

MY JOB AND GOD'S JOB  
PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

I.

William Carey (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAM CAREY), who is known as “The Father of Modern Missions,” was a shoemaker by trade. Soon after the young Englishman was converted in the 1700s, he became a pastor. As a result of his study of the Bible he developed a concern for people in other parts of the world who had never heard about Jesus. He presented his ideas about the need to reach these people with the gospel to a group of fellow pastors. After his presentation one of the older members of the group responded, “**Sit down young man! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.**” (PROJECTOR OFF)

Several years ago I was watching a television evangelist pleading with his viewers to send him money. He described the financial state of his organization and all of the good work that it was doing. He cried and urged his viewers to send him a check. He declared that if people did not respond, Satan would win a great victory, and the purposes of God would be thwarted.

These two incidents illustrate the extremes to which Christians have gone in understanding the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. In the first case the older minister minimized human responsibility and misunderstood the sovereignty of God. In the second incident the evangelist minimized the sovereignty of God and misunderstood the responsibility of man.

The way that we understand the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility has a big effect on our approach to life. If I am looking for a job, and if I take God's sovereignty to an unbiblical extreme, I might just sit around the house and pray and not even prepare a resume or respond to want ads in the paper or online. I might just expect that an employer is going to come knocking on my door. On the other hand, if I take man's responsibility to an unbiblical extreme, I might go out knocking on doors twelve hours a day and send out hundreds of resumes but never stop to pray and ask for God's guidance in my search.

Since the beginning of the church Christians have had difficulty in reconciling these two doctrines. In the Middle Ages some Christians withdrew from humanity to remote monasteries to spend their lives in prayer and contemplation. Some of these monastics had little contact with people and were of little practical benefit to anyone. On the other hand, in the Middle Ages others who called themselves Christians--- how many of them actually were is doubtful--- took it as their responsibility to regain control of Jerusalem and surrounding areas. It is evident that they weren't trusting in the sovereignty of God. For they committed horrible atrocities and too often gave no consideration to even the most basic things that the Bible has to say about ethics and morality.

There are some passages in the Bible that stress human responsibility, and there are others that stress the sovereignty of God. Today we are going to examine a passage that brings both of these doctrines together. As a result, I hope that we will come away with a better understanding about how to approach life.

In our study thus far of the brief New Testament Book of Philippians we have seen that the Apostle Paul brought the message about Jesus to the Greek city of Philippi about 50 AD. (PHILIPPI SATELLITE). He was attacked by an angry mob and tossed in jail. His godly behavior in the face of persecution produced a favorable response from a number of people in the community, and a church was begun. (PHILIPPI ROME) About ten or eleven years later Paul was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial on charges that his preaching of the gospel had violated Roman law. From his situation of house arrest he wrote a letter of encouragement to the Christians in Philippi, who were also experiencing persecution.

In the first part of #1 the Apostle Paul talked about how he had learned to live above his circumstances and to experience joy. At the end of the chapter he used his own example as a basis for encouraging the Philippians to remain steadfast in godly behavior in the face of persecution. Paul realized that when Christians are in a situation of stress, there is danger of disunity. But Jesus said that unity is to be the hallmark of Christians. So in #2 Paul said that the way for Christians to maintain unity is to be humble. The prime example of this humility is Jesus Christ, who as the Son of God gave up His position in heaven and became a man and died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind. The fact that He was glorified after His ultimate act of humility should give us hope for the future, recognizing that our sovereign God will reward us for humble service done for him.

I.

Thus we come to a conclusion, or a summary, in our passage in Philippians #2. Verse 12 (p. 981 in the black Bibles) focuses upon THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAN. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAN) Paul says, **“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...”**

Over the years the Philippian church had supported the apostle with finances, with prayer, and with encouragement. Perhaps more than any other church he had started, this church had matured spiritually. Thus it was out of heartfelt love that he called the Philippian Christians “my beloved” and that he made reference to their obedience.

