

# Philippians 2:12–18

## Work It Out

The Summit Church, *Philippians: The Secret to the Good Life*

**MPT:** Paul commands the church to live out their salvation with reverent obedience because God is actively working in them to make them distinct, joyful witnesses in the world.

**MPS:** God works in us, we work it out through us, and we work it out together so Christ shines before the world.

**UFN:** We all want to become the people God calls us to be, but we often get stuck between two exhausting options: try harder and feel crushed, or give up and feel ashamed.

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## Philippians 2:12–18

<sup>12</sup>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,  
<sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

<sup>14</sup>Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup>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, <sup>16</sup>holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

## INTRODUCTION

Officially summer ... lemme check on the parents real quick: *Are we okay? Everybody surviving?* I know when school lets out, suddenly your house becomes **Lord of the Flies**.

Summer, man ... you know, every year around this time, people start talking about getting “summer body” ready. And, personally, I love the idea of it: Every year I think, *“This is the year I stop eating ice cream with Oreos every night. You are almost a 40-year-old man ... you don’t need ice cream EVERY night.”*

And usually, in our household, this is when all the **dramatic changes** start happening: find a new workout plan, start using words like “macros,” tell Liz I’m “prioritizing clean supplements” (which is my way of telling her, *“I bought some expensive stuff ...”*)

- And for about a WEEK **we are locked in, baby**: chicken, rice, water, ground beef, rice, water, chicken, rice, water ...
- But usually about day five, I’m like, *“Hmmm ... there’s a BOGO on Tillamook, that’s a good deal ... it’d be bad stewardship NOT to buy this ... I deserve this ... and the kids would love it too of course—I do it for the kids! After all, ice cream is milk, milk is from cows, protein is from cows → ice cream is protein.”*

The problem isn't that **I don't know what to do**; the problem is that **knowing the plan** and **becoming the person** are two very different things.

I think that's where many of us are spiritually too. We know what obedience should look like—we want to be more **patient**; we want to **stop snapping at our kids**; we want to stop **grumbling our way through work**; we want to be less **anxious**, less **passive**, less **controlling**, less **concerned by what people think**, more **devoted to prayer**, read more **Bible** ... we want our faith to show up somewhere besides our church attendance.

So what happens is we end up bouncing between two bad options:

1. Some of us TRY HARDER: We make the plan, set the alarm, delete the app, start the Bible reading plan, and promise ourselves, *"This time will be different."* But then when we fail, **the shame gets louder**.
2. Others go the opposite route and just quietly GIVE UP: We say, *"Well, God is gracious ... I guess we all have our vices and struggles."* But what we really mean is, *"I don't think I'm ever going to change."*

In Philippians 2, Paul is gonna give us something better than **spiritual self-improvement** or **spiritual passivity**: Paul's gonna show us how to work out your salvation, because God is working in you.

## CONTEXT

In the first 11 verses of chapter 2, Paul showed us the obedience of Jesus: Jesus **humbled** himself, took on **flesh**, became a **servant**, and was **obedient to the point of death**—even death on a cross. Then Paul says, <sup>12</sup>**Therefore, my beloved,** (in light of everything you know about Jesus' coming in the flesh on your behalf) **as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence** (act the same way whether an adult's in the room or not), **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ...**

From here, Paul is gonna give us some specific **PRACTICES** showing what this "working out" looks like ... but before he does that, he first gives us the **PILLARS** that make obeying these practices possible in the first place. Pillars, then practices.

## PILLARS: What Makes Obedience Possible

### **Pillar #1: OUR WORK — We are not passive (v 12)**

Paul here is emphasizing the **active role** we must take in our spiritual lives—when it comes to our spiritual growth, **we are not passive participants**.

When Paul says “**work out your own salvation,**” the Greek word means “to accomplish,” “to produce,” or “to bring about.”

- This almost sounds antithetical to the gospel, doesn't it? *Bring about your salvation. Produce your salvation. Accomplish your salvation by continuous, sustained, strenuous effort.*<sup>1</sup>

Let's go to the deep end for a bit and take this piece by piece, okay? Starting with **SALVATION** itself.

- Usually, when we talk about salvation, what we're talking about is the aspect called **JUSTIFICATION**. Justification is God declaring the sinner to be righteous, through faith alone, on the basis of Jesus' righteousness alone.
- It's God rescuing us from the **penalty of sin** and bringing us into **new life with Jesus**. In justification, God **changes my legal standing**: The verdict goes from “guilty” to “paid in full” the moment you trust in Christ, because of what Jesus has done on my behalf. (JIMP)
- **Ephesians 2:8** says, “**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.**” In other words, salvation is a **gift you receive**, not a reward you earn.

