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Philippians 2: God Wills, We Work

Philippians 2: 12-16

This is the eighth sermon in a series that my colleagues and I have been preaching now on Paul's letter to the Philippians. This is Paul's final letter to the church. He's writing it from his prison cell in Rome. Last week we listened to St. Paul as he broke into a song which is the high water mark of the whole book. Paul's actually giving advice to the Philippians to care about one another, to put each other in front of one another in line, and be concerned about the interests of others as well as our own interests. Then he stops and says, "I'll show you what I mean. I want you to have the mind of Christ in you." Then he breaks into a poem about the mind of Christ. And, we get this absolutely amazing poem where he, starting with an illustration, launches into an amazing song that the church was able to use in singing in worship.

He says, "Jesus Christ who was in the form of God, the very essence of God, he thought it not necessary to hold on to that equality and he emptied himself, and took upon himself the form, the essence of a servant, and became obedient even unto death, the death on the cross." He died the death of a condemned; identified with us in our condemnation, for our sin.

Then, the second half of the poem: "And therefore, God the Father has highly exalted him. Given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue agree; confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the Father." That's the end of the song, this *incredible* song that just sweeps thru the 2nd chapter.

Do you know one of the things we learned in this song? A really key theological point that you don't want to miss is this. Paul is really driving home the point that the love of God is not just an idea in the New Testament; the love of God isn't just a theory, it's not a sentiment. It's an event that happens. It's a concrete action that happens in space and time. That's love.

That's the way it was in the Old Testament as well. In Deuteronomy, we read these words that introduce the Ten Commandments: "Hear, o Israel, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." That's redemption. That's an event that happened, an action. God brought us out of the land of Egypt. We were slaves and, with his strong outstretched hand, he brought us out of Egypt, out of slavery. That's the way the Ten Commandments begin, with the love of God.

That's the way our Lord's whole ministry is. He doesn't just say he loves us; he does things. He touches the person who has leprosy. He spends the night in Zacchaeus' house where

Zacchaeus gets saved and this causes all kinds of problems for Jesus because Zacchaeus was a sinner. Jesus isn't illustrating his love with that event. That is an event of his love. But the ultimate event is what happened at the cross. When Jesus takes our place at the cross, dies on our behalf, it's an event.

His victory is an event. It's when Jesus identified with us and disarmed the power that sin and death had over us. That's what Paul affirms to us in that great hymn. So, we shouldn't be surprised when he continues with that same language in the verses that follow. Let's take a look at the way he continues his train of thought in the next part of chapter 2, starting with verse 12.

He says, "Therefore, my dear friends (notice, he sees the song as the sign and the proof and the event of our belovedness in God's eyes) as you have obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence (see, he's in Rome, in prison; they're way over in Philippi) continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act in order to fulfill for His good purpose (decision)." That's what that last word means. Eudokia (good decision).

This passage is a real head-scratcher for some people. Because some people will say, "Wait a minute. What's Paul saying here? Is he giving us some kind of a works theology, or a works salvation where you earn your salvation? Is that what he's saying? I don't think so. And, it becomes really clear when you look at the whole text in its totality. It's also really clear if you read the text literally in its Greek form.

Unfortunately, there's a language challenge here that can maybe throw us a little bit off track. Let me show you what I mean. A little language lesson now about Greek. I love languages, studying the subtleties and nuances and distinctions. I wasn't born into an English-speaking family, but as a child I quickly adopted it as my first language.

English is a great language because it's a high-action language. One of the marks of English is we put verbs at the beginning of our sentences. That's what makes English real high-spirited and really high-action. For example, last week my wife sent me to the store to pick up some groceries. She said, "Paul, honey, would you go to the store?" Now she hasn't even said another word and I'm already half-way out the door, right? Because it's a high-action language, I'm walking away...and she continues, "I need some potatoes; I need some vanilla extract, for sure, and you're allowed one impulse item. And some bread." And by now, I'm outside the door. And I'm on the way to the store, and that's the beauty of the English language. It's high action, it's high energy; you move quickly.

I'm told that German is different. They say German is like Greek. In the German language and in the Greek language, the verb is saved to the end of the sentence. That has a profound effect on the German language. It makes the German language a very precise language. No wonder it's the language of scientists, because it's precise; because of that one linguistic curiosity that the verb is at the end of the sentence. I'll give you an example. A German sentence would go like this; a German frau, talking to her husband: "Potatoes, bread, milk, no impulse items, rice, at the store...go!" The verb is at the end. So you're collecting all the nouns. You're collecting all of the objects and prepositions and everything, and you're getting a list as a good German wife or husband. You're writing it all down carefully, especially the "no impulse items" part. You're writing it all down. So you haven't walked out the door. Then finally you hear the key verb, "go."

