

Philippians 2:3-13

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. 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.

Brothers and sisters, normally I would open with an illustration of some kind, trying capture the essence of the message. My goal would be to give us a framework to take a biblical concept and tie it to our lives. But not today.

Today I need apologize to you, my brothers and sisters, my friends, some of whom I have known for three decades. This text has laid my soul bare. I have long wrestled with pride and arrogance. I believed that the Spirit working in me had brought me out of the bondage to that way of thinking. But it seems that I took my eyes off the prize. I allowed my own spiritual progress to deceive me, to make me think I was something that I was not. In a way, I was like king Hezekiah at the end of his life. I lost sight of the fact I needed to be like Jesus and look not only to my own interests, but also to the interests of others.

So, to each of you here in this room I need to say this: I am sorry. I have led in arrogance and not in the humility of Christ. I humbly ask for your forgiveness. And to those who are not here because of that arrogance, I pray this sermon will reach your ears and more importantly your hearts. I regret the damage I have done. I ask for your forgiveness as well.

It is hard to preach a sermon when your own life is the illustration. But I feel compelled to do this for two reasons. First, I need to do it for my own soul. I have been under a weight for several months, but I think my self-deception goes back further than that. I need to preach this word first and foremost to myself. Second, I want us all to see that God's word is truly living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

As I've read and re-read this passage from Philippians, I've been struck by Paul's structure. He starts with a call, which is in essence a command. And he ends with a call, which is in essence a command. In the middle is the beautiful Christ hymn, which serves both to exemplify the commands but also to exalt both the humility and the majesty of Christ.

Here is the four-part outline that broke me and brought me to a place of repentance:

- 1) Humility and others-focus should mark everything we do
- 2) Christ's humility is the foundation of our faith and the basis of our own humility
- 3) Our salvation, including our humility, must be worked out in the grit and grime of life
- 4) God is always at work to will and to work for his good pleasure

Read with me again Philippians 2:3-4 **Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.**

I'm a little leery to comment on these verses. They seem so self-evident. These verses have a two-part command structure that is common in Paul's teaching. Stop being conceited and self-focused. Start being humble and focusing on the needs of others. Easy to say. Hard to do.

But I need to say this. I've read these verses several times over past few months. Their true weight never really landed on me. I read them analytically not devotionally. I did not let the word of God pierce me. I did not even ask this one simple question: Father, how am I doing at this?

Consider this: earlier in the week I set up a sprinkler at the edge of our driveway to water a certain part of our lawn. When I went on to other things, our new puppies started playing with the hose, ultimately pivoting the sprinkler by more than 90 degrees. Now the sprinkler was spraying more water on the driveway than the lawn. The water that could bring life to my grass was simply flowing down the drain. If we are not careful, that is how we can approach God's word.

Brothers and sisters, here is the great thing about God and his word. If you let it speak and if you take time to listen, it will impact your life. Sometimes this impact is small and gradual like the growing of a tree. Other times is dramatic like an avalanche in the Rocky Mountains.

However, I need to offer this warning. It is easy, far too easy, to give God's word lip service. Just a moment ago I mentioned how the weight of this passage hadn't landed on me even though I had read it multiple times over the past few months. I can't tell you exactly why. Perhaps I was preoccupied with other things. Perhaps my mind simply wanted to dive into the

Christ hymn. Perhaps my own arrogance had built a callous on my heart. Whatever the reason, I placed a roadblock on the effectiveness of God's word.

Look at the command again. It is simply this: our focus must be outward, not inward. We must regard and treat others better than ourselves. We must step out of the mindset of this world and the natural bent of our heart. We must step into a different way of thinking and assessing each interaction we have with one another.

