

Calum Cameron: Phillipians 2.12-15 - How can I change?

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Well, this evening we're moving on in our study through the letter to the Philippians.

We're moving on into verse 12 of chapter 2. And after tonight, there's only, I've only got two Sundays left here, so it's looking unlikely we're going to finish the letter, but we'll see how far we get.

Last Sunday evening you might remember we were looking at the example of Jesus Christ in his humiliation and in his exaltation. Tonight we're moving on into these words in 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.

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Now, these words we're looking at from verse 12, 13, 14 and 15, they're fundamentally about the Christian life.

[1 : 08] They're about how we live in this world. They're about how we change as God's people. It begins by telling us to do something very interesting.

It says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. So how do we understand that? How do we interpret these words? I think that our starting point has to be what comes next in verse 13, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

So first of all, God is at work in you. This is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible about sanctification, about the process of change and transformation in the Christian life.

See, when we read the word salvation, our minds often jump straight to being made right with God, to escaping the penalties of sin to things like eternal life.

And these are all absolutely fundamental parts of our salvation. A salvation also involves the work of God's spirit to change you, to help you to live the new life, to gradually renew you and shape you and conform you into the image of God's Son.

[2 : 30] The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is a good summary of biblical truth, asks the question, what is sanctification? And it says here, sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and we are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

So if you have faith in Christ, then God is at work in you right now, to gradually restore you and shape you into what He created you to be, to be a person who represents God in this world.

That's what it means to be the image of God, to be a person who reflects the character of God. Verse 15 says, to be blameless and innocent, to display to the world characteristics of God, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

And God is at work in us to help us to do that, to die unto sin as the Catechism puts it. In other words, to deal with sinful habits, to put to death sinful desires, to live a life of faithful obedience.

That's fundamentally what sanctification is all about. It's God's work in you to shape you, to refine you, and ultimately to make you more like Jesus.

[3 : 59] Now it's vitally important that we understand the difference between justification and sanctification. And I'm aware there's a lot of theological jargon here, but it's important that we understand the difference, especially in something like Philippians chapter 2.

Now there's a project called the New City Catechism, and what they've done is they've taken the form of teaching of the catechisms of the question and answer style and they've put it into contemporary language.

And I think it's a good resource for summarizing what we believe, what the Bible teaches. And here it conveys I think the difference between justification and sanctification quite well.

It says, justification means our declared righteousness before God, made possible by Christ's death and Christ's resurrection for us. Sanctification on the other hand means our gradual growing righteousness, made possible by the Spirit's work in us.

So sanctification is about Christian growth. It's about becoming more mature. And that's something that takes place right through our lives.

[5 : 08] It's not something like justification, which is an instant act, an instant declaration by God. You're made right with God purely on the basis of what Christ has done.

So in simple terms, justification is where God accepts you. Sanctification is where God changes you. God's spirit remains at work in us as Christians to will and to work for his good pleasure.

That's sanctification. So what does this mean for our lives? The fact that God is at work in us. It means that real lasting change is possible.

See, the fact that we are justified and declared to be innocent by God doesn't in and of itself take away sin.

It doesn't mean that we instantly become immune to desires, to temptations. It assures us that we are free from the penalty of sin. It gives us great confidence and assurance for things like forgiveness.

[6 : 13] But it doesn't remove the reality of sin from our lives. It doesn't make us invulnerable to the power of sin.

Basically the point is this, when you become a Christian, your struggles and your battles with sin don't instantly disappear. Becoming a Christian is not a ticket to an easy life.

See, when we read passages like this, when it says, do all things without grumbling, without disputing, without questioning, how many of us can honestly say that we do that?

Maybe we're painfully aware that even today we've argued with someone. We've grumbled or disputed with a family member, a husband or wife.

Maybe we feel that we're always losing our temper with colleagues. Maybe we grumble about our minister or our elders. There are lots of ways that we don't quite match up to what the New Testament tells us to be like in terms of obedience, in terms of holy living.

[7 : 12] So when we come to passages like Philippians 2, it's great to remind ourselves that our status before God, our justification, our declared innocent righteousness is not something that we contribute to.

It's not something that we have to earn based on our own good lifestyles. But that does not mean that we can become complacent or stagnant as Christians.

The reality is that God is at work in you to change you. We said that sanctification is our gradual growing righteousness.

But that's only made possible by the work of God in you. I mentioned this to Tim Keller a few weeks ago, but I think it highlights well the way that God is at work in you by his spirit.

He said God sees you as you are. He loves you as you are. He even accepts you as you are. But by his grace, he does not leave you as you are.

