Work Out Your Salvation: A Tale of Two Workers
Philippians 2:12-18

I want to get your imaginative juices flowing this morning. I want you to picture a man, lounging on the sofa, the original couch potato, and he's overweight, unwashed and greasy, and he's surrounded by empty beer cans and crisp packets, and most importantly he's got the TV remote control in his hands, and there's a little bell on the table next to him which he rings when he wants his wife to brings him another beer, and if that fails, his shout is a loud as his belly is large, and he just yells. Let's call him Mr. Slob.

And now think of another person. Imagine a slight, thin, anxious looking lady, who is always busy, she's always worrying, especially about what others might think of her, and she's always trying to please and to do, and she feels like she needs to be in every place at once, and her life is this frantic, peaceless, joyless doing. Let's call her Mrs. Tense.

Now, those are two very different people, aren't they? If you met them you'd think they were poles apart: the couch potato and the anxious doer. And yet they are both trying to find happiness. Slob thinks he'll find it by doing nothing other than feeding his belly, having his own way and others entertain him; Mrs. Tense thinks she'll find it by making the grade in the sight of others and having others approve of her, and say well done to her.

And this morning I want you to see how those two represent the different errors we can fall into as Christians, and how Paul argues against both and shows us a much better path to joy and deep inner happiness.

Work it Out
Look at verse 12: 'Therefore, *my beloved*.' Paul's writing to these Christians living in Philippi and whilst he knows they are by no means perfect, he still loves them. He's heard news that there are these divisions and relational cracks beginning to show in the church there, that they haven't got it all sorted, anymore than he has, and yet there's still this deep affection for them.

And he wants these friends, and you and me, to see something: 'Therefore…' Given what I have just been saying (in the preceding passage) about Christ coming as one of us, and humbling himself and dying on the cross because he loves you, given that he obeyed God to that degree, and given that he is now enthroned as Lord of heaven and earth; given all this, *therefore*, there are going to be some implications for the way you live life.

And that's not 'Hey, God has done everything for you in Christ, so you don't have to do anything, here's a sofa.' It's not a free pass to becoming a spiritual, moral couch potato, 'well if God loves me, and he accepts me as I am… pass me a beer' and you wallow with the remote whilst God entertains you.

No. Verse 12, '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.'

Therefore, given that *Christ* obeyed to the point of death, and is now Lord of all, I want you to go on walking this life of obedience to him. Not just seeing Christ as your great moral example, nor obeying some list of 'do's and 'don't's, but humbling yourself fully under his Lordship. To let what he has done for you, and the implications of your salvation, permeate every part of your life.

Now sometimes it seems that if you believe in God's grace, then to talk of our own *effort,* our *applying* ourselves to growing as Christians in maturity and character and virtue, is kind of like a dirty word: it's out of bounds, it's no go, it's sort of 'anti-grace'.

But as one writer has said, 'effort is not a four letter word, is it?' And Paul here says that what Jesus has done for us places on you and me a responsibility *to do*, that we must now work out in our living what it means to be saved. That there is as someone else has said, 'this responsive work of obedience, this hard graft of daily warfare.' And that leaves no place for the spiritual Mr. Slobs of this world.

And yet, the other error is to think that it is through our doing that we *earn* salvation. That rather than work *out* our salvation, we think we have to work *for* it, and that by living a moral life and making the grade and trying to earn God's favour we can somehow gain God's approval and put him in our debt. And the problem is that that ends up as a kind of spiritual Mrs. Tense, there's no sense of peace or rest or inner joy because you can never be sure you've done enough. And for those of us who are by nature driven and go-getters, I suspect that that error may be more likely ours than that of the couch potato.

And so what Paul is saying here is, 'look, when you know that because of all that Christ has done for you, you are accepted by God and loved by him, and that he lavishes his undeserved and unearned grace on your life, that you are saved, you are going to want live that out, and work that out in your attitudes, and how you talk, and what you do with your life, and how you do it. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your 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' (Eph 2:8-10). In other words, you are not saved *by* good works; but you are re-created in Christ and saved *for* good works. So… do them. So, just as you might be given a new car, but you've still got to get in and drive it; or if you get married you've still got to work out the living together, so in Christ you have received this gracious gift of salvation, now come on, work it out, apply it to your lives, live it, Paul says.

And Paul wants them to walk this path of obedience to Jesus whether he's with them or not: v12 again, 'not only as in my presence but much more in my absence.' Now for these Philippians, maybe it was easier to stay faithful to Jesus and walk the walk as a Christian when Paul was there. I mean having him around would sure keep you on your toes, wouldn't it? But with him gone, maybe it's easier to let things slip. And for you and me, the same can be true, can't it? When the normal is turned upside down, or the things that root us are unsettled, it's just that bit easier to lose the moral compass, isn't it? Whether you're under increased stress and the stuff you thought you could rely on is taken out from

under your feet, or you're away on a business trip, or you've moved here and away from home and all that's familiar. When life is uprooted, or turned on its head and the familiar is gone, those things that maybe rooted you to the Christian life can be loosened, and Paul's saying, 'that's when the rubber hits the road. And you need to stay close to Christ, to walk in obedience whatever is happening to the familiar and the comfortable and the reliable.'