Is this hard? Absolutely. Is it impossible? No! Remember what Jesus said about the salvation potential of the rich young ruler. Matthew 19:26 **But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."**

You may be asking or thinking but how? How can I possibly reverse course after years even decades of self-seeking? The answer is the same as it is with any and every sin we face: Look to Jesus. And that is what Paul does. Jesus' humility is the foundation of our faith and the basis of our own humility

Philippians 2:5-8 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Think about what Paul is asking of us here. It is not simply "hey look at what Jesus did for you", as great and glorious as that was. He gave up his position in heaven for each one of us who call ourselves Christians. He went from royalty to poverty. He left the sinless presence of God to spend three decades in the midst of sinful humanity. And the most humiliating of all is that the eternal, sinless Son of God died in full agreement with the Father so that each and every person who puts their faith and trust in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

I need to pause for a moment and ask this question. Do you believe this? That Jesus died, literally died, a gruesome death on the cross and absorbed the wrath of God for you. Not you collectively. You specifically. If so, that is wonderful, and we will spend eternity together praising God. But if not, I plead with you to not neglect such a great salvation. The Bible is clear. Jesus himself is clear. Our sins. My sins. Your sins. They deserve judgment. They deserve hell. Without Jesus each and everyone of us is on our way to eternal conscious torment. But the good news is this: Jesus took that torment for you. Will accept his gracious gift? Will you receive the salvation and forgiveness he freely offers?

Oh Father, help us to see our desperate need for Jesus. Whether we've been walking in faith for decades or considering this truth for the first time, open the eyes of our heart so that we

can see the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of Christ and humbly surrender our lives to him.

Paul's call to us is to see all of this but not to leave it on the shelf. His call is the call of the Spirit to adopt this same humility in our interactions with one another. "Have this mind among you" or as another translation puts it "have this attitude". Jesus' attitude was complete submission to the Father. Jesus' attitude was to be a servant to all. Jesus' attitude was not to cling to any of his own intrinsic authority, but to lay it all aside for the rescue mission he and the Father and the Spirit designed together.

As I write this, I am keenly aware of how far short I fall of this calling. As a pastor I sincerely appreciate says "the messenger is far from the message". I confess I have not lived up to this calling. But that does not negate the call to each of us.

And that is Paul's next point: We must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. There may be some listening to this message asking a very real question: "what do you mean 'work out your salvation'?" Doesn't Dan always say there nothing we can do to earn Gods favor? Doesn't he also say we can never pay God back? How is it even possible to work out our salvation if it is already fully accomplished for us on the Cross?

Those are great questions. But remember that Dan also says that the Christian life is grace with blisters. Or as a theologian I once read said: following Jesus requires grace driven effort. Here's how the apostle Peter said it: 1 Peter 2:2-3 **Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.**

So, here is my attempt at an answer: our salvation, while it was fully accomplished on the cross and fully vindicated by Jesus' resurrection, our experience of it only happens over time. What we know of Christ, what we understand of his work in our lives grows as we grow in him. But what is challenging is that this growth is our responsibility.

So, whether it is humility or purity, devotion or wisdom, patience or self-control, the call here and elsewhere is for us to work these things out in our lives. We need to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. You may ask, what does that look like? Perhaps it looks like honestly seeking God's guidance in these areas and then actually listening to and responding to his answer. Perhaps it means seeking candid and direct feedback from trusted brothers and sisters in Christ and then actually responding to what they have to say. Perhaps it means putting the phone down, clearing the the calendar and actually spending time with the one who loves you the most.

However, if you are like me there is probably something nagging at you. You look at yourself, I look at myself and we say: we can't do this. The climb is too steep. We're in the Grand

Canyon at night without a light and without any water or food. Paul of course says it better than I can in Romans 7:19, 21, 24 **For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?**

What then is our recourse? Are we in a spiritual catch-22? A dilemma from which there is no escape. Paul offers a general answer in 1 Corinthians 15:57 **But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** Peter says it this way in 2 Peter 1:3 **His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,**

But here is the punchline from our passage: Philippians 2:13 **for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.** This should be good news to all of us who take God's call to obedience seriously. God is at work in us. In me. In you. In each and every one of us.

This means we are not in a spiritual catch-22. There is no dilemma. Unless, of course, we create one. We can ignore the call of God. Look how well that went for kings of the Old Testament. We can try to muscle it ourselves. Look how well that went for the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Or we can let go and let God. Look how well that went for the church to which James was writing.

But if we work with God, alongside God, in conjunction with God, at least two things happen. First, we approach the task with fear and trembling. Why? Because it is a big deal. Paul has already laid out how important humility is. It is foundational to the church. Jesus' humility is the reason anyone of us is here at all. No humility, no cross. No cross, no salvation. No salvation, no church. But our humility is also crucial. If we are not emulating Christ as best as we can, the church will suffer, this church will suffer. That is why this passage has hit me so hard. I have not lived up to God's call in my own life and I have let each one of you down.

