

GOD WORKING IN, ME WORKING OUT

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

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.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

There is an old expression - *it's really old* - the English adage has been around for over 400 years. It's timeless because it's so indicative of human nature. I'm sure you've heard it, "**When the cat's away the mice will play.**"

In other words, **where there's no supervision, people do as they please.** This shows up most frequently in the workplace. Often, when the boss is out of the office, the workers take some time off - very little work gets done.

There's an old Fedex commercial that best dramatizes the idea. **(Clip)** "**When the cat's away the mice will play.**"

Obviously, everybody in that office liked to play golf, and when Mr. Delaney was *away* everybody *played!*

This is an age-old problem for human beings. Most folks are *externally-motivated*. They require immediate supervisor to see to it they stay on task. If there's not someone setting the pace, productivity slows to a crawl.

And this is not just the case vocationally, it's also true morally and spiritually - an external authority is needed.

This was the reason God gave the Law to Moses.

Moses, the Lawgiver, received a set of rules. God's Law became the external authority. Without it societal mores would've degenerate to the lowest common denominator. Human beings like to take the path of least resistance, and live according to their baser instincts, "if it feels good, do it" - "looking out for number one" - etc. Thus, sinners have to be chaperoned, or they run wild.

Perhaps this is the biggest distinctive of the Christian life. When a person comes to Jesus, God puts His Holy Spirit, *and thus His intentions*, inside of them. God's Spirit becomes an inner instinct, and impulse, that both enlightens and prods them in a God-ward direction.

A Christian becomes *internally-motivated*. The need dissipates to have someone looking over their shoulder.

If you're talking about a pastor and his congregation you should be able to say, "When the cat's away the mice will **pray**." Or, "When the cat's away the mice will **stay on track**." Real Christians have an *inner compass*.

This was Paul's experience with the church in Philippi. He commends them in verse 12, "Therefore, my beloved, as you

have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence...”

A cat named Paul was in Rome, in prison, awaiting trial before the Emperor. Yet in his absence the spiritual fervor of the mice he left behind remained undiminished.

The Philippians stayed committed to the Gospel.

They didn't need Paul in the office to make sure they did their jobs. They obeyed the will of God because God's Spirit had put it in their heart to obey, not because a supervisor was on location holding their feet to the fire.

Remember, Paul's previous thought in verses 9-11. He had cast a spotlight on the exaltation of Jesus. Paul told us that “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” One day the unbelieving world will see Jesus for who He really is - *not the carpenter from Nazareth - but the King of Heaven and Creator of Earth*. The world will see Him in all His glory.

They'll say “Wow” then they'll bow. It'll be a wow-bow. But what sets the Christian apart is this wow-bow-now.

We've bowed to His authority now, *in this life*. We've humbled ourselves. We've acknowledge that Jesus is our only hope. *He died to forgive us. He rose to rule us*. He knows more about life than we do, and we're trusting that His way is best. We've adopted His mindset. We're no longer living *for ourselves*, but *for God and for others*.

And it's interesting, when our knee bows, it triggers a work in our hearts. God's Spirit goes to work inside us.

I'm sure you know why wedding rings are worn on the fourth finger of your left hand? The ancients believed that the vein under that finger ran straight to the heart.

They even called it the “**vena amoris**” or “**vein of love.**”

Well, I'm more puzzled why no one ever assumed that there was an anatomical connection between *your knee* and *your heart*? It makes more sense. For when you bow in surrender to Jesus, changes occur in your heart.

Paul tells us in verse 13, “**for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.**”

Understand, **Christianity is an inside job.**

God's Spirit works in our spirit *motivating us*, and *molding us*, and *making us* after the likeness of Jesus.

I hope you realize not all super-heroes are created equal. Take Batman and Spiderman for example...

The caped crusader, Batman, is actually the wealthy tycoon, Bruce Wayne. He fights crime with cool gadgets, and bat-know-how. He has a superior intellect, acute detective skills, and a mastery of martial arts - *but no real superpowers*. Other than being a highly-motivated, talented rich guy - Batman is like you - *except better*.

Whereas, Spiderman is just the opposite. While in High School, Peter Parker was bit by a radioactive spider. The next day he woke up with spider-like abilities.

Peter can now spin webs and climb up buildings.