The reference to presence and absence appears to relate to “working out your salvation,” rather than “always obeying.” It would not make sense to say that the Philippians are more obedient when Paul is absent than when he is present. Instead the apostle is urging these Christians in Greece to work out their salvation not only in his presence but much more in his absence.

The verb “work out” is in the present tense. It has the idea of “continue to work out.” This is an ongoing process rather than a onetime event. The verb is also imperative, which means it is a command. There is some human responsibility here. The Philippian Christians have an ongoing responsibility that has to do with working out their salvation.

The same original Greek verb was used by a writer by the name of Strabo who lived at the same time when Paul did. In speaking about silver mines in Spain he once wrote, **“The silver mines are still being worked out at the present time.”** (*The Geography of Strabo*, Book III, #2.10) The silver mines were in the possession of the Spaniards, but the silver in them was still being mined.

Salvation is the key term in these two verses. It is the subject that is to concern the Christians at Philippi, and, by extension, it should be our concern as well. The Christians at Philippi were mostly Gentiles who came out of a Greco-Roman culture. The term “salvation” in their culture was used, among other things, to describe deliverance from the gods, who were regarded as fickle and unpredictable beings. So salvation meant something to them. It had come to mean even more to these Gentile Christians as the Jewish Apostle Paul had explained to them that people were sinners separated from a holy God and thus needed deliverance from this state of sin and judgment.

Unfortunately salvation in a religious context doesn’t mean much to many people in our culture any more. Talk of “being saved” is greeted with smirks by many in our culture. Modern man does not see himself in need of any kind of salvation--- education maybe, empowerment perhaps, government assistance, yes--- but not religious salvation.

The National Association of Biology Teachers issued a statement (REPORTS OF NCSE) some time ago in which it declared that all life is the outcome of **“an unsupervised, impersonal, unpredictable, and natural process.”** (*Reports of NCSE* [17{1}:31-32]) If life is merely the result of the chance collisions of matter, if we are simply the result of impersonal scientific forces, salvation is a meaningless category. We live. We die. We are no more.

But such an analysis does not correspond with reality. How can the impersonal account for personality? (PROJECTOR OFF) We are created by a holy and loving God. We are made in His image, and thus we have a capacity for love and self-reflection. We have longings for meaning and significance in life. We have a conscience and innate moral sensibilities. All of these elements are the reflection of the product of a personal God, not of some random biological and physical process.

Because we are made in the image of God, the vast majority of people around the world and down through history have had a faith in some kind of God or gods. Governments which have sought to stamp out religious faith have been notoriously unsuccessful. Surveys taken of American adults show that the vast majority of us profess belief in some kind of deity.

The question is: How do we get in touch with Him? The term “salvation” is treated as archaic by many people involved in this discussion. I was fascinated to notice an article on the editorial page of the *New York Times* several years ago. (Karen Armstrong, *NYT*, 9/1/1996) The first sentence of this opinion piece was: **“Is acceptance of Jesus Christ necessary for salvation?”** The author, a former Catholic nun, went on to talk about a pastor in a particular denomination who had concluded that people don’t have to believe in Jesus to become acceptable to God. This pastor was taking flack for that from his denomination. The author of the editorial went on to talk about how enlightened people were coming to recognize that they could get to know God by taking the best insights from all of the religions of the world. There are many paths to God, and it doesn’t really matter which path one takes.

This line of thinking was similar to the thinking of Gentiles in the first century Roman world, among whom Paul and the Philippians lived. Most Gentiles were polytheists. They believed in many gods. The Romans were tolerant of these religions. Roman religion was also polytheistic. The Romans merely asked that their various subjects add the Roman emperor to their pantheon of gods. After all there are many paths to the gods. In 2018 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that seven in ten Americans agreed with the statement that **“Many religions can lead to eternal life.”** Christians had a problem with that idea then, which resulted in persecution, and Christians ought to have a problem with that line of thinking today.

(PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:6) The founder of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, declared in John 14:6, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** That claim is either true or false. But if a person does not believe it, he or she should not call himself a Christian. This Jesus made even more outlandish claims. He claimed to be God come in the flesh. On one occasion He told His fellow Jews, **“I and the Father are one.”** Many of His Jewish listeners took up stones to kill Him. They recognized that He was claiming to be God.

It is unfortunate that some respond to the teaching and story of Jesus by concluding that Jesus was simply a great religious teacher. (PROJECTOR OFF) English writer and scholar C.S. Lewis pointed out years ago that there are really only three choices that we can make in our view of Jesus. One cannot conclude that somebody who went around claiming to be God and the Jewish Messiah and the only means by which people can come to know God was simply a great religious teacher. He was either a liar or a lunatic or the Lord. Possibly He was simply a clever man who knew perfectly well that he was neither the Messiah nor uniquely God. Perhaps He simply lied. As poor as He was, He wasn’t after money. Maybe He was after power. But then we have a hard time figuring out why He put Himself in a situation where the Jews colluded with the Romans to have Him killed.

So perhaps He was a lunatic. He was crazy. He genuinely thought that He was God, but He was mentally ill. After all there are a lot of people in mental institutions who think that they are God or Jesus Christ. But the problem is: How could a lunatic come up with

such profound religious insights and have an influence that is still having a tremendous impact upon the behavior of people throughout the world 2000 years later.

We are left with the third option--- Lord. Jesus Christ was who He said He was. He was the Second Person of the Triune Godhead who became a human being and died upon a cross to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind. He physically rose from the dead and later ascended into heaven. By trusting in Him, we can be saved from the penalty for sin, which is an eternity spent in hell, and we can instead enjoy eternal life in heaven.

This was the kind of salvation that Paul was talking about in v. 12 in our text. So what does Paul mean when he says that Christians need to work out their salvation? We often tend to think of salvation as something that happened to us Christians in the past when we put our trust in Jesus as our Lord. That is often the way in which the term is used in the New Testament. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8) Ephesians #2 vv. 8 & 9, for example, uses the verb form of this word when the author writes, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith...”** Titus 3:5 (TITUS 3:5) says, **“He saved us--- past tense--- not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy...”**

The word “salvation” is also used in the New Testament in reference to a future deliverance. (ROMANS 13:11) Romans 13:11 says, **“...it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.”** Here it seems that Paul is talking about the time when Christ returns to earth to bring Christians to heaven with Him. So there is a future aspect and a past aspect involved in our salvation.

In Philippians #2 v. 12 we see that there is a present aspect that is involved in our salvation. In trusting Christ as our Savior we have been initiated into the Christian life. That is a past event. Now being participants in this salvation life, we have present obligations. We are to work out this salvation, both as individuals and as church families. We are to work out its implications in our marriages, in our families, in our schools, in our businesses, and in our churches. Our salvation ought to change the way that we live in every area of life. In Colossians #2 vv. 6 & 7 (COLOSSIANS 2:6-7) Paul says, **“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith...”**

Working out our salvation involves spiritual growth. We need to mature as Christians. This necessitates the practice of the fundamentals of the Christian life: Bible study, prayer, Christian fellowship, worship, and service. As we are involved in these pursuits, and as we apply the implications of salvation to the different areas of our lives, we will experience spiritual growth. We will become more Christlike in our character. That character development will include evidence of humility, which will in turn promote unity among fellow Christians, which was Paul’s concern in the context of our passage.

Paul also says in v. 12 that this working out our salvation is to be accompanied by “fear and trembling.” This fear and trembling does not refer to a terror and dread of God, a

fear that He may send us to hell or zap us if we step a little out of line. Paul was a joyful person who wanted the Philippian Christians to share in this joy. At the same time he was serious about his mission in life and serious about the God he served. The apostle was calling for a reverential fear of God that stemmed from the fact that God is a holy God, from the fact that sin does have negative consequences to ourselves and others and the cause of God, and from the fact that we believers will one day face a judgment from God. At stake at this judgment will not be the issue of where we Christians will spend eternity. That has already been decided. This judgment will involve the giving and withholding of rewards..

