

# Joy From a Jailhouse

---A Letter to the Philippians---

## 10 — God's Work in You—Part 1: The Believer's Role in Sanctification

I want to begin with a series of questions: **Does your spiritual growth depend on you—or God? Does becoming more Christ-like happen because of *your* efforts or *God's*?**

**1 Thessalonians 4:3** (NIV) says, “*It is God's will that you should be sanctified.*”

Is sanctification *your* responsibility or *God's*? The answer to each of these questions is—**BOTH**. Your spiritual growth *does* depend on God, but you also have a role to play. If you're going to become more Christ-like, *both* God's power *and* your effort are required. To be sanctified in Christ cannot happen without the work of God in your life, but at the same time, there are choices of obedience that you must make.

Before we go any further, let's define what it means to be *sanctified*.

To be *sanctified* is “*to be set apart for God; to be made holy.*” To be *sanctified* is to become more and more the image of Christ. I want to be sure that we understand *sanctification* because I'm going to be using this term often both today and also next week. **1 Thessalonians 5:23** (NIV) says, *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

There are two equal and opposite errors which Christians make when considering the work of *sanctification*. One group stresses *God's* role in sanctification—suggesting that God does something *to* us, with no effort on our part required. *Another* group suggests that it's virtually all *human* effort with very little reliance upon God required. In **Philippians 2:12-13** (NASB) the apostle Paul avoids *both* of these unbiblical extremes, presenting a balanced view of sanctification. Let's read these verses aloud together in unison. Ready? <sup>12</sup> *So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

Within these two verses, Paul presents a resolution between the *believer's* part and *God's* part in sanctification. And yet, he makes no effort to rationally harmonize the two. God is content to simply say, in effect, that believers have a role—that's vs.12—and God has a role—that's vs. 13.

From the earliest days of the church, in regard to living the Christian life, the relationship between the power of God and the responsibility of believers has been debated. Is it *all* God's doing? Is it *all* the believer's doing? Or is it a combination of both? This is not an unusual question when dealing with spiritual truth. In fact, this same question arises in regard to salvation itself. Is it *all* God's doing, or is there a requirement on man's part to respond and believe? Scripture makes it clear that *both* the sovereignty of God *and* human response are involved. I don't fully understand it—but I still believe it to be true.

The same dual emphasis is found throughout the New Testament. For example, in his second letter, Peter reminds believers that <sup>3</sup> *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.* <sup>4</sup> *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.* 2 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV) So these verses says that “*his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness...*”

But then Peter says: <sup>5</sup> *Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;* <sup>6</sup> *and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;* <sup>7</sup> *and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.* <sup>8</sup> *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 1:5-8 (NIV)

So let me get this straight: God has *given* us everything we need? That's right. But—we are to make *every effort* to grow spiritually? That's also right.

James admonished, “*Submit yourselves, then, to God.*” But then he added, “*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*” James 4:7 (NIV) Believers' sanctification requires diligent effort. And yet, it is empowered by God, who—according to His sovereign power—works out His will *for* and *in* His children.

Here's the point: **When it comes to spiritual growth and sanctification, there is our part, and there is God's part. Both are necessary.** This week, our focus will be Philippians 2:12—our part. Then next week, Lord willing, our focus will be Philippians 2:13—God's part.

One clarification: **At no point is Paul suggesting that we can attain salvation by human effort.** Salvation is of the Lord. In John 6:44 (NIV) Jesus said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*”

And to the Ephesians Paul wrote, <sup>8</sup> *For by grace are [you] saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:* <sup>9</sup> *Not of works, lest any man should boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9 (KJV) Grace alone through faith in Christ alone have always been the way of salvation. Now...

