

“DOES OBEDIENCE PRODUCE SLAVERY OR FREEDOM?”

(Philippians 2:12-18)

“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain. Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. For the same cause also do ye joy, and rejoice with me.”

The second chapter of Philippians has two themes — a large, major theme and a small, “minor” theme. The major theme of the chapter is *humility*. Indeed, this is without question the greatest chapter in the Bible on the subject of humility. The master-key of this chapter, and the master-key of Christianity, is humility. The “minor” theme of the chapter is *obedience*. Our text is an example of the importance of obedience.

Modern man, captured by secular humanism, has raised his voice in loud protest against the virtues of humility and obedience. He cries, “Humility is an unnecessary cowering and groveling before a supposed God — because of a superstitious fear of the unknown. And obedience is nothing short of slavery.” He taunts the Christian with the words, “Where is this ‘freedom in Christ’ we hear so much about, if we must *obey* Him?”

The brilliant poet Shelley spoke for such men in one of his poems:

“Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whatever it touches; and *obedience*,
The bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame
A mechanized automaton.”

The italics in Shelley’s poem are mine. “Obedience makes slaves of men,” said Shelley, and his complaint may be valid in some cases. As examples: (1) There is extreme peril in full obedience to any mere mortal man. Such unquestioning obedience may easily become slavery. (2) There is grave peril also in full obedience to any church or religious system (indeed, to *any* system of any kind). I was astounded to read Ignatius Loyola’s statement in the Constitution of the Catholic Jesuit order: “We must, if anything appears to our eyes, white, which the Church declares to be black, also declare it to be black.” This is dangerous, debilitating, and likely *damning*, obedience to a church and a religious system. This makes *religious* slaves of men, and the most binding, demanding, and destructive kind of slavery is *religious* slavery.

The Christian’s obedience is to be only to the Lord! And yet, we must make the practical acknowledgment that we will likely render obedience to Him only if we first hear His truth

through His church. When Christ's minister speaks to us the Word of the Lord, and we obey it, we are obeying Christ. So the Christian's powers of discrimination and discernment must be developed (Hebrews 5:14) so he can detect the difference between the Word of God and the mere words of men. Again, disciple-making is a paramount necessity for this development. Jesus said, "If any man will *do* His will, he shall *know* of the doctrine, whether it comes from God or some other source." If any Christian sincerely wants to hear the Word of God that he may earnestly obey it, he will hear it — with understanding.

No Christian dares to obey any man purely passively and unthinkingly, lest Shelley's charge becomes true and that Christian becomes "a mechanized automaton." *But the obedience to Jesus Christ rendered by a Spirit-filled Christian is not liable to this error. We can trust Jesus Christ as we can trust no mere mortal man.* For one thing, His guidance is perfect, and for another, He only seeks our highest good.

Having said all of that, it must also be stated that it is a badge of honor and *freedom* in the New Testament for a Christian to call himself "a bondslave of Jesus Christ." The early Christians applied this designation eagerly to themselves. The word is the opposite of "free" in I Corinthians 7:21. Now the paradox: The Christian is decidedly, decisively, deliberately, definitely *not free*. But conversely, the Christian is definitely and decisively *free!* No true and free Christian ever serves Christ against his own will. You will recall that a slave happy in his master's service could voluntarily be bound to that master for life (see Exodus 21:1-6). The Christian has freely yielded himself to the possession and control of Jesus as his Savior and Master. And when Paul (and other writers in the New Testament) uses this word for himself, it does not set him apart from the rest of the believers, but identifies him as one of them. All of them happily thought of themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ.

The truth is that ***obedience to Christ is the fulfillment of man.*** This is the revelation of Jesus and the Bible, and this was Paul's Gospel — and anyone who proves it in practice finds it to be wonderfully true. Paul gloried in being a slave of Jesus Christ because it gave him a freedom undreamed of before: *the freedom to fulfill his own true self.*

Take a violin in your hand. That violin is a poor instrument when it is used as a sledgehammer or a broom, because he who thus uses it obviously does not know *what it is for* and *how to use it*. Design and intention indicate purpose. In the hands of a master violinist, the violin "comes into its own," by its own "*obedience*" to its owner's loving and skillful employment. Man, too, is a poor instrument when owned and used by another man, or by a tyrannical system, or by himself (can you imagine a violin trying to play itself?). He "comes into his own" when He who designed him with intent and purpose and value takes him in His own hand. Man is "taken in hand" by the Master the day he is saved, and he plays out his role for the rest of his days in the manner prescribed in our text.