[8 : 14] This whole letter to the Philippians is all about living the Christian life in a world that's full of sin and temptation. And these words here are telling us that there is real, powerful, lasting change available through God's work.

See God's spirit at work in us helps us to say no to temptation when it feels overwhelming. His spirit equips us to choose obedience when our desires are urging us to do the absolute opposite.

God actually changes and reshapes our desires so that we want to find our satisfaction. We want to find our fulfillment in him. So God's spirit at work in us is also expulsive.

As Thomas Chalmers, one of the free church founding fathers, put it, he said, The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.

So how can an alcoholic say no to the burning, intense desire for a drink? Because Jesus is better. How can someone struggling with lust, with temptation, resist the urge to act on it?

[9 : 28] Because Jesus ultimately is better. How can we stop ourselves from always trying to get the last word in our argument? From losing our temper. Because Jesus is better.

Ultimately we're never going to properly deal with the sin in our lives if our answer is just to try harder, if our answer is just to be better people. With the help of God's spirit at work in us, we have to want satisfaction from Jesus more than we want satisfaction from sin.

So the work of sanctification is about change, but it's also a work of progress. It's not something that is accomplished instantly.

The verb that Paul uses here, it has a kind of continual, ongoing sense to it. You see, God did not begin a work in your life in the past and then leave you to carry on with it.

If you're a Christian then God is at work in you, present tense. See there are two extremes that people go to, I think, when it comes to thinking about this.

[10 : 37] Some people say that because it's something God starts, it's up to me to finish it. God maybe begins the work of salvation, but the rest is all about my obedience, my faith, my perseverance.

But remember the first thing we saw in chapter one of this letter in verse six, Paul says, I am sure of this, he who begins the good work in you will bring it to completion.

So God begins that work of salvation in us, but God also brings it to completion. God does not leave us to our own devices. But the other extreme says this, it says that because God does that, because God is in our salvation from start to finish, it means that he does all the work.

It means that we have nothing to do, we are utterly passive. Some people will use the expression we need to let go and let God. But that extreme, I think, is just as unbiblical and unhelpful as the first one.

See in Romans chapter six, Paul deals with this kind of thinking, he says, what shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

[11 : 49] By no means. We are those who have died to sin. How then can we live in it any longer? He goes on to say further on in the chapter, we need to count ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather, offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.

And offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

So if you're a Christian today, you are a person who has been brought from death to life. And the New Testament makes it so clear that there are so many blessings and privileges attached to that.

There's the power of knowing forgiveness, of knowing the assurance of God's pardon. There's the reality of union with Christ.

[12 : 58] There's the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. There's the fellowship and the togetherness of being a part of God's people, of being a part of a family.

But as well as all of those blessings, there are implications. God has given us this new life through Jesus Christ, and there are real implications for us in how we live.

And we're going to think about that in just a moment. Our first point this evening is this, God is at work in you. That is the foundation for any kind of talk about sanctification, for any kind of talk about obedience.

Before we do anything, God is at work. We think about the great promise God makes in the book of Ezekiel. And just think as we read this about the one who's making the actions.

Who's the subject in all of this? Ezekiel chapter 36 verse 26, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

[14 : 02] And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. The primary action in those verses is of God.

The Bible teaches us that God changes our hearts from the inside out so that we can respond in obedience, we can respond in faith.

That's just the outworking of what God works in. So the command to work out our own salvation is firmly grounded and planted in the knowledge that God is at work in you.

Now our second point, because God is at work in you, you have a job to do. The Bible teaches us time and time again that how we live is really, really important to God.

Our actions matter to God. The things we say matters to God. The things we think about matters to God. The Bible places a great emphasis on our obedience as God's people.

[15 : 09] Titus chapter 2 verse 12 says that God trains us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

So the idea that's conveyed time and time again is that how we live as God's people is really important. And in these verses in Philippians chapter 2, there's plenty that we are told to do.

There's plenty that we're told to be like. We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We are to do all things without grumbling or disputing.

We are to be blameless and innocent. Now how do we do that without being legalistic? And that kind of question has been a huge problem for the church for years and years and years.

Some people will say that if you say anything about obedience, if you say anything about holiness, then instantly you're being legalistic. You're undermining the truth that God accepts you by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone.

- [16 : 32] Other people think that your obedience and your moral lifestyle are the basis by which God will accept you or reject you. So the question really is, in what ways are we passive and in what ways are we active when it comes to working out our salvation?

What is it that we do and what is it that God does? Well, first of all, and again if you'll bear with the theological jargon, we are passive when it comes to our justification.

