

## **Lights in the World**

**Philippians 2:12-18**

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Obviously you are aware of the fact that, by day, I am a pastor. You may not be aware that, by night, I'm a mad scientist and I have discovered the cure for baldness. This stuff is great! You put it on at night and sleep with it on; in the morning you shower it off. Do that for one week and you will have a lush head of hair the rest of your life. You only have to do it one week, and it lasts the rest of your life! As a matter of fact, this stuff is so good that we've set up a booth in the foyer. You can purchase your tube today—\$79.95.

You know, it really doesn't matter how hard I work to convince you of this product, there still is one big problem. And that is what? Yep, still no hair. No matter how hard I try to sell you on this product, my message doesn't ring true... 'cause I'm still bald.

That is what Paul has been talking about. The message of the gospel is a radical message. It is a message that says we have been radically reborn. We have become new creations. We have been set free from the bondage of sin. We have the very nature of Christ within us and the life of Christ flowing out of us. We have become the children of God, heirs to the family fortune. We are headed to paradise forever. But the only way that message will ring credible is if our lives line up with what we say is true. Otherwise, people simply do not believe it is true.

When we think of conduct worthy of the gospel (which is what Paul has been talking about) I know initially we would think of the gross, immoral-type sins that would discredit our message; and certainly those are an issue. But Paul is writing to believers, and he is really talking about things we may not initially think about ourselves.

He has been talking about the importance of unity—of having one mind and one spirit. He says that if we are in conflict with our brothers and sisters in Christ, it just doesn't ring true with our message.

Paul has been talking about the reality of the need for sacrifice. We don't pull into the shadows and hide just because opposition comes at us. But we stand there like we believe what we say is true.

He has talked about the fact that we have to die to ourselves. There can be no more selfish ambition; but rather, we think of others as more important than ourselves. He says that we display the attitude in our lives that Jesus modeled for us when He left the glories of heaven in order to take on the form of a slave, to be nailed to a cross for our sins.

Paul continues to talk about conduct worthy of the gospel. But in the process, he reminds us that if we conduct ourselves worthy of the gospel it is the route to joy. It is ultimately the way that we experience joy.

We are looking today at Philippians 2. Any time you are studying a New Testament letter, like Philippians, you always want to pay close attention to the connectives—words that might often seem rather insignificant, but they are important because they connect the train of thought. In this case, in chapter 1 verse 27, Paul says, "Only [*a word that means 'of most importance, of first importance'*] conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel." I believe that's the beginning of this discussion here. In chapter 2 verse 1, he says, "therefore."

The word “therefore” connects us back to what he has been talking about previously, so the train of thought continues.

Chapter 2 verse 12 begins: “So then . . .” Having thought about what Jesus did for us and that attitude that was displayed by Jesus, we are to conduct ourselves worthy of the gospel. It is obvious that’s what Paul is still talking about. “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

Paul opens with some very encouraging words. He is saying to them, “You *have been* obeying; you just need to continue obeying. You not only were obedient when I was there with you in my presence, but you’ve continued to be obedient in my absence.” So there’s a word of encouragement there. He talked about that in chapter 1 when he told them, “It’s obvious you have become partakers of the gospel—that this message of Jesus Christ has become real in you and you’re living it out.

It’s important to remember that when we gather like this in a worship service, it’s very easy to be a Christian. This is the easiest environment in which to do that. As a matter of fact, you’re the odd man if you come here and don’t act like that. But it is much more difficult when you go out into the marketplace. It’s much more difficult when you go home or back to school or out into your neighborhood. It’s not enough just to live like a Christian when you know somebody’s watching.

It’s like teaching our children. I try to teach our children not only to obey when I’m hovering over them like a hawk; but I want them to obey when I’m nowhere around. I want them to internalize and to own these principals, so that these convictions will become their own.

That’s the same thing Paul is saying to these Philippians. What he is saying is, “Not only were you obedient when I was there, but in my absence you’ve continued your obedience.” He is saying that they have internalized it; they’ve made it their own.

He says they are then to “work out” their salvation with fear and trembling. What does that mean? What does it mean to *work out your salvation*? That’s not terminology we typically use. First of all, you need to notice it does not say to work *for* your salvation. Our salvation is a gift from God on the basis of His grace. Paul says, “You are a saved people, so work out (live out, flesh out) your salvation. But still, what does that mean?