II.

So this salvation deal does involve human responsibility. In v. 13 we also encounter THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD) Paul says, “...**for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**” The mistake that Christians sometimes make is trying to work out their own salvation without taking into account the sovereignty of God. We adopt a certain code of do’s and don’ts, or we accept a set of do’s and don’ts that others have tried to impose upon us. Then we try to live up to those standards by depending upon our own energy or discipline to meet them. We usually fail in the process.

In a similar way some of us have had the experience of going to a Christian camp as a young person and responding to a challenge to dedicate our lives to Christ only to fall back into old habit patterns a short time later in spite of our good intentions and best efforts. Sometimes Christian young people have also responded to a challenge to commit their lives to becoming missionaries and Christian workers. Later that enthusiasm sometimes dies out. The problem in those situations is often that the motivation and effort come only from ourselves and our own energy. It isn’t really God who is at work in us. It may not have been God who was calling us to some kind of vocational Christian service. It may have been only another human being.

The promise in v. 13 is that God will be at work in us to work out our salvation. The way that He works in us will vary from individual to individual, and the path in life down which He guides us will also vary from individual to individual. If as a child I had been challenged to dedicate my life to becoming a pastor, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. I became a Christian at a fairly young age, but I had no interest in becoming a pastor. Even when I went to college, the idea of going to seminary and becoming a pastor was the farthest thing from my mind. The pastors that I had known were not the kind of people after whom I wanted to model my life.

But then when I went to college, I got involved with a group of Christian students, and I started studying the Bible, and I started to learn how to share my Christian faith with others. I developed a passion for understanding the Bible better. By the end of my third year in college, I wanted to go to seminary to understand the Bible better. I still had no desire to be a pastor, but God was at work in me to will and to work for His good pleasure.

In order to fulfill seminary requirements I served for two summers as a youth pastor in a church in Ohio. I loved it. I began to think that after seminary I would like to try youth ministry in a church. That's what I did. After three or four years of doing that, I began to desire to become a pastor. Here I am.

This is not to say that being a pastor is the pinnacle of Christian development. It is not. Working out my salvation involved becoming a pastor. For you it might mean becoming a mother or a grandmother. It might mean being an elder or a Sunday school teacher or a secretary or a Christian businessman or a volunteer in a community organization. The point is that while we have a responsibility to work out our own salvation, there is also a divine element in the picture. We need to recognize and trust that God is at work in the process.

I doubt whether we will ever be able to understand completely this side of heaven how man's responsibility and God's sovereignty fit together. But the Bible teaches both. In this passage the two doctrines cross paths. In working out our salvation God's sovereignty is at work, and man's responsibility ought also to be at work. We might be tempted to look at the situation as a 50-50 proposition: We do half of the work, and God does the other half. That would be wrong. We are fully responsible to work out our salvation. Yet as we do that, it is God who is at work in us.

I had an appointment scheduled one morning when I was single and working in a church in Massachusetts. At the last minute the person whom I was to see canceled out. So I was in the church office when the phone rang. It was a call from a fellow who was in need of help. My experience has been that most such people from outside the church who are looking for help are only wanting money. But as this story unfolded, it seemed that the fellow on the other end of the line was truly a Christian and that he had a legitimate need. He and his pregnant wife had travelled across the country from California to come to live and work with a Marine friend of his in Boston. Their car had broken down, and they had hitchhiked the rest of the way because they were low on money.

When they got to Boston, they discovered that their friend had just re-enlisted in the Marine Corps. So this young couple was left high and dry. She was only seventeen and several months pregnant. He was about twenty years old. They called our church a few miles north of Boston when they stumbled across it in the Yellow Pages.

I went to work on the phone, trying to find a place in Boston that would take them in. I really didn't want to become too involved myself. While I was waiting to hear back from a couple of places, I went to put a new message on the dial-a-devotional answering machine that our church had. I was using messages that came from the Our Daily Bread devotionals, with which many of you are familiar. So I turned the machine on and started reading the next devotional message that was in the book.

