

WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

Text: Philippians 2:12-13

Reading: Phil 2:1-16, 1 Peter 1:1-11; 3:8-18

Belgic Confession Art 24 (first half)

Theme: We are to work at living out our salvation knowing that God is at work in us.

Purpose: To encourage us in a life of sanctification knowing that God is at work in us.

Every area of study and activity develops its own language. Take golf for instance. Golfers will talk about an albatross, a birdie and an eagle; they will refer to an apron, a bogey and a mulligan. When some of hear these terms on the sports news we have no idea what they mean!

In the church and in theology we have our own terms and phrases. We talk about the inspiration of the Bible, about the incarnation of Jesus and about the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

We also talk about justification and sanctification. Children, these are big words but they are very important words in the Bible and they are central to our understanding of salvation. They are directly connected together and justification must always be followed by sanctification.

Justification is “an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 33)

God can justify us because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul described that work of Jesus in the beginning of chapter 2. Jesus is the greatest example of someone who humbled himself and was obedient to God’s will, even to death on a cross! Paul urged the believers in Philippi to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus; that is, to obey God by showing love, humility and compassion (v 1-4).

In response to the work and example of Jesus Paul urged them to work out their salvation. This is a way of describing sanctification, which is “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die to sin and live unto righteousness.” (WSC Q. 35)

We will consider this command to work out our salvation and will look at our work and at God’s work.

1. OUR WORK (V 12)

a. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison, probably in Rome. He had a deep affection for the Christians in Philippi because they had helped and supported him in his work. He addressed them as “**my dear friends**”, or my beloved.

b. He had established the church in Philippi and while he was with them had taught them to obey God’s commands. Now he was far away from them, but he wanted them to **continue to obey God**.

Children, your parents want you to follow God’s commands, not only when you are with them but also when you are at school or at the house of a friend or out playing sport.

A teacher wants her pupils to work steadily not only when she is watching them in the classroom but also when she is out for a short time.

Paul had the same concern for these Christians; he wanted them to obey God “not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence.”

c. So he wrote, “**Continue to work out your salvation...**”

Salvation is a very broad term - it includes all that God has done, is doing and will do for us.

God has saved his people through his Son Jesus Christ. He has declared us to be right with him on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ. If you believe in Jesus you are saved; this is your present position.

You did not get this because you worked for it but rather because you accepted what Jesus has done. But having been saved you must now work at your salvation. You are not to work *for* it, but rather work *at* it, work it *out*. This is something you must do.

Paul is not going back on some of his other writings; salvation cannot be *gained* by works, but it must *produce* works; justification must lead to sanctification; faith must be seen in deeds. Conversion isn't the end of the Christian walk but only the beginning; after that we must go on, we must make progress, we must grow and develop and mature.

One commentator compares this to marriage. On the day a man and a woman marry they enter the legal permanent relationship of marriage; they are fully married. All of us who are married would advise them to *work at* their marriage because this relationship takes "a lifetime of exploration, enjoyment, development and discovery" (Motyer).

So too with working out your salvation: when you believe in Jesus you are saved, but you need to work at your salvation because this too takes a lifetime of development and discovery, of growth and progress. This describes the process of sanctification, of becoming more and more like Jesus, of growing in the fruit of the Spirit.

The verb "work" is an imperative, a command; this is what you must do; this is your responsibility. The word is also in the present tense, so this is to be an ongoing process which takes time.

You will be tempted to give up on this because it requires much effort. Think of a work-out in a gym - you have to exert yourself, you perspire. This is true spiritually too - working out your salvation requires strenuous activity.

Not all Christians see it like this; some believe there are quick-fixes to becoming holy. Pentecostal theology suggests that the key to spiritual victory is to be found in a single dramatic experience called the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." Others suggest that you can gain holiness by following some simple rules; there are superficial Christian books that offer spiritual victory in ten easy steps.