That's the way science thinks; you first collect all the data and then finally the verb. "Go!" So German is very clear. (Boring, sometimes, but clear because you're waiting for the verb). You're waiting for what's going to happen. You get all these words and then you finally find out what the verb is; what you're supposed to do.

Greek is the same way. In the Greek language, the verbs are at the end. I'll show it to you from this text. I'm going to read from this text directly from the Greek. Paul starts out:

"Therefore my dear friends, as you've always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence"—and here's how the next line, the famous line, would work—"With fear and trembling." That's very German, isn't it? That's very Greek, "With fear and trembling." Notice, we just heard this song about Jesus Christ and the tremendous glory that he's received from God; we're just awed by it; totally blown away by the reality of it. So it's right, you start with fear and trembling.

Well, he uses two words for fear, one common word and one less common word. The common word for fear, "phobeo," where we get our word phobia, is used first. "...with phobeo and the second word "tromos," an interesting word which is more rare, yet where we get our word trauma, is the word used for "tremble." Fear and trembling.

By the way, many of you know most medical terms come from Greek. That's why a trauma room in a hospital is a room where the patient is still quaking; they're shaking in the trauma center. Trembling. Isn't that interesting? That's trauma. You're still trembling; it's a fear word.

So with fear and shaking, you're in such awe at the song he just sang. Then the next line: "the salvation, yours..." Paul is interpreting what's happened in the great salvation gift of Jesus Christ at the cross on our behalf and his victory on our behalf. It's given us salvation. That word translates "peace" in the Old Testament. He's given us that peace, that salvation.

So, here's the sentence: "With fear and trembling... the salvation, yours..."—OK, now are you ready for the verb? Katergo! -- work it out! Make an event of it! That's what he's saying. He's not talking about works righteousness. It is not saying that **you** work out your salvation. **It's your salvation that wins you!** It's your salvation that works itself out in you! It's God's grace that wins you. See, the whole thing is from God's grace. His love. That's why he starts out, "Beloved. My dear friends." So, the salvation is yours, make an event of it! Work it out. And, that's that wonderful Greek word erg. Make an event of your salvation. Work it out. Make it practical. Do something with what God has given you.

Just so there's no confusion, Paul follows it up with a second sentence. "For it is God who works—" and he uses the word erg again—"God is at work in you." Remember, that's the way the book started. Paul's opening words to the Philippian Christians and to the Christians at CPC is, "He who began a good work in you..." He said the one who began the good work in you will continue it. Now Paul repeats that here in chapter 2: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act to fulfill his good purpose, his good decision."

Paul's not saying you're going to win your salvation. He's doing the same thing that James did. James makes the same point. The grace you received; the discovery of the Lord Jesus Christ; you and I must make an event of it in our lives. Jesus said the same thing. "Those who hear my words and do them are the ones who build their house on a rock; those who hear my words and

don't do them are like foolish people who build their house on sand." What the apostle Paul is saying to the Philippians is so wonderful. He's saying to us, now that we've experienced the love of God, now we've got to make an event out of that love, we need to work it out in our lives. That's good news. That's not bad news. That doesn't mean you're going to win your salvation by the things you do. Even the word order makes it clear: "The salvation yours, work it out. Spell it out. See it go through all the parts of your life. Don't just think about it. Spend your whole life doing this." That's the journey of faith.

A lot of times we just think about things and then finally we decide to do something about them. That's the whole motivation in this thing called following Jesus; for doing mission, or sharing your faith, or sharing your money, or whatever you do.

That's what Paul was saying. Then he goes on to say that all of this happens in a less than ideal world. I'm kind of glad he does that. We're not so sure we want to be in a less than ideal world but that's reality. Look at the world the Philippians have to live their life in. Nero is the emperor. It's going to get worse before it gets better and Paul knows that. Paul is in prison, basically on death row. He hopes to come back to the Philippians but he doesn't get to leave. He goes on to say, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing so that you may become blameless and pure," and then he says something curious here: "that you may be like children of God in a warped and crooked generation."

He pours it on. You're going to be like children in the middle of a crooked—by the way, the word for crooked—it's another medical term—in Greek is scolio. Twisted, bent, you know, scoliosis—and in the next word, a really long word, that means "people schooled in the art of evil." "You're going to be in the midst of people who have been to evil school." They've been learning how to do dirty tricks. That's the world you get to live in. That's the Roman world. There were actually people getting trained to doing devious and deceptive and bad things. So Paul says, "That's the world you have to live in. You're going to be like children in the midst of a bent and 'schooled-in-evil' generation who has been taking lessons in that."