Now we are to **WORK OUT** that salvation, Paul says. While salvation is a gift you receive, it also **becomes a life you live**. This is what we call **SANCTIFICATION**.

- Justification is God saving me from the **penalty** of sin and declaring me righteous; sanctification is God saving me from the **power** of sin over my life as I grow in righteousness.
  - Justification = one-time declaration
  - Sanctification = lifelong process
- The English word “**sanctify**” (or “**sanctification**”) is built on the Latin word *sanctus*, which means “holy.” So any time you read in the New Testament the word “sanctify,” it's talking about **holiness**.
- In sanctification, God is **progressively changing my life to look more like Jesus over time**—he's making me holier and holier like Jesus. This happens from the day you become a Christian until the day you die—you are living out (working out) what God has already put in you.

Think about it like this: Who has ever had a **surgery that afterwards required physical therapy**?

- Imagine someone has **major knee surgery**. The surgeon does what only the surgeon can do—he repairs the thing you could never repair on your own. The only thing you contributed to the surgery was the thing that was broken and needed fixing.
- Then after the surgery, the doctor says, “*Okay, now you need physical therapy.*”
  - Imagine if you said, “*No, no, doctor, I believe in grace. I'm just gonna sit here and trust the work you already did.*”
- If you respond like that, you're actually **undermining the purpose of the surgery** and **dishonoring the surgeon who just fixed the issue**. No, you need to **work out** the **surgery** by **performing PT**.

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<sup>1</sup> Piper & DeYoung, *Acting the Miracle*, p. 134

- **The therapy doesn't perform the surgery. The therapy works out the healing the surgery made possible.**
  - That's sanctification: We are not working for salvation; we are working out the salvation Jesus has already completed in us.
  - The grace of God doesn't destroy our individual responsibility as Christians ... rather, the grace of God makes it possible to work out what God has already put in.

You say, *Well, if I'm working, isn't that contributing to my salvation?*

- Nope, not to your justification ... not to your legal standing before God. **The only thing we contribute is sin.** That's it. There's NOTHING you and I can do to get our salvation **started**, there's nothing we can do to **keep it going**, and there's nothing we can do to **finish it**. If it rested on us, we'd fail.
- Know how I know? Scripture says, **"His mercies are new every morning."** You know why? CUZ WE NEED MERCY EVERY MORNING.
  - It's not, "God starts it. We finish it."
  - No, we are simply working OUT what he has already put IN.
  - Nobody says it better than **Dallas Willard**: **"Grace is not opposed to effort. It's opposed to earning."**

We do this **WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING** ...

- Those terms convey a sense of **reverence** and **awe** toward God. It's not a **paralyzing fear** but a recognition of God's holiness and underscores the seriousness with which we should approach our spiritual lives.
- ***Do you look more like Jesus today than you did a year ago? Have you grown at all in holiness since you got saved?***
- If you are serious about following Jesus, you must be serious about holiness.

The first pillar is OUR WORK and realizing we are not passive.

### **Pillar #2: GOD'S WORK— We are not powerless (v 13)**

Even with all of that—as we are *working out* our salvation—God is still the **primary agent** in salvation *and* sanctification: **<sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

- **To will** means he works in our **desires**.
- **To work** means he works in our **obedience**.
- **For his good pleasure** means he works **in our direction**.

If I only work, I become **proud or exhausted**.

If I only "let go and let God," I become **passive or lazy**.

But if God works in me, then I can **work it out with hope.**

God doesn't just *tell you* what to do; he changes what you **want to do** and then **empowers** you to do it. The early church father **Augustine** wrote about his conversion in his book *The Confessions*, and reflecting on his salvation he wrote a humble prayer that said: "Lord, command what you will, and give what you command."