Our text also unwittingly confronts us with the age-old argument between those who hold two quite opposite views of salvation. One view could be called the *haughty man's* view of salvation (the vanity of salvation by *works*), and the other could be called the *humble man's* view of salvation (the victory of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ). Some have tried to argue that this text supports the Pelagian view of salvation by self-effort, but a little careful examination of the text will show clearly that this is not the case.

Some people say, “I never accept anything that I haven’t earned and deserved.” This is sheer, utter, perfect (!) *nonsense!* Such a person certainly didn’t earn the very gift of life itself. Furthermore, he does nothing to earn and deserve the air he breathes. And he is incapable of survival outside of the provision of God and the support of society. And he didn’t cause, invent, earn or deserve any of these things! He is “a beggar at Heaven’s gate” with regard to all worthwhile things, and “beggars cannot be choosers.” Beggars have never been renowned for their earning power!

Note that the text does not say, “Work *for* your own salvation,” but rather, “work *out* your own salvation.”

Two other phrases deserve our attention before we actually explore the matter of Christian obedience. Paul reminds the Philippian believers that they had obeyed him while he was with them, and now he counsels them to obey (note that there is no object; he does not tell them whom or what to obey) “now much more in my absence.” They had rendered “eye-service” when Paul was there with them, but he encourages them to obey all the more since he has gone away from them. So Christians are to live “dependently *independent* lives.” They are to become so dependent on the Lord that, if necessary, they can live independently of Christian leaders. And this raises the whole issue of “following the leader.”

Many Christians were brought to Christ and have grown in Him under the leadership of a charismatic and dynamic Christian leader. In large measure, Paul was this type of leader. This type of leadership has both advantages and disadvantages, both delights and dangers. All Christians, both leaders and led, must be alert to the dangers and determine to live balanced lives here as in all matters of the Christian life.

Some of the dangers of charismatic, dynamic leadership in the community of believers are:

(1) The temptation of clerical tyranny (absolute and unquestioned control by pastoral leaders) or clerical autocracy (this is the leader’s temptation; here the pastoral leadership assumes self-rule over the Body), or the temptation of clerical worship (this is the temptation which confronts those who are led by such a leader). Both temptations are subtle and potentially deadly, and must be answered by the humble obedience (of both leader and led) featured in our text.

(2) The temptation of the leader to be the Lord’s proxy or substitute. To have a pastor whom one can simply obey without argument solves a lot of problems for simple souls. Such a leader usually presents only a sterling side of his character. He never manages to confess a real sin, and thus he is always admired as if he were a perfect leader. This stance misleads both the leader and the people who are led.

(3) The temptation of unquestioning submission among the followers. This kind of submission reached its extreme in Jonestown, the cult led by Jim Jones, and the Branch Davidian compound led by David Koresh in Waco, Texas. But these are only extreme examples of those who have allowed themselves to be Satan-duped into blind following of such leaders. Most

unquestioning submission to dynamic leaders is much less drastic and detectable than in those cases, but it is still very dangerous.

Paul's counsel in verse 12 of our text will provide a sure guide for us with regard to "following the leader." We will see in this study what Paul's real object was. It was to make them obedient to the Lord rather than to himself. They had been leaning on him at Philippi, *perhaps (probably?) too much*, when he was with them. The right business of the Christian pastor is to lead his people into a complete dependence upon the Lord. Ideally, he should do this to such a degree that he works his way out of a job. I say "ideally," because sheep will never be fully independent of their shepherds! The right way of securing this is to be the kind of man Paul was — one who himself practiced total self-commitment and obedience to Christ. He often gave such counsel as this: "Follow me — *but only as I follow Christ.*" Nevertheless, the temptations mentioned above are always subtly present to leaders and followers.