It is important that we define our terms correctly. Oftentimes, when we refer to salvation what we seem to mean by that is a point in time when we trusted Christ as Savior. But when we do that, we’re not really consistent with the language of the New Testament. What we are doing is using the concept of justification as if it were a synonym for salvation, as if those two mean the same thing. So it is important to distinguish between the two.

*Justification* is a legal term which means to be declared legally righteous. Therefore, at the moment we trusted Christ as Savior, God the Son stood before God the Father and declared us legally righteous—not on the basis of our works or our own goodness, but on the basis of Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross. Almost every time the New Testament refers to justification it is in the past tense, because the majority of the New Testament is written to believers, and therefore they are reminded: “You have been justified.” It was at a point in time.

However, *salvation* is different from that. Salvation is in the past, present, and future; and that is the language of the New Testament. We *were* saved (past tense) from the enslavement to sin. We are presently *being* saved. Often we refer to that as sanctification. It is this process we're in of becoming like Jesus (Philippians 1:6: He who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it)—that's the journey we are on. And then finally, future salvation—we *will* be saved from the wrath of God to come.

Romans 5:9 is a good verse that gives you the typical meaning, or tenses, of these words. Paul says, "Much more then, having now been justified [*past tense*] by His blood, we shall be saved [*future tense*] from the wrath of God through Him." The majority of times when the writers talk about salvation in the New Testament, it is in the future tense. The least number of tenses in the New Testament regarding our salvation is in the past tense. So the strong emphasis is: you *were* justified, you *are being* saved, and *you will ultimately be* saved (your salvation reaches its completion).

Paul said that in Galatians 3:3—that this process was started on the basis of grace, and it is on the basis of grace that our salvation will be perfected (completed).

That is, then, what he is talking about in Philippians when he says "work out your salvation." He is talking about this present tense salvation (the living out, the fleshing out) of our salvation—working towards the point of completion that God has promised in Philippians 1:6.

The word that translates "working out" is an interesting word. It was used to describe, for example, a mathematician with a problem that must be worked out to completion. A mathematician doesn't do half a problem and walk away (although that's how I used to do it). But a mathematician reaches the completion. The word was used to describe a farmer. A farmer doesn't just plant the crop and walk away; he plants it and works it all the way through to the harvest. So we understand that to *work out our salvation* doesn't just mean that we're out there slugging away doing our best. It means there is progress; there's growth. We're working toward this point of completion.

And of course, we're to do that "with fear and trembling." Now, what does that mean? Well, what it doesn't mean is that we are afraid of God. There is no question but what God wants most is to be intimate with us; and you can't be intimate with someone you are afraid of. So that's not what it means. It has to do more with the reality of what a serious calling this is. "Fear and trembling" really conveys the idea that we understand the soberness or the seriousness of our calling—that Jesus Christ, the God of the universe, left His glory and was nailed to a cross for the sins of the world, that those who place their trust in Him have eternal life and will live forever with Him in paradise. And He has called us to be the proclaimers of that message; therefore we realize what is at stake here is *forever*. This isn't some sort of an intellectual ping-pong game. This isn't just playing church or some religious thing we're doing. This is for all the marbles. This is what ultimately matters.

Every single person you bump into, or go to school with, or work with, or who lives next door—maybe even in your own home—will spend forever somewhere. They will either spend forever in paradise with God, or they will spend forever in condemnation separated from God. And we have been called to proclaim that message, not only with our words but with our lives. We need to be sobered by the reality that this is very serious.

This was driven home to me years ago in my former church. I had a call one day from a man I'd never met. He was a rancher up in the sand hills and he said he needed to talk. So he came in and I met him. He was a huge guy (probably about 6'6") and just big. He sat down in this chair and kind of engulfed the whole chair. You could tell this was a guy who wasn't used to coming in and talking about his problems. He was squirming and was really uncomfortable.

Then all of a sudden he just started to shake, and then he started to weep. When he finally gathered his composure, he told me the story. His wife had walked out on him, and he was a broken man who didn't know what to do. It had happened months before, and he told me about how night after night he was right on the edge of taking his own life. He talked about how the only thing that had kept him alive for these months was this devotional book that somebody gave him, and in it he found these promises from God and this truth from God. He was just holding onto these nuggets of truth and they were keeping him alive—that's how he explained it.

He pulled out this devotional book, and this thing was so worn out you could barely even read the printing on some of the pages. It was circled and it was underlined—you could tell this guy just lived in this thing. He went through the book and began to tell me about all these truths he had discovered that he was clinging to; because if they weren't true, then he was dead.

