

WORKING OUT

The Book of Philippians #14

When I was young we used to watch a TV show called “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis”. The show aired from 1959-1963. I was too young to understand the love part of the show back then but I still remember one line from that show that was said by Dobie’s beatnik friend, Maynard G. Krebs; anytime someone mentioned the word “work” he would echo in a high pitched voice “work” because he had an aversion to any form of it.

Today some of us feel like Maynard when we hear two simple words – “working out”. What is your reaction when you hear them? When people tell you they have been “working out” do you want to join them or avoid them? Do you conjure up a vision of joy or a vision of drudgery? Is your idea of a workout spending an hour in the gym every day? Or is it getting out of the house and driving to the store and then putting the groceries away? Or maybe just dealing with children (and some adults) all day long is enough of a workout for you. Whatever your definition, “working out” has become part of our modern day vocabulary.

Ever since the fitness craze of the 1980’s there has been a deluge of workout programs, DVDs, videos, and TV shows about working out. Whether it’s a running program, an eating regimen, the latest Nordic Track equipment or a TV show for the Biggest Losers incorporating all of the above, fitness has benefited many people. Some have even saved their lives through their personally tailored workout routine.

We’ve all seen those before and after photos where people look dramatically different because Jennie Craig or Weight Watchers has given them a new lease on life. But we’ve also heard of those so addicted to fitness that they concentrated on the external to the detriment of the internal, assuming if their outward bodies were healthy their internal organs were also healthy. But this was not always the case. Some, though they were outwardly fit, were internally ill and as a result they died physically renewed but internally decayed.

Christians are not immune to this fitness craze. Since our bodies are called the temple of the Holy Spirit many believe that we should be in the best possible physical shape. So they go to gyms and Zumba classes and break out their Jane Fonda workout videos and faithfully exercise at home. And there is nothing wrong with this. In fact, some of us here probably wish we had the discipline and time to do what they are doing because we too would not mind being in better shape. But we don’t take the time and don’t discipline ourselves because we don’t have the will to put in that much effort for something we are not that committed to doing. There is much hope but there is no effort made to turn that hope into a reality.

Paul actually addresses physical exercise in 1 Timothy and gives some practical advice concerning it.

1 TIMOTHY 4:7b-8

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

Paul is not saying there is no reward for being physically fit. After all he must have been in pretty good shape himself because when he was not on board a ship he walked everywhere he went, from Southern

to Northwestern Greece, throughout Turkey, Syria, and Israel, around the Mediterranean Sea. And certainly being able to walk those hundreds of miles aided him greatly in spreading the gospel of Christ.

But Paul is saying that there is another life ahead of us and we need to be fit for it as well. Bodily discipline is of little profit in preparing one for eternity. After all we shed this body for another. So whatever effort we put in to this earthly body will have little impact on the heavenly one we will inherit.

Those who make physical perfection their goal usually attain it. And they have every right to be proud of their accomplishments, for they are among the few who actually accomplish their goal. But they inhabit human bodies and all bodies decay. Some, like Jack Lalane might maintain a level of strength and fitness till the end of their life, but even those who are in great physical condition will one day die. Their bodies will never stay in a permanent state of strength and perfection.

There will come a time when they will leave their earthly bodies. At that point the amount of physical strength they achieved will not matter. (If one denies decay then one denies accountability.) Now please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying we should not take care of our bodies. We should do all we can to stay in the best physical health we can so that we can be the most useful to God in service to Him.

What I am saying is that if all one does is exercise their body without exercising their faith, then their entire bodily discipline will profit them nothing in the world to come. No discipline of the physical can bring about the eternal. On the other hand, as Paul says, the discipline of godliness is profitable for both this life and the next since it holds promise for the life to come.

Paul addresses this same theme in the second chapter of Philippians. He first tells us that we should have an attitude of humility, the same attitude which was also in Christ Jesus who humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Then, after giving this ultimate example of humility, Paul follows up with a request for the same obedience Christ possessed - coming from a heart devoted to the Father, a will in sync with the Spirit, and a mind set on fulfilling God's desires.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

This is a different kind of workout. It is a working out of godliness through spiritual discipline, not the working out of muscle mass through physical discipline. But if salvation is a free gift of God given to us through our faith in Him and not something we work at, why does Paul say to “work it out”? I mean Paul has told us that our salvation is not of works, lest any man should boast.

