

Rooted in Grace: Christ Changing Me
Philippians 2:12-13
Sunday, August 24, 2025

This is the third Sunday in our sermon series on God's grace, Rooted in Grace. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about Prevenient grace, the grace through which God seeks to get our attention: to show us His unconditional love for us and how our sin has alienated us from Him.

Last week, we talked about God's Justifying grace, through which we come to faith. However, we also talked about how that faith isn't something we can manufacture. We can choose to entrust ourselves to Jesus' saving life and work, but God is the one who enables us to make that choice. New and eternal life in God's love is ultimately a pure gift of God. We cannot accomplish it by ourselves.

Over the last two weeks, I hope I've convinced you of our utter helplessness in terms of our salvation. We are completely at God's mercy.

Which isn't a novel idea. It's actually a basic principle of Protestant Christianity, of which Methodism is a part. It's the primary theological doctrine that distinguishes Protestantism from, for instance, Roman Catholic theology, which believes we can, in effect, work our way into salvation by doing good.

So, imagine my confusion this week when I started to dig into our text for today. The apostle Paul, writing to his friends in Philippi, tells them to "work on (or out) your own salvation with fear and trembling."

Sounds pretty Catholic to me. Seems on first reading as if Paul is telling his congregation in Philippi to pull themselves up spiritually by their own bootstraps? And, if that's the case, I

may need to ask for a refund of my seminary tuition. I mean, in light of a passage like this—if we’re supposed to work for our salvation—how could Martin Luther, who was a pretty smart guy, and all the Protestants who followed him, possibly come to the conclusion that our faith and salvation is entirely up to God?

There’s got to be more to this passage. How can we make sense of this?

Well, the first question I think we should ask is, what does Paul mean here by “salvation?” Last Sunday we talked about God’s justifying grace, the grace through which God enables us to choose to entrust ourselves to Christ so we can be reconciled with God and our sins can be forgiven.

And I think when we read “salvation” in today’s text, our first instinct is to think about that moment of justification. But I’m not sure that’s what Paul is talking about here. And the reason is, he’s writing to the Philippian *church*. He’s writing to people who have chosen to follow Jesus. He himself baptized many of them. They have already received “salvation” in their reconciliation with God and forgiveness of their sins. So, that can’t be what Paul’s talking about, because if it is, there’s nothing left for them to “work” on.

So, it seems pretty clear that Paul is talking about something a little different ... something more.

Remember the house image I gave you last week? How we can think of life in God’s grace as a house? Prevenient grace is God’s action in our lives through which we’re brought to the door—the threshold of a relationship with God. Justifying grace is the grace through which we’re given the ability to open the door and step into the house.

But Paul seems pretty clear in today's scripture that just stepping into the house—stepping into a relationship of divine love with God—is not the extent of our salvation. There's something more. Again, using the house analogy, there are lots and lots of rooms for us to explore. We've still got a lot to learn and to do before we can really “know” the house. And, in the church, we call that process of exploring the house, the process of sanctification.

As we know, God is love. God created us out of God's love to live *in* G's love. Jesus called this state of living in God's love new, bountiful, and eternal life. As we talked about last week, that new life begins when we entrust ourselves to Christ in faith. But for the vast majority of us, it isn't an all at once thing. We don't instantly start living perfectly in God's love.

John Wesley believed in the idea of progressive sanctification. When Jesus was talking to the Pharisee Nicodemus in chapter 3 of John's Gospel, he said that when we are justified—when we are reconciled with God and begin to live our eternal life—it's like being born again. We're spiritual babies. And so, like babies, we have a lot of growing to do.

But this growth isn't just something that happens *to* us. It's something we've got to participate in. That's what Paul means when he says we've got to work on our salvation. Exploring the inside of the house isn't just going to happen. It takes work.

Which kind of seems to bring us back to where we started, doesn't it? We're still talking about us doing the work on our salvation.

But Paul's pretty clear we're not alone in this work. Listen to what he says next: “*for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

Remember last week? In his letter to the Romans, Paul said that when we are reconciled with God, “God’s love is poured into our hearts, through the Spirit of God that is given to us.”

When we come to faith in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit which ignites within us the new and eternal life Jesus came to bring. And it is that Spirit that works within us—and with us—to do the work of our salvation. As Paul says in today’s scripture, it’s the Holy Spirit that “enables us to will and work for his—God’s—good pleasure.” The “work” that Paul is talking about in today’s scripture is the Holy Spirit working within us to change us into the image of Christ.

But we’ve got to do our part. We’ve still got to “work on our salvation with fear and trembling.” So, how do we do that? How do we work with the Spirit to grow closer to God and more into the image of Christ?

Well, it’s something I talk about all the time. It’s spiritual practices. Seeking to spend time with God. Doing the things Jesus taught and did himself. Things like prayer, meditation fasting, simplicity, silence, solitude, service, giving, participation in small groups. As valuable as Sunday morning worship is, if you’re spending the other 167 hours of the week ignoring God, you just aren’t going to be doing a lot of spiritual growing. You can’t.

Think about it this way. How good do you figure you’d be at reading if, when you were learning, you had spent just one hour a week at it? Or if you wanted to run a marathon, how do you think you’d do if you limited your training to one hour a week? We take all kind of time for things like jobs and hobbies, running and reading. Yet what Paul is talking about in this scripture

is WAY more important—it's the most important thing in the universe—yet so many of us spend virtually no time on it.

But here's the thing. When I was young, the more I read, the better I got. And the better I got, the more I wanted to read. Along the same lines, when I first started running, I would just count the minutes until the workout was over. But the more I ran, the more of a runner I became. And the more of a runner I became, the more I wanted to run.

It works the same way with our soul. The more we respond to and work with the Holy Spirit through spiritual practices—the more time we spend with God—the more like Christ we become. And the more like Christ we become, the more time we want to spend with God. And the more time we spend with God, the more like Christ we become. It's a virtuous cycle. It's sanctification.

And next Sunday, we're going to put this principle into practice. We're going to do the sort of things Jesus did. We're going to worship, but we're going to Worship Outside the Walls. We're going to serve our neighbors