And I just stared at him. I felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me, because I had written that devotional book. He had no idea. I'd written it for a company in California, and someone had given it to him. I just sat there thinking how this is very serious what we're doing. This is very serious because it's about life and death. This is about *forever*. When we are proclaiming the truth of God with our words and with our lives, this is very serious business. That is what Paul means by "with fear and trembling."

If you were here the first weekend in January when we did the State of the Church message, you saw a video testimony by Charles. He told the story of how Jason, as a high school student, had impacted his life with the truth of Jesus. At the very end of that testimony, Charles said, "I feel like I owe Jason my life." That's pretty serious stuff. That is what Paul is talking about.

But you say, "You know, I think I understand this; but I thought it was God who was doing the work in me—not me doing the work." Well, you're right about that. Why do we work out our salvation? Verse 13: "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

The reason we are to work out our salvation—to live like it—is because God is doing a work in us. God is the one who is changing us. We learned this in Galatians: that I cannot do it myself, and I cannot make myself righteous. I am dependent upon the Spirit of God to do for me what I cannot do for myself. But because I know that is true and I believe that's true, I need to live consistent with what God is doing in me. I am a partner with God in this. I cannot just flop back and say, "God, you do it, and I'm here for the ride." It doesn't work that way.

That word "work" is the Greek word from which we get our English word "energy." It is God's energy; it is God's power in us. It is both His desire, His will, and it is His power that

accomplishes this for His pleasure. Ultimately God changes me for His pleasure, as he puts His grace on display in the heavenlies.

There are lots of things in our Christian life that we cannot fully explain or understand, and I think the older I get, the more of those I'm discovering. I can't quite explain how this works. I understand that God has promised that He started this work in me and He is going to complete it. I am going to get to the finish line; I am going to become what He has called me to be. I believe that. But I also understand, at the same time, I am somehow a partner in that. And my responsibility is to make my choices and cultivate my attitudes in a way that is consistent with what He is doing in me. I'm not a passenger; I'm a *partner*.

I understand the Bible says that I am made in the image of God, and because of that, I have a will. I make my choices, and somehow my choices figure into that. That's why we're commanded to conduct ourselves. It isn't automatic. That's why we're told (commanded) here again to work out our salvation—because it is not automatic.

Several years ago there were a number of books written that dealt with what we often call our position in Christ. Our position in Christ means those things that are automatically true because of who Christ is. So, for example, I stand righteous before God today. Even if I sinned last night, I'm still righteous; because it's not my righteousness or my performance. It is the righteousness of Christ. That's called positional truth.

But these books swung, in my opinion, so far to one side that they almost were saying because of positional truth it doesn't matter how we live. So some would think, *I can live like the devil and this is still true of me*. We need to be careful with that. It very much matters how we live. It very much matters what we choose to do and the attitudes we choose to cultivate day by day. Paul is reminding us that it is God who is doing the work in us, but we should live consistent with that.

For example, verse 14: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." Again, when we think of working out our salvation, of conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, our tendency is to think about these big, kind of gross, immoral sin areas. And once again, Paul is taking us to some areas we probably wouldn't think of. We may tend to dismiss grumbling as really not that big of a deal: "Oh yeah, I may be a grumbler, but at least I'm not an adulterer."

I don't think God sees it that way. When you read through the Bible, you find that grumbling is a very big deal to God. Grumbling means to be a complainer. It means to be dissatisfied—to be discontent. There are many passages in the Old Testament that talk about how the grumbling of the nation of Israel angered God. Numbers 11:1 says that their grumbling fueled the fire of God's anger. There are occasions in the Old Testament where God wiped out a portion of His people because they were grumbling. It is a very big deal to God.

I think sometimes we just get in this negative mode and we don't even know that we're grumblers. But I'll guarantee you, the people around you know. It would probably be good for all of us to ask the people around us, "Do you think I'm a grumbler? Do you think I'm a negative person? Am I a complainer?" And please, if a grumbler asks you that, don't be nice and say, "No, of course not!"—because this is serious to God. Look at them and say, "Yes, you have a problem with this. You're a complainer. You're a grumbler."

Now again, this is being talked about in the context of conduct worthy of the gospel. Why does grumbling discredit our proclamation? Well, let's think about it. Our message is a message of grace. In other words, we didn't deserve any of this, and it's been lavished upon us. We are heirs to the family fortune. We have been radically changed. We have more than we could ever possibly deserve. If God never did one more thing for me, I have more than I could possibly ever imagine deserving. If we believe that's true, then how could we be grumblers? Either we do not believe it, or we are just selfish to the core. The people of God, of all people, ought to be characterized by thankfulness and celebration and rejoicing. That's what our message is—that we are the recipients of unimaginable grace!