- What he's saying is that whatever God commands us to do comes with the **power** and **motivation** to do it. Whatever God **requires**, God provides.
  - God's not a cheerleader who just stands off to the side of your life, yelling loudly for you to *try harder, run faster, jump higher*.
  - He's also not just a coach who gives you instructions and tells you what plays to run.
  - Sure, God cheers you on and coaches you along the way, **but he does SO MUCH MORE**: Through the Holy Spirit, he enters into your soul and mind and empowers you to live out the very things he commands—willing and working in you for his good pleasure!<sup>2</sup>
- **Galatians 2:20** speaks of Christ living "in me"... **Romans 8:11** assures us that the Spirit who raised Jesus "lives in you."
- **Philippians 1:6**, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Listen, the Christian life is not a **rowboat**, where everything depends on how hard you pull. It's also not a **lazy river**, where you just float with no effort, with a cold drink in your hand. **It's more like sailing.**

- We raise our sails: We open our Bibles, we obey, we repent, we confess sin, we serve. But God is the one who sends the wind and supplies the power.
- **You can't create the wind. But you can raise the sail.**
- **Spiritual growth is not you rowing harder or floating aimlessly ... it's learning to raise the sails of obedience to the wind of God's grace.**

Here's the pattern: **God-given salvation → God-given desire + God-given power → God-enabled obedience → God-directed glory**

- God gives the **salvation**
- God gives the **desire**
- God gives the **power**
- We **work it all out** in obedience
- And all the glory goes back to him

In normal Paul fashion, he anticipates the question which emerges at this point ... which is, *Okay, Paul, HOW do we work out our salvation? What does that practically look like?*

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Sam Storms for this analogy.

While the next few verses are not a comprehensive list, in verses 14–18 Paul shows how Christian growth becomes visible in five practices. (It’s why I titled this message “*Work It Out.*”)

## PRACTICE: What Obedience Looks Like

### Practice #1: GRATITUDE — *We kill the complaining (v 14)*

<sup>14</sup>Do all things without grumbling or disputing,

Do all things—do EVERYTHING—without grumbling, complaining, arguing, or disputing. Greek word for “all things” means ALL THINGS.

Now, there’s certainly a time to **lament**, or **weep**, or even give tough **critiques** and **feedback**. For instance, it’s not complaining to report harassment to HR ... or to tell your spouse they hurt your feelings. That’s not what Paul is talking about.

What he’s talking about is **a type of grumbling that serves as ingratitude toward God**—it takes us back to the first message in this entire series, where Pastor J.D. showed us that ingratitude was at the heart of the original sin.

- CHS: *“A murmuring spirit is the devil’s music.”*
- Because complaining is, ultimately, questioning God’s goodness and wisdom. It’s murmuring against God.

And here’s the thing, man, while this *seems* so basic, it’s actually INCREDIBLY counter-cultural, cuz **grumbling is our native tongue today**, isn’t it?

- I mean, even as Christians, we don’t complain, right? ... noooo, we just “**vent**” or “**share prayer requests.**” We just “**get stuff off our chest.**”

What Paul’s doing here is drawing a parallel between **how we act today** and **how the Israelites acted in the wilderness** ...

- **Exodus 16:2–3**, the whole congregation is grumbling against Moses, and they say, **“Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”**
  - God literally split the sea, crushed Pharaoh, fed them with bread from heaven ... and now they’ve been in the wilderness barely a month and they’re saying, *“Pfft, honestly, Egypt had better food.”*
  - **That’s what grumbling does: Grumbling edits your memory until slavery looks better than salvation.**

Paul commands the church to **avoid the negativity that marked Israel in the desert**. Instead, as Paul says in **Ephesians 4:29**, you should “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but **only such as is good for building up**, as fits the occasion, **that it may give grace to those who hear.**” Basically, when it comes to complaining, if it’s not building someone else up, then shut up!

Here’s the thing about **working out our salvation by NOT grumbling**: We gotta realize it’s possible to *do* the right thing, but with the wrong spirit.

- See this all the time in **marriage counseling**: *I’m going to counseling!* You’re “obeying,” but your spirit is wrong.
- Grumbling = obedience without joy
- Here’s the question: ***Where are you obeying God but narrating your resentment the whole time?***

Opposite of grumbling is **gratitude**. And when you refuse to complain, there’s actually promise attached to it: **Do all things without grumbling ...<sup>15</sup>that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.**

### **Practice #2: INTEGRITY — We mind the gap (v 15)**

If you’ve ever ridden the **subway in London**, you hear the warning over and over: **MIND THE GAP**—it’s even written everywhere. It’s this constant warning for folks to watch their step between the **train door** and the **station platform**: Don’t fall in the gap! Mind the gap!

- **Paul is saying, “Take notice of the distance between what you confess and how you live. In other words, mind the gap.”**
- When Paul says “**be blameless, innocent, without blemish,**” he’s not calling for **sinless perfection**, but **visible consistency**. Cuz when the gap between our words and our lives gets too wide, people trip over it.
- **Probably the greatest cause of atheism today is Christians who say Jesus is Lord with their lips but then deny him by their lifestyle.** It’s not Christians who *struggle*; it’s Christians who *pretend*.