Justification, the Shoracacism says, is an act of God's free grace by which he pardons our sins. He accepts us as righteous in his sight, only on the basis of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, credited to us and received by faith alone.

And that is absolutely central to our salvation. And in working out our own salvation, we do nothing to add to that. But as well as being justified, we are also adopted into God's family.

Justification is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons, the children of God.

- [17 : 47] Both of these are acts of God's free grace. We are passive in justification. We are passive in being made right with God. We are passive in being adopted into his family.

But we have a very clear job to do when it comes to sanctification. It does not mean that today we can add anything to the finished work of Christ.

Working out our own salvation does not mean that we can do anything at all to make ourselves right before God. It does not mean that we can ever possibly become his child by our good works.

I think it's so important to grasp that first of all. These words are written to Christians. Working out your own salvation with fear and trembling is a command given to people who have already come to faith, people who have already come to know Jesus, who have been adopted into his family.

And if you're not a Christian here today, I cannot emphasise that enough. There's nothing you have to do except trust in Christ, trust in his righteousness, and you'll be declared innocent by God.

- [18 : 59] So what it does mean though is that Christians, those of us today who are a part of God's family, we have a role to play. We have a job to do. Sanctification means that we cannot just put our feet up in the Christian life.

It's the aspect of our salvation in which we cooperate with God, which we work together with God in order to grow. And all of this whole section ties back to what Paul says in verse 27 of chapter 1.

He says, let your manner of life, let your lifestyle be worthy of the gospel of Christ. So living in unity, living in humility, living in obedience, all these themes that we've been looking at, these things are fundamentally a response to what Jesus has already done to the gospel that we have received.

Let your manner of life be worthy of that gospel. So we are active in sanctification. But the Bible also teaches us that in Philippians chapter 2, sanctification is something we have to take seriously.

Verse 12 says, not only are we to work out our salvation, but we are to do so with fear and trembling. Now what does that mean? It doesn't mean that we should be uncertain or scared about salvation.

- [20 : 20] It doesn't mean that we can't have assurance about what God has done for us. It doesn't mean that we should be filled with dread when we think about our faith.

So what does it mean to work out our salvation with fear? Well, maybe you can remember a few weeks ago Thomas was preaching on the book of Proverbs and he reminded us that there are two kinds of fear the Bible speaks about.

There's servile fear and there's filial fear. They're quite a mouthful. Filial fear is the kind of fear a servant or a slave would have of a cruel and wicked master.

The picture is of a servant who lives in dread, who lives in terror under this kind of hard, oppressive bully. So they live their life in constant fear with the thought of oppression, with the thought of abuse from their master.

And Thomas pointed out to us that some people live with that kind of fear of God, that God is this kind of cruel, harsh taskmaster.

[21 : 21] But that's not what the Bible wants us to feel. That's not the kind of fear that God asks his people to have. Servile fear is not what Paul means when he says work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

See what the Bible is asking us to have is the other kind of fear, the filial fear. Now what does filial, filial fear mean? Well, the word comes from the Latin word for son.

So filial fear is just referring to the relationship between a father and a child. It's a fear that is founded on affection, on love.

Thomas explained to us that filial fear is like a child who loves their father with the deepest reverence and respect and affection. So their desire is to please their father, to want to never do anything that would dishonour or disobey their father.

That's the kind of fear we're told to have in Philippians chapter 2. In other words, treat your salvation with the utmost reverence and respect. Don't be flippin' or overly casual about sanctification, about working out your salvation.

[22 : 34] Take it seriously. And the word trembling here I think deserves to intensify that feeling. We have to take our sanctification really seriously.

The opposite of that is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call cheap grace. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* we might be able to get on the screen. He wrote this, cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.

Grace alone does everything and so everything can remain as before. Well then, the Christian should live their life like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world standard in every sphere of life and not try to live a different life under grace from his old life before.

We cannot live with that concept of cheap grace if we're to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We should instead desire, we should long to be more and more like Christ.

We should want to live life with this humble, obedient attitude that Paul's just laid out for us in the beginning of the chapter. His humiliation, his obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[23 : 56] But another reason we need to take sanctification seriously is because it is hard work. Sanctification is a difficult thing. In the second half of 1 Peter chapter 1 it's another great passage that speaks about sanctification.

Peter says to us, he tells us to be holy. He says be holy as your father is holy. Be like obedient children. And it's really interesting what Peter says, right at the beginning of that section he says to them first of all to gird up their loins.

And that's a really strange and bizarre expression for us to get our heads around. It's not exactly a phrase that we would repeat to our peers. But in the ancient world most people would wear these long robes.

