

LIVING AS CHILDREN OF GOD

Philippians 2:12-18

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.25.2004

Mark Twain once wrote, “Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.” Perhaps what is most annoying about a good example is our inability to follow it. And so the good example, rather than inspiring us, may actually infuriate us, since it serves as a rebuke to our failures. On the other hand, a good example may inspire us, but we soon realize that it cannot enable us. What I am trying to say is this: a good example is indeed a good thing, but we need help because we seldom can live up to the good example.

As we saw in our last lesson, in Phil 2:1-11, the Apostle Paul presents Jesus Christ as our great example. But who can possibly achieve what Jesus Christ achieved? Who can possibly live as Jesus Christ lived? It seems presumptuous, and perhaps even preposterous, to even try. It is popular these days to ask, “What would Jesus do?” But even if we know the answer, where do we find the power to do it? We need help.

There is good news. Paul, having set before us the divine *pattern* for our lives, goes on to tell us of the divine *power* for our lives. “It is God who is at work in you,” declares Paul, “enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:13). In the letter to the Galatians, Paul said it this way: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Yes, we *can* be like Jesus Christ. But it is not by *imitation*, it is by *incarnation*—Christ living in us. The Christian life is not a series of ups and downs; rather, it is a process of ins and outs. God works *in*, and we work *out*. Through the inward work of God, we live outward lives like Jesus Christ.

Drawing upon the example of Christ’s obedience (2:8), Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to show the same obedience in their lives. This brings us to verses 12-18 of chapter 2.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me (NRSV).

The introductory “therefore” lets us see that Paul’s appeal is based firmly on what he has just said about Christ. There is no hint that the Philippians are not doing well. They have always been obedient, Paul says, but he does not say to whom the Philippians were obedient. The translation I read—the NRSV—assumes that the Philippians were obedient to Paul, and this seems supported by the references to Paul’s presence or absence. Ultimately, of course, it is God to whom they owe obedience, and Paul is simply the one through whom God’s commands are channeled.

It is not clear whether Paul is referring to his presence in Philippi in the past or to a possible future visit. He may even be thinking of his “presence” and “absence” in the more radical sense, as we saw in 1:23-25, of remaining in this life or departing from it. If Paul is thinking in terms of this more radical sense, then his quotation in verse 15 from Moses’ farewell discourse to the Israelites in Deut 32 is painfully powerful. It undoubtedly occurred to Paul that this letter may be his own farewell discourse to the Philippians.

”Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12). Fear and trembling are not the result of uncertainty or insecurity concerning salvation, but are the proper attitude in the presence of God. This attitude is perhaps better described in English as “awe.” The Philippians work out their salvation in awe of an awesome God. Previously, in verses 6-11, Paul described the gracious action of God in Christ, and now that gracious action demands a response. The Philippians are to complete what God has done by living it out in their lives. But this is not simply an individual matter. The “your” is plural in Greek, and the life that is to be lived is the life lived in the community of believers. Paul’s words, like those of Moses, are addressed to the people of God, not to a collection of individuals. More often than not, when these words of Paul are quoted, they are generally used in a very individualistic sense; that is, we as individual Christians are to

work out our own salvation. But this is a misunderstanding and misuse of Paul's exhortation. *Paul calls us to individually work out our common salvation in our life together.* We, as individual Christians, work out our salvation *within* the fellowship of the church and *not without* it. We are to work out our salvation *as part of* the body of Christ and *not apart from* the body of Christ. Furthermore, it is God who is working in us, enabling us to work out our salvation. "It is God who is at work in you"—the "you" is plural in the Greek. God works in us individually within the body of Christ.

So, what does this mean in practical terms? Ok Paul, when the Philippians work out their salvation by the power of God, how will this manifest itself? "Do all things without murmuring and arguing" (v. 14). Uh oh, maybe we would prefer that Paul had not been so practical! Paul has clearly "quit preachin' and gone to meddlin'." In Deut 32:5, the Israelites are accused of being blameworthy and are described as no children of God, a crooked and perverse generation. Paul now turns this idea inside out: Christians have *become* God's children, and they must therefore live *without* blame in *the midst of* a crooked and perverse generation. Furthermore, the Israelites were frequently accused of complaining about God's provision for them. Paul refers to such complaining in 1 Cor 10 where he describes the behavior of the Israelites and what happened to them as a result, and uses this as an example of what Christians must *not do*.

