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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
The Christian Life (3)

*The Christian Life:
What is Involved and How do I Live it?*
Part Three

**Unraveling the Miracle, Mystery, and “Mechanics” of the Christian Life:
A Study of Philippians 2:12-13**

John Piper has used the exhortation: “Act the Miracle!” as a way of giving expression to the essence of what it means to live a Christian life.

The “**miracle**” in view here is the activity of God in producing in our hearts and minds and wills the desire and power to obey his Word. The word “**act**” has in view what you and I do as a result of the miracle God has already performed in our hearts and minds and wills. To “act the miracle,” therefore, is a call to each of us to be diligent in doing what God has commanded, knowing that our energy and enthusiasm and exertion are all the fruit of a miracle in our hearts that has already taken place. ***We work out the Christian life, or act in obedience to the Word of God, only because God has already been at work within, performing a miracle in our lives.*** This is what we see in Philippians 2:12-13, the text we’ll use as foundational to our study of the Christian life. Here is what Paul wrote:

“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” (Phil. 2:12-13).

I’m going to use a word repeatedly that is key to what Paul is saying here. It is the word “*antecedent*”. Antecedent simply means *to come before*, to *precede*. When it comes to the Christian life, ***God is always antecedent***. He comes *first*. He acts *before* we act. We only act because he has *already* acted. God works in us *in advance* of our working for him. To put it in slightly different terms, God is always *prior*. He is earlier in time and order. His working is the *cause* of which our willing is the *effect*.

We see this principle in operation when it comes to *the love of God*. In 1 John 4:19 the apostle makes this simple statement: “We love because he first loved us.” In other words, God’s love for us is antecedent to our love for him. It is only because *God first took the initiative* in loving us that we, subsequently, are enabled to love him. God is always antecedent.

That is the profound truth that Paul is trying to communicate in Philippians 2:12-13. It is a truth that not only explains the mystery of the Christian life, but one that serves to encourage us when we are frustrated, and gives us hope when we are in despair.

I’m going to make an extremely bold claim: ***If you don’t understand this truth you will never understand the mystery of the Christian life.*** If you don’t walk away today with a solid grip on the principle of this passage, your struggle with sin and your desire to please God with your life will forever remain shrouded in mystery.

Let me say one more thing before we jump into the deep end of the pool. All of us struggle to make sense of ***the relationship between God’s sovereignty and our responsibility***. How do they relate to each other? If God is sovereign, how can we be responsible? And if we are genuinely responsible for what we do, doesn’t that undermine any notion that God is sovereign? I’m sure you’ve asked questions like these:

“How am I supposed to respond to the call to personal holiness? Where do I find the power to obey? Should I wait and remain passive until I feel the Holy Spirit prompting me to act? What is God’s role in my obedience? What does he do? If he is sovereign and I am dependent on his grace, does that destroy my freedom and responsibility? When it comes to God and me, who does what?”

This passage comes closer than any other biblical text to answering these questions and explaining the relationship between God's gracious sovereignty and our moral responsibility. Yes, God is sovereign and his work always takes precedence. As Paul said in Ephesians 1:11, *God "works all things according to the counsel of his will."* But we also must act. We must make choices and decisions and be energetic in embracing our moral responsibilities. ***The fact that God must first perform a miracle in the human heart does not mean that humans do nothing at all.*** Think of it in this way.

When God filled many at Bridgeway with generosity to give to our kids so they could attend Superstart summer camp, they were the ones who wrote the check to make it happen.

When God stirs you with love for our children so that you volunteer to help on a Sunday morning, you are the ones who walk to the Connect Counter and sign your name on the dotted line.

When God healed the paralytic in Acts 3, it was the man who got up and leapt about and ran.

When God awakens compassion in your heart to pray for someone who is sick and oppressed, you are the ones who come to the front and lay hands on them and intercede on their behalf.

When God reminds you of the beauty of Christ and fills your heart with the reality of his saving grace, it is you who shuts down that pornographic website and walks away from the computer.

When God infused resurrection life into the body and soul of Lazarus, it was Lazarus who walked out of the tomb on his own two feet.

Clearly, ***God must first produce within us the power to act. But we must then perform the deed. The miracle that takes place in your heart by God's sovereign and supernatural hand does not undermine or contradict your duty; rather he makes it possible for you to fulfill it.***

You act because God has already acted. ***The fact that God's action in you comes before your action on his behalf doesn't mean your obedient response is unnecessary or superfluous or meaningless. His action doesn't preclude yours; it empowers it.*** This is the principle that is found in our text.

