

PHILIPPIANS—WEEK 5
The Example of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus: Phil. 2:12-30

Paul begins Philippians 2 with an exhortation to believers to unity. He goes on to explain that the key to being single-minded is being submissive-minded. We are to follow the example of Christ, willingly laying aside our rights and privileges for the sake of others and for the glory of God. As we pursue Christ-likeness, we should exhibit the same attitude Jesus did—an attitude of submission. Easier said than done, right? Practically, how do we make that happen?

Paul begins with an instruction that is frequently misunderstood. In verse 12 Paul instructs us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Paul is **not** instructing us to figure out for ourselves what we want to believe and what we don’t want to believe. He is **not** instructing us to “find our own truth” when it comes to salvation. So, what is he telling us to do? The best way to explain what Paul is trying to communicate is to think of baking. If I want to add some vanilla extract to my cake batter for flavor, I don’t just drop it in the batter and just leave it there; I thoroughly mix the extract into the batter so that it is evenly mixed into every ounce of batter. Some of you may have even heard this called “working it out.” If I don’t work it out, I will have parts of my cake that are totally lacking in the vanilla flavor that is so important to the cake. The same holds true for our lives. The power of the Gospel is not just for salvation. The Gospel needs to permeate every facet of our lives, so that no matter when or how someone comes into contact with us, it is evident that we are Christ-followers. Every action we take, every decision we make, should be filtered through the Gospel.

I don’t know about you, but becoming like Christ has been completely overwhelming for me at times. There are times I feel like I’m doing great, but there are more times when I feel like a complete and utter failure. I can completely identify with Paul in Romans 7 when he bemoans the fact that the things he wants to do, he doesn’t do, and the things he doesn’t want to do, he does. That’s why verse 13 is so impactful for me. Becoming Christ-like and living a life worthy of the Gospel is not about my willpower. I would be utterly hopeless if it was. Living the Christian life is a miracle of God. It is God, not me, who wills me to do things that are pleasing to Him. It is God who works in me, transforming me into the image of His Son for His honor and glory. How amazingly freeing that is!

Now, that isn’t to say that we merely have to “let go and let God.” We are not passive in this process. While we are dependent upon God’s transforming work in our lives, we are responsible for abiding in and submitting to Him. Think of a sailor in a boat: the wind provides the power to move the boat, but the impact of the wind is limited by the sailor’s willingness to open the sail to receive the wind.

Paul concludes Chapter 2 with the example of ordinary, flawed men who were accomplishing great things for God because of their willingness to open their lives to His transforming power. Paul was openly mocked by believers in Corinth because of his awkward appearance. Timothy was a mere youth with health problems. Epaphroditus, too, suffered from health problems to the point he nearly died. Yet, God was able to use these feeble men to accomplish great things because they exhibited an attitude of submission. God used them, and, if we are willing to submit to Him, God can use us to accomplish great things, too.

Questions:

1. Discuss “working it out.” Has the Gospel permeated your entire life? Are there areas of your life not flavored by the Gospel?
2. Review Verse 13. How does your perspective change when it is God’s will not yours that provides the power for life transformation?
3. Discuss the concept of dependent responsibility. What does it mean to be dependent upon God yet responsible for my actions? How does this differ from “let go and let God?” How does this differ from “you’re not trying hard enough” or “you just don’t have enough faith”?