

Philippians 2:12-30, A Good Workout

The Apostle Paul writing to the church at Philippi, began an encouraging word to the church in Phil.1:27 to do everything necessary to grow spiritually and become more Christ-like. Paul wrote, "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel Christ". In other words, live the life of a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Be unified in your actions to exalt Christ and be good witnesses to the world around you. Then in Phil.2:1-11, Paul laid out the perfect example of Christ who made Himself so low in the incarnation in order to die for our sins. Jesus did the work of atoning for our sins through the humility and meekness of taking on the flesh, living the perfect life in an evil world among an evil generation. Therefore with Christ as our example it becomes us to develop the same willingness to sacrifice our life by taking on His life just as Paul wrote in Gal.2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me". Our potential to be conformed to the image of Christ must be developed by "working out". In Philippians 2:12, Paul will use a physical athletic analogy of working out to develop strength, endurance, and skill in a spiritual sense.

Work Out Your Salvation!

According to the Mayo Clinic, physical exercise (working out) is a must. Benefits include weight control, better health, good muscles and bone density, better attitude and mood control, more energy, better sleep, better social life, and a better sex life. The bottom line is that "working out" offers incredible benefits that can improve every aspect of your life! Most of us know that but it sure is difficult to follow through on regular workouts, and experts say we need at least 150 minutes of exercise a week. That's 30 minutes a day five times a week, or 3 fifty-minute workouts a week. I am definitely going to do that, but not this week! Why is it so neglected? One husband said he didn't have time, but his wife asked, "Then tell me how you watch 3 hours of TV every night". My favorite exercise is a cross between lunges and crunches—I call it "Lunch". My point is we can do whatever we are motivated to do, and in Philippians, Paul gives us the perfect motivation to work out spiritually. Since Christ has humbled Himself and sacrificed Himself to save us from destruction, surely we should be motivated now to live for Him and let Him conform us to His image. Therefore Paul directed the church to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" in Phil.2:12.

It may sound like Paul is saying that salvation is by works, but nothing could be further from the truth, and the context of all of Paul's letters makes this clear. Paul already said in Phil.2:1-11 that Jesus came down from heaven and did the work necessary to save us from our sins. He will go on to say in Phil.3 that he, Paul could not earn salvation, but Christ earned it for him, and in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and not of yourself, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works". Then again he wrote in Titus 3:4, "When the goodness and loving kindness of God appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us, but according to His mercy...so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." The working out Paul is talking about that is done by us is spiritual growth, serving the church, witnessing to the world, and being progressively conformed to the image of Christ. Once we believe in Christ, we are saved and the Spirit of God indwells us, but for a time we must still live in these sinful mortal bodies and it is necessary for us to show up for service and let God change us from the inside out as we currently represent Him on planet earth.

Growing, changing, and doing good works is also a work of God in us according to Ephesians 2:10, but we also have a responsibility to show up and exercise all the spiritual disciplines to be a part of this growth. It involves our active commitment and personal effort. In Phil.2:12 we read, "So then" or since all this is true "work out your salvation with fear and trembling". You have been saved and God has a further purpose for you to grow spiritually and do good works. How do you get started? Continue to obey the truth in the Word of God, serving and representing Christ well in spite of your circumstances, just as Paul's example while he was in jail in Rome. Paul was writing this letter from jail in Rome awaiting possible execution, but he saw his adversity as a chance to witness for Christ to the Roman guards (Phil.1:12-13). What does "working out" look like? We exercise faith, worship God regularly, serve willingly, have fellowship with believers, pray constantly, act like others are more important than yourself, but mostly just "present yourself" and let God work in you. This is the way Paul presented our responsibility in Romans 6:13, "present yourself to God as someone who is (spiritually) alive".

Synergism or Cooperation?

Showing up will cooperate with what God is continually doing within you. The Spirit of God has indwelt believers for the very purpose of changing your heart, your focus, and your life. Some theologians called this a synergy of your obedience and God's sanctifying work within

you. Other theologians balk at this saying its 99.9% God's doing so we should not see it as two equal actions. I don't know what the percentage is, but Paul would not give so many commands to believers to obey, exercise faith, and do good works if we didn't bear some responsibility. Webster defines synergism as the interaction of two things that when combined produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individuals. Therefore Paul commands the church to "work out", but also reminds them that simultaneously "God is at work in you to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil:2:13). Theologians call this sanctification, which literally means the process of God setting us apart from an evil world and making us holy. Millard Erickson defined it as "The continuing work of God in the life of the believer in making him/her holy during his/her entire life". In Ephesians 2:10, Paul wrote that God did not save us "BY" our good works, but "FOR" good works He desires us to do. God's Spirit is in us transforming our hearts, but are we cooperating? Cooperating with God and pleasing God should be our passion just as it was Paul's. This is why he wrote to the church in Phil.1:21, "For to me to live is Christ".

Grumbling Our Way Through Life

I find it interesting that after Paul commanded them to "work out", and then reminded them that "God is at work in you"; that he followed this with do it "without grumbling or disputing". Grumbling is our verbal expression toward disappointment or dissatisfaction. I remember as a rebellious teenager being told to go to church, and I would always protest and complain, "Do I have to? What for? I want to do something else!" The biblical example that comes to mind is Israel in the wilderness after they left Egypt in Exodus 16-17. Even though they were freed from slavery, they actually complained about the water, the food, the weather and just about everything. They even said in Ex.17:3, "Why have you made us leave Egypt, to kill us and our children?" We all as sinners have an inclination to gripe about our circumstances, but I can think of at least three reasons Paul used in his letter to the Philippians to willingly rejoice in all situations: so we will be blameless and innocent before the Lord, for the sake of the unsaved we should be good witnesses, and it pleases God. Paul looked at adversity as a way to serve God and bring glory to Him. Therefore, part of our "working out" is to always rejoice in the Lord, and find a way as Paul did to glorify God in all circumstances whether good or bad. Paul finished his thought about working out in Philippians 2:17-18, by reminding them of his sacrifice and asking them to rejoice in the same way. Our cooperation with God's work in us involves showing up and doing all things willingly.

Great Examples—Timothy and Epaphroditus—Phil.2:19-30

In Philippians 2:19-30, Paul gave the church two excellent examples of “working out” spiritually. Paul had told the church to live in a way pleasing to God, and to be obedient to the Word of God. Then he told them to do so willingly and without complaining or arguing. Their natural response to Paul might have been, “How is that even possible since we have the desires of the flesh, and we live in a depraved fallen world. Therefore Paul laid out three human examples that were well known to them—Paul himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. Timothy was one of Paul’s closest and dearest disciples whom Paul had converted on his second missionary journey in Acts 16. In Phil.2, Paul lists seven characteristics that qualified him as an example: a kindred spirit with Paul, very concerned for the welfare of others above himself, a single mindedness of effort, he had proven his value to the Lord, he was submissive to his leader, he had no agenda of his own but was dedicated to the gospel, and he was always available for service. Epaphroditus was a layman in the church at Philippi who had suffered the long journey to Rome to bring an offering to Paul, which probably made it possible for Paul to live in a rent house while he awaited trial (Acts 28:30). Paul said that Epaph had suffered greatly and almost died trying to get to Rome to serve Paul, and he delivered Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. We know the names of all the great and rich men like Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Bill Gates, etc. But here was a no-name guy who Paul said “hold men like him in high regard” because he was a fellow worker, a soldier for Christ, a messenger of God’s Word, and a minister to the needs of others. MAY WE ALL BE AS WELL!

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