

A Good Work Out
Philippians 2: 12-30
Don Lincoln

So here we are, mid-stream in the second chapter of Philippians, after having last week gone through this incredibly glorious Christ hymn – an ancient liturgy piece – “Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

(*BIG BREATH*) – “**THEREFORE**” – “**THEREFORE.....**” Paul goes through this long hymn and then he says, “**SO.....**”

(hurried) “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling!”

How often verse 12 is misunderstood – that verse that says work out your own salvation. People frequently suppose it means Christians are responsible for doing things which will earn them their salvation, on the principle of “the Lord helps those who help themselves,” which is not a text found anywhere in scripture.

“Work out your own salvation” doesn’t mean “devise” your salvation. Read the rest of Paul and he makes it clear that salvation is God’s work from start to finish. “Work out” means make it effective, make it real, let it be actualized in you. As one scholar says it, “We must work **out of us** in faith what God in His grace has already worked **into us**.”¹ Paul wants the Philippians to work out for themselves what their salvation looks like. What this business of being saved will actually look like when it’s put into practice – in their unique context, in their particular place of living.

And what DOES it look like? Paul has already said it. “You should have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.” And what does that mean? “You should do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, consider others as better than yourselves.” “Empty yourself; take on the form of a servant.” This is what Paul has been saying to the Philippians.

Jesus said it more succinctly, “No greater love has one than this – than to lay down your life for your friends.” And of course we KNOW from the Good Samaritan story who Jesus called friends.....

Paul goes on in this chapter, as if to say, “let me give you an example or two.” Paul commends to them Timothy and Epaphroditus – examples of what he’s talking about. Some folks think this is like a “business aside” in the letter. Paul’s been into this great theological rhetoric, and it’s seems as if he takes a break from that and wants to fill in a little important administrative details.

Actually, I think it's the great theological rhetoric that has sent Paul to thinking about Timothy and Epaphroditus. Imagine him saying: "Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.....like.....say.....TIMOTHY!!!"

Notice as Paul commends Timothy to the Philippians, he doesn't say "Timothy is a great preacher," or "Timothy is a truly holy or righteous man." Not at all. Paul writes this, "I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare."²

"Timothy," Paul says, "will truly care for you when I send him. He will regard you as more important than himself. He will not look to his own interests, but to yours." This is what the Christ mind looks like when it is at work in you! As Paul says, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and work for His good pleasure." As you see it in Timothy; you'll also see it in Epaphroditus, who almost died for the sake of serving Christ. "Serving me and serving the gospel," Paul says. As you see it in them, so it will be in you. God's work. In you.

And while this may be a new way for you to live – **it is the most human way** to be. The way God intended us to be and to live. To have this messianic mind, this mind of King Jesus – being willing to expend yourself for the sake of others – counting others as more important than yourself. Just as Timothy will come and do for you and just as Epaphroditus has done for me.

Think about the application of that. Can you imagine a world where EVERYONE actually lived that way. "No – I insist.....after you....." Imagine if that's what you heard all the time. What would happen if we were constantly stumbling over ourselves to consider others more important than ourselves. "No – go ahead – I insist – you first, please."

Someone once said, "Christianity does not need to evangelize; it just needs to be its true self."³

That's exactly what NT Wright says in his lecture on our series in this class. So many in the early church became Christians because some people down the street were living in a different way as they followed Jesus – they were being kind to one another; generous to their neighbors. When people did bad things to them they did not strike back – they radiated a different kind of life – to friend and strange alike – and people noticed and they wanted some of that.

People weren't becoming Christians because they had read some great theologian, or heard someone expounding some abstract doctrine. It was because they witnessed people living differently.

When God is working through you, Paul says, you will shine like stars in the world, in the middle of a twisted and depraved generation. As Jon said in his children's message, "In the darkest of dark, the stars shine brightest."

You will be the beacon of hope that people in the world need need, the sign of God's beauty in a world that has defaced it. Complete what God has done in you – God has made His salvation, given you His salvation – COMPLETE IT by letting it pervade, influence, overtake your lives – and you will shine. You will shine and be a light in the world.

I've been pondering this week – what it means to be shining lights in this world, as the mind of Christ overtakes us, and what does it mean in our particular context with this increasingly spreading pandemic, the cries for racial equity and changes afoot in our nation. What might this text mean; how might it apply? In the middle of studying, reading, and reflecting, I came across this parable:

“Once upon a time there was a town that was built just beyond the bend of a large river. One day, some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three bodies floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled three bodies out of the river.”

“One body was dead so they buried it. One was alive but quite weak, so they put that person in their hospital. The third turned out to be a healthy child whom they placed with a family who cared for it and raised it.”

“From that day on, every day a number of bodies came floating down the river and, every day, the good people of the town would pull them out and tend to them, taking the sick to the hospital, placing the children with families and burying those who were dead.”

“This went on for years. Each new day brought its quota of bodies and the townsfolk worked at developing more elaborate systems for picking them out of the water and tending to them. The whole town took a certain pride in its generosity. However, during all these years and despite all that generosity and effort, nobody ever thought to go up the river beyond the bend and find out why, daily, those bodies came floating down the river.”

That's the difference between charity and justice. Charity responds to the real needs of others but in itself does not question what caused those needs. Justice tries to go upriver to identify and change the conditions that are at the root of the problem – whether it's injustice, or selfishness, or prejudice, or self-centeredness, or a virus or hatred.

Let's get behind why this is happening; why this is spreading; why there's unrest and see what we can do to change it. People will tolerate, even praise our charity, but very often there is suspicion or outright hostility for those who do the works of justice.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

“We the People of the United States in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice.....” It’s been a few years since 56 men committed treason by signing the Declaration of Independence that gave rise to the words of that constitution. Because they had come to believe the injustices could no longer be tolerated.

“Sisters and brothers,” Paul writes, “It is God who is at work within you.” God, who has already completed the work of salvation; it is your job now to let the miracle of the Gospel take hold and have its impact, its effect on you and your life.

That work will be concrete, energy-burning, time-consuming. It may require perspiration, calluses, sore back and bone weariness. It is not to earn your salvation – that’s been done, but in response to it. It is what the spirit of God inspires in us –The spirit of God will inspire you – will inspire you, like Timothy and Epaphroditus, not to be concerned about yourself out of ambition or conceit but to consider others worthy of all you can give, your life and your love.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Jac Muller, NT Professor at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.
2. NT Wright; commentary on the text.
3. Michael Bourdeaux, *Risen Indeed: Lessons in Faith from the USSR*; 1983