In contrast to the "crooked and perverse generation"—probably a general reference to those who are not the children of God—the Philippian Christians "shine like stars in the world." There may be an echo of Dan 12:3 here, since in that text it is said that the wise will shine like the lights of the heavens and will thereby provide light for others. As the Philippians "hold fast to the word of life" in their struggle with opposition, they will be an example—a light—to those around them. In following the example of Christ, we become examples to those around us.

Finally, as the Philippians offer a sacrifice that comes from their faith—an offering of their lives to God and an offering of the gifts they sent to Paul—Paul is ready, if necessary, to pour out his own life over the sacrifice of the Philippian Christians. "Even if" this should happen, Paul declares that he is glad and will rejoice with the Philippians, and he urges them to be glad and to rejoice with him.

When I first began preaching, I had a sermon entitled "Marks of the True Church." I

even borrowed from an older preacher his professionally lettered sheet. Yes, a big, white bed-sheet that was hung up behind the pulpit. That was “PowerPoint” in those days. In this sermon, I identified the characteristics of the one, true, New Testament church. Of course, the conclusion was that we, the Churches of Christ, were right and everyone else was wrong. Fortunately, I continued to grow in my faith and soon stopped preaching this sermon. Today, I am still ashamed of the fact that I ever preached such a sermon. Why? Because although most of *what* I said was factually correct, *how* I said it was arrogant and judgmental. Even if I was right, I was still all wrong. Furthermore, what I did *not* say spoke volumes. Not once did I ever say, nor did I ever hear another Church of Christ preacher say, that one of the marks of the one, true, New Testament church was that everything is done without complaining or arguing. But that is precisely Paul’s primary point in the scripture we have studied today. In fact, Paul uses the story of Israel’s failure to instruct us as to how *not* to behave. One of the major causes of death among God’s people in the Old Testament is gripping and grumbling.

Today, there is too much complaining among the people of God. It seems so easy to criticize and to complain, to grip and to grumble, to destroy and to divide. God doesn’t strike folks dead today, not at least in vast numbers as in ancient Israel; He just lets us slaughter ourselves with our mouths. Paul challenges us to see that if we want to be a shining light in the world, we must get our corporate act together. We certainly have a lot of work to do in working out our common salvation. And we certainly need God’s help. We must not only *do* what Jesus would do, we must also *not do* what Jesus would not do. And Jesus was no complainer.

There are three principles in Phil 2:12-18 that I urge each of us to remember. *First, there is a purpose to achieve.* As a body of Christians, we are to so live our lives that we shine as stars in this dark world. Does our life together reflect that Jesus Christ is living in us? Does our life together shine the light of love and hope? Does our life together cause others to want to know Jesus Christ? “Loving others as Jesus loves us” means loving one another as Jesus loves us. Loving others outside of our church begins by loving others inside our church. We will not be a light to those on the outside if we do not have love on the inside. The light must come from within, and the fuel for that light is our love for Christ, which means we love one another as He loves us.

Second, there is a power to receive. We must allow God to work *in* us and *through* us if there is to be any worthy work that comes *out of* us. Jesus living in me is a painful proposition. Why? Because it means that I must die. The power of the crucified Christ only works in those who have crucified themselves.

Third, there is a promise to believe. Joy comes from sacrifice and service. Read the Letter to the Philippians. What we find is that joy is not so much something we feel, as it is something we do. For Paul, joy is a verb. Like Jesus Christ, joy is the fruit of a life of sacrifice and service. Yes, I know that sounds strange to the world in which we live. But then again, have you taken a hard look at the world in which we live? It's a world of darkness in which joy is sought in all the wrong places.

There is a purpose to achieve, a power to receive, and a promise to believe. Jesus Christ has shown us the way. Which way are you going to go?

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