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling"

The Christian life is a *battle* that calls for the active and energetic engagement of our minds and our wills. *We are not made holy or like Christ at one stroke, instantaneously.* It is a process, but one in which we take a very active part. The NT uses a variety of images and metaphors to emphasize the active and rigorous nature of the Christian life. Listen to a couple of them.

"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I **press on** to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Philippians 3:12).

"So then let us **pursue** what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Romans 14:19).

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So **run** that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I **discipline** my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us **run with endurance** the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

"**Fight the good fight of the faith.** Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Timothy 6:12).

The sanctifying grace of God is not a divine kiss that suddenly transforms a frog into a handsome prince! Holiness is not something that falls from heaven willy-nilly. It is what God produces in us through certain instruments, experiences, and means that he has ordained and it always involves struggle and effort and focus and sacrifice and energetic commitment on our part.

Some in the history of the church have believed that the key to Christian living is, quite simply, to do nothing. Some called this *quietism* since the idea was to remain silent and passive until the person felt the inner prompting of the Spirit or until they heard the Spirit speak in some way. In other words, these people embraced passivity in their approach to Christian living. Christians should simply *“let go and let God.”* Quietists insist that we should resist trying to do anything that we believe pleases God until we sense the prompting and urging of the Holy Spirit to act. Otherwise we are acting in the flesh.

But you cannot reconcile a passive and quietistic approach to the Christian life with what Paul says here in v. 12. The verb translated ***“work out”*** has the sense of laboring at something until it is brought to completion, hence to accomplish or to achieve. Hence, “produce it,” “bring it about,” “effect it.” This calls for ***continuous, sustained effort*** on our part. When it comes to your experience of the saving and sanctifying grace of God, says Paul, unfold it, discover it, make progress in it. When I speak to a young married couple and say, “Work at your marriage,” I’m not telling them to go to a pastor and repeat their vows and sign a certificate. They are already married. I’m calling on them to live in accordance with what is already true.

Take in hand this salvation God has graciously given you in Christ and put it on display. Bring it to consummation. Take the necessary steps in order that the salvation you have received by grace might unfold and flower and take shape in a way that pleases God.

Nowhere is this concept seen more clearly than in Ephesians 2:8-10.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

So how do good works relate to salvation? Clearly, although we are not saved ***by*** good works we are saved ***for*** good works.

This is what Paul has in mind in Philippians 2:12. He *doesn’t* say “work to acquire or obtain or earn your salvation, for God has done all he can and now it is up to you.”

Remember that ***Paul is addressing Christians***. These aren’t unsaved folk whom he commands to work so they might earn or merit acceptance with God. These are believers in Jesus in the church at Philippi. Therefore, he cannot be telling them to get themselves saved. He can’t be saying, “work for your salvation” as if salvation is something they haven’t yet experienced but are to strive to obtain.

There is a vast difference between ***“work for”*** and ***“work out.”*** Work “for” assumes that “salvation” is a goal or reward for which you are laboring or striving. Work “out” assumes that “salvation” is already in place; salvation has already been accomplished and experienced and you are now unpacking it, exploring it, laboring so that it might come to full flower, as it were.

So, to sum up, ***Paul is simply calling on all Christians to be diligent in the pursuit and practice of holiness***. Be devoted in your Christian walk to becoming ever more like Jesus, conformed to his image, loving what he loves, hating what he hates, thinking and talking and choosing in a way that would please him.

We are to do this with ***“fear and trembling”***? I think by this he has in view *our attitude toward God*. Perhaps we can catch a glimpse of what Paul had in mind by thinking back on what he said in Phil. 2:9-11. If every being in the universe, whether human or angelic, will one day acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus and bow in his presence, then ***the only reasonable response to him is humble, reverential fear and a healthy dose of trembling***. He is God, and we are accountable to him for every thought that passes through our minds and every word that falls from our lips and every action we take, every moment of every day. If that doesn’t cause you to tremble, nothing will.

Perhaps there is also a measure of “fear and trembling” at the prospect that if we fail to “work out” our salvation we will not have lived up to our privileges as God’s children and will suffer the loss of rewards and perhaps the loss of experiential intimacy with God. The bottom line is that *diligence in Christian living is no casual or flippant matter. It must be undertaken with urgency and seriousness.*

Therefore, the “fear and trembling” of v. 12 comes from our recognition of who Jesus Christ is, as just explained to us in vv. 5-11. The fact that he is Lord, before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess, awakens us to the magnitude of our responsibility and the awesome majesty of the one whom we obey.

