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WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION

Philippians 2:12-13

By

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Christians have often been confused over the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility in the matters of salvation and sanctification. Some have emphasized God's sovereignty in salvation to the exclusion of human responsibility. For example, when William Carey planned to go to India as a missionary, he was told by one minister, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine." Others have stressed human responsibility to the exclusion of divine sovereignty. These folks lay a guilt trip on you by saying, "If you don't witness to your neighbor, his blood will cry out to God against you on judgment day!" They put all the emphasis for salvation on us.

On the matter of sanctification, or growth in salvation, some teach that we are to be passive: "Let go and let God." If you struggle or strive against sin, they say you're operating in the flesh, because the Christian life is an effortless experience of "not I, but Christ." Others stress obedience and effort to the exclusion of God's power, so that people end up trying to live the Christian life in their own strength.

Where's the biblical balance? I contend that the Bible teaches both/and, not either/or. God is absolutely sovereign and yet we are responsible, both in salvation and in sanctification. If the scale is tilted, it is in the direction of God's sovereignty, since He initiates, sustains, and brings the whole plan to completion. But, even so, we have a responsibility in the process. The apostle Paul brings out both emphases in our text, which teaches that ...

We must work out the practical implications of our salvation
because God Himself is working in our midst.

To understand this text, we must take note of the context and of several facts brought out by the Greek text. In the flow of thought, these verses introduce the conclusion of an appeal for

unity that began in 1:27 and runs through 2:18. "So then" (2:12) in Greek indicates a conclusion from what precedes. Also, all of the words used here are plurals in Greek. Paul is not telling individual Christians to individually work out their personal salvation, as is often taught. Rather, he is appealing to the church, based on the example of humility seen in Jesus Christ, to work out the practical implications of their salvation in their relationships with one another. Because God Himself is at work in their midst as a church, they need to lay aside personal rights and humbly serve one another, putting others ahead of self. In so doing, they will stand out as lights in this dark, selfish world (2:15).

So Paul is especially concerned about these dear people ("my beloved") working out the relational implications of their salvation, with a view to their corporate testimony to the lost. If we talk about salvation but can't get along with one another, either in the church or in our homes, the world laughs off our message. But when the world sees Christians laying aside selfishness and regarding one another as more important than self (2:3), they will be more inclined to listen to the gospel. That's Paul's main message here, that we need to work out the practical implications of our salvation, because God Himself is working in our midst. There are four important things about salvation that we need to understand from this text:

1. We must possess salvation before we can work it out.

"Salvation" is a theological word we sometimes toss around without thinking much about its implications. It's a radical word because it points to a situation where someone is in dire straits. The American pilot who was recently shot down in Bosnia needed to be saved, because he could not get out of his predicament by himself. The Marines who rescued him saved his life. A person who is drowning needs a savior, because he is about to perish. Someone who is mortally ill needs a doctor or some medicine to save them, or else they will die.

The Bible tells us that the condition of every human being outside of Jesus Christ is that we are perishing, under God's wrath and condemnation. Unless we are saved, we will go into eternity bearing the penalty for our sins, which means eternal separation from God and punishment in the lake of fire. Unless we see our

desperate condition, we will not call out to God to save us from our sins. Jesus described His mission as “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). So we will not understand “salvation” if we think it just means that Jesus can give you a happier life. It refers to God’s rescuing us from Satan’s domain of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13, 14).

Paul was not writing to people who lacked salvation, telling them that they needed to work in order to obtain it. Rather, he was writing to people in whom God had begun the good work of salvation (1:6), telling them to work out the practical implications of the salvation they already possessed. The Bible is clear that we can never work for salvation, to earn or merit it, since it is the free gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). Good works can never gain heaven for anyone, because no amount of good works can ever eradicate our sin, and God’s holiness and justice demand that the penalty for sin be paid. If anyone could earn heaven by good works, he would boast in himself, which God will not allow. We are not saved by our good works, and not even by our faith. We are saved by Jesus Christ. Faith is simply the hand that receives the life ring of salvation that He throws to us.

I can’t emphasize this point too strongly, because by far the most prevalent error people make about salvation is to think that God will accept them because of their good works. The world operates on the merit system. Every religion in the world, except biblical Christianity, is built on that system: If you’re good enough, you’ll earn salvation. I’ve sometimes been amazed at how deeply this is ingrained in us. I’ve had people sit under my preaching when I have labored to make it clear that we are not saved by any works that we have done. But then they’ve told me that the reason they think God will accept them into heaven is because they’ve tried hard to be good and to love others.