And he says, we are *each* responsible for ourselves: v12 again, 'work out *your own* salvation.' Now, you can just imagine, can't you, how in a church where there are these relational strains beginning to show that people could begin to just discretely, subtly, begin to point the finger at others and how they are or are not doing things. And maybe there's just a bit of gossip beginning, which of course is always couched in very spiritual terms, 'well, of course you see what Mrs A. has done, now really I don't think that's quite appropriate, do you, I mean for a Christian?' And we are more interested in what's wrong with others and what they should be putting right, than our own growth in grace.

Now of course, that doesn't mean that we don't share a mutual responsibility for each other, we absolutely do, and part of what Paul is going for in this letter is deep and rich, heart-level community life together where we precisely do care for each other. But when it comes to working out our salvation, our gaze should first of all be inward: 'How am I doing? How could I respond in a more Christ like fashion? How am I doing in growing in love and patience and self-control?' As Jesus said, first take the plank out of your own eye, before you try to take the speck from your brother's.

And Paul says that these Philippians, and you and I, should be working out our own salvation 'with fear and trembling.' Now that might seem odd to you. 'Hey, I thought God loved me; I thought Jesus had dealt with my sin; I didn't think there was any cause to fear God now.' But just think about it, when you love someone deeply, there is a right sense in which you hate to hurt them, isn't there? When you are afraid to hurt them or displease them, because of what it will do to them and that relationship. And there is this godly fear that is born of a real, deep love for God, and it takes holiness seriously, because God is Holy, and Christ is the Lord. And so Paul is saying, 'look work this out, and be serious, be sober about. Don't play at the Christian life.'

Now, of course, our couch potato friend doesn't fear anything does he? Because he thinks he's the lord upon his throne, his sofa, and the only thing that trembles there is his belly. And sadly, our anxious doer friend Mrs. Tense, she is one stick of fear, but there is no love or joy mingled with it.

But in the gospel there is this coming together of love and fear, of deep acceptance and trembling obedience and it results in a life lived worthy of the gospel.

But you could read all that Paul says we should be and do in this short passage, and, frankly, be overwhelmed. Ok, so I've got to obey, and work and do and be

blameless and innocent, and without blemish, and shine like a light and hold fast the word, and, and, and…. And I can't do it.

Which is why Paul says what he says next. Second point:

Because it's God who's at work
Verse 12-13, '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.'

Now, if you are to do anything, first there has to be the desire, the will to do it, and second there's the actual doing of it. And you and I go wrong because either we don't want to do what we should do, which means we also want to do what we shouldn't, or we want to do it but from the wrong motives, or we want to do it but find we just don't have the ability, the moral power, to carry it through, and we fall flat on our face again.

But Paul says that from start to finish, whilst you and I are called to walk this life of obedience to Jesus, and work it out, it is God who works the working. And we can only work this salvation *out*, because he is working this salvation *in* us. He starts it, he saves us by his grace, and then he gives us these desires to do what pleases him, he transforms our wills, but he doesn't then leave us to struggle on alone, he also empowers us to get on and do it.

Which means that without him we can do nothing, but with Him we have all the motivation and power we need to live this life of obedience. But as we do so, there is zero ground for boasting and bragging and thinking, 'my, look how holy I am, I bet Mr. B wishes he was as mature as me' because it is all the work of God's grace. So in actual fact, if as we grow in Christian maturity, we find ourselves responding differently and in a more Christ-like way than we might have previously, far from it being a reason for pride in our self-effort, it's actually a reason for even greater humility, as we realize that all along it's His work and not ours.

And did you notice why God works his grace like this in your life? It's there in v13, 'for his good pleasure.' He does it because it pleases him. He chooses you, he works in you, he transforms you by his Spirit, he enables you to make right choices and gives you the power to carry them out, simply because he loves to, and because he loves you, because it gives him pleasure to lavish his grace upon you and to see Jesus increasingly glorified in your life.

But did you also notice that Paul is remarkably short on specifics here, isn't he? He tells us we've got to work it out because God is working it in, but he doesn't tell us what it will look like, with one crucial exception.

Because relationships matter
Verse 14, 'Do all things without grumbling or disputing.' Do all things. Now, that's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? I mean, when I was preparing this I sat at my desk and tried to think of something, anything, that was not included in 'all things'. And it's that pesky word, 'all', isn't it? It kind of just sweeps everything up, there's

no get out clause. There isn't one little square inch of my life where this 'working it out with fear and trembling' doesn't apply. There's no little dark corner where I'm allowed to retreat and suck my thumb in self-pity and grumble and complain and argue. And that means our marriages, our relationships, our families, our work, they all fall in this remit of 'all things'.

