

God Works in You for His Good Pleasure
Philippians 2:12-18
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Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Philippians 2:12-18

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

One of the fun things about living in a new area is trying out new restaurants, especially local ones. Looking up restaurants that I haven't eaten at on Yelp often makes me laugh. Inevitably these are the kinds of comments that are side-by-side (these are actual quotes):

"Hidden gem! ...the best burger I've ever had... Food: 10/10... I loved every bite... Service: Although busy, the waitress was very attentive & friendly."

"I do not like there food it is bad no one will like it service is terrible there ambiance is also terrible."

Same restaurant, two very different reviews. Next:

"This place is amazing, great service, incredible menu, and the best tater tots I've ever tasted."

"My husband purchased a hot dog for a late lunch and approximately 30 min later was on the side of the road vomiting with severe cramping and diarrhea."

Again, same restaurant!

"In an age when service is hard to come by, this place has it. I was very impressed by the service... the staff was attentive... Food was great... Thanks for a great meal!"

"This place was such a disappointment... They brought out my husband's dish and about 15 minutes later my dish came... The waiter was so busy getting take-out orders ready that he couldn't be bothered to wait on us properly. We will not return!"

Clearly everyone has a different set of expectations and experiences. And I get it: if a restaurant has terrible service or gets you sick, they might need to hear about it. But I feel like many times it says just as much about you as it does about the restaurant with those kinds of angry, critical comments – especially since no one asked and you had to go to the trouble of posting a review. Now, again, it's not wrong to have an opinion, and you might be helping people by warning them away from bad experiences, but online reviews often degenerate into sounding like the comments sections for articles. They're angry, offended, and looking to inflict as much damage as they can.

And it's not just Yelp and restaurant reviews. Today's online world has allowed negative voices to be loud and amplified to be spread all around the world. One writer, Chris Best, explores some of the biggest problems with social media:

"For a while, it felt like we were getting a great deal. Social media giants gave us rekindled friendships, family photos, even the occasional uplifting story or useful insight. But too much of what we've received has been toxic gruel, tube-fed... by sophisticated algorithms designed to exploit our worst impulses and keep us agitated, excited, engaged. We have become conditioned to accept that viciously tearing down complete strangers online is normal and admirable, and that it is right and proper for a bad tweet from decades ago to ruin someone's life. Even worse, these poisonous dynamics have leached into our offline lives, in the form of broken relationships, decreased attention spans, and damaged mental health."¹

¹ <https://on.substack.com/p/breaking-off-the-engagement>

What a contrast to what we're called to as believers in Christ. "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" "*outdo one another in showing honor,*" and "*be kind to one another and tenderhearted*" are some of the exhortations in the New Testament that we're given to guide our personal conduct and speech. Paul explains in our passage today that negativity expressed through grumbling and arguing is not the mark of a Christian who models Jesus to the world. It is one of the points that Paul makes as he reminds the Philippian believers what they should be striving towards in their spiritual lives, being light in the darkness. In the first two verses, he charges them to

I. Keep Up the Good Work (vv. 12-13)

¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

How do we usually think of the phrase "work out"? Physical training, lifting weights, getting in shape... I just started working out at Planet Fitness after a couple years of not going to a gym. I don't love working out, I just know I need it or I get really lazy and my body will break down much earlier than I want it to. As much as we know that we need to work out our bodies, and we should be working out our minds with study and learning, the other area that we should work out is our Christian obedience. 1 Timothy 4:8 - "*for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*"

The command to "*work out your own salvation*" in verse 12 can be a troubling phrase for us because we've understood that salvation is by grace alone, not by works. Eph. 2:8-9 - "*For by grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God, not a result of works.*" If we're saved by God's grace, why was Paul saying that salvation had to be worked out? And I think the best answer is that Paul is not saying work *for* salvation, he says work it *out*.² You cannot work out your salvation unless it is already worked in. We have to make a distinction between our coming to faith in Christ, which is called justification, and our living out the Christian life, which is called sanctification. Paul is clearly referring to our sanctification, the whole time in between us becoming Christians and going to heaven. I like what Eugene Peterson calls sanctification: "a long obedience in the same direction."³ This working out our salvation is looking for ways to glorify Jesus in our lives, finding ways to put the Bible's positive commands into action - worshipping God, loving your enemy, helping the helpless, ministering to those that God puts in our paths. It's also negatively turning away from sin, putting our ungodly desires to death, and fleeing evil. It's the life of obedience that Paul has called them to, exercised whether he is physically with them or away.