Here’s the question: ***Where is there a gap between what you confess and how you live?*** (For what it’s worth, this is a question probably best answered *not* by you but by those who know you really well.)

And when you mind the gap, Paul says, “You’ll become blameless, children of God **among whom you shine as lights in the world**, in a crooked and twisted generation.”

- *Shining like stars* is Paul flipping some of the language used back in **Deuteronomy**—in Deuteronomy 32:5, Israel is described as a crooked and twisted generation.
- Now here in Philippians 2, Paul is calling the church to **be blameless and shine like lights in a crooked and twisted generation**.
- He’s saying, “Just as stars stand out in a dark sky, the church is called to be a distinct WITNESS in a broken culture.”

### Practice #3: WITNESS — We shine by shutting up (v 15)

Alright, this one is hilarious to me ... cuz Paul says, “You wanna reach your family, your neighbors, your school, your spouse, your workplace for Jesus?” According to the Apostle Paul, one of the things you can do to be different—to be a witness in a crooked, twisted, watching generation—is to simply not complain.

- It’s not to tell people to “*Honk if you love Jesus.*”
- It’s not to **leave gospel tracts** as restaurant tips.
- It’s not **wearing aggressively confusing Christian T-shirts** like “*This blood’s for you.*”
- It’s none of that! (In fact, some of y’all need to stop confusing WITNESS with *weirdness*. Just stop doing these things. They’re weird.)

No, this all goes back to v 14—you wanna shine as lights in the dark world? The next time the **boss asks you to work after hours**, or when the **service is slow**, or when **coach adds extra conditioning**, or when the **teacher assigns a group project**, or when the **church service runs long** ... Paul says the most evangelistic thing you can do is to **keep your mouth shut, because in a grumbling world, gratitude GLOWS.**

- Not complaining is SO countercultural it will literally make you SHINE. You will stick out like a sore thumb, and people will wonder why you’re not jumping on the complain train.
  - I mean, can you imagine what the people in prison with Paul think about prison? Can you imagine the witness Paul is as he’s over there like, “I know we’re locked up, but REJOICE!”?
- **Jen at VZW:** *You sure do complain a lot for someone who is trying to tell me where to find joy.*
  - I wanted her to believe my message, but my mouth was contradicting my message. I was telling her Jesus gives joy while giving a running commentary on everything I didn’t like.
  - I don’t care how good of a sermon I preach, **if I constantly complain, that’s the loudest sermon anyone will hear from me.**
  - **Where is your complaining dimming your witness?**

### Practice #4: BIBLE — We hold fast to the Word (v 16)

As we shine ... <sup>16</sup>holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

Paul says we shine in this crooked and twisted generation by “holding fast to the word of life.” That phrase can mean both **holding tightly to the Word** and **holding it out to others**—we cling to the Bible ourselves, and then we hold it out to others.

And here’s the thing: You cannot SHINE AS LIGHT if you are not clinging to the Word *that gives light* → **Psalm 119:105**, “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*”

- That means the Bible doesn't just give **information**; it provides **illumination for my life**: It shows me who I am. It shows me where God is leading me. It shows me what is true when my feelings are louder than my faith, or when I'm confused, or when my flesh is lying to me, or when everything around me feels so dark. **It brings LIGHT to those parts of my life.**

This is what **Psalm 19** is all about:

- The law of the Lord is **perfect**, reviving the soul.
- His testimonies are **sure**, making wise the simple.
- His precepts are **right**, rejoicing the heart.
- His commandments are **pure**, enlightening the eyes.
- *So how does God **revive your soul**?* Through his Word.
- *How does God **make you wise**?* Through his Word.
- *How does God **put joy back in your heart**?* Through his Word.

Listen, this whole idea of working out—nobody builds strength on **cotton candy** and **Coca-Cola**. Nobody says, *“Alright, summer body, here I come ... hand me the Skittles and show me fitness reels.”*

- Yet, that's exactly how many of us try to grow spiritually—we feed our souls with clips, quotes, podcasts, reels, and Christian-ish inspiration, and then wonder why we have no strength **when temptation hits, suffering comes, or obedience gets costly**.
- On the contrary, Jesus said, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*<sup>3</sup>
  - **Translation: YOUR SOUL NEEDS ACTUAL FOOD.**
  - A Bible verse on Instagram is a snack. A sermon clip is a snack. A podcast can be helpful. **But you cannot snack your way into spiritual maturity.**

To be clear: Our faith is not in the Bible; it's in Jesus. But the Bible is what points us *to* Jesus. **John 5:39**, Jesus says **all the Scriptures bear witness about him**.

