

There is Still Work to Do

- I. What's the work?
- II. Who's going to do it?

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

¹⁴Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”¹⁶ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

Just for a minute, I want to take you back to spring of 2018. A whole crowd of Mount Olive members and friends are gathered around a pile of sand on the Mount Olive parking lot. The sun was shining brightly. The kids had their little plastic shovels in their hands. They were all gathered for a ceremonial groundbreaking for our new school expansion. It was an historic event. (Almost as historic as the blizzard that dropped a record 21 inches of snow on the city 7 days later.) And yet in spite of that weather, Mount Olive moved forward in faith. Throughout that summer, Mount Olive volunteers worked tirelessly, dismantling the playground, demoing the locker rooms, assembling a new playground, painting and cleaning and moving furniture until finally on November 10th, we dedicated the new addition, all to the glory of God.

I remember thinking on that day, “Wow, I can't believe this day is finally here. The building is finished. The work is done.” But of course, even though the building was finished, the work really wasn't done. You might say that there's still work to do. There's debt to pay down. There's further remodeling to do. In fact, isn't that the impetus behind our second Forward in Faith campaign? As a congregation, we recognize that we still got some work to do.

Well, in our text for the day, the Apostle Paul takes that concept, namely, that there's still work to do, and he applies it not to a building project or a debt retirement campaign. He applies it to our lives as Christians. Even though God has accomplished a whole lot for us already, even though we celebrate what God has already done, the fact is, there is still more work to be done. In fact, let's use that as our theme today. Christian...

There's Still Work to Do

As we dig a little deeper into this text, we're going to seek to answer two questions:

- I. What is the work?
- II. Who's going to do it?

If you happened to watch the little sermon teaser that we put out this week, you heard me say that today we're going to study one of those “wait a minute” passages of Scripture. You know, one of the Bible verses that leads you to say, “Wait a minute. That doesn't sound right.” I mean, judge for yourself. Paul writes to the Philippians, *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.* Now, I suppose there are some people who would have no trouble with that statement. There are a lot of people in our world who believe that they

really do have to work out their salvation. The Catholic church, for example, basically teaches that faith + good works = salvation. In other words, if you want to get right with God, you if you want to end up in Heaven someday, you're going to have to earn it by your good behavior. But because no one can ever be sure that they've been good enough, that whole belief system comes with a whole lot of fear and trembling. Just think of Martin Luther before his conversion. He was afraid of God, as he tried his best to work out his own salvation.

But then what happened? Luther discovered the gospel. He read in Roman 4:5, for example, *To the man who does not work but trust in God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.* Or in Titus 3:5, *God saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.* Or 1st John 2:2 which says, *Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* What Luther discovered is what by God's grace you and I as Lutherans already know, namely, that we can't save ourselves. Nor do we need to. Jesus has done it all for us. When he said on the cross, "*It is finished,*" he meant that all our sins are paid in full. That's what allows God to offer eternal life to all those who simply believe it. That's the good news. It's what puts our hearts at peace and our minds at rest.

But now, if that's true, if salvation is a free gift that does not come by our works, then why in the world would Paul say what he does here in our text? *Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, no less!*

Well, to properly understand these words of scripture, or for that matter, any words of scripture, we need to begin by studying them in context, both in the immediate context and in the context of the rest of scripture. For the immediate context, let's go back to the start of this chapter. Here Paul is writing to the members of the Christian congregation in Philippi, *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded having the same love being one spirit and purpose.* In other words, Paul is writing to Christians, people who have already been united to Christ through faith, who are in fellowship with Holy Spirit. To these people, Paul goes on to say, in effect, "Now, Christians, live like the holy people God sees you to be in. He writes, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* In fact, he points to Jesus as the ultimate example of that kind of humility. He says, *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus... who even though he was God, became obedient even to death on the cross.*

The point is this. In this whole section, Paul is not talking about what people need to do in order to get right with God. No, he's talking about how Christians are to live, once they know that Jesus has already made them right with God. Paul is talking about the appropriate fruits of faith. Good works done not to win brownie points with God, but rather, to say thank you to God for his grace. Paul is talking about the obedience that Christians render to God, not because they have to, but because they want to.

Isn't that what Paul is referring to when he writes to the Philippians here in our text? He says, *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence...* In other words, Paul commends the Philippians for their God pleasing behavior, both when Pastor Paul was in town and when he wasn't. Paul then goes on to say to those Spirit-filled Christians...*continue to work out your salvation.*

So, the first question is, I. What work is Paul referring to? Is he talking about the work a person must do in order to be saved? Or is he talking about the work of person does because he he's saved? Well, in light of the immediate context and the context of the rest of the Scripture,

(which says that we aren't saved by our works), I think you know the answer to that question. Paul he's not talking about what a person must do to be saved. He's talking about what a person will do because he is saved. Or to put it another way, Paul is not in the realm of Justification, that is, how to right with God. He's in the realm of Sanctification, how to live as a child of God.