One further item will introduce the actual study of the text. The clear and consistent Biblical view of salvation is that it operates in three grammatical tenses — the past tense, the present tense, and the future tense. Past-tense salvation ("I *have been saved*") is salvation *in possession* — once I have it, I have it forever. Present-tense salvation ("I *am being saved*") is salvation *in process*. While past-tense salvation is perfect and invariable (there are no degrees of regeneration and justification), present-tense salvation has much fluctuation and variation in it. Future-tense salvation ("I *will yet be saved*") is salvation *in prospect* — there is coming a day when I will be perfectly saved in a full, final, forever way. This will occur in the day of completed redemption that is referred to many times in the New Testament. The theological name of past-tense salvation is *justification*; the theological name of present-tense salvation is *sanctification*; and the theological name of future-tense salvation is *glorification*. *Justification* of the sinner (past-tense salvation) is gained in a *crisis* moment when the sinner is broken over his sins, repents of them, and trusts and receives Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. *Justification* is point action (it occurs at one moment of time). *Sanctification*, on the other hand, is gained through a continuing process. It is linear (ongoing) action, and the process must continue through every "now," every present moment of the believer's life. *Glorification* is also point action, beginning at a moment of time. It begins with the crisis of the believer's death, and its results continue in the Presence of God perfectly and forever.

It is important to remember as we study our text that this passage concerns *only our present-tense salvation*. It concerns only our sanctification. No part of this text concerns our salvation from the eternal penalty or eternal punishment of our sins (past-tense salvation). It concerns our responsibility for our own sanctification — while endowed by the Presence and power of God. Remembered that we have chosen to explore the matter of obedience from this text, we will now turn to the study itself.

I. THE DEMAND FOR OBEDIENCE

First, we note the *demand for obedience* that is made in the text. Verse twelve says, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always *obeyed*, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, . . ." The Greek word translated "obeyed" is based on a root word which

means “to obey as a result of listening.” We have already examined some matters about Christian leaders, and we will later be told in this text the importance of “the word of life.” These two — Christian leaders and the Word of life — are to function together. The Christian leader’s primary ministry is to “hold forth the Word of life.” If God has called him to do this (pity him and his followers if He has not!), He has also called people to hear what he says. And they are to hear with a certain predisposition. They are to “hear underneath the truth” (the exact meaning of the Greek word translated “obedience”), not merely listening, and not merely appraising, but listening in full submission to Jesus as Lord as He reveals His truth. This is the word for “obedience” in the New Testament. And this is the obedience that is commanded in our text.

We see here the *responsibility* for this obedience. It is stated in these crucial words, “Work out your own salvation.” This is the commanded responsibility of every Christian. There are no exemptions, exceptions, or exclusions — *every Christian*. Every Christian is responsible to work out his own salvation. But what does it mean to “work out your own salvation”?

The words presuppose the possession of salvation (that past-tense salvation has already occurred). The verb, “work out,” is a present middle imperative verb. The present tense means that this is a present responsibility — each believer is to be doing this at every moment. The middle voice means that, as the believer fulfills his responsibility, the results (the *benefits*) come back to him (!). And the imperative mood means that this a command of God, a command that has equal force to any one of the Ten Commandments, or of any other command of God.

The term translated “work out” is based on the Greek word that gives us our English word “energy.” This tells us that the command here insists on highly energetic action on the part of the Christian. Do we see such action generally among Christians today? No? Then we can only conclude that most dull, sluggish, inactive Christians are *radically disobedient*.

Now, let’s explore the meaning of the words, “Work out your own salvation.” I am from the state of Arkansas. Arkansas has a small town in it that bears the name, “Bauxite.” That’s right, Bauxite, Arkansas. You can guess its background. Years ago, it was discovered that the terrain there was rich in bauxite ore. By whatever process or crisis, God had previously worked that bauxite into the earth there. When man discovered it, he moved in and began a process of development to exploit the riches God had earlier worked into the earth. Man began to “work out” what God had already “worked in.” We will look further at God’s in-working later, but at the moment, we are looking at our responsibility to work out something God has already worked into us. British commentator Guy King said it beautifully: “I am to *mine* what is *already mine*.” Salvation comes only by a crisis miracle of God’s in-working, but once we have it, we are mutually responsible with Him to work out that which He has worked in. So present-tense salvation (sanctification) is a “co-op” between God and His child.

This can be seen Biblically in the great salvation/sanctification text of Ephesians 2:8-10. “By grace are ye saved through faith.” Salvation is all of grace, but it implicates man’s response of faith. “And that not of yourselves.” Nothing that arises out of you can contribute to your salvation. “It is the gift of God.” It has been fully provided by God Himself, free of your effort and merit. “Not of works.” Your performance cannot contribute to your salvation. “Lest any

man should boast.” If one sinner could contribute one one-hundredth of one percent of the necessary work to gain personal salvation, *heaven would never hear the last of it! He would boast all over heaven forever!* But your salvation is so arranged as to totally exclude human boasting.