But there is nothing magical, easy or quick about the life of sanctification; there are no shortcuts, no pre-packaged solutions. We have to *work* at it, we have to persevere, we have to strive for the goal and see it through to the end.

d. Do this "**with fear and trembling.**"

This does not mean we are afraid of God. He is our Father in heaven who loves us. Rather it means that we view God with awe and respect, recognising that he is our almighty God, the Creator, the Holy One.

We do not fear that he might hurt us, but rather than we might hurt him by our sinful lives and by dishonouring his name.

To avoid this we must keep his commands and be holy as he is holy.

In chapter 1 verse 27 Paul wrote that whatever happened, whether he came to see them or only heard about them in his absence they must conduct themselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." In fear and trembling we must recognise the seriousness of this calling to honour the Lord Jesus in all we do.

The Holy Spirit calls you to work at your salvation. What do you work hard at? What do you give most of your time and attention to? What are you most interested in, most concerned about? Sadly, many of us apply ourselves far more vigorously to various hobbies or interests or work than we do to being holy, than we do to being like Jesus.

Are you working at your salvation with fear and trembling?

2. So we turn from our work to **GOD'S WORK**

Work at your salvation “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Paul wanted to assure them that although he was not with them, God was, and God was at work in them and with them and this was all they needed.

The conjunction “for” leads into the reason why we must work out our salvation – it provides the basis or the ground for this.

a. You can work because **God works in you**. He planned the way of salvation; he chose us, he elected us even before we were born; he sent his Son to die for us and he sends his Spirit to apply to us the benefits of Christ.

If he had not worked then we would still be dead in our trespasses and sins. Salvation is his initiative. We “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came through Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24).

Many Christians describe salvation as a 50/50 arrangement between God and us; God does his half and now it is up to you to do your half.

But that is not so. Salvation is 100% from God, it is all of grace; he began it and he will finish it.

Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

But you must also apply yourself to your salvation 100%. You can't sit back and let God do it all. No, you are to work at your salvation with all your energy!

b. As you do this you can be assured that God works God works in you **constantly** and **powerfully**.

The verb ‘works’ is in the present tense. God is always at work, he never stops, he never gives up, he never gets tired.

And his work is powerful and effective. The Greek word for work here is *energeo* from which we get our word energy. It describes an energy that always achieves its purpose, that is always effective. God is at work in you and me and his work is powerful!

b. God works in you **through his Spirit**.

Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son send the Spirit into the heart of the believer. The Holy Spirit causes us to be born again and then he lives in us.

Our hymns reflect this biblical truth:

“Spirit of God, who *dwells within my heart*,
Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness mighty as thou art,
And make me love thee as I ought to love.”

“Come, O Come, life-giving Spirit,
God from all eternity,
may thy power never fail us,
 dwell within us constantly.”

The Holy Spirit works internally, in our hearts and minds. We can't see him because he is a spirit but we can see the effects of his work, we can see the external evidence of his working which is the fruit of the Spirit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22f).

Are you making progress in these areas?

Are you growing in the fruit of the Spirit.

Can you see the evidence of this in your life? Can others see this progress?

c. God's work in us **fulfils his purpose** - he “works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

He softens, shapes and guides our wills so that we want to live for God, we want to obey his laws, we want to follow Christ.

He gives us the strength so that we can act in obedience to his law, so that our deeds conform to his commands, so that we do the works he requires of us.

As he does this through his Spirit he fulfils “his good purpose” in us. The word “purpose” can also be translated as “pleasure”; God's pleasure is fulfilled when his purposes are realised.

Parents want to see their children grow and develop and mature in every area of their lives – spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. When we see this we are pleased, it gives us joy and satisfaction.

God is pleased when he sees his children grow in holiness; when they become more sanctified, more filled with his Spirit, more like Jesus Christ.

Have you grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Are you becoming more sanctified?

Are you working with the Holy Spirit to become more like Jesus?

Are you continuing to work out your salvation knowing that God is at work in you?

Amen