

**“Working Out Your Own Salvation”**  
**Philippians 2:12-13**  
**June 22, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We return now to our series in the Book of Philippians, as we come this morning to Philippians 2:12-13.

As we hear now from our text, beginning in verse 12, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi:

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, we ask you this morning,  
to give us understanding according to your word.  
Deliver us according to your promises.  
Our lips this morning have poured out your praise,  
because you teach us your statutes.  
Our tongues have sung of your word,  
because we know that all your commandments are right.  
And so, as we attend now to your word,  
grant us understanding and be at work in our hearts,  
for Jesus’s sake. Amen  
[Based on Psalm 119:169-172]

**Introduction**

The text we are focusing on this morning is a short one – just two verses. And as we look at them now, what we see is that: Not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation, by God’s power, and especially in our relationships.

Let me say that again: Not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation, by God's power, and especially in our relationships.

Let's break that down together.

### **Not Just Before Others, But Before God**

First, we see that we are called to obey God's word, and live as his people, not just before others, but before God.

This is how Paul starts. In verse twelve he says: "my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation"

Paul here is praising the Philippians. They have, in the past, sought to obey the Lord Jesus – to live out the implications of their salvation. For that he commends them.

But he also expresses some concern here ... that they might not do as well in his absence as they did in his presence.

Now, one reason for this may be the help that Paul is to them – after all, God gives us leaders and ministers to help us live the Christian life. So, in one sense, it's only natural that his presence would be a help. [Ferguson, 52]

But in another sense, it seems like there may be some concern that when Paul is not watching them, they will struggle to live as God has called them to ... or at the very least, it will require some extra effort on their part.

And we have each experience this ... haven't we? We tend to have more patience with our children when we're in the narthex on Sunday morning, surrounded by other Christians, than the amount of patience we might have had on the car ride here, when it was just us and our family. We tend to be kinder to our spouse when we're meeting together with the pastor than we might be later that evening when we recap that earlier discussion. Children, you may find that you tend to speak more respectfully to people at school, when you're surrounded by teachers and peers, than you speak at home, when it's just your siblings or parents present.

In a whole host of settings, we tend to do a better job obeying God's commandments when others, whose opinions we value, are watching us.

And as much as this makes sense ... it's also troubling.

Sinclair Ferguson raises the concern like this – he writes: "Dare we face up to the embarrassing truth that Paul's words suggest? Professing Christians are sometimes obedient only as those who please men rather than those who please God. When an apostle was present, some of the Philippians were 'present and correct'. But perhaps not otherwise." [Ferguson, 52]

Now ... what's troubling about this is not how we respond to the presence of other people. What's troubling is how we fail to respond to the presence of God. Because this pattern of behavior reveals a lack of faith in the Bible's claim that we live all of our life in God's presence.

God is always watching us. That's what the Bible tells us. All of our life is lived before the eyes of God. But we so often fail to take notice – we fail to remember it, to believe it. And so, when other people aren't present, we act like no one else is present. But God is always present. And it's his presence that should always be the primary thing that shapes our behavior.

And because that is true ... and because it's easier to forget that when other human eyes are not on us, Paul is pointing out that it's actually especially important for us to strive to obey Christ in those moments when human eyes are not on us. It's then that even more is required from us – to remind ourselves that we live our lives before God, and so we should strive to honor him even when only he will see it. [Barth, 70-71]

Why do you obey God's law? Is it to please God ... or to please the people around you?

That truth is often revealed in those moments when no one else is watching.

And to be clear, for any Christian, some of what is revealed in those moments will be positive.

Paul is, after all, speaking positively about how the Philippians have obeyed in the past. And it may be helpful to pause now and to reflect on the ways you have obeyed when no one else is watching – those times you did what was right even when those whose opinions you most value were absent. Those moments of obedience are evidence of your faith – evidence that God is at work in you. Don't discard or denigrate that evidence – see it, and let it encourage you.

But also, at the same time, we will see the gaps. We will see the ways that we do not live before God with as much diligence as we live before other people. And that should pierce our hearts, and make us all the more attentive to what Paul has to say to us here.

So the first thing we see is that we are called to obey God's word, and to live as his people, not just before others, but before God.

