

“For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

—Philippians 2:13, NIV

“Doing good and loving the other is not presented by Paul as a strategy so that the church can accomplish conversion as its real mission; apparently such love IS the church’s mission, or at least it is the one that Paul actually wrote about.”

—Brian K. Peterson, *Being the Church in Philippi*

LEARNING GOALS

1. To better understand God’s mission for his church in the world
2. To gain practical and spiritual ways to participate as a community in God’s mission

REFLECTION

We begin in verse 12 with the word “therefore,” so we read these next verses with the Christ Hymn in mind. The Christ Hymn is about us too! Verse 5 says that we should live in relationship with one another having the same mindset as Christ Jesus. We’ve got to think like Jesus thought as we live together as a church. We must mimic Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (2:5–6). “This is not just a hymn about who Jesus was,” says Paula Gooder. “It’s a hymn about who we should strive to be as a Christian community.”

Being The Church

In verse 12, Paul commends the Philippians because they are doing the right thing. They have continued their good work even in his absence. Paul seems very proud and engaged with this church and expresses his love and friendship for them. He is encouraged because they have been obedient to his teachings when he is present and when he is away. Too often when a leader is not present, people become discouraged or do not feel responsible for the ministry. That is not what has happened in Philippi!

Paul encourages them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Notice that he does not say work *for* your salvation. This wording should not make us anxious. "Fear" in this context can equally mean reverence or respect. "Trembling" can be translated as being in a state of awe of God's holiness, and "work out" is literally to achieve or accomplish.

Paul isn't talking about personal growth. He is encouraging them as a church to be active, to be united and "to work out their salvation by living according to the standards found in Philippians 1:27–2:11, that is, to work for unity by looking to the interests of others" (Thompson and Longenecker, 81)

In verse 13 Paul says that God enabled the Philippians because he has a plan, and that plan is to fulfill his good purposes. "Both the desire and the deed belong to God; both the prompting and the performing are attributed to Him. Nevertheless, it is only as we cooperate with Him that we see the true potential of our lives realized" (Gordon, 89). He is saying that it is God at work in them. We have to be dependent on God, and we have to accept responsibility for moving forward with God's work. We also must allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, the church, in this journey so that we can reach our full potential. Our salvation is an ongoing, communal, vital, Holy Spirit empowered process initiated by God Almighty.

Paul is writing to the community of believers in Philippi and now, in verse 14, he gets specific and commands them to "do everything without grumbling or arguing," which is the opposite of fear and trembling. This verse is directly related to the previous verses. He is talking to the church as a whole about unity and love for one another.

Negativity will always have a devastating effect on how “we work out our salvation” as a community. In the Christ Hymn, Jesus humbled himself, and if we are to be imitators of Christ, unity and love for one another must be our goal.

Paul also sees love for one another and unity as “necessary for a corporate witness with integrity” (Gorman, 438). Have you ever heard a non-churched person say they don’t go to church because they cannot stand being around so many hypocrites? Our relationships with one another are a witness to the world.

Verses 15 and 16 have so much promise. If we can stop arguing and grumbling, we will be blameless and pure, and then we will be “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” This quote from Deuteronomy 32:5 has double meaning. It looks back to Israel, whose people constantly complained and grumbled during their trek through the wilderness. It also refers to the Philippians’ current situation in that the church exists in the hostile and pagan city of Philippi.

The Philippian church is to “shine like stars in the sky.” Paul is saying that the church must be radiant with love in this dark world. The Philippians must be able to reflect the love of Christ as they live out their lives in that community of faith. In Daniel 12:3, Daniel describes the wise as shining stars. That’s what Paul encouraged the Philippians to be. He is encouraging them to be light, to shine!

Thompson suggests that “while the counterculture of the church may have an evangelistic impact, Paul’s primary concern is their endurance in the midst of the hostile climate. Indeed ‘holding on to the word of life’ suggests the need for endurance” (Thompson and Longenecker, 82). The mission of the Philippian church is to love one another and to persevere together as they live out their faith in community.

Similarly, Peterson argues that “Paul never says that the church should do good so they can attract more converts. Doing good and loving the other is not presented by Paul as a strategy so that the church can accomplish conversion as its real mission; apparently such love is the church’s mission, or at least is the one that Paul actually wrote about” (Peterson, 168).

Finally, in verses 17 and 18, Paul is troubled that his work might somehow be in vain. He knew that his work really lived in people, so if those people did not continue in faith, there was a sense that his ministry might have been pointless. Paul also acknowledges that his imprisonment may lead to his death. The phrase “being poured out like a drink offering” would resonate with Jews and Greeks as an offering to God/gods. Those who read this letter were anxious about his future, and he assures them that all will be well. Paul is asking this church to be joyful because his death will bring glory to God.

Two Living Examples of the Christ Hymn

The first example is found in verses 19–24. Timothy was with Paul when he wrote this letter. Paul commends Timothy to the Philippians in a very loving way, comparing Timothy’s actions to being like a “son to his father.” He hoped to send Timothy to Philippi soon so that he (Paul) can be cheered up with news of their faithfulness. Paul misses his brothers and sisters! He praises Timothy in very specific ways—for his Christlike attitude and selflessness (v. 20), his genuine concern for their welfare (v. 20) and his service in the work of the gospel (v. 22). Finally, Paul assured them that while his future is uncertain, he would send Timothy to Philippi no matter the outcome.

