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## Philippians 2:12-18

### Christian Obedience - A Command and a Promise

#### Intro

On January 20th, 1961, the newly elected president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, gave his inaugural address. At the end of that speech, Kennedy spoke his now-famous line: “*Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.*” These are powerful words that many of us know by memory. Kennedy’s speech was intended to call his fellow Americans to action, to work towards a specific goal and live out what he believed to be our national identity.<sup>1</sup>

What these words reflect is that *motivation is a powerful thing*. It is not enough to simply say what should be done; there must be sincere motivation to do it. We as Christians know this. **Right behavior** - doing the right thing - is incredibly important; God commands it! But equally important is **right motivation** - not only doing the right thing, but doing so **for the right reasons and in the right way**. So what is the right motivation to do good things as believers? Why should we, as Christians, obey God, turn away from what is wrong, and do what is right? Or maybe we should back up a little more, and first ask: **should** we be motivated to do good things and obey God? Is it even important to do so?

Can we take John F. Kennedy’s words and apply them to the Christian life, saying: “*Ask not what God can do for you - ask what you can do for God*”? This might sound right at first; after all, we are supposed to serve God, living as Servants of Christ! We are to live our lives not for ourselves but in service to the Lord, obeying Him in all things. But if we *only* think of it like this, then we might be motivated by a spirit of *legalism* rather than the gospel. Should we only think of what we do, not what God does? Of course not! We are not saved by our works. God does not need us or anything from us. The gospel begins with the reality that we are not good enough, that we can *never* be good enough, and that we *desperately need God’s help* - we need His *grace*, His undeserved love, forgiveness, and salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, <https://www.ushistory.org/documents/ask-not.htm>

So then, can we word it this way: “*Ask not what you can do for God - ask what God can do for you*”? Again, this sounds good at first, too! This affirms the fundamental need for God’s grace in our lives. We cannot save ourselves; we *must* approach God realizing we desperately need His help, His grace, His love, His redemption. But it also falls short. Just as church history has been plagued by those who emphasize legalistic action, so has Christianity also been plagued by those who see grace as a license to continue on sinning, as if any attempt at obedience is futile, pointless, and maybe even wrong. But this cheap view of grace is not a biblical view of grace. **Grace is free, but never cheap.** We need God to save us, and we also need God to **change our hearts, so that we can believe and obey Him.**

So here is a better way to put it, then: “*Ask what you can do for God because of what Christ has already done for you, because of what God is doing in and through you.* The grace of God we receive, by faith in Jesus Christ, **compels us to live differently, to love God by obeying Him in all things!** As Christians, *we must obey, not because we earn our own salvation through obedience, but precisely because of the grace we receive in Christ!*

### **Phil. 2:12-18**

In Philippians 1:27-2:4, we saw how Paul called the Philippians, and therefore *us*, to live out a life transformed by the gospel, *especially in the communal context of the local church.* Then, in chapter 2:5-11, we saw how he grounded the call towards selfless, sacrificial humility and unity the very example we have in Christ’s own selfless sacrifice on the cross; Christ, who is the perfect God-Man, the glorious center of the entire universe, humbled Himself and obeyed God the Father even to the point of dying in our place! How much more so, then, should we respond in humble obedience? That is the point that Paul is driving home in this next passage, Philippians 2:12-18. After looking at the glorious work of Christ in the gospel, Paul brings the conversation back down into our everyday lives, both as individual Christians, *and as a church community.* He once again calls us to live out the gospel in obedience to the Lord, *reminding us that the work of Christ not only saves us by taking away our sins, granting us forgiveness and righteousness by faith in Christ, but also by changing our hearts and transforming our lives to live like Christ more and more, as individual Christians and as a Christian community - a local church!* We’ve just seen that Christ’s life and obedience is **an example for how we should live;** here Paul reminds us it is also *the very reason we have any hope to actually live*

*differently!* Jesus not only gives us an example for our obedience, but also **makes it possible for us to obey Him, by God's grace!**

That's what we see here in this passage: the call to obey, and then **the right motivation to obey**; God's demand that we obey Him in all things, and also His promise that He is the one that works in us **so that we can obey Him, because of His grace.**

