

## Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 4

### “Faith and Works”

#### Philippians 2:12-13

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We are considering these Lord’s Day mornings pairs of biblical truth and of existential realities that are unique both for their distinction from one another on the one hand – it is of critical importance to Christian theology that they never be confused – and, on the other, their inseparability. They are not the same thing, very obviously, but in biblical teaching they belong together and their relationship to one another is fundamental to a biblical worldview. We have so far considered *historia salutis*, the once for all accomplishment of salvation by Jesus Christ, and *ordo salutis*, the outworking of that salvation in an individual’s own space and time; 2) law and gospel, the moral obligations that God has imposed on the life of mankind and the message of deliverance from moral failure through Jesus Christ; and 3) justification, the forgiveness of our sins, and sanctification, the transformation of our lives, distinct but inseparable dimensions of salvation. This morning our distinct but inseparable pair is *faith and works*, trusting the Lord to do for us what we cannot do ourselves, on the one hand, and our effort to work out our salvation on the other.

### Text Comment

v.13 Several matters deserve comment. *First*, the phrase “work out your salvation” in v. 12 obviously is another way of saying “obey.” The run of the thought is “as you have always obeyed...continue to work out your salvation...” The accent is falling on our living in obedience to God and serving him by doing his will. The stress on obedience ends the sections as well in v. 13: what God and what Paul are after in us is both the will to work and the working itself; both the desire and the commitment to obey *and* the actual obedience. [Silva, 117]

*Second*, the “for” with which v. 13 begins emphasizes that our obedience, our “working out our salvation” depends upon God’s work in us. Our working is possible because of divine grace. What we have here then is a classic instance of the interplay between God’s grace and our responsibility. And it is left, as it is always left in the Bible, for us not to harmonize the two emphases, as if we can easily explain how they relate to one another, still less to choose one over the other, but to receive them both, believe them both, and live in obedience to them both: giving ourselves to obedience all the while depending upon the Lord for the grace to do so.

Now there are some highly interesting features of Paul’s exhortation in vv. 12 and 13. *First*, there is the striking juxtaposition of God’s working and ours. “Work out your salvation...” Paul says to us, “because God is working in you...” This strikes us as paradoxical. How can God command *us* to work if our working depends entirely upon *God’s* work in us? And if *God* is working, why do we need to work? Surely God’s working makes our working superfluous, or at least no commandment need be given to us since if Almighty God is working in us certainly we will work as a result. But any attentive reader of the Bible knows that this juxtaposition of the

indicative – what *God is doing* – and the imperative – what *we must do* – is entirely characteristic. That God is at work in our lives, that our salvation utterly depends upon what *he* does for us and in us, *never means* that there is nothing for us to do. We work *because* he is working. God is interested in the transformation of our lives as human beings; his salvation has precisely as its purpose that we should think and act differently. And, what is more, he works through means: he uses our working to accomplish his will for us and in us.

Then, *in the second place*, there is the interesting fact that Paul commands us to work out *our salvation*. There are many people in the church who think that salvation is something that happens to a person, it comes of a sudden, and that is that. You are saved; you are in. They see the need to work at their jobs, to work to make money; they admire those who work hard to obtain success, they might well admit that one must work at a marriage or to work at raising one's children, but they see no need to work out *their salvation*. They have that already. Many Christians have thought it an actual defect in someone who imagines that he must work out his salvation, as if that person didn't realize that salvation is the gift of God's grace. You don't work for a gift. It is given to you; it is not achieved or accomplished or earned.

These are arguments so obvious and so attractive to people that it should come as no surprise that throughout the ages, in both Christian thought and Christian experience, faith has so triumphed over work, trusting God's effort has so triumphed over our own effort, that the working side of the Christian life has been almost completely eclipsed. There are other also perfectly understandable reasons for that.

First and foremost is the mighty emphasis in Holy Scripture on the grace of God and salvation by God's grace alone. Indeed, Christians thrill to the fact that salvation as a gift of God's love and an accomplishment of God's power *is the uniqueness of our Christian faith*. It is precisely here that the Christian message separates itself so profoundly and beautifully from all the other religions and philosophies of mankind. In every other faith, whether religious or secular, salvation – however salvation is understood – is the reward of human effort. It is man's own accomplishment, it is his doing! It is earned!

In the Bible and the Christian faith it *is God's doing*: God's accomplishment and God's gift. Only in the Christian faith is the human predicament declared to be hopeless apart from the intervention of God and only in the Christian faith is God said to have loved human beings to the extent that he was willing to make punishing sacrifices on their behalf to rescue them from themselves and the consequences of their comprehensive moral failure, supremely his own just judgment. The longer one lives and studies the thinking of mankind the more extraordinary seems the utter uniqueness of the Christian message at this, the key point. God's love and grace combined with God's power is the only hope of everlasting life. It is for this reason, of course, that the heart of the Bible is the ages of waiting for the Messiah to appear, the building of anticipation, then finally incarnation of the Son of God – God coming into the world as a man – his suffering and dying for the sins of his people, his resurrection *as a man* to new and everlasting life, the very life that will be his gift to those who trust in him, and finally his coming again to consummate that salvation and take his people to heaven.