### **We Are to Work Out Our Own Salvation**

But the next thing Paul says is that when you obey, you're not simply obeying, but you are "work[ing] out your own salvation."

Not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation.

Now ... what on earth does that mean?

We can start with what it doesn't mean.

And to start, it should be obvious, but it needs to be said, that when Paul says "work out your own salvation," he's calling you to focus in this moment on your own salvation ... and not other people's salvation.

Now, I don't mean you should neglect evangelism or ministering to others – that's not what's being discouraged here.

Rather, what I mean is that this topic and this sermon is one of those topics and sermons where we are especially prone to think of someone else who we think needs to hear it ... rather than ourselves.

But Paul's "your own" in these verses should call us back from that. It calls us to apply God's word here to ourselves before we seek to apply it to another. Because first and foremost, Paul is calling you this morning to "work out your own salvation."

But then, a second clarification we need to make here is that Paul is calling us to work out our salvation, not to work for it.

The language here is really important, because if we misunderstand it, we can take it as a command to earn our salvation by piling up enough good works.

But as Sinclair Ferguson puts it: "We are not to work *for* it or work it *up* but work it *out*, that is, to make sure that its influence and implication permeate the whole of our lives." [Ferguson, 53]

Ferguson continues to explain that the idea here is that Paul "wants to see salvation transforming every aspect of our lives" into the likeness of Christ. [Ferguson, 53] And other commentators explain this phrase in very similar ways. [Fee, 234 n.20; Fee, 234-235; Barth, 72; Wright, 107]

This isn't about earning our salvation, but about working our salvation's implications into every aspect of our lives.

And what it means in practice is that we are called to obey the Lord who saved us. [Fee, 232 n.8, 235]

Because "For Paul *faith in Christ* is ultimately expressed as *obedience to Christ*." [Fee, 233]

If we really have faith in Christ – if we really believe he is who he says he is: the Lord of the universe and the Savior of our souls – then we will strive to obey him.

And if we really believe that Jesus has done for us what he says he's done for us: that he has given himself for us – if we believe that, then we will strive to give ourselves to him.

Faith in Christ is ultimately expressed in obedience to Christ.

This is what working out the implications of our salvation means – it is to live our lives for Jesus Christ, and under his Lordship.

That's what it means to "work out" our salvation.

But that then leads us to another question: Why does Paul zero in in verse 12, specifying that we must work out our "own salvation."

The language seems to put the full weight on us.

This calls for another clarification. Because what we need to see is that Paul here is not pitting our work against God's work in our Christian walk, but he is pitting our responsibility for our Christian walk against other people's responsibility for our Christian walk.

We can sometimes read “work out your own salvation” as meaning “you work it out yourself, rather than expecting God to do it for you.” But in context, that’s not Paul’s point. And we know this, because in the very next verse, Paul emphasizes God’s participation in this process. But, by contrast, in the phrase right before it, Paul emphasizes his absence in the process. And so Paul is not saying “you work out your salvation yourself, rather than expecting God to do it” ... he’s saying, “you work out your salvation yourself, rather than expecting me – Paul to do it for you.”

Paul’s emphasis here is not actually about our role as opposed to God’s role in working out our salvation ... his point is about us taking primary responsibility for working out our faith, as opposed to expecting some other person in our life to take primary responsibility for our faith. [Wright, 107]

And so you need to ask yourself: Are you living your Christian life in such a way ... where you act as if your Christian faith – the working out of your salvation – is primarily the responsibility of some other person in your life?

Maybe, if you’re younger, it’s your parents. You identify as a Christian ... but you don’t really take ownership of your faith ... you don’t take responsibility for your spiritual wellbeing ... you expect mom or dad to do that for you. And maybe that made sense when you were six ... but now you’re sixteen ... or twenty ... or thirty ... and you’re still expecting them to work out your salvation for you.

Or maybe it’s not your parents but your spouse you put that responsibility on. You expect your wife or your husband to work out your salvation in your life. They drag you to church, or they drag you through spiritual discussions, or they drag you towards obeying the Bible ... they drag you ... and you act like spiritual deadweight.

Or maybe for you it’s someone else you put this responsibility on: a friend, a sibling ... a pastor.

But either way, Paul is calling such behavior out. Paul is saying that as you grow up, you need to take responsibility to work out your own salvation – and not expect other people to do that for you.