### **I. Christian Obedience is Our Responsibility and God's Work of Grace In Us (vv. 12-13)**

Verse 12 starts off this passage with a very clear, explicit call to Christian obedience: ***"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence..." (2:12).*** Paul starts off saying, "Therefore," in light of everything we saw about the self-sacrificial love, humility, and obedience of Christ in the gospel - everything we saw vv. 5-11 - **therefore**, we, too, should obey God in all things, at all times, in every way. He urges them to continue obeying God, whether Paul himself comes or not. But this exhortation, this call for Christian obedience, continues in an even more explicit, even *surprising and shocking*, way: ***"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."***

The call for obedience here could not be clearer or more emphatic; in fact, it is so clear *that it is jarring*. Such words force us to stop, slow down, and think carefully about what the Bible is demanding of us here. At first glance, this verse might seem to contradict the Protestant, evangelical understanding of the biblical gospel - **that our salvation comes not by our own works in any way, but only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ**. So what does Paul mean when he says ***"work out your own salvation"***? Is he denying that salvation is by grace alone? Is he saying that our salvation comes about through our own good works and efforts? Absolutely not! By no means! After all, these are the very words of **Paul**, the same man who writes, in Romans 4:3-5: ***"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."*** Or in Galatians 2:16: ***"Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."*** And we could go on and on quoting verse by verse, from various books of the Bible, proving again and again that **salvation**, forgiveness from sins,

and being declared righteous by God, comes *not by our own works* but by *grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone!*

Indeed, Paul makes this emphatically clear in the very next verse, verse 13: **“for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** Yes, these verses are complicated and require us to think carefully through them, but right off the bat, we know this with certainty: **Paul is not, in any way, contradicting the gospel**, that we are *saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone*, all to the *glory of God alone*.

How do we understand these verses, then? First, by understanding that Paul is affirming two truths that we see affirmed all throughout the Bible: **1. Human Responsibility**, and **2. God’s Sovereignty**. 1. First, every single human being is responsible for their own obedience and their own sin before God, and every single human being is responsible to respond to the promises and demands of God *in faith and repentance*; 2. Secondly, God is absolutely sovereign, in complete control, over everything that happens, even in every part of our obedience and salvation. These are two simultaneous truths; they may at first sound contradictory to us, but the Bible always affirms both and holds them together; therefore, so must we. So how do we hold these two things together: **1. Human Responsibility** and **2. God’s Sovereignty**? Let’s look at these verses a little more closely.

Part of our difficulty with verse 12 is that the word “*salvation*” is used. Often times, we use the word *salvation* to refer specifically to our *conversion*, to the moment in which we repented and believed in the gospel of Jesus, trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness of our sins; we say, “I trust I am saved,” or “I was saved...” to mean we are trusting that we have been forgiven of all our sins and have already been declared perfectly righteous in Jesus Christ. This is a perfectly biblical way to use the word “*salvation*” or “*saved*;” however, it is not the *only way* the Bible uses the word, and it’s not how the word is being used here. “*Salvation*” often refers to the entire process of how we are saved, not just the beginning; it includes our “**justification**,” our “**sanctification**,” and our “**glorification**.” **Justification** simply means the point in our life, the very beginning of the Christian life, when we are *justified before God*, being forgiven from our sins and declared perfectly righteous, which happens the moment we turn to Christ in sincere faith, clinging to Him alone as our only hope, Lord, and savior. This is the part of *salvation* we usually refer to when we say “we have been **saved**.” Every Christian has been justified before

God and “has been saved.” However, we have be *declared righteous*, but that doesn’t mean that we *always are righteous*; we still sin. But our salvation doesn’t stop there. The second part is “**Sanctification**,” the process in which God *changes and transforms us* to be holier and be more like Jesus in all that we do; and this all leads to our “**Glorification**,” which is the final fulfillment of our salvation, when we will be raised with Christ for eternity, living with Him in perfected, sinless bodies, no longer sinning, but truly being righteous forevermore. That second part of salvation, our **sanctification**, is what verse 12 is talking about.

Justification necessarily leads to sanctification. Or, to put it more simply: everyone who truly **believes in Jesus necessarily becomes more like Jesus**. If we truly believe in Jesus, if we have truly been born again of the Spirit of God, then we go on to live changed lives; our faith is visibly demonstrated by our obedience, by our continued growth in holiness as we obey the Lord. We believe because God changes our hearts, because the Spirit of God breathes life into our spiritually dead hearts; and because of this, God changes our hearts **so that now we actually want to obey God!** We all start off spiritually dead; we don’t seek God, we don’t obey Him, and we don’t *want* to obey him: **we want and choose sin**. But, when we become believers, and the Spirit of God gives us new hearts, then God changes us **so that we want to obey Him** and even makes it possible **so that we can obey Him!** This is what verse 13 means: “*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work.*”