Paul summarizes verses eight and nine at the beginning of verse ten in the words, “For ye are God’s workmanship.” Then he adds the Christian’s responsibility when he states, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto good works, which He has previously ordained that we should walk in them.*”

Remember the past, present, and future tenses of our salvation. God *has* worked, God *will* work, and God *is* working *now* — and it is on the basis of His present work in us that we are to “work out our own salvation.” Here is a garden. God has already worked in all the vital elements of earth and sun and rain, but a gardener must now “work it out” by breaking up the soil and planting and cultivating the flowers. There was a time when every garden was a mere opportunity or a mere possibility. The fertility of the field and the availability of the elements were gifts of God, but those gifts were improved, or “worked out,” by a gardener’s labor.

Here is an illustration much closer to my own heart. A noble book is a gift. It is the distilling of much wisdom gained from varying experiences of life. But before we can make it ours we must expend time, mental intensity, and persistent effort in order to “work it out.” Indeed, we must “sell” all other books, for, as John Ruskin said, “If I read this book I cannot read that book.” Christian, apply these illustrations to our text and you will see Paul’s meaning.

There are several actions prescribed in our text which help to explain what it means to work out our salvation. The verbs are “obey” (verse 12), “shine” (verse 15), “holding forth” (verse 15), “run” (verse 16) and “labor” (verse 16). This is not intended to be an exhaustive list for “working out your own salvation” but we may take the liberty to regard it as a suggestive list. So the Christian vocation of “working out our own salvation” could involve such practical activities as *obeying Christ, shining the Gospel light into a dark world, holding forth the Word of life, running the Christian race, and laboring in Christ’s service.* Most of these terms call for urgent, consistent, energetic action. If there is no such urgent involvement in your life, and you know that you are a Christian, you are radically disobedient. The responsibilities are to “work it out,” verse 12 (this refers to your salvation); “shine it out,” verse 15 (this refers to your influence), and “hold it out,” verse 16 (this refers to your witness). “Work it out” is primarily a matter of *character*; “shine it out” involves both *character and conduct*, and “hold it out” (the Word of truth) involves *character, conduct and communication.*

To summarize: Our salvation comes solely from God; it is God’s gift to us and God’s accomplishment in us. However, our *working it out* is our acceptance of the gift and our relentless and unremitting effort to co-operate with God’s grace by giving over our wills and our actions to God as He works in us. And the word that is used here, *katēgazesthe* (try to pronounce that!), means to “work on to the very finish.” So this is the one life’s vocation that should command the attention and effort of every Christian all day long every day. This is the believer’s *responsibility.*

Then note the *requirement* that is specified for the fulfilment of this responsibility. “Work out your own salvation *in fear and trembling*.” At first glance, it would seem that these words enforce the secular humanist’s charge of “slavery” and “slavish fear” when he evaluates the Christian duty of obedience. But first impressions are often wrong, and this is no exception. One translation renders this phrase, “with reverence and healthy respect.” J. B. Philips translates it, “with a proper sense of awe and responsibility.” Alan Richardson translates it, “seriously and reverently.” Marvin Vincent says, “Not with slavish terror, but wholesome, serious caution.” All of these are reasonable translations of the basic words.

Why does Paul put this qualifying clause with the responsibility to work out our salvation? He is fully aware of the tendency of the Christian to become casual, glib, and irreverent about the great salvation God has produced in him. The words, “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?” were not written to lost people, but to Christians! In fact, we are commanded in our text to “work out our own salvation” precisely because it is so easy to have it and *neglect it*. Salvation may be free, but it is not cheap! A wise Christian will not permit himself to slide into careless and disobedient living, serving and obeying his own preferences, tastes and desires more than he serves and obeys Christ. History has shown again and again that it is disastrous to be part of a Christian experience that lacks solemnity in the Presence of God and commitment in the service of Christ.

The “fear and trembling” of verse twelve are not anxiety and doubt about God, but *about our own selves*. When we realize how easily we can block and frustrate God’s work in us by stubbornly resisting the working of His grace we must fear and tremble for the possible consequences. Our “fear and trembling” concern our awesome responsibility.

Basil, the great bishop of Cappadocia in the fourth century, wrote candidly to a friend, “I hesitate to write what I myself do in this solitude, night and day, seeing that, although I have left the distractions of the city, which are to me the occasion of innumerable evils, *I have not yet succeeded in forsaking myself*.” The grim fight was still on for him (as for you and me), the titanic struggle to transfer his trust from self to God. Thus, the “fear and trembling” of our text — the acknowledgment of a wholesome distrust of self which will free us to trust God.