- And what I've seen for two decades is that **I can usually tell how closely someone is walking with Jesus by how seriously they take his Word**. You cannot—you will not—be deeply shaped *by* Jesus if you are neglecting the words *of* Jesus.

***What does your time in the Word reveal about how seriously you take Jesus and his words?*** (Shameless plug: download TSC app and take part in Daily Revival!)

Last practice Paul gives us for this workout plan—he says, ***Yes, you work out your OWN salvation ... but you cannot work it out ALONE.***

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:4

## Practice #5: COMMUNITY — We finish together (vv 17–18)

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

A drink offering in the Old Testament was wine poured out onto the altar, completing a sacrifice with a fragrant aroma that rose to God.<sup>4</sup>

- And Paul says, “*That’s my life: my time, comfort, strength, reputation, freedom—all Poured out so that you might know Christ and keep growing in Christ.*”

Y’all, that right there is **Christian community**. Christian community is not just people you sit next to at church, see once a month at small group, or the folks you keep saying, “We should grab lunch” to.

- **Christian community is people whose lives are on the altar for one another’s endurance.**

We talk about this all the time, but most people don’t drift because they didn’t know enough Bible verses. They drift because they were isolated, unchallenged, unknown, and unprotected.

You wanna build community? — I’ve heard Matt Chandler talk about how every person needs a **KING’S TABLE** (referencing David):

1) **JOAB (David’s general): someone who will fight for you**

- a) Joab would go to war for David. *Battle to fight? I’m your sword. Half saved.*
- b) **The Town:** *I need your help. You can’t ask me any questions. You can never talk about it afterwards. And we’re gonna hurt some people.* → **WHOSE CAR WE GONNA TAKE?**

2) **JONATHAN (best friend): someone who truly knows and loves you**

- a) Need to know me well enough to know when I’m “off”
- b) Someone who has access to the REAL you, not just a highlight reel
  - i) *Here’s what I’m struggling with ...*
  - ii) *Pray for me about this ...*
  - iii) *I can’t stop thinking about ...*
  - iv) *I’m gonna be traveling by myself for work ...*

- c) ~~A few years ago I was chatting with Hank and told him: *I feel needed; but I don’t feel wanted.* Bonfire. Spoke words of life and encouragement.~~

3) **NATHAN (prophet): someone who will rebuke you**

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 15:1–10

- a) Someone who is unimpressed with you and who is willing to say *you're being an idiot*
- b) Someone to hold you accountable. Someone to say, *"The way you talked to your wife at dinner last night was not okay. The way you keep gossiping about others is not okay."*
- c) **Here's a good way to know where you need accountability:** *Wherever you resist the hardest is likely where you need it most.*

**You cannot become the best version of yourself by yourself.**

Proverbs 13:20 says, **Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.**

- In other words, *the people you walk with will shape the person you become.*
- *You cannot be a man/woman of God unless you are in community with men/women of God.*
- You work out your own salvation, but you do not work it out alone.

*Are you trying to grow while living in isolation? Who is in your "work out" group? Whose faith are you being poured out for?*

This is the Christian life:

*We work it out together.*

*We pour ourselves out together.*

*We rejoice together.*

*And by God's grace, we finish together.*

## CONCLUSION (VAMP)

So let's go back to where we started: The problem usually isn't that we don't know the plan ... the problem is that **knowing the plan** and **becoming the person** are two very different things.

And that's why Philippians 2 is such good news:

- Paul doesn't just hand us a spiritual workout plan and say, *"Good luck. Try harder. More reps."*
- He also doesn't say, *"You'll never be able to become this, so might as well give up."*
- No, he gives us something better and points us to someone better: *Work out your salvation, because it's GOD who works in you.*

If you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit lives inside of you. You are not **passive**. You are not **powerless**. And your life is not **pointless**.

- Work out what God has put in.
- Raise your sail.

- Kill the complaining.
- Mind the gap.
- Shut up and shine.
- Hold fast to the Word.
- Build a King's Table.
- Pour yourself out for somebody else.

Work out your salvation, [knowing that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus](#). You don't have to settle for just knowing the **plan**; by the power at work within you, you can become the **person**.

So let's work it out. (WIO on 3?)