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So if we could do nothing to obtain the salvation we currently enjoy, how can we “work it out”? Isn't faith enough for this as well? Faith is always sufficient in the eyes of God. But there is a difference between the words translated as “works” in Ephesians 2 and “work out” in Philippians 2. The work in Ephesians that could not possibly bring about salvation is not the same work that Paul refers to in Philippians when he says to “work out” our salvation.

The word translated as “works” in Ephesians refers to an act or deed. And Paul rightly states that there is no act or deed we could do that would result in our salvation. It is the same as getting a paycheck at the end of the month because you worked for it. It was the wages you earned as a result of the work you did. But we are sinful people. And the wages of the work of sin is death, not eternal life (Romans 6:23). Eternal life is God’s gift based on God’s accomplishment, not on anything man could accomplish. It is not a product of any work we could do to earn it. It is the product of faith alone. We cannot earn salvation.

But the word translated in Philippians 2 as “work out” refers to producing something, to do something from which something else results. I know this can sound a little like the first so let me help you out by making a better distinction between the two. If you are a talented artist then when you paint a picture or sing a song you are producing something outwardly which is already inwardly present. You are bringing forth externally that which is already present internally. You are working out the talent which is already present in you. If you did no painting or singing then no one would ever be able to discern that you were an artist. There would be no visible proof to back up your claim.

Since no man is born with salvation implanted in them from birth, it is impossible for them to bring forth salvation. Man cannot bring forth something which He does not have. And there is no act or deed which could bring about salvation since salvation is a gift not a payment of wages for work performed. But once the gift of salvation is received then there is something man can do to work out this salvation.

That’s because, though salvation occurs in a moment in time, it is not a one-time event. It is not only a confession but also a service of the heart and mind as well. Out of the mind comes the will to do and out of the heart comes the desire to do. So when the will to obey God and the desire to please Him is mixed with the power of God to overcome the flesh, then the salvation of God is made visible, it is worked out into the visible from within the invisible.

We recently watched the movie *“The Agony and the Ecstasy”* starring Charlton Heston and Rex Harrison. Produced in 1965, it is the story of the painting of the Sistine chapel by Michelangelo in the early 1500’s. Michelangelo considered himself a sculptor. He excelled in seeing what was hidden in a block of granite or marble and coaxing it out into the open so that all could see the vision which he saw lying beneath the hard exterior. Certainly all who have seen his work agree that he was a master at sculpting works of art out of hard and unyielding rock.

But Michelangelo did not consider himself a painter and had no knowledge of the art of fresco painting so was very reluctant to commit to doing the task. But he was commissioned and compelled to do so by Pope Julius II, the “warrior pope” so had very little say in the matter. He started the task by painting two of the twelve disciples on the ceiling as instructed by the Pope. But after completing them he went back and destroyed the two fresco paintings because he was not satisfied with their quality. He then left Rome and headed for parts unknown. The Pope was furious and sent out his army to bring him back. Michelangelo successfully avoided capture for several months. Then he voluntarily returned to Rome to complete the ceiling.

Why did he return? Because when he first started out he was attempting to paint the vision for the ceiling which the Pope had requested of him. But Michelangelo could not paint someone else’s vision. He had to paint his own. In what appeared to be an inspiration from the Lord through His creation, Michelangelo saw in His mind’s eye what the ceiling should look like. And so, with an energized vision for the work he returned to Rome and presented His vision to the Pope.

What had originally been limited in scope now encompassed the entire ceiling. Though angry with his disappearance, the Pope agreed with this new concept and commissioned Michelangelo to complete it based on his inspired design and not on the haphazard vision which the Pope had originally commissioned. At first the painting was just a work which Michelangelo was trying to accomplish for the Pope. He was attempting to do what he was told, but that was not accomplishing beauty, only drudgery. After the vision was implanted in him, Michelangelo was compelled to work out this internal vision. It became a thing of beauty to be produced and not a task to be completed through drudgery.

