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COOPERATE IN THE GREAT WORK OF GOD (Philippians 2:12-18)

As I prepared for Christian ministry, I attended seminary and studied the field of music. One of my favorite classes was Seminar in Form, a four-month examination of the five Piano Concertos of Beethoven. For every session of this class, we were to analyze the form of a movement of a concerto, ready to defend our opinions, since the form of a piece is not always clear-cut.

The professor for this class had laid out an interesting and challenging exercise for our class. He gave some direction, kept us on schedule, motivated us to keep going and prodded us toward deeper thinking. What he didn't do was our work.

Each one in our class had to do an immense amount of preparation for each meeting. Hours of listening and score study would lead us to the conclusions we would present to the group. I loved it, but I learned something other than the way Beethoven organized his pieces. I learned that if I was to learn from this professor, if I was to grow as a musician and gain skill and insight, I had to cooperate with the professor's design of the class. He encouraged us and laid out the requirements, but we had to apply ourselves to gain anything from it.

This is the idea we're confronted with in the passage we'll look at in this study. God has laid out a plan and empowers us in his work in our lives, but we must cooperate and do our part to see any development toward becoming more like Christ.

STRIVE TO GROW

*Philippians 2:12, 13 – 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, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.***

Verse twelve begins with “therefore”, so what follows expands on what preceded. Last time, we saw the amazing passage detailing the example of humility of Jesus as he willingly offered his life to redeem those who believe in him. As a result of his death and resurrection, his exaltation is promised when every knee will bow to him. Because of that truth, Paul writes therefore we must work out our salvation as God does his work in us.

We have to be careful, though, not to interpret this as working for our salvation. That contradicts other Scripture and cannot be the meaning here.

*Ephesians 2:8, 9 - For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is **not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast.*

We are told here to “work out” our own salvation, but it also says that “it is God who works in you”. In English, the word “work” is used in both phrases, but not in Greek. When we are told to work out (*katergazomi*) our own salvation, the word means to do or accomplish something. The word for God's work, though (*energeo*), means to be operative or the put forth power. There is effort on our part and on God's part, but different kinds.

It's much like having a car. There are things I have to do to be able to go places in my car. I open the door, turn the key, operate pedals, know and obey laws of the road, replace gas, change oil and many other things. But without an engine, my efforts mean nothing. The engine does something I cannot do. It makes motion possible. It energizes the whole trip.

It's the same in our spiritual lives. What is our effort to work out our salvation? We should regularly read and meditate on the Bible, pray, serve and fellowship with others, striving for growth in all areas of our spiritual lives.

And what does God do as he works in us? Among other things, he brings us from death to life, from unbelief to faith, from lifelessness to fruitfulness, from faith to works, from wickedness to holiness, from following to producing disciples, from spiritual infancy to maturity.

So our work is displaying the fact that God is at work in us for our salvation, not as a way of earning our salvation. We make efforts to cooperate with what he is doing in us, energizing us toward maturity in him.

Notice, too, that we are told to do this with “fear and trembling”. This isn’t cowering in a corner. Rather, it involves being wary of our old nature, our tendency to do things that move us into sinful patterns, choking the work of God’s Spirit in our lives. Pleasing God doesn’t happen naturally, but supernaturally, which takes careful work and diligence.

*2 Corinthians 3:4, 5 - Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. **Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.***

SHINE AS LIGHTS

*Philippians 2:14, 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,***

Paul then gives us a picture of what those around us will see if we cooperate with God, working out our own salvation. They will see positivity, blamelessness and uprightness in what we say and do. In this dark world, that kind of behavior will get attention.

Believers are told to make following God look attractive. No one will be drawn to the Christian life by observing a grumbling, complaining believer. Even though we go through rough days that make it almost impossible not to complain, we must develop a default attitude toward our circumstances that is honest, but not critical and negative.

SEIZE THE WORD

*Philippians 2:16-18 – **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. 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. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.***

The Scriptures reveal who God is and how we can cooperate with him in his great work of changing believing people into his goal of spiritual completion. It is key, then, for us to know and internalize this word of God so that we can participate with him. This means holding fast to the word of life.

The word here for “hold fast” means to observe or give attention to. Americans probably have more access to the Bible than any group in history, yet neglect it at our own peril. When I talk to people about the Bible, I get the sense they think it says what they want it to say, not what it really says. For anyone to cooperate with God in his great work, accurately knowing the Scriptures by holding fast to the true intent and meaning of the texts is critical.

*2 Timothy 2:15 - Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, **rightly handling the word of truth.***

So, work in cooperation with God to become more like Christ, which is the whole point of following him. He ultimately does the energizing work in us to give the forward motion, but we have to decide to put out effort as well. The final goal is to bring glory to him for his great grace and love that makes all of this possible.

*Ephesians 3:20, 21 - Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, **according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.***

BIBLE STUDY

Legislators and Staff (During Session)
Thursdays, 8:00 a.m.
Room 153 House Office Building