Therefore, when Paul says “*work out your own salvation,*” what it means is this: “continue to prove, demonstrate, and participate in your salvation by *actively pursuing growth in sanctification, or holiness*; prove your faith genuine and demonstrate that you are truly a believer, by *actively striving to obey God in all things!* **Why? Because this is what true faith looks like in the life of a believer!** Paul is **not** saying our salvation depends on our works or obedience. Paul is also **not** saying that the believer suddenly becomes perfect; no, we do continue to sin. But he **is** saying that the believer’s life should look different, and should look **less and less** like a life ruled by sin and **more and more** like the perfect life of Jesus Christ! **Why? Because God is at work in our hearts, changing our wills so that we desire to lovingly obey Him, actively changing us so that we can and do obey Him!** And He does this not because of anything good in us, but purely by His grace; or as Paul puts it: according to God’s “**good pleasure.**”

The book of James puts it like this: ***“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”*** (James 2:18). And again, in verse 26: ***“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”*** (2:26). True, repentant faith in the gospel of Christ is visibly demonstrated by works of obedience to God. And make no mistake, both our faith and our works are the very work of God’s grace in our lives. **Martin Luther famously worded it this way: “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”**

**[Illustration]:** Picture a graph, like we used to draw in math class: A horizontal line at the bottom represents the length of our Christian life. A vertical line represents how *sinful* or how *godly* our lives look. We wish that the graph looked like this: a flat line at the bottom, representing complete sinfulness, until we become Christians, and then a hockey stick, with a straight line going all the way up, the second we become believers, meaning we go from “completely sinful” to “completely godly” just like that. Unfortunately, that’s not how it works. But the graph **does** have a steady upward trajectory, or direction, from the moment we become believers. It’s not a straight line, to be sure; the Christian life includes many moments of sin, failure, sometimes even backtracking. But even though the line may be jagged, it’s *always on the rise, always increasing towards godliness*. At any given moment, our life might look more sinful than yesterday. But when we back up, at look at the whole picture, the Christian life is one transformed and changed by the grace of God, so that our lives look much godlier over time than we did before we were believers.

This is the goal: **that we constantly strive to grow in obedience, desiring to obey God and pursuing to obey God in all things, firmly trusting in His grace for every part of it, so that we persevere to the end in faith.**

So to **summarize** verses 12-13:

We have a command: **actively pursue obedience to God!** The absolute importance of this is underscored and emphasized by the words **“fear and trembling”!** Every believer must strive to put sin to death and demonstrate true faith and love for Christ by actively striving to obey Him in all things! But this command is immediately followed by a beautiful promise of grace: **God is the one that works out our salvation through us! He is the one at work in our hearts by grace, so that we desire to obey Him and actually can obey Him!** Christian

obedience is a necessary mark of a Christian life. The true Christian *desires* to obey God and *increasingly grows* in obedience! Why? *Because of God's grace in us! because God promises that this is what He does in our hearts as believers!* We are responsible to respond to God's Word in obedience, and He promises to supply the grace we need for us to obey, both to **will** and to **work**. *What wonderful motivation to obey the Lord!*

**[Transition]:** After giving the general command we all have as believers to obey, Paul then moves in towards specific examples of Christian obedience and what it looks like to be motivated by grace:

## **II. Christian Obedience is Visible, Evangelistic, and Edifying to Others (vv. 14-18)**

Verse 14 opens with a very clear, specific, and practical command: ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing.”*** Earlier, in 1:27 - 2:4, Paul urged us to strive for Christian unity with one another, especially as fellow church members: *“doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves”* (2:3). This command is very similar, returning to that same point. Later on in this book, in chapter 3, Paul makes clear that the Philippian church's unity was being threatened by disagreements and arguing among church members (3:2-3).

That probably doesn't shock anyone; two thousand years later, this is still a sad, but all-too-familiar reality in many churches today, where church members grumble and complain, argue, disagree, and bicker, sometimes even ending in church splits or church death. And who doesn't struggle with these sins in their own heart? Oh how easy it is to grumble and complain about things, far too often reflecting *a lack of faith and trust in the promises of God!* Oh how easy it is to let our disagreements with one other break out in frustrating, arguing, quarrelling, and down-right ugly in-fighting! This is what selfish thoughts and ambition naturally produces in us, isn't it?