“For”

What an incredibly big word “f-o-r” is! We could as easily translate it with the English word “because.” “For” or “because” is there as Paul’s way of alerting us to the way in which we are going to carry out the command of v. 12. *How are we going to do this, Paul?* His answer: *only by the antecedent working of God in your desires and actions.*

So, Paul is not telling us to sit idly by, twiddling our spiritual thumbs, passively waiting until some inner urge stirs us to act. He is saying quite the opposite. *Get up and get to work with the confidence that what just prompted and empowered you to do so was God antecedently at work in your heart.*

As I noted earlier in the examples I gave you, *Paul is not saying that God is working in our place, as if to say he’s doing the work so we don’t have to.* God himself does not work in children’s ministry so that you don’t have to. God himself does not greet visitors with a smile and a warm embrace so that you don’t have to. God himself does not attend a small group or pray for the sick so that you don’t have to. Rather, God is supplying us with the power so that **we** can perform the work. We act the miracle he produces.

It’s also important for us to see that Paul **doesn’t** say, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling **so that** God might then go to work in you.” God’s working in us is *not the divine response to our acting but the divine cause of our acting.* God doesn’t act in us as a reward for our having first acted for him. God’s working in us is the cause and the explanation for how we find it possible to work out our salvation. God’s work in us is always antecedent. His work comes first. The word “for” is Paul’s way of putting these two realities in proper order. *God’s working in us is the cause. Our working out our salvation is the effect.*

When God works antecedently in you, it doesn’t make your effort unnecessary; it makes it possible. God performs a miracle in your heart in order that you might obey his Word.

The author of the book of **Hebrews** says virtually the same thing in **13:20-21** of his letter. There he writes:

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, **equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight,** through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Here he tells us that God’s covenant with his children is eternal and sure because he will not leave us lacking the necessary resources to do his will. He abundantly provides you with whatever you need to do his will. But he does even more than that. Just as we saw in Philippians 2, *God works in us the very willing and working that he requires of us.*

He causes us freely and joyfully to take advantage of the resources he gives. God is faithful to his new covenant promises: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes” (Ezekiel 36:27).

You should know that virtually every non-Christian religion and philosophy reverses vv. 12-13. All other religions in one way or another put your effort first and God’s action second. That is utterly disastrous. Only Christianity asserts the antecedence and priority of grace and then the obedience and good works of men and women.

Paul says much the same thing in *1 Corinthians 15:10* – ***“I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”*** Paul worked hard. He labored long. He struggled and strained more than all the others combined. And when he was done, and wiped the sweat from his brow, he declared that it was all of God. It was all of grace.

How do we experience this power of God, this inner reality of grace that stimulates and then sustains our work? ***Galatians 3:5*** provides us with the answer – ***“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”*** God is at work in us through his Spirit to will and to do of his good pleasure by means of our faith-filled hearing. We hear God speak. We believe what he says. We exercise faith in his Word. ***And it is in and through that faithful hearing and trusting that the Spirit supplies us with power to say No to temptation and Yes to obedience.***

“But Sam, how do we hear faithfully? How do we find the power to trust what God says in the first place?” We hear with faith because God has already been at work in us to open our spiritual ears and to give us a taste for his glory and a love for holiness. We hear with faith because God is antecedently at work in us to will and to do in our hearts what is needed so that we will hear with faith!

“To will and to work for his good pleasure”

If left to ourselves we would neither want to obey nor find the power to do so. Or even if we want to, sometimes we simply can't. But *God is present to transform our desires and to energize our actions.*

Not only does God empower our “doing” of certain deeds, such as humble service for the sake of others, but also the very “willing” that lies behind and accounts for the doing. Paul isn't advocating a division of labor between God and man. It's not 50-50. God does 100% of the work in providing power and incentive, and we do 100% of the acting through the power he has supplied.

God works in us what pleases him! It is *his* “good pleasure” that we strive to fulfill through obedience. God is acting on behalf of his own good pleasure. God is acting in us because it makes him happy when we will and do what he wants. And whatever is ultimately for the sake of his good pleasure is good for us as well.

Be sure you remember that ***Paul does not say that God works in us to produce everything we do.*** He has nothing to do with our sin. He only produces the power and will for us to do what is pleasing to him, namely righteousness.

In all likelihood, when Paul talks about the “will” of God and doing what is “pleasing” to him he has in mind those things he mentioned back in *Philippians 2:1-4*. So, if you find yourself lacking the desire or the will to defer to others and serve their interests above your own, God can awaken in you what you lack.