Then note the *reasons* for this obedience. Look at the word “wherefore” at the beginning of verse twelve. Actually, there are two “wherefores” in the context, one in verse nine and the one in verse twelve. The first one is found in the greatest passage on the Person of Christ in the entire Bible (verses 5-11). Humble obedience was infinitely rewarding in our Great Example, Jesus (study the “wherefore” of verse nine), and the “wherefore” of verse twelve indicates that humble obedience to Him in our lives today would have similar results. Jesus, the Son of God, was obedient while living in a world filled only with disobedient people. As a result, heaven will be full of disobedient sinners (you and I included) who became convicted and broken enough to bow at His feet, confess Him as Lord, and receive His salvation.

The introductory word “wherefore” in verse twelve dares to link our little lives with the glorious life of our exalted Lord. Paul fixes his wondering and worshiping gaze upon the humble obedience of the Lord Jesus — “He humbled Himself, and became unto death, even the death of the cross” (verse eight), and then he asks us to act in a similar way. So the first reason

for *our* humble obedience is *His* humble obedience. His conduct becomes our command; His model becomes our mandate; His example becomes our exhortation.

The second reason for our obedience is found in a phrase in verse thirteen: “His good pleasure.” This phrase may refer to: (1) The will of God, or (2) The pleasure, satisfaction and gratification of God. In either case, the motive of our obedience is to please and glorify Him. God Himself is pleased and gratified when we obey Him and when His purposes are accomplished (remember, His purposes are always perfect and always good). We are forever asking God to make *us* happy; would it not be wise if we occasionally stopped to ask *Him* how *we* can make *Him* happy?

One writer said, “Divine sovereignty and human responsibility meet at the crossroads of some mighty decisions. And remember, the sign marked ‘His good pleasure’ is the only one worth following.”

The final reason for our obedience is mentioned in verse sixteen: “That I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain.” A Day of Evaluation is coming for every Christian, and the terms of the test are stated throughout the New Testament. The Bible reveals that each Christian will either “receive a reward” or “suffer loss,” and that he will live with the result forever. Paul seems to live with his eye fixed on “that day.” Even in this passage, his appeal to the Christians at Philippi is motivated by “that day.” He tells them that he has made an investment (ponder that word carefully; investment is made to get a dividend, to draw interest) in them which is now at stake. Having preached to them, taught them, and disciplined them, he is looking for returns “in the day of Christ” -- the day when we will receive suitable rewards for service rendered (see II Cor. 5:10). Paul’s expectation of reward included not merely those to whom he has personally ministered the word of life and personally disciplined in the Christian life, but also includes the number of people who will be won in turn through *their* soul-winning and disciple-making multiplication. So he urges them to “work out their own salvation,” to “hold forth the Word of life,” and to “shine as lights in a dark world.” As he writes, he is gazing ahead to the “day of Christ,” and he asks them to follow his gaze.

Here, then, is a lengthy look at the demand for obedience in these verses. We have looked at the Christian’s responsibility of obedience, the requirement of obedience, and the reasons for obedience. Now we will go a step further.

II. THE DYNAMIC OF OBEDIENCE

Second, we will look at the *dynamic of obedience* that is revealed in the text. After the command to “work out your own salvation,” the text then says, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.” So the text balances *our outworking* with *God’s in-working*. God’s *demand* to “work out your own salvation,” is attended by God’s dynamic, “for it is God who is working within you.”

Note the *Person* Who provides this dynamic. “It is God Who works in you.” You see, dear Christian, before your conversion, God worked *on* you by His Holy Spirit. Now, since you are saved, He works *in* you — by His Holy Spirit. When a sinner is saved, Jesus Christ comes into that sinner in the Presence and power of the Holy Spirit. “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, He does not belong to him.” If He is not in us, we are not Christians at all. But He is in every born-again person, and His Presence is the dynamic for this obedience and the accomplishment which comes through it. His “working in us” is the dynamic for our “working out of our salvation.”

