
UNBROKEN JOY
WORK HARD, TRUST HARD
Philippians 2:12-13

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.

Paul, in this section of Philippians, is helping us to live out our daily lives as Christians. He is telling us, going all the way back to Chapter 1, verse 27, to live a life that's worthy of the gospel. Live a life that's worthy of the good news that you've received that has changed your life. Among other things, he has told us that this life is a life of radical humility. God has called us to follow the example of Christ, to empty ourselves, to serve, to humble ourselves, to obey. In these verses, as he is continuing with this explanation of how we live day in and day out, he gives us a principle of how to apply everything he is talking about. So in verse 14 and following it, he will kind of pick back up on some of the specific things that we are to do. For example, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." There you go. We could have five or six messages just on that verse alone, right? Do everything without grumbling.

He is going to get back in to some of the nitty gritty of what we do, but there is a principle here in verses 12 and 13 on how we apply everything. It's really two truths, and we don't think about those truths going together. We think that they are almost incompatible. One truth is: Work hard. Work with all your heart at living out your Christian life. The other is a truth that focuses on God working in you, willing and working in you, working in your will and your activity to bring about his good pleasure. We typically think of these two things as opposed: Either I'm doing it or God is doing it. It's an unhealthy separation.

In fact, Paul's purpose in Philippians is to bring us into the life of joy that is ours in Jesus Christ. There is joy in Christ. That's Paul's assumption throughout. This is a manual for joy, for sustained, unbroken joy. At the risk of being misunderstood, I think that this principle really impacts your experience of joy. Learning how to live your life, going for it with all that you are in Christ while trusting in Christ with all your heart, is very important in experiencing joy. Joy is not like money. As a Christian, you are in Christ. Joy is yours. But you have to spend it. Money is not that way. Some of you believe it is that way and some of us live that way, but if you don't spend your money

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and you just invest it and save it and never spend it, at the end you can give it to other people. Now, I'm not advocating you do that necessarily. That's not the point. But with joy, if you don't give it and spend it and express it and live it out, the whole experience diminishes and other people don't share in it.

There is a place where it's unnatural (that's probably the best word) if you are a Christian and Christ has changed your life and his joy is in you, if you're not working at it, you're not giving yourself, I mean really, with all that you are, pursuing Jesus Christ, getting everything out of your life that is hindering that or in any way shrinking that reality, it's unnatural. It's unnatural for the Lord of the universe to live in you and for it not to be your life. So we need both sides of what Paul talks about here. We need these two truths. We need to work hard and we need to trust hard.

Let's take the first one: Work out your salvation. "Work out your salvation," Paul writes, "with fear and trembling." Now, we need to begin with this word "salvation," because it really informs exactly what we are talking about. Let me say, as we begin to talk about salvation, that when we say "work out your salvation" Paul is not saying, "work at your salvation so as to be saved." No, the bible teaches very clearly that we are saved by grace, that it's a gift. In other words, Paul is talking to the saved. He is saying, "You are saved. It has come to you as a gift. It is God's mercy. It is God's grace. Now there should be an outworking of that in your life. It should be expressed. You need to be working diligently so that it finds fruition, expression in your life, knowing that one day it will be finalized, it will be perfected. But from the moment God saves you and you are forgiven until the moment God completes it, we are to be living it out, working it out." So he is not saying here that this is the way you get saved, but "salvation" is the key word.

I want to take us on a little bit of a progression in terms of understanding and I think the best way to do that is if you go with me to 1 Samuel 15. Let's go to a passage in the Old Testament that gives us just a little bit of a picture about what it means to be saved. Here's what I'm after right here in this part of the message -- I am praying that this idea of what it means to work out your salvation with fear and trembling -- that God will take that and grab your soul with it, almost like taking you by the collar and shaking you. Because I believe that Paul wants that to be so imprinted on our souls, but it won't happen if the word "salvation" falls on us as if falling on deaf ears; if this is, "No, no, yeah, yeah, I'm saved. I'm a Christian."