So for them to do any kind of strenuous activity they would have to lift their robes up and tuck them into their belt which would create a pair of shorts.

So in the ancient world, girding up your loins was the equivalent of rolling up your sleeves. It was like saying get ready for a hard task. Prepare yourself for action.

- [25 : 03] So the point here is that sanctification is difficult. It requires a preparing of our minds. It requires an intentionality about holiness, about obedience.

So the knowledge of God at work in you means we also have a job to do and it's one we have to take seriously. Now thirdly and briefly, because God is at work in you to sanctify you and to change you, people will see something different about you.

This is what verses 14 and 15 are all about. It says do all things without grumbling or disputing. Why? So that you may be blameless and innocent.

The vision of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation among whom you shine as lights in the world. So this is essentially speaking about how other people see us, about how our neighbours and our family and our friends look at us.

The word sanctify literally means to set something apart, to dedicate something as different. See what we are told to be like here in verse 14 and 15 is essentially what Israel was supposed to be.

- [26 : 26] If you go back to the Old Testament, it's ultimately what Israel failed to be. See Israel was supposed to be a people who displayed God's justice, who showed his integrity to the world, his holiness, his love to the nations around them, nations who were engaged in all kinds of moral and spiritual depravity.

But rather than doing that, Israel became just like their neighbours. They became caught up in the behaviour of those around them. They were no different when people looked at them.

So as Christians, as God's people today, we have to constantly challenge ourselves, we have to constantly ask ourselves what does the world see when it looks at us?

What do your friends, your family, your neighbours, your colleagues at work, what do they see in your life that's different? A huge part of how we witness to our world is through telling people about Jesus, it's through proclamation, it's making the Gospel known to unbelievers.

Another huge part of our witness is in the very way we live. It's the way we proclaim good news by our lives. Verse 15 says, we should shine as lights in this world.

- [27 : 45] We should be trying to point people to Jesus, not just by our words, not just by the things we say, but by our actions, by our obedience, by our whole life.

So we are different, but we're also called in verse 15 to be in the midst of the world. And I think that is a really important word there. So often Christians will act as if we are above the world.

Some Christians will look down on the world as if they are morally superior. Some Christians will look at the world from a distance because they don't want anything to do with the world.

They don't want to be in the world. We are different from the world. We are set apart as God's holy people, but we are still to relate to our world.

We are still to be in our world, not off our world, but in the world, in its midst. So for us to withdraw from it is actually a form of disobedience. See, we cannot shine as lights in the world if we're hiding away from people.

- [28 : 49] Jesus says this in Matthew chapter 5. He says this, you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

Instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

So God's work in you, his sanctifying power in your life, means that people should, people will see something different. And we want to display that difference to everyone around us.

Not in a way that we're making ourselves look morally superior. We're trying to highlight that we've got it all sorted and everyone else is terrible. But we want to show the world what God has done.

We want to show the world what God is doing in us and through us. And when we do that, we are shining like lights. We are broadcasting to everyone around us that there's something different in us.

[29 : 54] Ultimately, that's what we want our sanctification to be all about. We don't want to be changed, we don't want to grow just for our own benefit. We want other people to see and to wonder at what God is doing in us.

We want that to be desirable to them, something that is attractive. Now, there's one last thing I think about verse 15 that's really interesting. We don't have time to fully explore it, but we're referred to there as children of God.

So in a sense, what we're doing in our obedience, in our attempts to live a holy life, we are merely living out our status. See the point there is that obedience cannot make us God's children.

Obedience is important because we are God's children. St. Clair Ferguson said that the most basic New Testament incentive to live a holy life, to obey God, is an emphasis on what you already are.

And we are God's children by faith. So shine like light in the world, Paul says. So just as we conclude, if you're a Christian this evening, if you're faith and you're hope and your trust are in Jesus, then God is at work in you.

[31 : 13] And secondly, because God is at work in you, you have a responsibility, you have a job to do, an obligation to grow and to obey and to display signs of that growth to the world around you.

Ultimately sanctification is good news. Often we present the good news, the gospel as being all about faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And it is that, it can never be less than that.

But the good news is more than that. The good news is that by faith in Christ we can be changed. We can be transformed, we can live a new life, a better life.

Even if we've battled with the same habits, with the same problems, with the same challenges for years and years and years, with God at work in you, you can experience powerful, radical, transforming power.

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. We pray that God will help us and equip us by his spirit to, even this week, die to sin, to live to righteousness and to reflect something of Christ to the people around us.

[32 : 31] Amen.