Everything in life requires energy. It takes energy to walk and to work. It takes energy to obey and to worship God. It also takes spiritual energy to grow as a Christian, and to live a life that's pleasing to the Lord. The primary verb in Philippians 2:12—which translates as *work out*—calls for believers to exert energy to finish the task that God has given us to do. In Philippians 2:12, Paul suggests **Four Things that Christians Must Understand and Obey to Work Out their Sanctification.**

1. I Will Understand the Example of Jesus.

Philippians 2:12 starts with the words *So then...*

The first aspect of believers working out their sanctification is understanding and following Jesus' example. *So then* indicates that a conclusion is being drawn from a preceding statement. Here, it refers back to the example of Christ, whose life-example of humility, submission, and obedience was described in vs. 5-8. In His Incarnation, Jesus did not cling to His equality with God the Father, but emptied Himself of His divine rights and privileges. While still completely God, Jesus took the form of a bond-servant, obeying His heavenly Father, even to the point of dying on the cross for our sins. One of the greatest realities of the Incarnation was the fact that what Jesus did—He did in the power of the Holy Spirit—just as we also must do today. **The essence of growing in maturity begins with submitting to and obeying the Father—just as Jesus did.**

We would do well to remind ourselves of the words of 1 John 2:6 (NIV) which says, *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus [walked].* So—if your sincere desire is to mature in Christ, ask yourself this question: *“Am I truly walking in obedience to Christ in every area of my life?”* If your honest answer would be NO—I am not walking in obedience to Christ in every area of my life—then your starting point for sanctification is before you. You cannot grow spiritually as long as there is willful disobedience in your life.

2. I Will Understand that I am Loved.

Philippians 2:12 continues with the words *my beloved...*

Paul's love expressed in this verse is a reflection of God's love—for you. Growing in godliness—in *sanctification*—is a difficult process. Understanding that you are deeply loved is a fundamental foundation stone. Most of you know that both of our children are adopted. We discovered many years ago that we could not biologically have children. The pain of this reality felt much like the pain that a person feels when someone you love dies. In the midst of our childlessness I remember feeling very, very sad. I didn't understand why we couldn't have children. This pain took me to a place in my relationship with God that I didn't anticipate: It took me back to the basics. Here's what I needed to know: *“God, do you love me?” “Do you, really, truly love me?” “Because if I know for sure that you truly love me, then come what may, I will survive—but I need to know for sure.”* Eventually, through the Spirit of God and the Word of God, I came to this conclusion: *“God, I hurt so bad. But because I know that I know that I know that You love me—I...trust...You.”* I had to know!

Because the battle to live like Jesus is hard—you have to *know*—down deep in your soul that *Jesus...loves...you*. Let me assure you that He does love you. No matter who you are or what you've done—Jesus *deeply* loves you. **John 3:16** (KJV) reminds us, *“For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son...”* Sometimes, I don't think we fully appreciate how personal this verse is. God's love for you is *very* personal! He knows your name! He knows everything about you—both the good and the bad—and He loves you with all His heart! So much so, that you can insert your name *into* **John 3:16** and it's still accurate: *“For God so loved \_\_\_\_\_...”* [Put your name in the blank] *“...that He gave His only begotten Son...”* **Jesus. Loves. You.** By the way, God also showed his love for us in answering our prayers for children—by way of adoption. We thank God for his answer.

### 3. I Will Understand My Need for Obedience.

**Philippians 2:12** continues with the words *...just as you have always obeyed...*

The third element of believers working out their sanctification is understanding their need for obedience to the Lord. The word *obeyed* translates a Greek verb from which we get our English word *acoustics*. The basic meaning of this verb is this: *“Placing yourself under the authority of what you've heard.”* In other words, *“What you've heard in the Scriptures—obey!”* Now listen to your pastor: It is not enough to simply know what the Scriptures say. When my children were little, in response to instructions I was giving, I would sometimes hear them say, *“I know! I know!”*—to which I would reply, *“I don't care what you know—I care what you do!”* God could say the same thing to us.

Lydia obeyed the Word that she heard Paul preach. As she *“was listening... the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.”* Acts 16:14 (NASB) Response indicates obedience. So, too, did the Philippian jailer respond in obedience when He heard the Scriptures. After Paul and Silas <sup>32</sup> *...spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.* <sup>33</sup> *...the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.* Acts 16:32-33 (NIV)

In order to obey the Word of God, we must first *hear* the Word of God. But hearing is not enough. We must actually *obey* the Word of God. James 4:17 (NASB) says, *To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

It may very well be that at this very moment—there are things that you *know* you should do in obedience to God—but you’re simply not doing it. You do not have a hearing problem. You *know* what’s right! Rather, you have an *obedience* problem! You cannot advance in your relationship with Christ until you obey what He has told you in His Word you should do.