And so began the task of working out the concept birthed in the mind of Michelangelo. Sketched first onto paper, then stenciled onto the fresco which had been plastered on the ceiling, Michelangelo eventually started the tedious task of filling in the lines with paint. Standing on scaffolding which he himself designed in order to reach the 70 foot ceiling, Michelangelo worked sometimes day and night eventually making himself too sick to work for a period of time. But he eventually completed the task after four tumultuous years. There was agony in the doing but there was ecstasy in the results. Hence the name, of the movie, “The Agony and the Ecstasy”

There is an agony and an ecstasy in the working out of our salvation as well. I envision “working it out” to be like a painter with an empty canvas or a sculptor with a piece of clay or marble. There is a vision inside the mind and heart of the artist which envisions the finished product. They actually see on the canvas or within the marble or clay what is hidden from the rest of us.

The one watching the sculptor in their initial stages of creation cannot determine what the finished product will be like. But once the artist starts to chisel away the marble or form the clay with his hands, a gradual image of what might be starts to appear. With constant work and attention to detail the finished product finally becomes visible to all. What has been “worked out” is what is visible. But it was always there, hidden in the interior and seen only in the mind of the creator. Now, freed from its hard and shapeless exterior, it becomes visible to all.

This is what “working out” our salvation is all about. God has created our marble and clay and placed within us a precious piece of art. It is hidden by the hardened exterior shell which was formed through years of sin and disobedience. But through repentance and forgiveness we now have the Spirit living within us, providing us the tools to chip away at the sin-hardened attitudes which have caused us to be un-moldable in the past. As we yield to the Spirit’s touch and listen to the Master’s instruction, the hidden treasure lying within us comes to the surface and is gradually revealed.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

“For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”

The treasure is already there. It is our salvation, which is the righteousness of God imparted to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. But this is an interior treasure dwelling within our earthen vessel of clay. The power of God is able to reveal this treasure and bring it to the surface. But the power of God works in conjunction with our will. It is God’s power and our will that will bring forth the treasure. That’s why Paul gives us the instruction to “work out” our salvation.

But Paul tells the Philippians to work out their salvation with “fear and trembling”. Why fear and trembling? We are told many times in Scripture not to be afraid and to “fear not”. Hebrews 4:16 says we

are to draw near to the throne of God with confidence and grace”. And 1 John 4:18 says “*there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear*”. The same Greek word translated as “fear” appears in both 1 John and Philippians. So why would Paul tell us to do anything from fear and trembling?

The Greek word translated as fear is PHOBOS which is where we get our English word Phobia. It means fear, dread, terror; intimidation; This certainly conjures up the thoughts and emotions of those who have some kind of phobia, be it a fear of heights, a fear of spiders, or a fear of airplanes, or any other phobia. People with phobias tend to avoid anything which relates to their fear. John Madden, the famous football coach has a fear of flying. So he always travels on trains or busses. That is where the famous “Madden Bus” expression came from. But the Greek word PHOBOS can also mean respect, reverence, and awe. So it can have a positive as well as a negative connotation.

Paul says we are to work out our salvation with fear AND trembling. So what is trembling? The Greek word translated as trembling is TROMOS and means a trembling or quaking with fear. Some of us have probably had at least one moment in our lives when we were trembling with fear. The trembling came because the situation that produced the fear was so extraordinary or so overwhelming that the shaking started and could not be stopped. It was a special kind of fear, an out of the ordinary fear that revealed itself in bodily form through trembling.

There are several examples in Scripture where men shook with fear. Typically this happened when angels appeared to men such as the one who appeared to Daniel after fighting with the Prince of the kingdom of Persia, the angel Gabriel who appeared to the father of John the Baptist before his birth, or the one who appeared to the women who came to the tomb of Jesus and to the guards who were guarding it.

DANIEL 10:4-10

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, while I was by the bank of the great river, that is, the Tigris, I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult.

“ Now I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, while the men who were with me did not see the vision; nevertheless, a great dread fell on them, and they ran away to hide themselves. So I was left alone and saw this great vision; yet no strength was left in me, for my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained no strength. But I heard the sound of his words; and as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground. Then behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees.”

LUKE 1:11-13

“And an angel of the Lord appeared to him (Zacharias), standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard. And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.’”

MATTHEW 28:2-8

“And behold, a severe earthquake has occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And His appearance was like lightning, and his

clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.

“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where he was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.’ “And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.”