Paul, instead, is calling each of us not to passivity, but to activity – to focused, and serious, and vigorous activity.

[Barth, 72]

Working out our physical health – cultivating and maintaining the physical life we have – letting the physical health we have permeate our bodies – that takes vigorous and intentional activity.

Why do we expect that working out and maintaining our spiritual health would be any different?

It’s not. It too takes vigorous and intentional activity. That’s what Paul is bringing out here.

We’ve made several clarifications about what’s going on in this text. But the short version may simply be that Paul is calling us here to take our own Christian lives seriously.

Not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation.

## **By God's Power**

But then, with that, to that line in verse 12: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” Paul adds in verse 13: “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

And so, what we see is that not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation, by God's power.

And this is key. Paul isn't just guarding against misunderstanding what he said in verse twelve (though that may be some part of it). Paul is reminding us of how any of this is even possible. [Fee, 237-238]

When we want to see our salvation worked out in our lives – when we want to see fruit in our lives in how we love God and how we love the people around us – then we need to look to God for help.

And we need to look to God to help us not only with the strength to do what we are called to do ... but also with the will to do it. Because Paul says in verse thirteen that that both the work we need and the will we need comes from God.

That may mean sometimes, when our willingness to obey is faltering, we are called on to pray honest prayers, like: “God, I don't want to obey you right now ... but I know I need to ... so I ask you to help me – help me want to obey you ... heal my will, so that I will what you call me to.” Or even more simply: “Lord, help me to love what you love, and hate what you hate.” That is a prayer for our will to be conformed to God's will.

And then, it also means looking to God when we feel like we lack the spiritual strength and fortitude to do what he calls us to – the strength to love him and to love those around us as we should.

In each case, we are to look to God, and to depend on him to shape our will and strengthen our efforts.

We depend on him by looking to his Holy Spirit, whom he has given us in our hearts to shape our wills and strengthen our efforts.

We depend on him by attending to the means of grace: reading the Scriptures, receiving the sacraments, praying our prayers, worshipping with God's people – and trusting that by these means, he will shape our wills and strengthen our efforts.

We depend on him by walking in faith, knowing that he will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear, but in every situation, he will be at work to shape our will and strengthen our efforts, as we entrust ourselves to him. [1 Corinthians 10:13]

If we have clung to Christ in faith, then he will work in us, “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

And so, not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation, by God's power.

## **Especially in Our Relationships**

Finally, as we seek to apply this text to our lives, we see that not just before others, but before God, we are to work out our own salvation, by God's power, and especially in our relationships.

Now, where, you might ask, do we see this, in verses 12 and 13?

Well, we don't exactly see it there. [Though, it's worth noting that the phrase "fear and trembling" in verse twelve is a phrase Paul seems to use in his letters primarily to describe humility before other people. And so he does give us a subtle link to this theme (and a pointer back verse three) even in these two verses. See Fee, 236 and Barth, 71]

But we do see it when we read these verses in context.

And the context is especially important here because verse twelve begins with the word "Therefore." And when a text begins with the word "Therefore" ... it's usually a good idea to pay attention to what came before it. [Fee, 231-232, also n.7] That's why verses 1 through 11 are printed for you there in the bulletin. Because this emphasis in how Paul is applying these ideas comes out not in verses twelve and thirteen, but in the context of what came before the "Therefore". [Barth, 71-72]

So look now at this passage as a whole, starting in verse 1.

After appealing to them in verse one, Paul says to the Christians in Philippi: "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Paul here is focused on how they act in their relationships – how they treat one another.

Then, in verse five, he says: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus," and he goes on to describe how Jesus lived this loving mindset out –humbling himself to serve others, lovingly pouring himself out to bless others. That's what this mindset looked like in our Lord Jesus.

And then, Paul says: "Therefore, my beloved, [...] work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

There are many ways we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But the focus in this context is on the ways that have to do with how we treat the people around us: whether we sow division between us and them, or seek unity between us and them ... whether we act in selfish ambition and conceit, or we count others more significant than ourselves, in humility ... whether we look to our own interests, or to the interests of others.

Paul is especially calling us to work out our salvation in regard to how we relate to the people around us, as we live our lives before God.

So let's take a moment now, and consider that.