The verb of the phrase, “It is God who works in you,” is a present tense, active voice verb. The present tense means that God is at work in you at this very second. Think of it! The Eternal God has stooped to work within the narrow limits of your inner life. Your heart may be as filthy as a stable, as dark as a cellar, as stifling as an over-crowded room. But He, Whom the heavens cannot contain, and in Whose sight they are not clean, is steadily at work in the unpromising, uncongenial confines of your heart. Should we not be very careful to make Him welcome, and to remove every hindrance to His work? On one occasion in the ministry of Jesus, He went into the Temple, looked around, and immediately began to overthrow all the hindrances to His free work in His House. What might He do in you, in me, today?

“God works in you.” The word translated “works” is the root word from which we get our word, “energy,” or “energize.” It means that an energetic God lives inside of every Christian, and He is going to work every moment to fulfill His purposes there. Let this make a deep impression on your mind, Christian. The Christian life involves Divine dynamic, Divine energy, Divine work, Divine accomplishment. It is not (I repeat, *not*) a passive, indolent life. It was said of Jesus that “virtue went out of Him,” and the same is true of Christ *in you* — and frankly, it will also be true of you *in Him*.

A close examination of the text will reveal that the word “energy” is used three times in two verses — once in verse twelve (“*work out*”), and twice in verse thirteen (“God is the One *energizing* in you to will and to *energize* according to His good pleasure”). *The Holy Spirit made the entire passage to pulsate with energy*, and that energy is the dynamic by which a Christian is to “work out his own salvation.” Because there is an Energetic Worker within, there is the possibility of an energetic outworking as well. This energy is first *experienced*, then it is *expressed*. *The stream flows out only because the spring rises up*. Jesus *implanted* His life in us the day He entered our lives. And now He *imparts* His Presence and power to us moment by moment. He *entered* us then; He *empowers* us now. He *saved* us then; He *sanctifies* us now.

Note the *provinces* of this dynamic. Paul is even more specific about the work that Christ does in us each day. “God (emphatic) it is Who works in us, both to *will* and to *do* His good pleasure.” So He works on our *desires* and He works on our *deeds*. He seeks to sanctify our desiring and our doing. And what else *is* there in the Christian life? So God does not do His work in us mechanically or by iron force. He works by inner promptings, inner movings, inner checkings, inner suggestions, inner inspirations, inner whispers that are delicate and sensitive. No wonder we are counseled to “Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4:30). If we treat these inner workings with neglect or rebellion, they subside. Remember, this present-tense salvation involves a cooperation between us and the Holy Spirit.

God works in us “to will.” God does not treat His children like lifeless machines. He deals with us as moral agents who can say Yes and No. He will not compel us to be saints, or force us to be holy (though He does have strong means of persuasion!). There are certain signs that God is willing His good pleasure within you -- if you have a holy discontent with yourself; if you have a hunger for a better Christian life; if you have a determination to live for “God’s good pleasure.” And there is a necessary conclusion that must be drawn from this truth. It means that every holy impulse that has ever been expressed within His child comes from Him, and from Him alone.

“Every virtue I possess, And every victory won,
Every thought of holiness, Are His and His alone.”

But God not only inspires the will, God also energizes the work. “God works in you both to *will* and to *do* His good pleasure.” He not only puts the *desire* into our hearts, He also provides the *drive* to carry out His will. He inspires the earliest impulse and He empowers and directs the final accomplishment. God leads us to *purpose* His will, and then He lends us the *power to perform it*.

Can you imagine what would happen if all Christians became aware of this truth and began to implement it in their daily lives? But we must sadly admit that this is hardly true. We are more like the truth revealed in a Dennis the Menace cartoon. Dennis is standing in his front yard with his little female “friend,” Margaret. A lawn mower is standing idle in a yard that is half-cut. Dennis says indignantly to Margaret: “It is *so* a power mower — and here comes the power!” And he points to his father, Mr. Mitchell, who is wiping his sweating face with a towel as he comes around the corner of the house. Honesty would force many defeated Christians to say, “The Christian life *may be* a power-life, *but I have to supply the power!*” This text takes us worlds away from such a sad confession.

A father came home from work one evening to find his small son sprawled in the grass of the front yard. “Are you ready to play, son?” the father asked. The boy feebly replied, “Naw, Dad, I’m too tired.” “Son, what did you do that made you so tired?” “I’ve been galloping on my ‘horse’ all over the neighborhood,” the boy answering, referring to the stick-horse he sometimes played with. “Son, I’ve ridden a horse many times, but it has never made me *that* tired,” the father teased. “Yeah, but Dad, *your* horse *carries* you, but when *I* ride, *I’ve got to do my own galloping.*” Every Christian has the Lord of the universe — and all of His resources — within him, and yet most Christians are still “doing their own galloping.” Who is doing the “galloping” in *your* life, *you* or *God*?