From these passages we see that there are two aspects of fear – terror and dread on the one hand and respect, reverence and awe on the other. The context of the Scripture tells us which type of fear we are dealing with. Certainly the guards at the tomb of Jesus experienced terror and dread. But the women, on the other hand, experienced awe and reverence.

God gives us several verses in Scripture concerning what we should and should not fear. He tells us not to fear what man can do to us, not to fear what tomorrow holds, or what we shall eat or drink or wear (Psalm 27:1). But we are also told that we are to fear the Lord (Deuteronomy 31:12; Joshua 4:24; Psalm 33:8) and that the fear of the Lord leads to life (Proverbs 19:23), prolongs life (Proverbs 10:27), is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7) and is the instruction for wisdom (Proverbs 15:33).

So it would appear that we are not to live in fear, dread, or terror of any created thing or any need we have, but rather live with respect, reverence and awe of the Creator (Proverbs 29:25).

When Paul speaks of “fear and trembling” in reference to working out our salvation, he is saying that we should be in awe of God’s power working within us, respectful of His authority over us, and live in reverent obedience to His commands. We bring forth (work out) God’s gift to us (our salvation) because we understand His authority, His requirements, His empowerment, and His expectation of us. It is because of our reverence for Him that we bring forth the fruit which He has planted and watered within us.

But we are not left to our own devices in the working out of our salvation. We have help and someone who will prod us into this exercise of faith. In verse 13 Paul reveals the impetus, energy, and stimulus which compel us to “work out” our salvation. He says,

PHILIPPIANS 2:13

“For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

It is God’s Spirit living in us that compels us to bring forth fruit from the righteousness which dwells within us. It is impossible to work out our salvation without this impetus. Without the power of God we cannot do anything to please God; nor do we have the will or desire to do so. Without His power we are self-centered and ensnared by our own selfish desires. We cannot manifest God’s attributes without God’s Spirit.

ISAIAH 64:6

“All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

We can possess the desire to do good but the actual doing of it is not possible without the power of God working within us.

ROMANS 7:18-25a

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

There is nothing good that dwells within us with the exception of the Holy Spirit. No righteousness without God’s imparted righteousness. What had been worked out in our lives prior to our confession of and repentance from sin through faith in Christ were deeds of darkness, words of self-condemnation, and lives lived in pursuit of self, all worthy of death, destruction, and eternal damnation.

But God has brought us near to Him by the death and resurrection of His Son and our belief that sin’s price has been paid by the cross of Christ. We have been adopted as sons and daughters of God, children of the Righteous One who sent His righteous Spirit to live and work within us in order to bring about the beauty and perfection of holiness in these frail vessels of clay.

It is God who began the good work of righteousness in us and it is God working in us who will bring about the perfection of this righteousness during our time here on earth. And He will continue to do so until the Day of Perfection itself comes when Christ appears in the heavens and takes us home to be with Him forever.

PHILIPPIANS 1:6

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Today we have looked at how God sees the treasure that is hidden inside each one of us. Like Michelangelo with a block of granite, God chisels away at our flesh in order to reveal the hidden Spirit within. Ad God will perfect His work in us by the power of this same Spirit. Even when we do not believe the potential we have to create beauty out of our inexperience, like Michelangelo and the painting of the Sistine Chapel, we can create a thing of lasting beauty for all to see if we yield to the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

But we are not without responsibility in this effort of righteousness. That is why Paul tells us to “work out” our salvation with fear and trembling – to bring forth in this body of clay what is hidden within by the Spirit. This is our spiritual workout.

Next week we will look at what part we play in the “working out” of our salvation and what God’s purpose is for revealing the treasure hidden within us to the world. We will learn, like Michelangelo did, how to seek out what we do not yet understand so that we can create what we do not fully comprehend in order to become what we do not know we have the potential to be. But that’s for next week. Today, let me close with this.

Wendy and I love to watch “*Dancing with the Stars*”. On this show celebrities who have little or no dancing experience are paired with professional ballroom dancers and compete with one another for a “mirror ball trophy.” Through the years the ages of the celebrity contestants have ranged from as young as 14 to as old as 72. Some have been former Olympic champions and successful sports figures. Others have been actors and reality show stars, as well as TV program hosts. They come from a variety of professions but all have a fan base of some sort to help vote for them to stay on the program.

