is

something the Christian is called to do. They are called to be holy, set apart for God, and to help by praying for others, and by speaking to others about this God to bring them into contact and to fellowship with this God who they serve. And while this is, again, a high calling, we remember the first point, it's God working in us. And so, Paul concludes by saying don't do this with any self-pity. Don't be serving the Lord with bitterness in your heart all that we're called to sacrifice and to give up. Don't be doing that, but instead be rejoicing. Be rejoicing. Don't be grumbling, children, but instead remember you are priests called to serve this God and so serve him with joy and gladness.

Well, congregation, this is how to live the Christian life. On the one hand, it's a high calling. Paul sets the bar. He pushes it up for us. He will not let us lower it. But on the other hand, he reminds us of our God, our great God, who is at work in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure and so to labor out of faith in this God. May he help us live this God-centered and grace-empowered life. Amen.