First you need to ask yourself: Whose opinion of you do you especially worry about and fret over? Whose opinion of you do you especially value? What group of people are you most concerned to impress?

And then, when those people aren't watching – when there's no realistic way for them to see you or observe you ... in those moments ... how do you treat other people?

In those moments, when those people whose opinion you so value can't see you – in those unobserved moments, how do you treat your family members? How do you treat your spouse? How do you treat your children? Or how do you treat your parents or your siblings?

Or what about at work or at school? When those people whose opinions you so value can't see you – in those unobserved moments, how do you treat your co-workers? How do you treat your peers? How do you treat your subordinates?

When those people whose opinions you so value can't see you – in those unobserved moments, how do you speak to your friends and family about fellow church members whom you both don't really like?

Or try this: When no one else is there to hear you ... how do you treat that call center worker, who's trying to help you, but struggling with the language and the system they are a part of – who did not make the customer management system that's frustrating you, but who is the face of it in that moment, that person, that individual – how do you treat them on the phone, when no one from church is on the line to hear you?

We could keep coming up with scenarios, but the bottom line is this: When the people whose opinions you especially value aren't looking ... when only God is watching ... do you live out your salvation in how you treat other people?

Because that's what Paul's getting at here.

Paul is calling us here – God is calling here to us – to live out our salvation in how we treat other people, even when no one else is watching. Because God is watching. And God cares.

In fact, God cares so much that we are reminded in verse twelve, that we should go about this task “with fear and trembling.” Because the Maker of the universe cares that much about how we treat other people when no one else is looking on.

God cares how we treat other people, because other people are made in his image ... and because other people will last for eternity. And so God cares deeply how we treat them.

C.S. Lewis helps bring this reality out in his essay “The Weight of Glory.” He argues that many of our problems with how we treat those around us come about because we fail to live in light of the eternal promises of God: the promise that every single person – every man, woman and child – will exist for all eternity, either glorified in God's presence, or, if they reject God, turned grotesquely inward on themselves, forever.

And realizing that should affect how we treat other people now. Lewis puts it like this – he writes: “The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a

serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else [they may one day be] a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or [the] other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.” [Lewis, 45-46]

In that moment when you’re feeling frustrated, in that moment when you’re feeling selfish, why does it matter so much how you treat your spouse, or your child, or your parent, or your sibling, or your friend or your co-worker – why does it matter?

Because you are surrounded by immortals. It’s immortals whom “we joke with, work with, marry, snub,” neglect and sometimes even exploit.

And so, our call is to love them as Jesus loved us.

That’s what it means to work out our salvation with fear and trembling in the context of our relationships.

That’s what Paul is calling us to here.

But he’s not calling us to do it in our own strength.

Remember, Lewis says that the weight of your neighbor’s glory, which should be laid daily on your back, is “a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.”

If you try to do this in your own strength, you will break.

But if you approach this call with humility ... then you will remember – then you will truly believe – that as Paul says in verse 13: “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Only God can give us the strength to take up this calling. In fact, only God can give us even the will to take up this calling.

And so we must look to him. And looking to him, we must then strive, as we relate to the people around us, to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves.” To each “look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Where is God calling you to do this better?

Get specific – get concrete – identify one or two or three concrete relationships right now. Identify your child or parent or your spouse or your sibling, or your co-worker or your classmate or someone in this room, or someone out in the world – someone you know you have been selfish

and conceited towards ... someone you know you have counted as less important than yourself ... someone whose interests you have devalued or ignored. Identify that person right now.

And now consider how, this week, maybe even this afternoon, you, by God's power, are going to live out – to work out – the implications of your salvation in your relationship to them, by loving them with humility ... by counting them as more significant than yourself ... by looking to their interests ... by having the same mind towards them as Christ Jesus has had towards you ... by showing them Christlike love that is patient, kind, and humble ... by pouring yourself out in some way for them – even if they don't deserve it.

That's what it means to work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.

That's what God is calling us to this morning.

Let's go out and obey God's calling.

By his power.

For his good pleasure.

And for our eternal good.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Translated by James W. Leitch.

Introductory Essays by Bruce L. McCormack and Francis B. Watson. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Lewis, C.S. "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1949 (2001 Edition).

McDonough, Sean M. Introduction and notes to Philippians in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.