Philippians 2:12-18 *No Turning Back: We Work, God Works*

***George Muller***John Piper shares the following summary of the life of a man named George Muller:

George Müller was born in Germany in 1805, and he died in 1898 in Germany. He was a follow-up specialist for D.L. Moody, and he preached in Spurgeon’s Tabernacle. He inspired Hudson Taylor in his missionary dreams, and he preached in the same church for sixty-six years. He lived out his life mainly in Bristol, England.

When he was twenty-eight, he founded what he called the Scripture Knowledge Institute. It had five, what he called, *objects*.

1. Founding schools abroad
2. Bible distribution
3. Missionary support
4. Tract distribution
5. Orphan care

The fifth one is the one we know him for best: “To board and clothe and scripturally educate destitute children who have lost both parents by death,” to use his own words.

And so he built five orphanages, and by the time he had died, he had cared for 10,024 orphans. He did all of this while preaching three times a week. When he turned seventy, he fulfilled a dream by becoming a missionary. For the next seventeen years, he traveled to forty-two countries, preaching on average once a day — to about three million people in total.

When he was ninety-two, he led a prayer meeting on a Wednesday evening at his church. Afterward, he went home, and when they brought him his tea the next day at seven o’ clock in the morning, they found him dead on the floor beside his bed.

He had read his Bible two hundred times from beginning to end. He brought in millions of dollars through his prayers. I had somebody do the calculation for me in today’s dollars, and they estimated $150 million. He prayed it all in, without asking anybody for money. He never took a salary for the last sixty-eight years of his ministry. He trusted God to put it in peoples’ hearts to give him what he needed. He never took out a loan, and neither the orphans nor he were ever hungry. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/use-means-but-trust-in-god>

George Muller was a remarkable man of faith. His biographer, a man named A.T. Pierson, summed his life up like this: “He devised large and liberal things for the cause of Christ.” That’s a good legacy. We should all want it to be said about us that we devised large and liberal things for the cause of Christ. And we should all want to use whatever time we have here on earth—whether it be 92 years or 72 years or whatever--to pursue that dream.

The reason I wanted you to hear Muller’s story is because he illustrates a principle that lies at the center of our text today. Here is an idea that lay at the heart of the way Muller lived his life: Work really hard. Work really, really hard. Give your all in work for Jesus. But… don’t trust in the work. Trust in God.

Or, I’ll put it like this: Do everything as if everything depended on you; but know in the deepest part of your heart and soul that everything depends on God. **Here’s a quote from Muller himself:**

This is one of the great secrets in connexion with successful service of the Lord; to work as if everything depended upon our diligence, and yet not to rest in the least upon our *exertions*, but upon the blessing of the Lord, who *alone* can cause your efforts to be made effectual, to the benefit of your fellow men or fellow believers.

John Piper summarizes that quote like this:

In other words, labor with all your might, but do not trust in your labor — trust in God. Plan hard, but don’t trust in your plans — trust in God. Speak clearly and creatively, but don’t trust in your speaking — trust in God. Sing, but don’t trust in your singing — trust in God. Create and produce and lead and manage, but don’t trust in your creativity and leadership and management and productivity— trust in God.

Or, we can summarize like this, this will be our big idea today:

**“We work outwardly because God is at work inwardly.”**

We need to give it our best shot, and trust in God. This is hard for us. We want to live our lives believing we are in control. We want credit for things that go right. We want to fix things that are wrong. And, in a sense, our passage today tells us we should live this way.

But we need to remember that God is ultimately in control. We need to have an abiding faith that things depend on Him far more than us. We need to trust that even while we are striving and working and putting in the effort, our loving and faithful Father is also at work, striving and working and putting in the effort.

And it is His work that counts the most.

***Therefore…***Our passage today is Philippians 2:12-18. Last week, the passage of scripture I chose was rather long, and I wanted to walk us through it verse by verse, so we had to dive right in. This week, our chosen passage is quite a bit shorter, and yet I really only want to focus in on two verses. Even though it is shorter, I apologize that I am not really going to get to verses 14 through 18. Allow me to **read the whole passage,** and then we’ll zero in:

**12**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13**for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

**14**Do everything without grumbling or arguing, **15**so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky **16**as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. **17**But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. **18**So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

The verses that I want to focus on today, the verses that really give us our big idea of working outwardly because God is working inwardly, **are verses 12 and 13:**

**12**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13**for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

These verses start with the word “therefore.” A friend of mine says that anytime you see a “therefore” in scripture, you need to figure out what it is there for. And clearly, this “therefore” connects us to what comes just before this. Remember last week? The headline for last week was from verse 27: “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.” Then we saw that Paul gave us two ways to do that: standing firm and standing together. Most of the emphasis last week was on standing together. Paul urged us to, in humility, consider others better than ourselves (2:3). We were urged to put you ahead of me. And for an example, Paul pointed us to the attitude of Jesus Christ. That led us to the great Christ-hymn, those familiar verses that talk about how Jesus did not use his position as God to His advantage but went down, down, down for us. We saw how Jesus humbly served us by dying on the cross; and we saw that, as a result, God has exalted him to the highest place and His is the name above every name (2:5-11).