And once we realize that, once we realize that Paul is talking about living our lives as Christians, especially in the midst of what Paul will later call *a crooked and depraved generation*, once we realize that Paul is talking putting our faith into action in our lives, that's when we realize, there really is Still Some Work to Do. In our personal lives, there are plenty of things that we need to keep working on, for the sake of our eternal salvation.

Isn't that right? I mean, do you feel like right now, you're a finished product? You feel like you're right where you want to be in your walk with God? You've got nothing you need to work on? No flaws in your character. No bad habits. Everything you do is perfectly in line with God's will for your life? Yeah, me neither.

In fact, just about the time I start to think that I'm not doing so badly. I've got this Christian lifestyle pretty well locked down, then I read a passage like the one here in our text, where Paul says to me, "Robb, *do everything without complaining or arguing*. Uh-Oh. Those words convict me. How many times have I done the right thing, but not with the right attitude? I did what was expected of me but I still grumbled about it, maybe not out loud. But inside I was griping. I was mentally whining. I had a little black rain cloud over my head, as I allegedly did my good deed. Or how often have I been guilty of arguing about something. No, it probably wasn't a knock-down, drag-out argument. It was more of an edge in my tone of voice. Kind of picking at that other person. Not being satisfied with anything they do or say. Not being willing to put the best construction on their behavior.

I don't know about you, but when I look in the mirror I see a person with a lot of flaws, a person who needs a whole lot of work. I have a laundry list of things that I need to do better. And because that list is so long, and because the same items keep showing up on it, there are times when it just feels overwhelming. I want to make changes for the better. I want to produce fruits of faith. But I feel like I just can't do it. And maybe there are times when you feel the same way.

Well, today, God has some good news for us. He tells us that what you and I so often can't do, God can do—and does do, in us. If you think about it, any time we see a major task that needs to be accomplished, any time you see that there's still work to be done, the natural question is, So, II. Who's going to do it? The same thing is true in our spiritual lives. When we see a change that needs to be made, when we see fruits that need to be produced, it's easy to assume, "Well, I guess I better do it. It's up to me to make a change. I've got to have the willpower to do better next time."

But actually, did you hear Paul says here in our text? After telling the Philippians to *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling* (which may sound like it's all their responsibilities to produce the fruits of faith), Paul goes on to say, "No, actually, who's going to produce those fruits of faith? God is." Paul writes, *For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose*. Do you realize what that means? It means that your desire to do the right thing is not really something that you worked up in your own heart. It's God who gives you that desire. And not only does God give you the desire to do what is right, he gives you the ability to do what is right. He does that by recreating you in his image. When God forgave all your sins in Jesus, he gave you a clean slate. He made you a new creation. And that new status in God's eyes is what gives you the desire and the ability to do what pleases him.

And why did God work in you that desire and ability? Paul says, *in order to fulfill his (namely, God's) good purpose.*

That's right, God has a purpose for your life of sanctification. And whether his plan is to use you to bring the good news of Jesus to your coworker, or heal a relationship broken by sin, or to bring a word of encouragement to someone down in the dumps, the fact is, God is working in you and through you to carry out his good purpose. It's just as St. Paul said in Ephesians chapter 2, *We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

My friends, the point is simply this. Our salvation is 100% in God's hands. First, Jesus redeemed us. He bought us back from sin, Satan and death, with his blood and righteousness. On the cross he said, "It is finished," meaning there is nothing we can add to it. Then God the Holy Spirit worked faith in our hearts through the gospel in word and Sacrament. He made us spiritually alive and set us apart to do good works. Jesus work of redemption is done. But the Spirit's work of sanctification? That's ongoing. It's a work in progress. When you look at the work that needs to be done in your life, remember who's going to do it. God is. As God feeds your faith with his word and Sacrament, he's going to produce in you the fruits that are pleasing to him.

In that sense it's a little like our building project. The majority of the work has already been accomplished. The building is up and we're the beneficiaries of it. But there's still some work to be done. The question is, Who's gonna do it? The answer? Well, if it's God's will, God will do it. But he'll do it by working in us and through us. May God continue to work in us the desire and the ability to carry out his good purpose, for our good and His glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.