

December 13, 2020

OBEYING THE LORD AND SHINING AS LIGHTS IN THE WORLD

Philippians 2:12-18

(6 of 12 in a series through Philippians)

David McCullough ends his biography of the Wright brothers, noting that when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon in July of 1969, he was carrying with him a small swatch of the fabric from wing of one of the first airplanes Wilbur and Orville Wright constructed. It was Armstrong's way of acknowledging that without the creativity, innovation, and hard work of these who came before him, it would never have been possible to be stepping on the moon nearly seventy years later. Interestingly, Orville Wright would credit their interest in ultimately building the world's first powered flying machine with a toy that his father had brought home to them in 1878. It was something like a helicopter of sorts, powered with rubber bands that allowed it to fly across the room. Big moments in life are simply the result of smaller, more basic moments in life.

But it's easy to ignore the small and basic, isn't it? As Christians, we might fantasize about standing before the firing squad or being thrown into jail for the sake of Christ. But we seldom (if ever), I would guess, fantasize about rebuilding the torn down fence at the widow's house or taking a meal to someone who's sick. But the book of Philippians brings us back to these things. It reminds us of the need not to neglect or overlook the small things in following Christ. It simply tells us to obey Jesus again and again. In the text we're going to look at today—Philippians 2:12-18—we'll find that Paul speaks of the Philippian believers as shining "as lights in the world" (2:15). It's quite a captivating image. I'm sure each of us would love to think of ourselves as shining as lights in the world in a way that brings glory to our Lord. But the way that Paul describes us doing that is actually by doing things that seem quite basic. But rather than being discouraged by this—since doing basic things may not match the level of excitement we felt at the idea of shining as lights in the world—we should rather be encouraged, realizing that by doing some basic things that we are all able to do we can be the very ones who shine in this darkened world and draw attention to Jesus. What then does Paul tell us that we should be doing? First, he tells us something that I'm going to word as "pursue righteousness in every area of life."

Pursue righteousness in every area of life

In verse 12 Paul writes, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." A verse like this probably brings many thoughts to mind. Why is Paul putting an exhortation to work next to talking about salvation, since we know that we're not saved by works? What does the phrase "work out your own salvation even mean"? Why is the sermon point worded "pursue righteousness in every area of life" if it is drawn from this verse where Paul isn't using any of those words?

Well, let me start with that last question first. The reason I've worded the point this way is because this is the most succinct way I can word what I think Paul is saying here. Now the further question is obviously, why do I think this is what Paul is saying here? Let me try to explain.

First, remember when we looked at 1:27-30, and I mentioned that this paragraph was really a summary statement of what Paul was going to talk about going forward? It's as if he crammed into those verses everything he wanted to say, and now he is fleshing it out a bit. Well, if you go back to 1:27, you can see that Paul used very similar language there to what he's using in 2:12. He wrote, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that are standing firm in one spirit."

We can hear the parallels, can't we? There, Paul mentioned whether he sees them or is absent, and in our text he says, "not only in my presence but much more in my absence." There he mentions living in a manner worthy of the gospel, which sounds a bit odd at first hearing, and in 2:12 he mentions working out your salvation which also sounds a bit odd at first hearing. But I think he's basically saying the same thing. In 1:27 we said that Paul was telling us to live the whole of our lives in a way that honors the gift of salvation that we've received. A student who applies himself diligently to his studies, for example, is living a life worthy of the scholarship he received. He's not earning the scholarship. That's already happened. But he's behaving in a manner worthy of what he's received. That's what Paul had been saying back in 1:27. He wanted them to live in obedience to Jesus in all areas of life. I think he's basically saying the same thing now, just wording it a bit differently.

But let's dive into his wording more specifically for just a second. The words "work out" come from a term that is typically translated "do" or "produce" or "bring about" when Paul uses it elsewhere in his writings. In other words, Paul is exhorting us to do something or bring something about. That is probably easy enough to understand, but that makes things a bit tricky for us when the object of that is "salvation." After all, we understand that we don't produce salvation or bring about salvation. It's something God does by his grace, right? Well, here's where we need to think a bit more broadly about how the Bible speaks of salvation.

Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation as referring to our justification, that is, something that occurred in our past. So, Paul can say "by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:5), meaning that we have been justified, declared righteous by God at the moment we placed our faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. That's probably the most common way you and I speak of salvation as well. But the Bible will also speak of salvation as something future. In Romans 5:9 Paul can say, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."