None of the celebrities are professional dancers but they all have one thing in common. Their inadequacy as a dancer and a mentor to encourage them in their journey. Not all will achieve perfection through their dance moves, but all submit to the process of learning. Not all look like professional dancers when they leave the competition, but all grow stronger in the process.

They learn that even in their weakness the strength to persevere can be found. Even if they could never hope to be a John Travolta, or a Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, or Gene Kelly, or even a Michael Jackson, they can be the best they can be. None who been voted off the show have ever regretted their decision to try. All have found a newfound love for dance. And all have left being lifelong friends with those who cared about them and helped them to bring the hidden gem within them to the dancing floor for all to see.

And they discovered through the discipline of a daily routine, with someone to guide them and to encourage them, they could do something they never thought they could. Brothers and sisters we should do no less for one another. There is a hidden gem of God’s righteousness living in each one of us. Some of this beauty is being held captive by sins deceit or by Satan’s snares. Some is being repressed by the lie that says there is no beauty to be found, that what you see is what you get.

There are many negative voices in this world which broadcast daily messages of negativity and insecurity. All believers need an encourager, need an advocate to defend them against these attacks. Jesus is our advocate in heaven who intercedes for us in the throne room of God. And the Spirit is our teacher here on earth, our professional expert in spiritual matters. But who has God provided as our encourager?

In 1THESSALONIANS 5:11 Paul says to:

“Encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.”

And in Hebrews 3:13 we read,

“Encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘today’, so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

We are the encouragers. We are the helpers. We are all the mentors of the faithful. God’s Spirit is working in all of us for perfection and it is our responsibility to yield to that Spirit. But it is also our responsibility to ensure that we do not lose heart (2 Corinthians 4:16); that we continue to persevere in this journey of faith (1 Timothy 4:16). For that we need to be encouraged. The journey is long and hard.

We need mentors, those who have gone before us, to help us understand the journey and learn how not to give in to despair and fatigue. We need to be encouraged that there is indeed a hidden gem yearning to see the light of day. We need ministers of the gospel, counselors of God’s word, and witnesses to the truth that God will never leave us or forsake us, and that He has only good in mind for us (Titus 2:2-8). We don’t need naysayers and discouragers.

It is easy to find fault and criticize what we do not like, to grumble and complain and accuse others of inadequacies. But that is the job of Satan, not the job of fellow believers. Our job is to encourage one another day after day, not growing weary in well-doing (Galatians 6:9). If we are to truly “work out” our salvation, we need not only the prodding of the Spirit, but the encouragement of the saints as well. We may not win a “mirror ball trophy” at the end of our season here on earth, but we will receive a reward for our efforts, a crown of righteousness which awaits every believer.

2TIMOTHY 4:8

“In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

We are all headed for the same destination, traveling in the same direction, seeking after the same reward. Let us help one another to “work out” our salvation by encouraging the release and appearance of that which is hidden within us and to yield to the Spirit who works within us for this release.

And when we encounter those who think there could not possibly be any treasure hidden in them, let us come alongside and instruct them in the ways of God and His Spirit, helping them to see the treasure that God sees. Let us mentor them with our experience and encourage them with our testimony of God’s faithfulness; for we have all been formed out of the earth. We are all lumps of clay in the hands of the Master. He wants to make something beautiful out of each of our lives.

Not all of us will turn out to be Sistine Chapel ceilings. Some of us may be a painting by Picasso, or a Peanuts cartoon strip, or even a picture placed on a refrigerator. But there is beauty, uniqueness, and purpose in all of us and a desire for what we have to be wanted and admired. So let us encourage the hidden to become visible. Let us, each one of us, “work out” our salvation to the glory of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Next week we’ll learn how to do this and see what God’s purpose is for revealing the treasure hidden within us to the world. Until then let me close with this last thought.

Just as the comfort we give others stems from the comfort we have received from the Father (2 Corinthians 1:4), so does the encouragement we give to others stem from the encouragement we have received from the Father. We’re not looking to be pulled up by our bootstraps through our own strength and determination. Rather we are looking to be filled with the power of God so that together, with one mind and purpose, we can all glorify God for the work that He has brought forth in each one of us.

ROMANS 15:4-6

“Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”