That’s what all comes before our two verses for today. That’s what the therefore is referring to.

So, if we are going to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, if we are going to put the interests of others before our own, if we are going to imitate the mindset of Jesus Christ, therefore…this is what we should do. And there are two things: 1) continue to work out our salvation, because: 2) it is God who works in us.

***We Work***First, we need to continue to work out our salvation. **We work**. We strive. This is **verse 12**:

**12**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

Therefore—because of the gospel, because we are seeking to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel—we should work out our salvation.

Now, what does that mean? That can sound a little dangerous to some of our ears. Is Paul saying that Christianity is just like every other religion, where we just have to earn our way with God? If you are very familiar with the New Testament and the rest of Paul’s writings, then you know that doesn’t really match with the way Paul usually talks.

Notice very carefully what this is NOT saying:

This does not say “work FOR your salvation.” The Philippians are not supposed to earn their way into God’s good graces. That’s impossible, it’s heretical, and it will damn you if you try. That’s not the gospel.

Notice, also, that it does NOT say:

“Work to KEEP your salvation.” The Philippians are not being taught that God got them just so far by grace and now they have to maintain and preserve their salvation by working, working, and working in obedience. This is not saying that God grabbed you, but now it is up to you to hold on.

No. Notice, it says “continue to work OUT your salvation.”

That means to live out the full potential of the gift of your salvation—to live out of it. You have it, now what are you going to do with it? What difference does it make that you have salvation? Work that out! Work out the details, the entailments, the applications, the “SO WHAT’s of being saved.”

I think this instruction closely mirrors the instruction from last week to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). This ties in to the theme I’ve chosen for our whole study of Philippians. I’m calling the series “No Turning Back” and it’s based on Paul’s repeated calls for us to press on in our Christian journey. To keep striving, to keep pushing, to keep growing in our relationship with Jesus.

In fact, while I think it is important to clarify that Paul is not calling us to earn or keep our salvation; I want to be careful that I don’t water down the strength of this command. A commentator named Peter O’Brien translates the word behind “continue to work out” as “continued, sustained, strenuous effort” (The New International Greek Testament Commentary, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 279). Paul is calling us to put in the work. Like George Muller, he wants us to give everything in our pursuit of Jesus.

Another word for all this is “obedience.” The Gospel is not just provided to be believed, it also provides something to be obeyed. This is right here in the verse. Notice, Paul says, “as you have always obeyed…continue to work out your salvation.” In other words, as you have obeyed in the past, keep on obeying.

By the way, I like the way Paul puts this, because I feel like I can relate a little bit. He says, just as you have obeyed in my presence… You know what he’s talking about, right? There’s one way we act when the Pastor is around. We put on our best appearances when the Pastor is around. I feel this, sometimes, when I’m on the golf course and somebody let’s a bad word out, then they look at me and apologize. We want to look our best around the Pastor, around our church friends, and so on… Paul’s point is: don’t just act one way around certain people, but be consistent, act the same way no matter who is watching. That’s integrity.

Obedience isn’t our favorite Bible word. It sounds like dog-training. It sounds like somebody in the church bossing us around. It sounds like a bunch of petty little rules that get us to act one way on the surface but don’t do anything about the condition of our hearts.

But obedience is a Bible Word. It’s a part of the call of the Christian life. The Bible calls us to live out our faith! Act like a Christian! Do God’s will. Find out what pleases the Lord and get busy! Get obedient. Get a little crazy for Jesus! Not just to impress the Pastor or church people or whoever; but because the Gospel is real and it is changing us and we want to live in a manner worthy of what has been done for us.

The Gospel has come to you–work out what that means for you NOW.  What does it mean that you have salvation as a father? as a mother? as a son? as a daughter? on the job? at school? at a sporting event? on the open road?  What does it mean that you have salvation? Work it out!  Actualize your salvation.  Live it out!

Obedience is called for. It is necessary.  It doesn’t save you.  It doesn’t keep you saved.  But because of the Gospel, it is a requirement.

Therefore, as you have always obeyed, work out your salvation.

And do it, Paul says, with FEAR and TREMBLING.  Not cowering in terror at a holy God who is going to judge you; but awesome reverence and wonder at a God Who has judged His own Son for you and is calling you into His own service.