As we take this seriously though, we realize that we are operating in conjunction with God. He is drawing us out of our self focus. He is exposing our prideful thoughts and words. He is opening our minds and hearts to the needs of others. And he is showing us that true humility brings glory and honor to him.

If you ask me "what does it look like to work out your salvation while God works in you for his good purposes," I will say I'm not really sure. What I mean is it will look different for each of us. For some it will mean putting things aside that the world and others say are ok. But if those things cause you to sin, you need to walk, maybe even run from them. I have what

many will consider a trivial example from my own life, but for me it became such a source of stress, anxiety and anger that I had to put it out of my life. It was the NFL and namely following the Green Bay Packers.

Please don't hear me say that watching football is sinful or that cheering for the Packers or any other NFL team is wrong. But for me, for me, it was a direct line to such sin that I could not honor God and watch football. For me, I had to put football to death. But here's the thing, I couldn't do it alone. I became convinced over 15 years ago that I needed to take this dramatic step. However, I was the proverbial 2-year-old saying, "I can do it myself". It took my deeply unchristian thoughts and emotions during the 2011 Super Bowl for me to hear the Spirit's unambiguous voice saying, "with man this is impossible, with God all things are possible."

The journey since then has not been perfect, in part because many of my friends and co-workers really enjoy football and are fans of either the Packers or the Vikings or the Bears. And occasionally my stress level may rise if I am not diligent, but I stand here to say God has done a work in me even as I have done the work of putting football and the Packers behind me.

But working out your salvation while God works in you may look different to you. It may mean trusting that God is good even with a cancer or Alzheimer's diagnosis. It may mean leaning into Jesus as you do the hard work of marital reconciliation. It may mean releasing control of situations that we've driven into the dirt and do the heavy lifting along with God to bring those situations to the light of day.

Dan has said this hundreds of times and is no less true as I say it today. I do not know your situation. I do not know the entirety of your story. But I know this: if you are Christian, if you claim to trust in and follow Jesus, then working out your salvation is not an option. It is a command. And the promise is equally true that God will, let me repeat he will, work in you according to his will and for his good purposes.

I would like to end with a word of hope from the verses I skipped a little earlier. Philippians 2:9-10 **Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,**

I know many of us know this, but I also know it is easy to forget. Jesus' humiliation resulted in the greatest victory in the created universe. And that victory resulted in his exaltation at the Father's right hand. In Matthew 28 Jesus says all authority is his. Here Paul says the same thing. This Jesus we follow and serve, the one whom we trust and obey, he is King

over everything. There is not one square inch in all of creation where Jesus doesn't rightly say "Mine".

And there's more.

- Jesus' death brought us life. Eph 2:4-5.
- Jesus has given us a new identity: 2 Cor 5:17.
- Jesus' resurrection has removed the power and sting of death: 1 Cor 15:54-57.
- Jesus' work has removed all condemnation Rom 8:1
- and has drawn us into a love that can never end or ever be destroyed Rom 8:38-39.
- Jesus' blood has cleansed us Is 53:5
- and he has given us eternal life Jn 1:12

As I stand here, I am asking myself what you're probably asking: what's next? What do I do with the word that is in front of me. In a sense my answer is both easy and hard. We need to seriously ask this question of God: what will you have me do in response to your word? Am I truly humble? Do I actually emulate Christ? Can I honestly say with Paul, "follow me as I follow Christ?" Am I consistently pressing on to make Jesus my own? Am I really working out my own salvation with fear and trembling? Take it from me these questions are easy to give lip service to. And if you seriously ask this of God. If you actually expect answer. If fully accept his answer, the road will be hard. Matthew 7:13-14 comes to mind **"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."** But Matthew 11:28-30 is equally true: **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**

To this I would add: be diligent in your walk with Christ. As Jesus' words in Matthew 7 remind us, this is not an easy road. Life will try to pull you aside. Little things will entice you. Good things will draw you away from the best thing: following hard after Jesus. And while I am resisting giving you 3 points of application, I feel compelled to share one hard step that has made a tremendous difference in my challenge with humility. Sincerely ask a brother or a sister to give you a candid assessment of your walk with Christ. And actually listen to their response. As I said, it will be hard but remember Proverbs 27:6 **Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.**