Let me share with you at this point a practical paragraph from the pen of the great British preacher, F. B. Meyer: “God may be working in you to confess to that fellow Christian that you were unkind in your speech or act. Work it out. He may be working in you to give up that line of business about which you have been doubtful lately. Work it out — and give it up. He may be working in you to be sweeter in your home, and gentler in your speech. Work it out — and begin. He may be working in you to alter your relations with some with whom you have dealings that are not as they should be. Work it out — and alter them. This very day let God

begin to speak, and work and will; and then work out what He works in. God will not work apart from you, but He wants to work in and through you. Let Him. Yield to Him, and let this be the day when you shall begin to live in the power of the mighty Indwelling One.” Amen — and may God help us!

Note one final thing about the *dynamic* of the Christian life. We can also see in these verses the ultimate *purpose* of this dynamic. Read verses twelve through eighteen again, and note that there is an order, a progression, to these verses. We have not mentioned much about verses fourteen through seventeen, but this in no way diminishes their importance. Here is the order:

God works in you.
You co-operate with Him, “working out His in-worked salvation.”
Christian character is developed
This Christian character enables you to minister to *others* (verses 15, 16a)

God’s focus is on *others*, and the focus of the God-shaped Christian will also be on *others*. So we can see again the clear purpose for our Christian development. Our character is to be developed to serve others, and wonderful things develop in our character while we live to serve others. Thus, the best and happiest Christians are those who have forgotten themselves by burying their lives in the spiritual welfare of others. You see, all strength and effort that are consecrated to the service of others react upon our own character with eternal benefits.

Here, then, is the dynamic of the Christian life. We have seen the Person who provides this dynamic, the provinces in which it operates in our lives, and the ultimate purpose of it. Now, let’s quickly examine one final happy thing in the text.

III. THE DELIGHT OF OBEDIENCE

Finally, we will look at the *delight of obedience* as it is vividly stated in our text. Let me remind you that the main theme of the book of Philippians is “joy.” In fact, Greek scholar A. T. Robertson labeled this book, Paul’s Joy in Christ. Guy King quaintly said that it shows us “the joy way.” In verse 16, Paul used the word “rejoice.” But look especially at the climax of our passage. “*But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.*”

We must realize that joy is a *command* of God, and we must continually obey the command. In verse seventeen, “Rejoice,” and the verb is a present imperative verb. So the Christian is commanded to rejoice — now.

We must realize, too, that to rejoice is a *choice*. Some years ago, two Christian psychologists wrote a book entitled, Happiness is a Choice. Earlier, Paul had commanded the Philippians to “do all things without murmurings and disputings” (verse 14). So Christians may choose to grumble, or they may choose not to grumble. They may choose to be argumentative, or they may choose to not be argumentative. Here, they are commanded to make the choice to

rejoice. What a happy place the fellowship of believers would be if all Christians would make this choice — and say so!

We must realize, too, that rejoicing is *contagious*. The pattern of verses seventeen and eighteen never fails. “I rejoice, *and share my joy with you all. And I urge you, too, to rejoice in the same way, and share your joy with me.*” If one person got such a good case of the contagion of joy that he couldn’t hide it, many others would come down (rise up!) with it, too!

For Paul, it was joy all the way home, whatever the circumstance! The Philippian Christians are serving Christ (Paul speaks of “the sacrifice and service of their faith”), and Paul is serving Christ (he speaks of his life being freely “poured out like a drink-offering”). Note this principle: *the joy is mutual when the service is mutual*. The more Christians that are in the network of service, the more will be in the network of joy.

Though we didn’t stop at every point along the way, our journey through this great passage is complete. We have been reminded of our salvation, of our responsibility, of our relationship to Christian leaders and their relationship to us, and of the importance of obedience in the Christian life. We have seen the demand for Christian obedience — the responsibility for it, the requirement of it, and the reasons for it. We have seen the dynamic that is necessary for us to be obedient — the Person Who gives it, the provinces in which it is exercised in our lives, and the purpose of it. And finally, we have seen the delight of Christian obedience — we have viewed that delight as a command, a choice, and a contagion. Let’s close with a tiny reminder from the annals of history, an adage that stands forever: “To obey is better than sacrifice.” Then let’s listen to God’s commands — and rise up to obey them.