In order to try to bring that home to our hearts, I want to talk for a minute about salvation, because there are actually three pictures here in 1 Samuel 15 that really trouble me. I'm going to talk about two of them for sure. The first one is: God judges the Amalekites, and he tells the children of Israel to go be his agent of judgment on this culture. I want to be transparent with you: that really

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troubles me. In fact, it's one of the greatest challenges, personally, to my faith, when I read about these sections of scripture. But it shouldn't be beyond our ability to grasp that a culture, a nation can get so far from God that God judges the entire nation, so that an ancient culture that is practicing child sacrifice and every imaginable immorality, not capriciously, not flippantly, but as their sin fills up the judgment of God, God says, "At this moment, I am going to judge this culture."

What troubles us is that we know from history that happens. We know that there is a decay that happens in nations, in cultures, and that they fall under the judgment of God, but in most cases it seems so impersonal. Here it seems so directly applied. It should be - and I know I don't often speak this way - but it should be a wake-up call to you and me. I serve on a ministry. I serve on several boards, and one of those boards is Hope Women's Centers. The reason it's relevant that I serve on several boards is because this board is unique, because other churches relate to us so differently. "Oh no, no - he's going to talk about abortion, and it's so controversial." And it is! It's full of controversy, and I understand that. But it's amazing how many very large churches, very conservative churches don't want to touch it.

Then we are confronted with a series of videos which are showing us really troubling activity. I want to be careful here, because I know there is some editing and some things, but I think it's undeniable. In our country in some measure, the bodies of infants are sold for profit! Does that not appall you? And then the director of Planned Parenthood comes out with an explanation. "This has always been our policy," as if to say, "We have always done this" makes it okay!

Like many of you, feeling very uncomfortable in this moment, I read this passage about God's judgment on a people and I don't like it. I don't like hearing or reading about that expression of God. But then, I need to pause and say that this is the God of scripture. He judges sin. I would like to say that I am aware that as I speak in this way, many of you - not one or two - many of you have had an abortion, or you've helped someone have an abortion. I want to be sensitive and proclaim to you that if you have confessed that sin, repented of it, you have experienced the mercy of God and you are forgiven. I want to put a challenge to you: Don't live silently in shame, but speak up as much as you are able about the mercy and the forgiveness of God, so that others can experience that mercy before that moment, and not just after that moment.

Salvation. You see, when you look at this picture, I think about the flood. I think about God bringing a message of judgment, and I am there outside the ark. I deserve the judgment that I'm about to get. And I'm saved. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." You see, there's no awe until you are at that moment of understanding the judgment that we deserve because of our sin, and you know you are spared by the sheer mercy of God.

The second picture in this passage: King Saul disobeys the Lord. He does his own thing. So the prophet of the Lord comes to him. The prophet of the Lord tells him, "You've disobeyed God." Listen to this. These are very harsh words. He says, "You have disobeyed God. Has the Lord as great a delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices? He doesn't want your religious activity. Does he like that as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice...." Samuel goes on with his rebuke to Saul. Saul says to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the Lord and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord." Okay, stay with me. This is the second troubling scene. This troubles me. Samuel rebukes Saul, "You have disobeyed God." Then he gives him a sermon on how important obedience is. Saul confesses his sin. He actually confesses the root of it. "You know what? I did this because I feared people. I wanted people to like me."

Now, I don't know about you, but that's a sin I can relate to. It's the fear of man, as it's called in scripture. He asks for forgiveness. Look at what Samuel says. Samuel says to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel." I am not used to this picture of God. Are you? Are you used to God sending a prophet to confront a man for disobedience, then he confesses his sin, but the response is, "I have rejected you?" "As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.'" I am not used to God speaking like this, at all! Are you?!

Do you see this scene? "Please forgive me!" "No! You are rejected by God as king." He turns to go. In an act of desperation, Saul reaches out. The robe of Samuel tears and he says God has torn what was yours from you and he has given it to someone else, your neighbor, who is better than you. Imagine for a moment God speaking to you that way. "I reject you. I am taking from you what is yours, to give it to someone else better than you." That's harsh, isn't it?

Do you know who that "someone better" was? It was King David. Do you know who his neighbor was? It was David. And do you know what God said to David? "I am going to build your house, and your house will last forever. I am going to put someone on your throne who will never die and his kingdom will never come to an end. I will establish an everlasting kingdom." Jesus Christ came. He is the son of David. Because Jesus Christ paid for your sin, because he suffered in your place, the judgment that you see described here in 1 Samuel 15 is not yours. If you're in Christ, God's words to you are not, "I reject you." They are, "I accept you." "I accept you and I'm not only going to not take from you, I am going to give to you what doesn't belong to you."