A Christian who has embraced this fabulous message, who has realized how this salvation and this salvation alone could actually meet his or her desperate need as an inveterate sinner before the face of a holy God, is understandably captivated by it. It is what animates their faith in Jesus Christ, their love for God, and their hope of everlasting life. So it is hardly surprising that a preacher's emphasis on their obedience, on their working as necessary for salvation can strike them as thin gruel and, even worse, as a retreat into the religious mind of the rest of the world, the world that does not understand that human beings can never satisfy the requirements of God's perfect justice by their own efforts; a world that does not appreciate the splendor of God's way of salvation. An emphasis on the working, obeying, and serving of a Christian, they think, must diminish, if not hide altogether, the glory of divine love and power. Paul's mighty polemic against the very idea that we could earn our salvation by our obedience, by what he calls the "works of the law" only strengthens that conviction on their part. "Let's talk only of Christ's work; not of ours!" they say. And it is easy for them to say this since one has only to read the Bible to know how great, powerful, and relentless is its emphasis on salvation as a gift we receive by faith, a gift that does not depend on our effort.

"Thus says the Lord, 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me...' [Jer. 9:23-24]

"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts." [Zech. 4:6]

"Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' But [Jesus] replied, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God.'" [Luke 18:26]

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." [John 1:12]

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. *I give them eternal life*, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of the Father's hand." [John 10:28]

"So, then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." [Rom. 9:16]

"For by grace you have been saved by faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." [Eph. 2:8-9]

You are well aware that I could go on and on, multiplying biblical citations to the same effect. Salvation is the gift of God, lavished for love's sake on the profoundly undeserving, the accomplishment of God in all of its parts and in all links of the chain: from the Father sending his Son into the world for us, to Christ satisfying the justice of God on our behalf; from the Holy Spirit's conquest of our rebellious hearts to the final consummation of salvation at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. At no point were we or are we or will we be the decisive actors in this greatest of all dramas, the salvation of a human being.

So, a dislike of any emphasis on human activity in salvation, a fear that it may obscure the greatest glory of our Christian faith, is not without reason. The fact that the Bible's emphasis on divine grace has far too often been diminished or lost altogether and the Christian faith in that way denatured and corrupted and turned instead into an altogether typical religion of human effort and reward only adds weight to that fear and dislike. We have seen various forms of the effort to eliminate, at least to some degree, human working, obedience, and service as part of the story of salvation surface in our own time and even in our own evangelical Reformed circles. Think of the influential Keswick or Higher Life movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries or, more recently, of the Sonship movement. Such people want all the emphasis to fall on our resting in what Christ has done for us, *not on our doing for Christ*. Affiance, resting in Christ, looking to Christ, waiting upon God, claiming his blessing, believing instead of doing, these are the watchwords of the advocates of views of the Christian faith and life that diminish, if they do not entirely eliminate the place of human effort in salvation. For them, the efforts of anyone, Christian included, to work at salvation are rightly described in the Bible as "filthy rags," a reference to Isaiah 64:6.

But, of course, the problem with all such one-sided accounts of the biblical teaching is not only that the deeds described by Isaiah as "filthy rags" were not the deeds of believers but of the *unbelieving Jews* of his day; not only that resting in Christ, believing in defiance of appearances, waiting on the Lord, and so on is some of the *hardest work requiring some of the greatest effort* in the world, as any Christian soon learns, but that the Bible is equally clear and equally emphatic that God's salvation not only summons us to a working life, but *requires* such a life. Once again, the texts are so numerous that I can offer you only a representative smattering.

"*Strive* [that is a strong word for effort!] for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and *to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives* in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are *zealous for good works*." [Titus 2:11-14]

"Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect, but I *press on* to make it my own because Christ has made me his own. Brothers I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and *straining forward* to what lies ahead, I *press on* toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." [Phil. 3:12-14] This is the same Apostle Paul who said that he beat his body and made it his slave lest having preached to others he himself might be disqualified for the prize!