This was the message that was next and that I read: **“Christian love goes beyond just expressing beautiful sentiments. Along with cheerful smiles and encouraging**

**words, we must extend a helping hand by our self-sacrificing service. The *Sunday School Times* carried this story which illustrates the truth: As a minister was visiting a prison, one of the inmates asked, 'Do you remember me?' "No," the pastor replied. 'Well, I remember you. You got me out of one of the most sinful dives in New York City. You gave me a letter of introduction to a mission, where I found food and shelter. But first you took me to your home and gave me clothes. You helped me get dressed because I was shivering from delirium tremens and couldn't do it myself. Then you shined my shoes! You witnessed to me, but I don't recall what you said, because I wasn't interested in Jesus. Yet the memory of you shining my shoes has stayed with me, and now I want to give myself to Christ. I know that His love in your heart caused you to do that humble deed for me.'**

**Yes, friends, actions speak louder than words. It's easy to lend a helping hand to those who might bring us reward or prominence. But have you ever gone out of your way to show kindness and generosity to some downtrodden sinner who could never repay you in any way? True love for God and your neighbor is not demonstrated just by shouting 'Hallelujah' in the church. Others will be influenced by your testimony only if it is backed up by compassionate deeds of mercy.**

**Don't forget, your actions show more than anything else how much you really love others."**

What choice did I have at that point? Nothing else seemed to be working out. So I went down to Boston and picked them up. Their story checked out. They proved to be new Christians who truly did need help. For several months they came to live with me. I helped him to find a job. I helped her to find an obstetrician. Eventually the husband got a job back in California, and they returned to their home area.

Working out my salvation at that point involved taking in this homeless Christian couple. That seemed to be my human responsibility. Did I do it because of my innate goodness? No. In my sinful self I didn't want to do it. It involved a major inconvenience, and it involved some risk. But God was at work in me both to will and to work for His good pleasure. He had me in my office at the right time. In His sovereign plan there was no other provision for them that worked out. He sovereignly arranged it that I read a certain devotional at the right time that addressed the heart of the matter. So they came to live with me, and I was blessed by having them around.

Remember the story about the conversion of the Philippian jailer? When Paul was first in Philippi ten or eleven years earlier, an angry mob dragged him and his companion before the city magistrates, who ordered them to be beaten. Because Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, that was a serious violation of the law. So they were beaten and hauled off to jail and thrown into the worst part of the prison. But working out their salvation meant rejoicing in all circumstances. That was their human responsibility.



Because of the power of God that was at work in their lives, instead of grumbling and complaining and being depressed, they sang hymns and prayed.

Then about midnight there was an earthquake that resulted in the chains of the prisoners coming out of the walls and the prison doors falling off. You see, the sovereign God was at work. When the jailer discovered that the prison doors were open, he was about to kill himself, expecting that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul, who had somehow kept his fellow prisoners in the prison, stopped this jailer, who had not been especially nice, from killing himself. The jailer was blown away by this. He had never seen prisoners act like Paul and Silas. The timing of the earthquake and the behavior of Paul and Silas led to this man's conversion to Christ. It was due to the working out of salvation in Paul's life and the sovereign working of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Work out your salvation, for it is God who is at work in you. We Christians tend to go to extremes. Sometimes we cling to the sovereignty of God while we neglect our human responsibility. At other times we focus on our human responsibility and neglect the sovereignty of God. We forget to pray, and we forget to trust and wait for God to act. It is not right to let go and let God. Neither is it right to go and let not God. We are to take hold with God.

We are to work out our salvation. That means that we need to read the Bible, pray, have Christian fellowship, and serve God. It means that we are to integrate and apply our Christian faith to our personal life, to our marriage, to our parenting, to our job, and to our church involvements. As we see positive results in our lives, as we see the development of godly characteristics like humility, as we trust in a sovereign God, we will see evidence that God is truly working in us.

**“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.”**