Batman is a hard-worker, a high achiever. He made superhero status the old-fashioned way - *he earned it*.

Whereas Spiderman is the timid teenager who has an encounter that alters his life. He receives privileges that he doesn't deserve. He's a byproduct of grace. And remember the famous line that challenges him, "with great power there must also come great responsibility."

Realize Christians are like Spiderman, *not Batman*.

I know "Wow Bow Now" sounds like "Pow, Zowie, Kapow" - Batman words. But a Christian isn't like Batman. You're not the hard-working, high-achieving rich guy who overcomes evil through his own willpower.

Spiritually speaking, we're more like the High School Peter Parker who's flawed, and on his own a failure.

Yet we were bit by God's grace, and we've been transformed by an encounter with the Holy Spirit. A Christian has received a new nature - *all the **super-powers** of life, and light, and love, and peace, and joy.*

Paul says God works in us both "*to do and to will for His good pleasure.*" Notice, both "*to do and to will...*"

When it comes to God's purposes not only are we *empowered by God to perform*, we're also *inspired by God to prefer...* He gives us the desire to obey.

A Christian follows God not because God *forces us to follow*, but because we *want to follow*. Our **wants** change. I'm not obeying *out of duty*, but *out of delight*.

We're given the **willpower** to want it, as well as the **real power** to actually get it done. Both come from God.

This is the miracle of the new birth. Christians aren't well resourced, extremely talented do-gooders, like Batman. We're more like transformed Peter Parkers.

When Peter got bit by the radioactive spider, surprisingly spider-like qualities began to appear in him.

And when I get touched by the Spirit of Jesus, the qualities of Jesus start showing up in me. This is why Paul points out that the Philippians didn't need a **supervisor** - they had a **super power** working in them to help them follow God and to walk in His will.

And as with Peter Parker, Paul challenges them... "with this great power also comes great responsibility."

This is what he means in verse 12, when he writes, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Notice, Paul doesn't say, "work for your own salvation" as if it's a reward for your labor... or "work on your own salvation" as if it's the result of your personal ingenuity and design... or "work in your own salvation" as if it's a discipline that you can drill by repetition into your psyche.

Remember Jesus' final words from the cross, "It is finished." Everything that formed our salvation was completed prior to it arriving and provoking a response from us. Before the creation of the world, God worked **on** it and strategized every detail... At the cross Jesus paid **for** it, even with His own blood... And when you give your life to Him, the Spirit implants it **in** your heart.

No, you can't work **for** it, or work **on** it, or work it **in**.

But you can work it **out**! Paul writes, "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" Here's Christian living in a nutshell - **we work out what God worked in.**

God is the artist, whereas we are the brushes.

God is the spark, we are the steering.

God is the catalyst, we are the channel.

God is the change agent, we open up the valve.

God revs up the engine, we release the brake and pop the car into gear... God puts in us *the life of Christ*; then we take on *the mind of Christ*... *God changes my spirit, I change my mind*... This is what it means to be "*working out your own salvation*..." You believe deeply and seriously, then start living out what you believe.

This is Gospel-living, *and a partnership is implied.*

It's been said, "**Man can do nothing without God, and God will do nothing without man.**" Certainly, God is the headliner in our salvation. Jesus plays the starring role, but He gives us a cameo. We respond to God in faith.

We trust Him in the implications of what He's done. A Christian carries salvation out to it's conclusions.

The classical Greek the phrase translated, "*working out*" - as in *working out your own salvation* - is used of a mathematician crunching the numbers - figuring out and factoring the equation to reach its final answer. A Christian works through the implications of the Gospel.

I once read a quote, "**The Gospel faithfully preached**

meddles with everything else on earth.” And it’s true.

Think of it, *God Himself braved our world, laid aside the perks of deity, came with no fanfare or reputation, became a servant, wrapped Himself in our limitations, then obeyed the will of God to the point of the cross.*

Then the Gospel says, “**Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus...**” *That messes up all my plans!* I was hoping to be Big Stuff - not a servant. I was climbing the ladder, now I’m shimmying back down.

The Gospel slams on the brakes and changes my course. The implications are endless. And it’s up to us to think it through - not how it effects the other guy, but how it effects me... **“work out your own salvation.”**

Often the Bible gets criticized for not taking a more definitive stance on certain matters. As if it left obvious issues untouched. Take slavery for example...