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." [Eph. 2:10]

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day...” [2 Tim.4:7-8]

“So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” [2 Cor. 5:9-10]

Again, I could go on and on citing programmatic statements such as these that teach that God’s salvation not only produces effort, striving, and working in those who are being saved, *but requires that effort!* And beyond such general statements, we have, as any reader of the Bible knows, huge tracts of instruction as to how we are to live, what we are to do, what obligations we owe to God and to our neighbor, and with what works we are to advance the interests of the kingdom of God in our own lives and in the world around us. Indeed, a large part of the Bible is devoted to such instruction: the *how to* and the *what* of the Christian life. And none of that instruction is of the “if you happen to be interested here are some suggestions for how you might live” or the “while certainly this is not required, one way to live might be this” variety. It is divine law; it is the commandment of God everywhere. It is not only what God requires of his people and what Christ demands of his disciples – whether particular acts of obedience or particular forms of sacrifice – but again and again it is said that without such effort, obedience, and service *there can be no salvation.*

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but *the one who does the will* of my Father in heaven.” [Matt. 7:21] Jesus said that. And his brother James said a similar thing: “Faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead.” [2:17]

And so, it is that in Reformed theology it is taught that while “our works may be said to contribute nothing to the acquisition of salvation, still they should be considered necessary to the obtainment of it, so that no one can be saved without them.” [Turretin, XVII, iii, 3]

*If you can fully explain that sentence to the satisfaction of earnest minds, you will become famous throughout the Christian world!* True enough, precisely how to reconcile these two mighty emphases in the Bible – salvation as the achievement and the gift of God and the absolute necessity of a believer’s obedience and good works – no one can fully explain. To say, as Turretin said, that works contribute nothing to our salvation but that no one can be saved without them, is certainly no explanation of precisely how and why this is so. Theologians explain the relationship between God’s grace and our works in various ways, but no explanation fully satisfies all the biblical data or entirely resolves the tension between gift and reward. But what no reader of the Bible can possibly deny is that the exemplars of faith whom we meet in the Bible – from Abraham to Moses, from Gideon to Hannah, from David to Joseph and Mary, from Peter to John – were *not only* men and women whose trust and confidence was entirely in God, were men and women who loved God because he had first loved them, were men and women who were absolutely counting on God’s grace and mercy, *but were also* men and women who *practiced* the Christian life, who *obeyed* the commandments of God, who prayed and who worked, who made sacrifices and invested tremendous effort in living the godly life.

The Bible is, in fact, a history of the spiritual heroism of the saints, of their striving, working, and achieving. In the same way it is history of men and women turning away from confidence in themselves and placing instead their trust in a loving God who gave them a salvation they knew full well they could never obtain by their own efforts. They were looking up to God the whole time; they were in all of their obedience expressing their love for and gratitude to God their Savior; they were conscious of their utter dependence upon the Spirit of God to help them and empower them; and it never occurred to them to imagine that their works were somehow the price of their salvation or that by them they were earning entrance into heaven. But work they did, wrestle, fight, and strive they did throughout their lives because that was what God demanded of them, because that is what they knew was right, and because they knew they would have to account for their lives on the Great Day. They may have not used these words precisely, but they were working out their own salvation with fear and trembling for it was God who was working in them to will and to work for his good pleasure.

No one can read the Bible with an unprejudiced mind and not immediately appreciate both that salvation is by grace, that it is and must be the free gift of God, the titanic achievement of another, Jesus Christ, the God/Man, *and* that it produces and must produce a life of active, energetic work on the part of those who receive the gift and revere the giver. Paul said, “A curse on all those who *do not love* our Lord Jesus Christ.” And Jesus said, “If *you love me*, you will keep my commandments.”

How essential then that we know to distinguish between Christ’s work for us and ours for him, that we distinguish between the faith that receives a free gift from God and the work that we do for God precisely because we have received his gift of eternal life; that we know the difference between what God has done and what we do. There is a very great difference between the two. On the other hand, how equally essential, because absolutely necessary for the salvation of any man or woman, that we hold these two very different things together and never allow them to become separated from one another. They are intimately and integrally related to one another. Our salvation is both faith and works, God’s grace and our obedience; God’s mighty work of salvation and our working out our salvation: salvation is necessarily and essentially both.

And what does that mean? It means that we must be and must always aspire to be both great believers and great doers; great trusters in God and his hardworking servants; grateful recipients of his free gift and dutiful workers in his kingdom. We must be, at one and the same time, those who sing from the heart:

“Amazing Grace how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me...” Or even better,

“None other Lamb, none other name,  
None other hope in heaven or earth or sea,  
None other hiding place from guilt and shame,  
None beside thee!

“Lord, thou are Life, though I be dead:

Love's fire thou art, however cold I be:  
Nor heaven have I, nor place, to lay my head,  
Nor home but thee.

And, at the same time, recite with a ready will:

Be strong!  
We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;  
We have hard work to do, and loads to lift;  
Shun not the struggle – face it; 'tis God's gift.  
Be strong!  
It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,  
How hard the battle goes, the day how long;  
Faint not – fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.  
(Maltbie Babcock 1858-1901)