Are we totally on our own in this life of obedience, with God sitting back waiting to decide if we've done enough to please Him? Absolutely not, verse 13 says it clearly: "*it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" God works the miracle of salvation in our hearts and then continues to work in us, giving us strength to live out the Christian life. And as He works, we work too. Colossians 1:29 says it like this: "*For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*" I toil, He works - we move forward in faith as God works inside of us, enabling us.

Sometimes this is controversial, because you have people who naturally drift to one side or the other. You have people who say, "Let go and let God," and figure that God will do everything that He wants to do, you just sit back and refrain from sinning and you're good. Then the opposite camp is

² Doug Serven & Bobby Griffith, *Philippians: Birth of Joy* (Oklahoma City: White Blackbird Books, 2017), p. 63.

³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980).

the “Just Do It” camp, that is just waiting for a list of tasks to go get done. It doesn’t matter if you’ve prayed about it or you think it’s what God wants, you just want to get it done. But it shouldn’t be an “either-or” it should be a “both-and” – look for where God is moving and how He’s moving in you, and then strive and strain to work hard at whatever task He’s put in front of you. We are never left on our own, God is always working, but our Christian lives are compared to a race, a contest, a fight, a battle. Those take intense dedication and effort.

How about this idea of working “*out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” - what does that last part mean? Do I obey God always looking up to make sure that He’s not about to smite me? Do I sign up for all the ministries at church trembling with fear that if I don’t, God will send something terrible my way? We need to always have a healthy fear of who God is and what He’s capable of. When we’re tempted to think of God as our buddy or as our nice, smiling grampa in the sky, we have to remind ourselves that God is a “consuming fire” who is all-powerful. Remember *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* - what Mr. Beaver said about Aslan the lion? “Who said anything about safe? Of course, he’s not safe. But he’s good.”⁴ We need to remember that about God – He’s not safe and we can’t sanitize or tame Him, but He’s good. And He’s not a consuming fire to those who love Him and follow Him. The fear and trembling is not terror and dread, it’s awe and respect.

The next two verses emphasize that believers should

II. Let Your Light Shine in Darkness (vv. 14-15)

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ 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,

We’re studying Deuteronomy in the Men’s Bible Study, and the majority of what we’ve studied is Moses looking back at Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. And you’re reminded of how ungrateful and stubborn they were, and of how they grumbled and whined. They had just been freed from a lifetime of captivity to a foreign power, Egypt, and still they doubted God and complained in the midst of Him taking care of them. Paul was alluding to their behavior and warning Christians that those attitudes are poisonous to our spiritual lives. Paul says “*do ALL things without grumbling and disputing.*” It’s the ALL things that really gets us, isn’t it? I can do a lot of things without being negative, but all things? Every area of life – marriage, family, work, school, shopping, in-laws, civic duty, sports, church... that’s a lot of areas to keep my grumbling in check. We’re all prone to complaining when we don’t get our ways, when others don’t act like we think they should. There are any number of things that we could be resentful towards God about – why didn’t He give me a different body, a different family, a better place to grow up, more talent and skill? We forget the millions of ways that we’ve been blessed in life and focus on where we think we come up short. The solution to complaining and a critical spirit is humility and gratitude – 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – “*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will in Christ Jesus for you.*”

Some of us are good at not being openly combative but are guilty of grumbling under our breath or behind closed doors. Paul warns against both the private grumbling and the more public disputing. He is not telling us to never confront or argue for the truth; in Galatians chapter 2 he talks about correcting Peter to his face about not being willing to eat with Gentiles. Jesus’ directive to go to someone to call them to repentance in Matthew 18 still stands. Galatians 6:1 – “*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*” These things are not grumbling and disputing, they are godly conflict resolution and correction.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier, 1970), pp. 75-76.

The real danger is when we complain about one another in gossip and in ways that are destructive, not constructive.

In verse 15, Paul says the goal is to be “*blameless and innocent.*” That sounds impossible – what about the first part of TULIP – “total depravity,” we’re all shot through with sin? The words blameless and innocent in the Scriptures, when they refer to people other than Jesus, never means without sin, completely pure. Being blameless means that we look to establish a way of life that is above reproach and rebuke. “*Blameless and innocent*” are the opposites/the contrasts with the “*crooked and twisted*” adjectives later in the verse. We should look different from the world. Paul’s not asking you to paste a phony smile on your face and pretend you don’t have any problems. But you will shine as a light in this world when you can rise above your problems and have a godly attitude despite them.