In the NT, 1 Corinthians 7, new believers who were slaves are told to remain a slave, and use their place in society to launch a Christian witness... The critics condemn the Bible for not attacking an evil institution.

But here is where the critics are short-sighted. Paul knew that in **“working out our salvation”** there would be no room for bondage. The Gospel would prove that Christian love and liberty are incompatible with slavery.

Though the Bible doesn’t forbid the idea per se, *it does better* - it sows the seeds of liberty. If it had condemned slavery outright it would’ve abolished the institution, but done nothing to change the evil that causes it. *But the Gospel works from the inside out.* It changes human institutions by

changing human hearts.

This is why I say, “[the Gospel meddles with everything else on earth.](#)” It’s ramifications touch every aspect of life... It changes the language *a construction worker* uses on the job. It causes *a used car salesman* to alter his sales approach. It provides *an athlete* new motivation. It creates new purpose in *a marriage*.

It alters the way *a college student* spends his or her free time. It compels *the Hispanic man* to love his Black neighbor. It forces *the Black man* to forgive his White neighbor. It provokes compassion for *the person* struggling with a same-sex attraction, while it causes *that person* to open up to God’s ideal for sexuality.

The Gospel gives *the suicidal person* a reason to hope - *the mentally ill person* a path to peace - *the lonely person* the assurance they’re not alone. [The Gospel is the most powerful change agent on earth.](#)

My youngest son is *a fidgety guy*. He’s always looking for something to touch or handle. It’s a fixation.

He gets in my car and wants to go through the glove box... or sits down in my office and has to handle the nicknacks sitting on my desk... ***it drives me crazy.***

I usually yell at him and tell him to keep his cotton picking hands off my stuff. He meddles with everything.

But the Gospel is like Mack. When it’s received and believed, and you become aware of its far-reaching implications - *it meddles with your stuff*. It starts putting its

prints on every aspect of your life. And you're immediate reaction is to shout, "*Lord, leave me alone.*"

Oh, don't say that! Who are you to say such a thing to Jesus? Remember, every knee will bow to Jesus.

Don't *bow now*; only to rise up when Jesus starts to meddle. Let Jesus be Lord. Let Him get His hands on your stuff. You need Him to get into your business.

If it bothers you for Jesus to meddle, it's because you've taken back your stuff. If it's really His, He can do with it whatever He pleases - you won't get so antsy.

If you're a Christian, *your business is His business*. And you're better off letting Him into your business.

This is why Paul says, "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" In the Greek it's "*phobos and tromos.*" *It's the Almighty you're dealing with now!*

If that knowledge doesn't create a phobia - sweaty palms and some knocking knees - something's wrong.

I know He loves us, and calls us "*friends.*" But if Jesus doesn't deserve my respect, then why do I think He's big enough to solve my problems? *If I don't fear Him, why should my enemies? A Savior before whom you don't fear and tremble is not much of a Savior.*

Jesus is not to be trifled with - don't play games with God. There needs to be some "*fear and trembling.*"

I read an analogy this past week that compared the Christian life to a journey across the ocean. There are different ways a person can navigate such a voyage...

I can board a canoe with an oar and start paddling, but it won't take long before I'm totally exhausted. My best efforts won't be enough to get me across a sea.

Or I could take the opposite approach and purchase an intertube. Rather than put out any effort of my own, I could do nothing - just drift - just lay on the tube and expect the waves and tides to get me to the other side.

I'm afraid though, that'd be just as frustrating. Neither **rowing** or **drifting** would get me to the other shore.

Or I could board a sailboat with fresh sails and a workable rudder. It wouldn't be up to me to sail the boat anymore than it's up to me to make the wind blow.

But neither would my role be passive. I would have a part to play. When God sent the wind, it would be up to me lift my sails, and steer in a windward direction.

And likewise, it's God who sends the wind. Without it we're stuck going nowhere. Our paddling is futile. But when the wind blows it's up to us to cooperate and get ourselves in a position to take advantage of the gusts.

Again, here's Christianity in a nutshell... **Rather than look over our shoulder, and make us do what we know we ought, God puts it in our hearts. He works in us to do and to will. Then *what He works in, we work out.***

And here's what it looks like to work out your own salvation. Verse 14, **"Do all things without complaining and disputing..."** Once, two groups of Maryland firefighters - from neighboring counties - arrived at a burning house simultaneously. It was unclear which fire department had jurisdiction, so a fight

erupted over which crew was responsible for putting out the fire.