But instead, Paul calls us to visibly live out a life transformed by the gospel by **putting such complaining and arguing to death** and instead living as ***“blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.”*** In other words, he is practically applying what we just read about in verses 12-13; he is not telling us to *become* children of God, but to *visibly demonstrate* that we *already are* children of God by

*actually living like it!* And children of God love each other, striving to reflect the humble, selfless, self-sacrificial love of Christ for each other! We are to live out our faith in public, both as individuals and as a community of believers - a local church. We are to do this by **“holding fast to the word of life” (v.16)** that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ and the entirety of His Word, the Bible.

Once again, we have our command, but it is rooted in the promise of God: we do so ***because we are children of God, which is true of us who cling steadfastly to the gospel in faith.***

And Paul further motivates us to live godly lives together by reminding us of what happens when the godly faith is visibly demonstrated this way. He gives us two motivating reminders:

1. First, when we live out Christian obedience publicly and visibly, especially towards each other as a church, **it strengthens our evangelist witness to the watching, unbelieving world** around us. Or, as Paul puts it, ***“among whom you shine as lights in the world.”***
2. Secondly, Paul reminds us that our visible Christian obedience encourages and edifies our fellow Christians.

This is, I think, what Paul is getting at in the last part of v.16-v.18. Paul means that if these believers continue to grow in and demonstrate godly obedience together, demonstrating their saving faith even now, then this will lead to and culminate in the fullness of salvation ***“in the day of Christ”!*** This is reason for Paul to rejoice! It makes all of his sacrificial labor worth it. And indeed, he says the Philippians should rejoice as Paul proves faithful even in the midst of suffering and persecution, even if it results in his death! I think that is why Paul uses this metaphor of being ***“poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith”*** in verse 17. Why is all of this reason for us, as believers, to be ***“glad and rejoice”***? Because our greatest hope and desire for each other, should be, like Paul, ***to see each other continue to grow in Christ, to continue to cling to the gospel in saving faith, and persevere to the end, no matter what, and enter into eternal life, full salvation, in Jesus Christ!*** Our goal for each other must be to see each other saved. We cannot see into each others’ hearts; but we **can** hear each other profess faith; and **we can** see this faith demonstrated, or rather, see God’s grace made visible, as we see each other lived changed lives, growing more and more in Christ. So then, when we see each other live out Christian obedience, we should rejoice in one another!

As we walk in Christian obedience, as individuals and as a church, it is *evangelistic* towards non-believers, and it is *encouraging and edifying* to fellow believers.

**[Illustration]:** Not too long ago, I was reminded in a sobering way that our lives as Christians are always being watched. My wife and I were at home, working on the house together, when our tones suddenly shifted dramatically. Because of a misunderstanding between each other, we both became defensive and began disagreeing and quarrelling. We weren't yelling at each other, nothing dramatic; and yet our arguing was clear and visible, and we were being watched. Our son Titus came over, with wide eyes, and asked, "Are you guys frustrated?" He looked at me: "Are you being mean to mommy?" Ouch. **I was cut straight to the heart.** Even though subtle, he could tell our tones were different, he could tell we were arguing; he could tell we were "grumbling and disputing." I was immediately convicted and very aware of my sin in the moment; I confessed my sin, repented, and apologized right there, both to Ashley and Titus. And it as a sobering reminded that little eyes are always watching; little ears are always listening.

And so it is with us as believers. The Christian life doesn't remain personal and private; the sincerity of our faith will always play out visibly, for better or for worse. Brothers and Sisters, if we claim Christ, we must remember that others are always watching how we live. This is true of us all the time; how much more so when we gather as His people, as the church? Others are looking to see if we really believe what we say we do; the non-believing world is looking to see if our lives back up what we believe. So when we gather to worship him on Sunday mornings, or to pray for each other, or when we fellowship, or when we gather for church business meetings, **let us not grumble or complain, let us not fall into disputing, or arguing, or quarrelling, but let us live as innocent, blameless children of God, shining brightly, like bright stars, as a beautiful contrast to the dark, unbelieving world around us!** Let us do so because **that is exactly who we are by the grace of God!**

Brothers and Sisters, let us work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

And if you're not a believer this morning, I want to remind you once again: you can't "work out" your own salvation by your own works or being good; you can only do this by trusting not in your works, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who died for sinners like you and me. So trust in Him alone today! If you have any questions about this,

please come and speak with me or one of the deacons. You can come find me after the service, or you can even come up during the song in just a few moments and I would love to speak with you. Let us Pray.