Because the point is so crucial, let me be blunt: If you think that you’re going to heaven because you’re a pretty good person, you are not going to heaven! The only ones going to heaven are those who have recognized that they were lost and who called out to God to save them through the blood of His Son Jesus.

Once we possess salvation, then it's necessary to work it out in its practical, everyday implications. Paul here mentions how the Philippians had always obeyed, not only when Paul was present; but now, in his absence, he was sure they would also obey, not just him, but God. If their obedience had just been to please Paul, it would not have been evidence of a genuine work of God in their hearts. Those truly saved by God want to please and obey Him in all respects. Since God looks on the heart, we need to learn how to please Him each day with our thoughts as well as with our words and deeds.

Once we possess salvation, we must learn to hold in tension two seemingly contradictory truths that the Bible clearly affirms: that salvation, from start to finish, is God's work; but, also, that at the same time, salvation requires diligent effort on our part.

2. Salvation, from start to finish, is God's work.

The reason the Philippians needed to work out their own salvation was that it was God who was at work among them, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. That sounds contradictory, doesn't it? But the Bible puts both together.

We're not saved because we choose God; we're saved because God willed to save us. He begins the good work in us (1:6). John 1:12-13 says, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." James 1:18 says, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures." Jesus said, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16).

One of the most prevalent errors in Christendom today is the idea that lost people can choose God by their own free will. The fallen human will is bound by sin. Jesus said plainly, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). "No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom

the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:22). Left to ourselves, we all choose to go our own way. Salvation depends on God's choosing us and irresistibly drawing us by His grace according to His good pleasure.

God not only *wills* our salvation; He *works* it. Salvation is not through any human effort. It comes from the mighty power of God imparting spiritual life to those who were dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-5), resulting in a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Not only in its inception, but throughout the whole process, God must be the energizing power of the Christian life (our English word "energy" comes from the Greek word translated "work" in 2:13). Jesus said, "... apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We cannot live the Christian life in our own strength or effort, but must walk each day in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Salvation, from start to finish, is God's work.

"If that's true," you say, "then let's kick back and not sweat it. If God wants to do it, He will do it without our effort." Not so:

3. Although salvation is God's work, it requires diligent effort on our part.

Maybe this sounds like double-talk, but it is clearly what God's Word declares. We are dead in our sins, in bondage to sin, unable to escape. Yet God calls on us to be saved and He commands us to call others to salvation. As Peter "solemnly testified and kept on exhorting" his hearers on the Day of Pentecost, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40).

You say, "How can you exhort someone to be saved when he can't be saved by his own will or effort?" Perhaps an illustration from the ministry of Jesus will help. On one occasion, Jesus encountered a man in the synagogue who had a withered hand. Apparently he had nerve damage which made it impossible for him to move or use his hand. Jesus commanded that man to stretch forth his hand (Matt. 12:13). Humanly, that was an impossible command. But Jesus told him to do it and when the man obeyed, his hand was restored. On another occasion Jesus told a man who had not been able to walk for 38 years to get up, take up his pallet, and walk (John 5:8). The man did it!

In both cases, the Lord called those men to do something they could not do in their own strength. He imparted to them the supernatural power required to fulfill His command. But they still had to do it. If they had said, "I can't do it," they would not have been healed. God worked mightily, but they had to work, too.

Hear me carefully on this, because I could easily be misunderstood: There is a sense in which receiving God's salvation requires diligent effort on your part. If you sit back and say, "Well, I'm not sure whether I'm one of the elect, and there isn't much I can do about it anyway," you'll be lost! Complacency about your soul is deadly! You must have a desperate concern for your eternal well-being that moves you, in the words of 2 Peter 1:10, to "be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you." Jesus talked about men taking the kingdom of God by force (Matt. 11:12; Luke 16:16). He urged His hearers, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). If you are uncertain about your standing before God, do not give rest to your soul until you know that God has saved you.

There's a good illustration of this truth in the Old Testament. Six cities were designated as cities of refuge, where a man who had accidentally killed another man could flee so that a relative of the dead man could not avenge his death. If you were guilty of such an act, you wouldn't sit around, hoping that the avenger would not get you. You wouldn't have complacently shrugged your shoulders and said, "I can't do anything about saving myself." You would have taken off on the run for the nearest city of refuge, knowing that if you didn't make it inside, you would be killed. The avenger is in hot pursuit, and you're exhausted. But you don't stop until you're safe inside the gates of that city.

Those cities are a picture of salvation in Jesus our Refuge. God's wrath will surely come upon you for your crimes. If you die outside of Christ, you will have to pay with your life. But, God has provided a place of refuge. So there is an urgency, if you have not done so, for you to flee to Christ, who alone is our Refuge against sin and hell. In that sense, coming to salvation requires our diligent effort.