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If you grasp those pictures of God's judgment, and that we are spared in Christ, there is a sense where this phrase grabs you. "I will work out my salvation in fear and trembling," not fearing that I've got to earn it or that it's going to be taken from me. There's just a seriousness, a soberness about our work of living out the Christian life. You see, the gospel picture that Paul gave was not 1 Samuel 15, which I just took you to, it was a picture of the son of God coming in the form of a man to become a servant, to become a slave to serve you and me, to die on the cross. But unfortunately, those words are so familiar to you and me, and Christmas and Easter, and week in and week out, that they just kind of trickle down and hit the ground so that we lose the sense of awe and wonder at what the eternal son of God has done for us. So if we are not careful, we can lack a certain seriousness that should characterize our pursuit of God. It means to give expression, let it shape your Christian life. It means to work at it. Work hard at it.

As P. T. O'Brien has said, Paul has in mind a continuous, sustained, strenuous effort. Ask yourself this morning, "Is my pursuit of Jesus Christ a continuous, sustained, strenuous effort?" In other places of scripture it's described as a pursuit, a following after, a pressing on, a contest, a fight, a race. Paul uses all of those images to describe what he describes here as, "working out your salvation with fear and trembling."

If it would help you, you can simplify this verse. Paul uses a synonym for "working out your salvation." Can you see it there in the text? Do you see what he says? "...As you have always obeyed, so now...work out your salvation with fear and trembling." The idea here is that anything and everything in our life that does not please God, that is not right with God, that is not honoring to him, we would set aside. Everything that God wills for us to do, that pleases him, we would embrace with our whole hearts. It means obedience, with fear and trembling.

So we consider that this means a sense of awe and reverence, utmost seriousness. We think about what we have been spared. We think about the cost of salvation. It may help you to picture the opposite. Think about individuals we've seen who have a particular stronghold. They are bound in sexual sin, for example. Then they go out and they meet other individuals who are struggling with sexual purity and they are so harsh and stern. We even see preachers fall morally who have been some of the most vocal against sexual sin.

When I see that, I'm thinking, "I don't know, but if I've got a particular problem, I'm just going to avoid it from the pulpit." I'm thinking right now as I'm saying that, "Am I avoiding anything?" I'm not aware of it. But surely, if you are bound up in chasing after prostitutes, you're not going to preach against it. Don't you know that God is listening? Do you have no fear of God? That's the opposite picture -- to just kind of flippantly, casually live in sin and rail against other people who are

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doing the same things you are doing.

Have you ever been driving late at night and you are fighting to stay awake, and you fall asleep? Then you wake up because your car has gone off the road partially, or someone is honking at you? And then you are like, "Wow, I could have died!" Your heart rate goes from 60 to 160 instantly, and there is this sense in which you think, "Wow, I've got to pay attention! I've got to be alert! Maybe I need to stop and get coffee. Maybe I just need to stop altogether." That moment is what Paul is describing right here: that we are to give ourselves to pursuing the Lord. I believe that we could interpret this to say, "Okay, enough. Enough of seeing how far you can go in living like everyone else lives. Get serious about your pursuit of God!"

I know we don't want legalism. We don't want this thing like, "Man, if we show up two minutes late, Brian is going to have a fit and he's going to be all over us. I feel like if I miss a Sunday, I've got to explain to Brian." I'm not your problem! I didn't die for you. But if I did, I would expect you to come on time to the funeral! Good grief! Going through life... I can't do that very well. Listen, guys, hear my heart. You know, I want to celebrate life to the Lord. I don't want to be a legalist. I don't want to kill everything, every ounce of fun, but I believe there is no joy apart from Jesus Christ. There is no sustained joy apart from him, and if we are worked up about everything but him, it may be there, but it's like money we never spend.

The second part of this truth, and I'm out of time so I'm going to preach it really quickly: "...for it is God who works in you." Work hard, trust hard. Paul has combined two ideas that we normally think just don't go together. And it's important for us to understand that, so we use the example of Saul and the fear of man. That's a great point to just stop for a moment, because that's a root of sin. If you grow up and you're a people pleaser, and it just kills you if someone is unhappy with you, you can't just snap your way out of that. You can identify it. You can repent of it at that level. Call it what it is and say, "God, please forgive me. So many times I care more about what people think than about what you think and it leads me to be quiet when I should speak up and to say things I shouldn't say, and it takes all these weird expressions. God, help me."