Now, just think how that would sound to this little church where there are these relational strains beginning to show. Do all things without grumbling or disputing… yes, even that area where you are in friction and conflict. Working out your salvation as God works it in you *is* going to affect that relationship as well.

But just ask yourself, why should letting what God has done for me in Christ, Jesus humbling himself to the death of the cross, and him being the Lord of heaven and earth, why should that have anything to say to my grumbling to myself or God, or being in conflict with others?

Well, just think about what is going on when we grumble. Isn't it when we think we deserve better than we are getting, or to be treated better than we're being treated? And conflicts, don't they happen when we don't get our way, when I feel like what I want, or think isn't being given enough weight?

Now, the theologians reckon that when Paul is talking here of grumbling and disputing, he's drawing an analogy with the ancient people of Israel when they were wandering in the desert, grumbling and complaining against Moses and against God. And their problem was that they simply did not trust God, they didn't trust that God was good enough to provide for them or care for them or to bring them safely through their difficulties.

And at its roots, our grumbling and disputing is based on a similar lack of trust in God, isn't it? I grumble because I think I deserve better or to be treated better. And yet, when we look to the cross, we see that that is what we really deserve. But out of His love for us Christ has stepped into our place and taken it all upon himself, and instead God pours his love and grace and mercy into our lives. And when we realize that, we also realize we have no cause to grumble at all: after all, how could God possibly love us more, or treat us better, than he does in Christ? And when I realize that God promises to work all things for my good, and that he is the one in sovereign control, that Jesus is Lord, and not this other person, or this situation, then I realize that all my arguing and relational conflicts are just me trying to fight my own battles, and that I can safely leave them in God's hands and instead treat others with the grace with which he has treated me.

And Paul says that this working out our salvation, and especially letting it influence our relationships matters for three reasons.

Firstly, it matters **for the sake of others**:
V14-16: 'Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and

twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.'

Now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that those who follow him, 'are the light of the world… let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Matt 5:14,16) And in his prayer at the Last Supper he prayed 'that they may all be one…. [that we might know this deep heart-level unity] so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.'

In other words, by working out in our daily lives, and especially in our relationships together, this incredible love of God that has been lavished upon us, we are to be a beacon of light to a dark world, a lighthouse in the storm. To be to the nations, what Israel failed to be.

The problem is that if these Philippians, or you and I, are kicking up a dust cloud by fighting one another, the world isn't going to see the light. They're just going to see the dust and the fight. But as one writer has said, the world desperately needs to see that there is such a thing as beauty amidst all the ugliness.

Now of course that doesn't mean they will respond to it, does it? Elsewhere Paul writes that to some we are the aroma of life, but to others the stench of death. But of course it's one and the same smell. It's like the jar of marmite on the Slack breakfast table. I've got one daughter who will virtually eat nothing else for breakfast and another who complains bitterly if the lid is left off and she has to smell it at 6:30 in the morning. You either love it or hate it. But it's the same smell.

But to smell the aroma of life, or to see the light of the gospel, it can't be obscured by the dust cloud of infighting and disunity. Instead, Paul says, we must hold firm to and hold out the word of life: that the gospel really does result in transformed relationships, that it really does provide the answer to all that you are searching for, that this really is where you will find the life you are looking for.

Secondly it matters **for the sake of eternity**. Paul wants these Philippians' relationships to reflect all the grace that God has shown them in Christ, v16, 'so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.' Now, I once made the mistake of telling one of my girls that I was proud of her, at which she immediately fired back: 'Pride's a sin dad.' But there's a right kind of pride, a pride in others, isn't there? And Paul wants to know the right pride of a father on the day when we must all give account. And he knows that if they stay united and together, despite all they are facing, if they allow the gospel of Jesus to permeate even their strained relationships, then they will be proof that God is working in their lives, and that means Paul won't have spent his life in vain.

So relationships, marriages, churches that, through the scars and the pain, keep on working out this salvation together, matter, because it's the evidence that will

stand on the last day, that we really are God's people and because of that we're different from the dog-eat-dog world around us.

But there's one last reason that this working out your salvation including, and especially, in your relationships matters and that's **for your joy**.

Look what Paul writes in v17-18: 'even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me.'

Our couch potato friend Slob thinks that he'll find happiness by doing nothing and having others serve and entertain him. Our anxious doer – Mrs. Tense thinks she'll find happiness in others' approval of her. But Paul knows better, because he has found deep joy and gladness in the gospel, in knowing Christ's sacrifice for him and, in response, sacrificing himself and pouring himself out for others.

And he knows that these Philippians and you and I, can know that same joy and gladness too. You see, all the time we put our self at the centre, and either look to others to serve us, or to approve of us, we will never find real joy; but when we realize that God has served us in Christ and because of him we can know deep love and acceptance by God, then we will find lasting joy in him even in the times of trial and suffering and sacrifice.