Continuance or growth in salvation also requires our effort. There is a popular teaching, known as the Keswick teaching (it was popularized at some Bible conferences held in Keswick, England), that we are not to exert any effort in the Christian life, that any striving proves that we are operating in the flesh, not in the Spirit. It is built on verses like Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." That's a blessed truth which we all must learn to apply!

But there are also many verses in the New Testament which show that even the Spirit-filled life requires that *I* must strive against sin (Heb. 12:4); *I* must fight the good fight of faith (2 Tim. 4:7; Eph. 6:10-18); *I* must run the race so as to win (1 Cor. 9:24); *I* must be active in cleansing myself from defilement of flesh and spirit and perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). As our text says, because God is at work, *I* must work out my salvation. Doing it "with fear and trembling" implies both a reverent fear of God and an awareness of my own weakness and propensity toward sin that leads me to judge myself.

So the point is, even though God sovereignly wills and works all things after the counsel of His will, at the same time each of us is responsible to exert effort to work out the implications of our salvation each day. Yes, we must rely on the Holy Spirit and His power, not on our flesh. But, yes again, we must work. As Paul says (1 Cor. 15:10), he labored more than all of the other apostles; then he adds, "yet not I, but the grace of God with me." So we can't excuse our laziness or lack of obedience by saying, "God didn't move me to do it!" We must work with God.

We've seen that we must possess salvation to be able to work it out; and that while salvation is completely God's work, yet we must work out our salvation in dependence on God.

4. Salvation always has practical relational implications.

This is the main point of Paul's appeal here, that if we are truly saved by God's working in us, then we are under obligation to work out relational differences by following Christ's example of self-denying love. Just as Jesus laid aside His rights, just as He did

not live for Himself and His own pleasure, just as He put others ahead of Himself, even to the point of death on the cross, so we must learn to die daily to self and live for others for Jesus' sake. If you claim to be saved, but you persist in selfishness, in refusing to yield your rights, in demanding your own way, whether at home or in the church, your life isn't backing up your claim. If the living God ("God" is emphatic in the Greek of 2:13) truly is at work in our midst, we must work out relational differences in a spirit of Christ-like humility and love.

As Americans, I think we sometimes put too much emphasis on the individual aspect of salvation and not enough emphasis on the corporate side of it. Of course, salvation is intensely individual; if you're not saved individually, you're not saved. But being saved individually of necessity affects how you relate to others. As I said, all the words in verses 12 & 13 are plurals. You can't live the Christian life in isolation. You've got to work out your individual salvation in your relationships with other Christians, both in your family and in the church. And, I might add, it is *work*! It's a lifetime process, and it isn't automatic. But as we work through such problems or differences, we learn more of Christ. We grow in humility and servanthood.

I also add, the reason we work out our salvation in terms of good relationships isn't primarily so we'll be happy, but rather for God's good pleasure, that is, to please God, whose pleasure is that His people love one another. As we work out our salvation in loving relationships, lost people will see the difference God makes in our daily lives and so be drawn to Him.

Conclusion

John Wesley and George Whitefield were both used of God to bring thousands of people to faith in Christ in the 18th century. They were good friends although they differed greatly on the matter of God's sovereignty versus man's responsibility in salvation. Wesley put such an emphasis on human responsibility that he was unsure of his own salvation on his deathbed, after a life of preaching the gospel. Whitefield, on the other hand, was a firm believer in God's sovereignty in salvation.

A man who was trying to find a juicy bit of gossip once asked Whitefield if he thought he would see John Wesley in heaven. Whitefield replied, "No." "Do you mean that you do not believe that John Wesley is converted and thus won't be in heaven?" the man asked, hoping to procure his bit of gossip. "You asked me if I would see John Wesley in heaven," Whitefield replied. "I do not believe I will, because John Wesley will be so close to the throne of God and I will be so far away, that I will not get a glimpse of him."

George Whitefield was applying what Paul is here teaching. If, by God's grace, we have been saved--if it is none other than God who is at work among us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure--then, we must then be diligent to work out the practical implications of that salvation in our relationships with one another in obedience to God.

How are your relationships at home? With other Christians? If God has saved you, you've got to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who laid aside His rights and went to the cross on our behalf. Work out your salvation by dying to self and loving others for Jesus' sake.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss: One of our main problems in evangelism is trying to get people saved who don't even know that they're lost.
2. What are some of the practical dangers if we camp too hard on either God's sovereignty or human responsibility in salvation?
3. How can we know when to "let go and let God" or when we need to exert more effort on a matter?
4. How can we hold to essential truth without sacrificing love? Is all division among professing Christians wrong?

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