

Philippians XVI – Working Out What God is Working In (Phil 2:12-13)

Introduction – As always, remember, God only commands what He gives, and He gives what He commands.

The Text – *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now 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 do for His good pleasure.”*

The Connections for This Command – The command is tied to all that has been said to this point.

Therefore – We saw the importance of this word in v9. Christ’s glory is the logical result of His humiliation and suffering. Now Paul wants us to see the logical connection between Christ’s obedience and our obedience. Christ was obedient to the end, even death on the cross. Paul will now underline the obvious: those who are in Christ must and will do the same.

“my beloved” – As Paul turns to command the Philippians, it is in the context of his true affections for them in love (as in 1:8, repeating a quote, *“...for it tends in no small degree to secure faith in the doctrine when the people are persuaded that they are loved by the teacher.”* - Calvin). Our zeal for truth and obedience should never overshadow our zeal for love (Gal 6:1, 2 Tim 2:24ff).

“as you have always obeyed” – Paul’s correction is not to those who are in outright rebellion to the Lord (1:9) but rather to those who are inviting certain compromises in the fellowship (1:5) to remain and fester.

“in my absence” – As noted in 1:27, we must avoid the sin of outward righteousness when we know we are being watched by those we want to please. Do you act one way in front of your parents and another way when they are not around? Do you act one way at church and another way at the office? Or are you aware of the Lord of lords at all times?

The Command – This command is given to the church first, not to individuals. “Your own” is plural and refers to the Philippians’ salvation. Of course, individuals must obey this verse in order for the community to obey. But the picture is to the community’s obedience considered corporately first.

Continually Working Out – Sanctification takes place individually and in the life of the body. It is not a one time event. It is something which we are to continue to work out. Salvation is by faith from first to last. But this faith is something we must fight in, wrestle for, strive to stand firm in. There is a real battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. In the devil’s view, there is always hope for your destruction. John Owen said that the hard work of growing in holiness always involves *“stepping on the belly of our lust.”*

Salvation – Throughout scripture we see that there is an understanding that we are saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Salvation is all by grace through faith. That faith that saves is a faith that perseveres and continues working all the way until the end.

Fear and Trembling – First of all, this means, “with fear and trembling.” This phrase is used to describe a reaction in the face of God which squelches all rebellion, realizing that in fact He is the King of kings (i.e. Ex 15:16).

The Gift of Godly Fear – This is a fruit of the Spirit, a gift of God’s love upon His people (Jer 32:38-40) and is to be manifest here, in the corporate worship of God’s people (Heb 12:28). It is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7) and so is the starting point for knowing God’s will, and it moves us towards obedience (Prov 16:6) and hatred of our sin. But is also called a “fountain of life” (Prov 14:27). If I am aware that I am ever before the face of God, and I have been given the gift of godly fear, how much will I think of Him and contemplate His holiness?

Fear and the Working Out of Salvation – It affects my worship (Psalm 89:7, 147:11). It affects my sense of vocation (Neh 5:15). It affects my tongue (Psalm 39:1). So it affects both how I live before God and man. It affects the church’s worship and body-life.

The Promise – Paul, in no way, has works-righteousness in his mind. He is not commanding us to merit anything before God. He is calling us to submit to reality. You are saved. You are being saved. God is working in you (y’all).

Both To Will and To Do – God works this obedience of the faith into us. It does not come from fleshly indulgence that looks like piety but is actually only prideful legalism (Col 2:16-23). Where does the ability come from? God. Where does the desire come from? God. Where will fear and trembling come from? God. How do I receive these things? By faith. How are they imparted to me? Through the Word and sacraments by the work of the Holy Spirit.

For God’s Pleasure – And here is the good news. It is God’s pleasure to impart this grace to you. It is His pleasure to grant you faith. It is His pleasure to pour out His mercy. It is His pleasure to take you through sufferings. It is His pleasure to use those sufferings to bring you to glory in Christ.