In other words, Paul can talk about our justification as something that has already occurred but also look ahead to the day when we will stand in judgment and hear that we are welcomed into the kingdom of our Lord, prepared for us from the foundation of the world. He can speak of our bodies being raised from the dead and glorified, no longer affected in any way by the curse that

resulted from sin. He can speak of the transformation to come at the second coming of Christ when our hearts and desires will be perfectly transformed and we will actually be righteous. This is what we sing about in the song “There Is a Fountain” when we sing about being “saved to sin no more.” That’s the end or goal of our salvation. It’s certain to come, but it is future. And so we can speak of awaiting our salvation or looking for the fullness or completion of our salvation to come.

Well, when Paul then says to work out your salvation, I think he’s speaking of salvation not as that past event of justification when we were declared righteous by faith alone. I think he’s talking about that future aspect of our salvation, as we are conformed to the image of Christ and made righteous in our being. I think what he’s exhorting us to do is to work toward that. In other words, if I know there’s a day coming when I will finally be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ, finally through with sin altogether, then Paul is telling us to live to that end now. Strive toward that goal now. Or, we might say, pursue righteousness in every area of your life now.

Moreover, the reason Paul tells us to do this with “fear and trembling” before God is not to communicate that we, as Christians, should live our lives always in fear that we’re going to be condemned before him or face his wrath. There’s no condemnation for those trusting in Jesus. Rather, he’s communicating the seriousness of obedience. In other words, we strive for righteousness while never losing sight of the holy God whom we’re obeying. We don’t laugh off sin or think our rebellion is no big deal. We don’t excuse sexual immorality because others seem to be doing it or look past our gossiping tongues because no one seems to call us out on it. We remember our holy God, and in awe and reverence of him, we sincerely and seriously pursue righteous living in every aspect of our lives. That’s what Paul is calling us to do in verse 12.

He’s telling the Philippians—and, by extension, us—“I’ve seen you obey in my presence, but I want to hear that you’re obeying although I’m not with you now.” Obey in all areas of life. Live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Live so that your life looks like Jesus because that’s the end and goal of your salvation. And do it with fear and trembling, realizing that this is not a light and flippant matter that can be easily shrugged off.

But in case you think the apostle who speaks so gloriously of grace in his other letters is simply focusing on our responsibility here to work or strive or pursue righteous living, then note that in verse 13 Paul provides great encouragement for us. He writes, “For it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v. 13). This is a remarkable claim. So, put all your logical resistance on pause for a second—we’ll get to that—and just hear what Paul is saying. Paul is telling us that the will (or desire) and work to do this will be provided by God. The want to and the energy and ability to do this is provided by God.

Now, on the one hand, this shouldn’t sound surprising to us at all. Think about the promises about God’s new covenant work that we find in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. After years of Israel living disobedient lives and profaning God’s name among the nations so that the nations thought, “Israel’s God must not be that impressive if they keep disobeying him and worshipping our

gods,” the Lord said that things were going to change. Through the prophet Ezekiel he said that he was going to make a new covenant with his people, not like the one that he made with their fathers, which they broke. Then, he begins to speak of aspects of this new covenant, telling us that he would give his people new hearts and put his Spirit within them. Specifically in Ezekiel 36:27 he said, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Now, if God promised that he would put his Spirit within his people in the new covenant, *causing them* to obey him, and we now live on this side of Christ’s death and resurrection as God’s new covenant people, then it shouldn’t be too shocking to hear Paul telling us to obey and to realize that God is providing the desire and ability to obey him. This is the fulfillment of God’s promise for us, isn’t it? How will he have a people who will no longer profane his name as Israel did? He’ll put his Spirit in them and cause them to obey him, by his Spirit willing and working in them. It makes perfect sense, and we shouldn’t struggle with something like verses 12-13.

But for some reason sometimes we can find ourselves struggling because we pit the call to responsible obedience in verse 12 against the sovereign and gracious provision of God in verse 13 against one another. And so I’ve got a solution for us—stop pitting these against each other. The Bible consistently brings these together. Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 15:10 that he labored harder than all the other apostles. He worked hard to obey Jesus. He made choices day-in and day-out to turn from sin and pursue obedience. And if you asked him if obedience was a challenge for him, he would speak about how hard he’s working and disciplining his body to obey. But he also says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” Now wait, we might say. Was it Paul laboring hard or was it the grace of God producing all this obedience in him? Was it Paul’s work or the Spirit causing him to obey? And here Paul would tell us to take out the “or” and replace it with “and.” If you’re sleeping in too much, then pray as you go to sleep that God will give you the desire and strength to get up, then set your alarm clock and get out of bed when it goes off, and then thank God for giving you the desire and ability to do what you just did. And now expand that small example to all of life that that’s what the Christian life looks like. And if you think of it this way, then you’ll find yourself strengthened to obey and not giving in to the lie that somehow obedience is out of reach or you can never overcome this sin or that. Why would you think that when God is willing and working in his children through his Spirit? And you’ll not be puffed up in pride about any area of your life either. Why would you be puffed up when you recognize that this is the gracious working of God in you?