And irony of all ironies, the house burned while the cops tried to separate the firefighters... **And this is the story of many churches.** We complain and argue with each other, while hell rages and its population grows.

We're not saving people from the fire, because we're too busy complaining and arguing with each other...

Kent Hughes writes of a Dallas Church that made the newspapers when both halves of the congregation each filed a lawsuit trying to keep the other half of the congregation from coming onto the church property.

What could possibly cause a breach so severe?

Well, the dispute started at the church-wide potluck when one of the elders was served a smaller slice of ham than the child sitting next to him... *Wow, we should be careful at our Wednesday night dinners!*

Understand, folks are human and humans complain at times. Where *grumbling* gains traction in a church is when it's *entertained - when it's given an tolerant ear.*

If the complainer was immediately confronted, *"we don't want to hear your bellyaching,"* it wouldn't last.

The grumbler would get mad, or leave, or both. But it ruins a church when it's allowed to take root and grow.

Remember, what Paul spoke of earlier in Philippians, *a Gospel-oriented person realizes God is in control.*

Paul even saw his imprisonment as God's way of advancing

the Gospel. Paul had learned that **our inconveniences are actually God's opportunities.**

When your perspective is that oriented toward the Gospel there's no more room for *"complaining and disputing..."* Instead be *"blameless and harmless..."*

Verse 15, *"That you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation..."* What a vivid description of our world today - *"crooked and perverse."*

Rather than straight, this world has been bent.

We've been twisted and contorted out of our original shape. None of us are what we were meant to be.

Recently, shock-jock Howard Stern, of all people, commented, *"You're warped. I am warped. We are all warped."* That's a biblical statement. It sounds like Paul. Everyone is born *warped and twisted* in some manner.

This means you can say you were born a specific way - a *homosexual*, or *kleptomaniac*, or *alcoholic*, or *violent*, or *prone to some other tendency...* and though we can argue *whether you were, or your behavior represents a passive chose...* it really doesn't matter.

For the way we were born is not necessarily a good thing. We're all born sinners, which is *a very bad thing.*

And the results of sin are always negative, not positive. Everyone in this world was born twisted in some form or fashion. It's a *"perverse generation."*

But here's the question for Gospel-oriented people, *"The*

Gospel has the power to straighten out our twisted-ness. So how do we reach a crooked world?"

And the answer, *Not by condemning or critiquing the crookedness!* Paul says we'll impact our world by being *"blameless and harmless, children of God without fault"*

"Harmless" means *"simple and untangled"* - pure not perverse. Rather than *duplicity* - think *integrity*. The world needs to know our only motivation is their good.

And *"blameless"* - realize, *blameless* doesn't mean perfect. We all sin, but the *blameless* person owns and addresses his sin. He doesn't *deny it*, or *hide it*, or *make excuses*. The blameless person has admitted his sin and made amends - any accusation is old news.

The way you straighten out crooked people is by being straight up with people. As Paul says, *"among whom you shine as lights in the world..."* Notice, our job isn't to fight or condemn the darkness, but to shine the light. A bright light is what drives out the darkness.

There's a story called *"The Whisper Test."* It's the memoirs of a woman named Mary Ann Bird. Mary Ann was born with a cleft palate, a crooked nose, and was deaf in one ear. You can imagine the kids in her school were not very sensitive to Mary Ann's feelings. Her classmates would ask, *"What happened to your lip?"*

Mary Ann would always answer, *"I cut it on a piece of glass."* It was less embarrassing for her to chalk it up to an accident, than to admit that she was born that way.

At the school she attended there was an annual hearing

test. Mary Ann dreaded this test. Her deformity was humiliation enough, she didn't want the other kids to know she was deaf. The teacher would call a child to her desk and whisper a statement, "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." The student was suppose to repeat the teacher's statement. Mary Ann would cup her hand over her deaf ear to help her hearing.

One year Mary Ann was in Mrs. Leonard's class. She was everybody's favorite teacher. Fun, joyful, full of surprises - every student tried to please Mrs. Leonard.