So Paul says, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” Disputing means to argue. It means to be in conflict, and it is the outflow of grumbling. Grumblers tend to be nitpickers. The Greek word for “grumbling” has kind of a flavor of focusing your attention on insignificant things. Again, when we focus our attention on the things which are eternal, there are a lot of things where we say, “You know, that just really doesn't matter.” But grumblers just pick at all that stuff, and it leads to conflicts and disputes and worthless arguments.

Why do we act that way? Verse 15: “That you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach...” In other words, it's conduct worthy of the gospel. By not being grumblers and disputers, we're again proving that we are the children of God—that we are blameless.

That word “blameless” basically means that the accusations don't stick. I can't control whether or not people accuse me of things, but I can control whether those accusations stick, by my integrity. Blameless is a word that means without impurity, which is used to describe pure metals. It means that we have pure hearts—pure motives. In other words, we are “children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.”

We are *in the midst* of a crooked and perverse generation. We're not pulling back into our fortress and hiding from them. We're not hiding in the shadows; Paul has already told us that in chapter 1. Our calling is to be in the midst of them because these are the people we need to reach. These are the people we need to love. And in the midst of them, in the darkness, we provide a light.

Verse 16: “...holding fast the word of life...”  *Holding fast*  really means to hold up a banner. I stand in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, and I hold up a banner that says, “This is the word of life; this is the word of truth; this is what you are looking for.” But the only way people are going to believe that is if my life and my attitudes line up with what I say I believe is true. People should look at that banner and they should say, “You know, I think that's true! I've been around that person; I believe that's true!” That is what gives our light its illumination.

Verses 16-18: “...holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ [*when He returns*] I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.”

Paul is looking at his life like a race, and he is saying, “One day, when I stand before Christ, I want to know that I have not run my race in vain, but rather that it has accomplished

its intended purpose.” In other words, he wants to see that the gospel was advanced and he sees it coming alive in these people in Philippi. So Paul moves into some very graphic language. He takes imagery out of the Old Testament and says, “I may be poured out like a drink offering.” Remember, he is sitting in a Roman prison, and what he is saying in essence is, “I think I may be executed and my blood is going to be poured out; and it’s going to be poured out on an altar that is made of your service and sacrifice.”

Simply put, Paul will be executed because he has been a proclaimer of the gospel of Christ. It is because he went to Philippi and proclaimed the gospel that they will execute him. So their service—their sacrifice of faith (what it cost him to get the gospel to them)—is an imagery of his blood being poured out on that altar. He responds by saying, “But that makes me happy.” He says, “I rejoice with that” because that’s been his mission from the beginning. What has mattered to Paul is to advance the gospel; and if their faith is coming alive in them, then he says, “If it costs me my life, that’s fine—I rejoice with that.” That is the source of his joy.

Then he encourages them to do the same: to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel even if it costs them their very lives in order to advance the gospel, because that is what life is about. That is our calling. That is what ultimately matters.

Isn’t it interesting how tightly we hold onto those things we think will make us happy—that we think will bring us joy? And oftentimes, the very things we’re holding onto become the barriers to experiencing that joy. We’re selfish because we think somehow our selfishness will bring us joy. We think, *I’ve got to look out for myself. I’ve got to control my own happiness; and if I let go of that, I have no hope for joy.* So we’re selfish. And that creates disunity. It creates conflict. It creates grumbling. And it never leads to joy.

But when I die to myself and I choose to think of others as more important than myself, it begins to lead to reconciled relationships. It begins to lead to unity. It leads to a thankful heart instead of a grumbling heart. And the proclamation of my life lines up with the proclamation of my words—which ultimately leads to joy.

The only way we’re going to get there—the only way we’re going to really experience joy—is if we really understand what it means to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.

*Father, we are thankful for the truth of Your Word. We’re thankful that Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins that we may have life.*

*You’ve called us to be proclaimers of that message, a radical message. But Lord, for that message to be believed, our lives must give evidence of that truth*

*Lord, help us to understand what it means to work out our salvation in fear and trembling.*

*Lord, help us to be willing to die to ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves in order to advance the gospel and, in that way, to experience lasting joy.*

*We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.*