4. I Will Understand the Consequences of Sin.

Philippians 2:12 concludes with these words: *...not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*

The fourth thing that Christians must understand for the working out of their sanctification is the consequences of sin. Although God is loving, and merciful, and forgiving, He nevertheless holds us accountable for our disobedience. Like John, Paul understood well that <sup>8</sup> *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* <sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* 1 John 1:8-9 (NIV)

Knowing that we serve a holy God, we must always live with *fear and trembling* at the consequences of our own sin. The word *fear* translates from the Greek word *phobos*—from which we get our English word *phobia*. It refers to “*fright and terror*” as well as “*reverence and awe.*” The word *trembling* refers to “*shaking in fear.*” Some people say that because God is love, we need not fear Him. To that I say *Balderdash!* The phrases “*fear of the Lord*” and “*fear of God*” appear **616** times in the Bible! “*Fear and trembling*” are both proper reactions when considering the consequences of our disobedience.

In Proverbs 9:10 (NIV) we read “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” For one who belongs to Christ, this is not a fear of being doomed to eternal hell.

But it *is* a holy fear that seeks to give God the honor He deserves. It is *also* a holy fear that seeks to avoid the discipline of His displeasure. Such fear will help protect us against sin—and against the inherent destruction that accompanies our sin. Be reminded that *The wages of sin is death.* Romans 6:23 (NIV)

The *fear and trembling* that Paul is referring to also involves a strong distrust of our sinful selves. Only a fool says, “*It will never happen to me.*” Only a fool says, “*I am the exception to God’s rules.*” Only a fool says, “*Just this once...*”

**A man of God or a woman of God who walks in the wisdom of God knows that they cannot trust their own sinful nature.** Let me illustrate: When Crystal and I were engaged during our final year of college, we began to feel significant temptation toward sexual sin. At times, it was almost overwhelming. So here’s what we did: We made a covenant that we would no longer spend isolated time alone together. I lived in an apartment with three other roommates at the time. If Crystal was at my apartment, and if the last of my roommates departed, we departed at the same time. Why? Because we knew that we couldn’t trust our own sinful nature. We feared the Lord—and we feared the consequences of our own potential sin. Did it work? *By the grace of God,* we both entered our marriage as virgins.

**Believers should be serious in their dread of sin and in a yearning to do what is right before God.**

The fear of God is a solemn, holy fear that springs from a deep love of God. Such fear acknowledges that every sin is an offense against God. Such fear also comes from a deep desire to honor, obey, and please God in all things.

**Q. Do you fear God—and does your life demonstrate this holy fear?**

In Philippians 2:12, we are instructed to *work out* our salvation. The implication is continual effort: “*Keep on working out the development and maturation of your salvation.*”

**Working out your salvation has two aspects:**

- **First, it refers to continually working toward faithful, obedient living.**

This involves both an active commitment *and* personal effort. Sin in every form is to be renounced and replaced by righteous living. Paul exhorted Timothy:  
<sup>11</sup> *But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.* <sup>12</sup> *Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called...* 1 Timothy 6:11-12 (NASB)

**Righteous living does not just happen; righteous living is a choice.** While the *power* for obedience comes from the Spirit of God, you must *choose* to live God's way. **Q. Are you choosing to live God's way? Working out your salvation...**

- **Second, it refers to perseverance—to the very end.**

**Salvation has three time dimensions: Past, present, and future. The past dimension is justification—when believers placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and were redeemed. The present dimension is sanctification—the time of development *between* a believer's justification and eternity. The future dimension is glorification—which is the completion of salvation when believers will receive their glorified bodies. Therefore, Believers have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved. From the moment of salvation all the way to glorification, believers are to pursue sanctification.**

**Although it is not yet completed, the testimony of Scripture is that every believer's salvation is utterly secure. Perseverance in the faith is the unmistakable evidence of God's power operating within a soul. True believers will persevere because God's power keeps their salvation secure. Jesus repeatedly emphasized this truth. In Jerusalem, He declared,<sup>28</sup> *"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."*<sup>29</sup> *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."* John 10:28-29 (NIV)**

**The call for believers to work out their sanctification—their salvation—is found throughout the New Testament. This is fitting since **The joy of the Lord only comes as we surrender ourselves to obediently follow Him.****