Well, I don't know about you, but doesn't that seem like an uneven match? But he's not finished. It sounds like an uneven match except for the next two words that he says, "You stand in the middle of a twisted and schooled-in-evil generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." (Other translations say shine like lights.)

Light is interchangeable with the word truth. So you have truth and you have life. Truth. You know something interesting about truth? People who are schooled in evil have an advantage over you when you're in the way of truth. But it's only a temporary advantage. It's only the advantage of the first surprise. The first trick, because they've been schooled in being dishonest, gives them the advantage in the beginning. But over the long haul, truth has the advantage. Let me give you an example.

Suppose there's a car dealer who's dishonest and he's learned how to turn odometers back or there's a building contractor who's learned how to cut corners and not comply with the specs of a building project. In a way that person gets an advantage in the beginning. Because they didn't put the amount of concrete or rebar that was supposed to be in there to start with. Or they turned the odometer back—it was supposed to say 150,000 and it says 50,000.

Easier to sell that car, isn't it? Maybe the first time, but not the second time. Not when the people get your number. When the word is out that you are crooked or this company is cutting corners and isn't doing things right. . . In the long haul, the business woman/man who plays by the rules, plays it straight and is honest, has the advantage. In the short term, the person trained—that's the word Paul uses (schooled in how to be clever; schooled in how to be dishonest)—has an advantage at the beginning, but not later on. So you just have to wait it out, according to Paul. You have to wait out the validation of truth. But truth is finally validated. That's one of the challenges the Jesus follower is up against in the world. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. We're called to the way of light, not the way of darkness. Not to the way of dishonesty. Not to the way of deception.

We can't use deceptive means to win people to Christ. We can't because over the long haul, we've been committed to the way of truth. The way of truth is slower. It takes longer to be validated. Truth is slower, but it lasts longer. If it's an athlete who takes steroids to have an edge over his competitors and eventually the truth comes out, he's disclosed for who he is. But the person who plays it straight, in the long haul, has more going for himself.

Paul is saying, I want to commit you to that. Then he gives them one more thing: he says you have life in your hands, too. Many of you know that CPC has chosen to do mission partnerships in some pretty challenging places. Not because we want to be heroes; not because we think that we can change circumstances on the ground in some of these places by the sheer power of our will or the thickness of our pocket books or anything else. It's because we believe that God is at work, through Jesus Christ, transforming lives and making a difference in us and in the places we partner. Places like Syria, where, if you only read the newspaper, you would say it's not worth investing another dollar where people's will is being crushed with impunity, where the bad guys literally get away with murder. Yet God is doing amazing things there, opening doors for believers to share their lives with people in prison and their families and in depressed communities. Places in our own backyard, where the foreclosure rate is so high it's hard to imagine when things will ever get better, we're able to partner with other believers who share our conviction that God's story is greater than the prevailing narrative out there.

On my first trip to Goma, Congo, my fellow travelers and I were struck by the landscape around the area. Some of you know that Goma sits very close to an active volcano. One of the first things you notice when you're in the streets of Goma is how dark and black and hard the ground is everywhere. When you look close you realize that the reason for this is that in many areas, the ground is literally covered with lava flows that have solidified, creating a hard, concrete-like layer all over the place. It's almost symbolic of the hard circumstances that people in Congo face everyday of their lives—from economic insecurity to civil unrest.

The longer I stayed in Goma, the more I started to notice something else that was just as startling to me. As you look close, you begin noticing little protrusions in the lava. A plant, starting out as a little seedling, eventually becomes strong enough to burst through what is supposedly this impenetrable rock. ***I thought to myself: "What a parable. This little plant was coming up through the lava rock. Lava rock is stronger than a plant, except for one thing.***

What does a little plant have that the lava doesn't have? What is it? LIFE! It has life! Life is more powerful than lava. Look at the Rockies. They're being turned into dirt by little tiny lichens,

growing on the rock formations and all those great faces of granite. Plants can grow in rock. They can break it apart because they have life! More powerful than rock, more powerful than evil, this life. That's what Jesus Christ has to give. That's salvation. It's life. St. Paul tells the church and tells the Christians at Philippi: You've got two things going for you. One is truth—never sell it short even if you have to wait around for it. The other is life and you have to wait around for life, too. But it's more powerful than hate. It's more powerful than death. It's life. You have the light of the truth. You have the life of Jesus Christ in your life nourishing you, healing you, giving hope.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.