The second example is contained in verses 25–30. The name Epaphroditus means “belonging to Aphrodite,” the goddess of love. It is probably a name that no Christian parent would name their son. But somewhere along the way Epaphroditus had an encounter with Jesus Christ and was never the same. A transformed life is always inspiring! To the Philippians, Epaphroditus was a messenger who was trusted to deliver a care package to Paul. He became so much more to Paul, and apparently risked his life in service to Paul (v. 30). “Epaphroditus receives five titles: Paul’s brother, coworker, co-soldier; the Philippians’ messenger (apostolos, ‘emissary’) and minister to Paul’s needs” (Gorman, 440). He is described in Paul-like and Christlike terms. “Like Paul, he has been ‘longing for’ the Philippians (2:26; cf. 1:8), and like Christ, his ministry ‘for the work of Christ’ (2:30) took him to the point (in this case the ‘brink’) of death” (Gorman, 440).

In verses 26–27, Epaphroditus is distressed because the Philippians are upset that he had been ill. After traveling 800 miles from Philippi to Rome, he then became sick and nearly died. It's very touching that he is so concerned about the Philippians and is anxious to make that long journey back to the community that he loved so much. Paul rejoices that God had mercy and spared his life. In verses 28–30 Paul told the Philippians that he is sending Epaphroditus back and urges them to show him honor because of his total commitment to working for Christ.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “working out”? Do you know someone who has transformed their physical body by working out? How did they accomplish transformation? Did they have a workout partner?
- b. In the context of church life, do you “work out for unity”? Let's read this text with that concept in mind.

2. Involve

- a. Read Philippians 2:12–13.
 - i. To what is Paul referring when he says “therefore”?
 - ii. How does Paul address the Philippians, and what does this tell you about his relationship with them?
 - iii. What affirmation does Paul give the Philippians in verse 12?
 - iv. What might his fear have been? Have you ever had an instance where a ministry fell apart during your absence? What are some of the ways we can encourage independence in our coworkers?
 - v. When Paul says “work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” to whom is he speaking? Describe a time when you experienced reverence and awe in the presence of God.
 - vi. Describe some ways that we (Glenwood) can “work out” together!
 - vii. What is comforting about verse 13 and why?

- b. Read Philippians 2:14–18
- i. Describe someone who is a grumbler. Describe someone who has the “gift” of arguing? What do grumbling and arguing have to do with verses 12 and 13? How do these two actions affect the church? How should we react to negative, argumentative people?
 - ii. In verses 15 and 16, Paul gives us the reasons for not grumbling or arguing. What are they?
 - iii. Do you feel we live in a warped and crooked world? What attitude should we have towards those who are not light (for example: terrorists, politicians, criminals, and so forth)?
 - iv. In light of verses 14–16, what do you think the mission of the church is?
 - v. How can we “hold firmly to the word of life” as members of Glenwood?
 - vi. How does Paul describe himself in verse 17, and what is he preparing the Philippians for? Paul is embracing his fate which will probably lead to his death. How can we embrace death with this same peace of mind? Do you know someone who has died peacefully?
- c. Read Philippians 2:19–24.
- i. Have you ever heard the phrase “Lord willing”? How is that situation different from Paul’s “hope in the Lord Jesus”?
 - ii. What is Paul’s expectation in verse 19? Do you always believe the best about our church? How can we remain positive in the midst of trying times?
 - iii. How is Timothy “one of a kind”? How do you express your concern for Glenwood? What gets in the way of living out concern for our church community?
 - iv. In verse 22 Paul says that he and Timothy are like a father and son serving together. What does it take to mentor someone and prepare them to take your place in ministry?
- d. Read Philippians 2:25–30.
- i. Epaphroditus means “belonging to Aphrodite” (the pagan goddess of love). What does that tell you about him?

- ii. How does Paul describe Epaphroditus?
- iii. Who do think of as a sister/brother in Christ? What attributes does a coworker have? How can we be soldiers for Christ?
- iv. What other quality do you see in Epaphroditus in verse 26? Is it OK for men to be so empathetic?
- v. In verses 29–30 Paul encouraged the Philippians to honor Epaphroditus. Why? Should we at Glenwood honor people who have served well? Why or why not?

3. Challenge

- a. Read Philippians 2:12–30 several times next week. It would be helpful to read two or three different versions.
- b. Think about these scriptures and have an open mind. How can you apply them to your life and the life of our church? Put yourself in these Scriptures. Do you grumble and argue, or are you affirming and positive? How would you feel if you were Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, or the people of the Philippian church?
- c. Pray these scriptures. Take a moment to be silent and listen for God. Then, pray words from these verses. Ask God to bless our faith community with unity and love as we follow the example of Christ.
- d. Live these scriptures. Reading, thinking and praying are beautiful practices, but to “work out” our salvation as a church we have to make choices to do something! What is one thing that you can do this week to shine like a star for Christ?

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