Working out your salvation is not to be done lightly, flippantly, as if the blood of the Son of God was not infinitely precious.  Fear and trembling are called for. He is an Awesome God giving us an Awesome Savior through an Awesome Gospel!  Work out your salvation, Christian, with fear and trembling.

That’s the first thing. That’s the instruction in these verses. This is our part. We work.

But Paul does not leave us without a reason. That’s the second part, God’s part, and it is going to seem like a contradiction:

***God Works***Let’s **read both verses together again**, and pay attention to the transition from 12 to 13:

**12**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13**for [BECAUSE, ON ACCOUNT OF, FOR THIS REASON] it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

The motivation for us to work out our salvation is that God is working in us. We work because **God is working.**

This is one of the maddening things about the Bible, and Paul as well. The Bible is not afraid to link two apparently contradictory things together, with no hint of contradiction. Paul says we need to work as Christians, and He says God is doing all the work. And if we ask him which is most true, he’ll say “Both.” And if we press him and say, which is it Paul? Are we supposed to work? Or is God doing the work? He’ll say “yes.”

We are called to work in the Christian life. And it is God who does all the work. And, in fact, Paul says that God’s working is the motivation for us to work.

As George Muller put it: “work as if everything depended upon our diligence, and yet not to rest in the least upon our *exertions*, but upon the blessing of the Lord.” Or, as our big idea puts it: we work outwardly because God works inwardly.

Do you catch the story here?  God is at work!

God does not do it for us.  He does it IN us. God is supplying the necessary enablement, the empowering to ACT in a way that is obedient to Him.

More than that, He is working in our WILL. He is actually working in us to make us want to live in a way that honors His good purpose. Some of you may have been taught that God can’t mess with your will. But here’s a verse that says that He does, and we want Him to. He takes our hard, dead hearts of rebellion and replaces them with soft, living hearts that beat with obedience towards Him.

Short of this miracle of God’s empowering, heart-changing work in our lives we have no hope of living up to the command of verse 12. But, if we have experienced God’s work in our lives, then that gives us every incentive to throw everything we have into obedience to Him.

We work out–God works in!

Now, lots of people have hard time putting the two ideas in these verses together. Some people love verse 12 and some people love verse 13. But they are both necessary, and they are connected.

Some people love the call to obedience in verse 12: “Work it out! It’s up to you, Christian. Walk the walk! Here’s a list of expected rules and behaviors! We’ll show the world we are Christians by our laws.”

Some people love the assurance of verse 13: “Let go and let God! It’s God’s job to change me, it’s God’s job to grow me. If we have real faith, then we’ll show it by letting God’s will be done!”

But both are true. Both are needed.  If you ask me, I’ll tell you that verse 13 seems more important than verse 12-–God is the much bigger Worker (with a capital W!)—and His work is presented as the incentive for our work—but that doesn’t diminish Paul’s call for us to work; it strengthens it.

Some people are de-motivated by v.13.  “Well, if God is doing all that, why bother doing anything?”  But verse13 is the MOTIVE, the very reason God gives FOR us to do verse 12.

***Prayer Signifies What You Trust***When I told you George Muller’s story at the beginning of the message, I sort of glossed over what he is most famously remembered for. He raised over $150 million in today’s dollars. And he famously never asked for a single contribution. He never wrote a fund-raising letter. He never hosted a fund-raising banquet. He never made an appeal for financial support at the end of one of his sermons.

Now, let me be clear: there is nothing wrong with doing any of those things. In fact, I would argue that if you are leading a not-for-profit organization that depends on donations to carry out its purpose, then one of the main jobs is to raise funds. It’s important to connect the mission of your organization to the hearts of potential donors. You have to tell the story of your organization. You have to put in the work.

It would not have been wrong for Muller to do those things to support the orphanages and the church and the mission organizations he was a part of. But he famously did not. Instead, he prayed. If you had asked him how the money came in to support all the efforts his organizations made, he would have told you that it was God who raised the funds, that God put it on the hearts of the donors to give, that God was answering prayer. Muller is known today as Praying Muller, the man who prayed in millions of dollars.

But that doesn’t mean he did not work. Remember, this man strived in ways that make me feel like a lay-about. He preached three times a week. He lived at the orphanage with his wife and much of the care of the children was provided directly by them. He took up a new career as a missionary at the age of 70 and travelled to 42 countries, preaching once almost every day, and speaking to over 3 million people in a time span of 17 years.

John Piper says this:

Müller and his wife did not pray instead of work. They prayed because they didn’t trust their work. They trusted God. Prayer isn’t something that signifies laziness — it simply signifies what you trust. And I encourage you: trust God. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/use-means-but-trust-in-god>

Live your life as if everything depended on you; but know in the deepest part of your heart and soul that everything depends on God. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you.