It's important for you and me to know that when we come up against these strongholds of thinking, and patterns of emotion and affections, addictions, that God is greater than our sin, that he has died to forgive us of our sin. Whether it's an act, like a single act of abortion or multiple abortions, or broken relationships, or patterns of behavior and addiction, Christ forgives us. If we repent, he shows us his mercy. He has died for our sin and he breaks its power in our lives. In those moments where we just fail and fail and fail and we are just frustrated, saying, "God, help me! I'm 54! Will I ever get past this?!" God says to keep trusting, keep working, keep trusting. Don't stop trying and

keep trusting.

Sometimes I think God says to me, "Brian, I would have done it earlier, but you were just so arrogant. Had I done it earlier, you would have thought it was you. I just wanted to let it go a little while longer until you know." Sometimes I'm saying, "God, I get it! I want to be free of this sin!" He says, "Just keep trusting. Your hope is in Christ, not in you, not in your works, but if we think I'll just be casual about it, I'm just going to let go and let God, well good, because you are going to drown. You are going to let go? You better start swimming, in faith, in trust."

If it helps you, think about it this way: think of other pursuits in your life, things that you really enjoy doing. You don't just relax and not give yourself -- you pour yourself into those pursuits, either because they are important, or you enjoy them. It's unnatural to think about Christianity being anything less than that. I had some verses that I was going to take you to, to talk about how faith connects to obedience, but I don't have time to do that. So I want to just bring this to a close with a couple of applications.

I want you to see here in the second part of this verse, that though we have taken a briefer time with it, that it's God's delight to work in you. This is for his good pleasure. He doesn't do it reluctantly, or begrudgingly, or in a measured way. He does it extravagantly. It's his delight to show you mercy, and he works in your will and your activity. So God is working in you. In your very desires, dreams, affections, and choices, God is energizing change in your heart, transforming, converting. It is true conversion. As a Christian, you are experiencing a continuous inflow of God's grace to transform who you are, and it is taking expression in your will, your heart, and in your activity, your actions, your work, and it's his pleasure to do that.

I think I'm going to close with this. This will maybe help you if you can see the context in which Paul is making this exhortation. He is in prison and he can't be with them. So you hear in his words, he is saying, "Listen, just as you obeyed when I was with you, and you were worried about, 'Will I get out? And will I come back to you?' You obeyed when I was there. Now, in my absence...." You see, you can connect with that. Some of you know what it is to have a mentor, a coach, a teacher, a pastor that just made such a difference in your life. And some of you have seen that person fall or leave you, or God takes them, then what are you going to do? Paul's message is, "Listen, it's not me in your heart working, it's God! God is at work. You are the work of God! Don't lose heart! Double up your efforts! Get after it!"

This was an encouraging message to me because, you know, my family sits in the front row, and I don't know why, but they are getting married, and they are going away to college, and they are leaving me! And I want to tell you, I know it's natural and it's right, but I hate it, emotionally. I

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mean, sometimes it's nice to be alone, but that's not the normal emotion, right Mom? If you have sent off a child to college or you are in that transition, this is your verse. Listen, I love you. I want to be with you. But remember, it's God who is at work in you. I want you to work out your salvation in fear and trembling. This is your time to establish your faith, to drive down stakes, and say you belong to the Lord. Philippians 1:6: I'm confident that God is going to complete this in you. He has begun a work. He has saved you. Work it out. Live it out.

It's a great encouragement for us to find God constantly showing us this dynamic of just how wonderful human relationship can be and how dynamic and how deeply it affects us, but that ultimately Christ is that foundation upon which we can stand for all of eternity, and which brings us true and lasting joy. Because of that, we want to give ourselves in this one relationship in a way that at least matches all of those others, and really should exceed it, with a seriousness and a commitment where God takes us to a place, I believe, that Paul is telling us we will not experience less joy, but greater joy. It's yours in Christ. "Seize the day!" to use an overused expression, and live for Christ, that you might know his joy and fullness.