Paul referred to the world of his day as “*a crooked and twisted generation,*” and there was a lot of perversion in Roman society and in the temples, their extensive system of slavery, their practice of abandoning babies, barbaric gladiator games and killing Christians. And we look around today and say, “Did you see how sick our society is - drag queen story hour, and the Grammys, and human trafficking and all the political craziness – we’re a crooked and depraved generation if I’ve ever seen one!” But it’s not just Paul’s day and our day - we need to remember that every generation is ungodly, crooked, and depraved in its own way. No age of this world reflects the kingdom of God, they all rebel and embody depraved behavior in different ways. That’s why God places believers and churches all over; we are in the world but not of it. We are to stand out and shine light, no matter what hostility that provokes from those who love the darkness. Jesus is the light of the world, we can act as His lights in the neighborhoods and places in which we live and work. Matthew 5:16 – “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”

The final verses exhort the Philippians to

III. Make Me Proud and Joyful (vv. 16-18)

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. ¹⁷ Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸ Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

We have a parallel passage in one of Paul’s other letters, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 says, “*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*” In both letters, Paul knew that the end of his life was pending, and he was reflecting on what he had accomplished. He didn’t point to a bunch of church buildings that had been built, he pointed to the lives of those that he shepherded. And he was not just excited for his own reward from the Lord, but looked forward to hearing how the saints at Philippi would be commended. This is a similar sentiment to what Paul told the Thessalonians – “*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? It is not you? For you are our glory and joy*” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

A drink offering was what was poured on top of an animal sacrifice; look it up in Exodus 29. Wine was poured on or around an animal and evaporated with the burning, the aroma went towards the heavens, symbolizing it rising to God. So Paul was saying that the Philippians faith is the main sacrifice, he is just the wine poured over it. Paul regarded his own life as a sacrifice that advanced the faith of others. To the end, Paul lived out his own advice to “*count others more significant than yourselves*” and “*look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others*” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Conclusion

Recently I was playing golf and got paired up with a guy named Dennis. He was friendly and we ended up talking a lot since we had to wait on every hole because the course was backed up. He told me that his life plan was to work four more years at Lowes, retire at age 70, and then hopefully get in a good twenty years of golf, fishing, and bowling. So I said, "That sounds great, then what?" And he didn't really know what I meant, he started talking about how you never know what could happen, he could die early or he could win the lottery. So I said, "No, I mean at the end of retirement. When you die and go to heaven and they ask you why you should be allowed into heaven, what's the plan, what would you say?" "I haven't got any idea why they would let me in. I guess because I'm generous and nice to people." "Well, what are you going to do if being generous and nice to a lot of people isn't enough to get into heaven?" Blank stare. So I continued, "Thanks for being so honest and my initial answer is similar – that there isn't any reason to let me into heaven based on what I've done. But Jesus died in my place, so all of the sin in my life has been paid for and nothing can separate me from God's love." It was an awkward conversation interrupted by tee shots. But he's got my business card, I hope he emails or texts me, please pray for Dennis.

I was trying to be winsome and gentle in our conversation, but I kind of wanted to grab him by the shoulders and say, "Do you know that there could be so much more for you than hitting a little white ball or reeling in a big fish? Nothing wrong with those things, but you could have real purpose in your life and then an eternity of joy awaiting you." It reminds me of the C.S. Lewis quote from *The Weight of Glory* that I've probably quoted here before:

"Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."⁵

And as I was reflecting on that conversation, I thought about the fact that I shouldn't really expect anything different from a non-Christian; he should live his life to please himself, that's what I would be doing if I wasn't a believer. But I see that same kind of attitude in Christians and recognize it in myself: this feeling that life is just about doing the work that you have to do until you can retire and then do the things that you enjoy and have everybody leave you alone and have no expectations of you. We end up adopting the world's value system and we don't shine like stars in our generation. And Paul is placing before us the picture of someone who pours themselves out for the Lord and for others. And it's a lifelong pursuit, the race and the fight are not over until you die, and then you receive the crown of life and the pleasures of eternity in heaven. So as tempting as it is to stop pursuing ministry and living an others-first, sacrificial life, and start living life for what I want and what's easy for me, we are called to respond to the Spirit's work inside of us and looking for ways to share Jesus to a lost, twisted, and hurting world. Amen.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 4:5-6 - *"For what we proclaim is not ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."*

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).