When the day came for *The Whisper Test* and Mary Ann was called to her teacher's desk, she leaned forward and cupped her hand over her ear. Later, Mary Ann would write, "I waited for those words, which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life. Miss Leonard didn't say, "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." What she whispered was "I wish you were my little girl."

And this is how we reach the heart of a "crooked and perverse generation." We don't dwell on people's twistedness. We let them know that despite their deformities, there is a Father God who wishes they were *His* child. This love opens the door to the Gospel.

And according to verse 16, we live straightest and shine brightest "holding fast the word of life." You'll never *work out*, what God has *worked in* without "holding fast" to God's Word. The Bible lines us up.

The worst mistake a golfer can make is not lining up correctly. It's so frustrating to strike the ball solidly, only to hit

an errant shot, because you lined up wrong!

You *worked out* what was *worked in*, but you lined up wrong. Likewise, our spiritual life gets sabotaged when we line up contrary to the truth. We live by faith, but faith is no good, if it's not founded on God's truth. The forsaking of God's Word is what will always sink us.

You should know, I'm not worried about the strength of the world's arguments. A crooked generation will twist the truth, yet Christianity wins on logic every time.

What eats at all of us though, is *the loudness of the voices*. Where the world can't convince, it tries to bully!

Think of a baserunner racing for home. He sees he's out by "out by a country mile" - his only hope is to bulldoze the catcher and dislodge the ball. *This is the world's strategy*. It knows it's "out by a country mile. The only way crooked people can claim to be "safe" is by bowling us over, and dislodging us from the Gospel.

Like a tough catcher, we need to "*hold fast to the word of life!*" Jesus told us on the night before His crucifixion, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word."

Paul is happy that the Philippians are "*holding fast the word...*" - "*so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.*" Paul had invested his blood, sweat, and tears in the Philippians.

Paul brought them the Gospel under much duress.

He was arrested, and beaten, and jailed - before God delivered Paul and Silas in the middle of the night.

If the believers had abandoned God's Word, Paul would've

considered his time in Philippi a waste. His goal was to make every minute count. That they kept a firm grip on the Word meant his time was well spent.

Which is why Paul comments in verse 17, “Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.” The Philippians were Paul’s great joy.

It’s amazing that such a sacrificial relationship would bring a man such joy. Notice the peculiar picture Paul paints. He sees the faith of the Philippians as a lamb on the altar - “*the sacrifice and service of your faith.*”

Perhaps, he was thinking of what he wrote to the Romans, when he called all Christians to be “a living sacrifice.” Here the Philippians are now on the altar.

But if the Philippians were the sacrifice, Paul was the “*drink offering.*” In Judaism, and even among the pagan Romans, animal sacrifices were seasoned with a *drink offering* - a concoction of herbs, juices, spices.

It seasoned and tenderized the meat. It gave off a delicious aroma. We’re talking holy barbecue sauce - a spiritual steak sauce. Paul was an **A1 servant of Jesus.**

This is how Paul envisions himself - he’s the *drink offering*. He lived in a way that accentuated their faith. *Are you a drink offering on someone else’s sacrifice?*

You can be when you give to a missionary, or pray for a pastor, or thank a SS teacher, or support a struggling friend, or encourage a brother in Christ...

But here's the kicker... Once the *drink offering* was applied it was no longer seen. It was absorbed into the meat. The only person who knew of its influence, was the One who tasted it when He ate the meat.

That meant, though the sacrificial lamb was seen by everyone, the *drink offering* was only appreciated by God alone. *And this should speak volumes to us...*

Paul took joy, he experienced gladness, he rejoiced over a relationship that no one appreciated but God.

This isn't just joy at half-mast, it's joy when the flag doesn't flap at all. When no one else can see what was happening - *but God could, Paul's friends could* - and apparently that was enough for Paul. *What about us?*

In Philippians, Paul teaches us to be Gospel-oriented Christians... and here's more of what that means...

Are we working out what God has worked in?

Are we letting the Gospel meddle *with our stuff*, and *in our business* - is it shaping every area of our life?

Have you put a lid on your complaining? There's a crooked, twisted world out there that needs Jesus.

Are we holding fast to the Word of life, and shining the light of God's love into the world's darkness?

And last, but not least, are we willing to be poured out for other's sake? *Let's all be **A1** servants of Jesus!*