So hear Paul’s exhortation. Pursue righteousness. Quit messing around with a life that ignores what obedience demands. Start working hard at striving to look like now what you will look like at the fullness or completion of your salvation when Jesus returns. Make responsible decisions to turn away from sin right now. And ask for God’s grace to do so and praise and thank him when you do. And here’s the amazing thing, the God who gives you all grace for every step of obedience will reward you in heaven for your obedience. It’s like a dad telling his young son to pick up the basketball and jump as hard as he can to try to dunk it. Then, right when the son puts forth his greatest effort and jumps, the dad simultaneously lifts him off the ground, raises

him into the air, and enables his son to dunk the basketball—something the boy never could have done otherwise—and then says, “Well done, son.” Let us then work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work within us, both to will and to do his good pleasure. Pursue righteousness in every area of life.

The question, though, that we might be asking at this point is, “Is there anything Paul has in mind specifically as an example of what righteousness looks like in the life of a believer? Yes, Paul gives us one specific example of obedience, telling us to do all things without complaining and arguing.

Do all things without grumbling or complaining

Paul writes in verses 14-15, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

Interestingly, Paul tells us that if we want to stand out—as lights—in a dark, twisted world, we can start by not being people who grumble and complain. Amazingly, this seems to confirm that the world being made up of self-centered people who are full of selfishness, whining, and self-pity isn’t simply a description of the world in the twenty-first century but of the first century as well. And Paul tells us that if we want to stand out in a world like that, then simply stop complaining and grumbling. Stop whining and arguing about everything. If we do this, we’ll stand out. When Paul says we’ll be “blameless and innocent,” he doesn’t mean perfectly righteous, but he means that we’ll be characterized by righteousness—of good repute in the world where this isn’t common.

I think we all know how unattractive grumbling and complaining is. If someone’s interaction is consistently complaining or grumbling about something, you’ll eventually avoid them. And I think we all hate to think that we’re characterized by this, but it is easy to drift into this selfish and self-focused habit. In fact, it’s so easy that if we will intentionally not be that way, Paul says you’ll stand out like a light in the midst of darkness.

So let’s be this way. Pursue obeying the Lord in all areas of life as we look forward to the day when we will be made like him, seeing him as he is. And specifically let’s make sure that one aspect of our righteousness is shown in not complaining and grumbling about things. Kids, don’t grumble and complain when your parents or teachers tell you to do something. Adults, don’t grumble and complain about that less-than-glorious assignment your boss tells you to do. Don’t grumble and complain when difficult tasks come your way or you feel like life is tilted against you. Walk in contentment. And Paul tells us that we’ll shine as lights in the world.

And finally, we see one other aspect. We are to persevere in holding to the gospel.

Persevere in holding to the gospel

After telling us to do all things without grumbling and disputing Paul adds in verse 16, "Holding fast to the word of life so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." What Paul is saying is that he doesn't want to labor in their lives only to see them ultimately turn away from faith in the gospel of Christ. To turn away would be to show themselves never to have known the Lord. If they'll persevere the faith Paul would rejoice in being able to play a role in that. He writes in verses 17-18, "Even if I am to be poured out on a drink offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me."

What Paul is saying with is that if his life is spent even to death simply to be the small addition to what was a glorious example of persevering faith and sacrifice unto Christ in the lives of the Philippians, he'd rejoice. He simply wanted them to hold fast to the faith they were professing and continue to live out the saving work of Christ in all areas of their lives.

One of the clearest examples of the grace of God in our lives is shown when we persevere. Many have come along and claimed this or that only to fall away. Many vows have been made only to turn against them. Perseverance is what characterizes a Christian. And one reason we persevere, holding fast to the word of life is that we want others to know that what we profess is true. In other words, it may be your holding fast to the faith that sends the strong message to the unbeliever that the gospel you're preaching is real. So let's hold fast.

Interestingly, if we polled ourselves about what it might take to shine as lights in this world, we might dream of the spectacular. What's spectacular about Paul's word here is that it is anything but spectacular. Rather, he tells us to pursue righteousness in every area of life, stop grumbling and complaining, and persevere in that. In a world where we might be tempted to pursue the flashy path, it is this most unflashy path that will cause us to shine as lights in this darkened world. Let us now determine that we will labor in righteousness and persevere, trusting that God will provide for us the desire and ability to do this very thing. Amen.