So, how precisely does the Holy Spirit do this? How does he work in us to produce the willing and the actual doing of what pleases God? I think J. I. Packer has nailed it. Here is his answer:

The Holy Spirit's “ordinary way of working in us is through the working of our own minds and wills. He moves us to act by causing us to see reasons for moving ourselves to act” (156).

“So if, for instance, you are fighting a bad habit, work out before God a strategy for ensuring that you will not fall victim to it again, ask him to bless your plan, and go out in his strength, ready to say no next time the temptation comes. Or if you are seeking to form a good habit, work out a strategy in the same way, ask God's help, and then try your hardest” (157).

And when you are done, you can say what Paul did: ***“I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me”*** (1 Cor. 15:10).

The Antecedence of God's Sovereign Grace in our Hearts

I assume that most of you believe that God is sovereign over all of natural creation: over the stars above and the clouds and the rain and lightning and thunder and over every species of animal upon the earth.

But what about us? What of the human spirit? **Does God exert control over our hearts?** Or do we escape his sovereignty? It's one thing for God to direct the path of the wind or to shut the mouth of the lion. But we are shaped in his image and are the crown jewel of his creative design.

Nothing is quite so unpredictable as the human heart, or so it would seem. Its leanings and loves, its likes and dislikes, seem so random and free, subject to none but their owner. That God should rule over inanimate matter or creatures of instinct is easy to embrace. **But what about us?**

Paul speaks the point not only here in Philippians 2 but also in 2 Corinthians 8:16-17. "But thanks be to God," says the apostle, "**who put into the heart of Titus** the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord."

Titus and Paul were very close. It would have been easy and understandable for this young man to have taken offence at the way the Corinthians treated Paul. He knew of their slander and suspicion. He saw firsthand their disrespect and doubts. When Paul hurt, he hurt. The apostle's tears were shared by this trusted friend.

If he was to love them and feel an "earnest care" for their lives, God would have to overcome the obstacles in his heart. Titus could easily have yielded to indifference, perhaps even anger and disdain as he reflected on how unjustly the Corinthians had treated Paul. Given their history, Titus might well have nurtured a grudge against them. He probably thought often of the pain Paul endured.

Yet God worked in Titus to overcome these feelings of ill will. If God were to put "into the heart of Titus the same earnest care" that Paul felt for them, he would have to exert a sovereign influence in the depths of his soul to turn him to sincere devotion and a commitment to their welfare.

But wouldn't this require that God violate the integrity of Titus' will? How can Titus still go to Corinth "of his own accord" (v. 17) if it is God who is at work in him "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13)? Here we see the marvelous mystery of divine sovereignty and human accountability.

Don't overlook the fact that Paul thanked *God* for the choice Titus made in going to Corinth. Titus was filled with earnest and sincere love, for which Paul praises *God!* God and God alone is ultimately responsible for the choice Titus made, yet Titus made it "of his own accord"!

Although we may not be able to explain it, we must accept it: ***God's sovereignty did not undermine the virtue in Titus' decision. Ultimate credit goes to God, but Titus will be rewarded for his moral excellence.***

Is not "the king's heart" a "stream of water in the hand of the Lord" who "turns it wherever he will" (Prov. 21:1; cf. Ezra 6:22; 7:27)?

Was David asking for something God couldn't do when he prayed that he "keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts" of Solomon and all his people and that God "direct their hearts" toward him (1 Chron. 29:18)?

We should not be at all surprised, therefore, that God can put love and earnest desire for the Corinthians into the heart of Titus. Nor we should be at all surprised that he is the one who equips us with everything good that we may "do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:21).

So when you find yourself loving the unlovely, thank God for the miracle he has performed. Each time you choose what is righteous, thank God for the miracle he has performed. When you experience strength to resist sin, thank God for the miracle he has performed. When you show mercy to the weak, compassion to the hurting, and are generous to the needy, thank God for the miracle he has performed. When you put aside selfish ambition and treat others as more significant than yourself, thank God for the miracle he has performed. Go, therefore, and **act the miracle!**

Discussion Questions

- (1) Does Philippians 2:12-13 teach that our salvation is by works? If not, why not?
- (2) What do we mean when we say that God is always antecedent? If this is true, why does it not undermine our effort and the role of the human will in sanctification?
- (3) What is the theological significance of the word “for” with which v. 13 opens?
- (4) Does the fact that God is first at work in and through us to do his good will mean that we have no responsibility to obey the commands of Scripture? Does this mean we should simply sit passively and wait for a clear prompting of the Spirit before we do anything? If that is incorrect, what is the relationship between God’s sovereignty in our sanctification and our responsibility to obey his commands?