

**“More on Church Unity”**  
**Philippians 2:12-18**  
**January 16, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul is not yet done with this topic of church unity, a theme that dominates much of this letter. He saw this as a significant threat to the church, one that led him to call out by name two church members who were at the heart of the problem, Euodia and Synteché. Paul rarely names those he is rebuking, but he does so here because he recognizes that this disunity will spread if not stopped. Having just concluded his recounting of the humility of Christ as the mindset we are to have to promote peace in the church, Paul now applies that with some specific commands. Specifically, he wants the Philippians to obey, which recalls the example of Christ, who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. So the path to unity requires humility, and humility requires obedience. This is the idea Paul expands upon in this text.

**I. Unity and Obedience – v. 12-13**

Throughout these first two chapters, Paul has repeatedly made the same point about unity. That point is that human pride and self-centeredness is the greatest obstacle to unity, while humility is unity’s greatest friend. So how do we grow in humility. In the previous passage, Paul presents Jesus as our example of humility, saying that Jesus **“humbled himself by becoming obedient”** (2:8). We too will grow in our humility by becoming obedient, and that’s the focus of these first two verses.

There are many things in life that require tension if they are to work properly: the strings in a piano or any other stringed instrument, the elastic in your clothes, or the springs in your windup clocks. The humility of obedience is another of those areas requiring tension, and that tension is prominently displayed in these two verses. Verse 12 tells us to work out our salvation, while verse 13 tells us that God is the one who works this salvation in us. There is tension here, but not contradiction. Both are true, and our growth in obedience, leading to growth in humility and unity, depends on affirming both of these. Let’s look at each one.

Paul wants the Philippians to obey, whether he is absent or present. He is probably referring to their obedience to him, which because of his status as an apostle is an expression of their obedience to God. In pursuit of that obedience, he wants them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. This brings up an immediate and obvious question. Doesn’t this contradict the clear teaching of Scripture elsewhere that our salvation is by God’s grace and not

our works? Didn't Paul say explicitly in Romans 4:5 that the person God justifies is **"the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly"**? The answer is that there is no contradiction here because salvation is a bigger category than justification. Justification is the first part of our salvation, in which God forgives our sin and declares us righteous. As the Heidelberg Catechism words it, "Out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart" (Q. 60). But salvation is more than this. It also includes our sanctification, by which is meant our growth in holiness and Christlikeness. Our sanctification is also by faith, but unlike justification, requires effort from us.

If you are to grow in humility and obedience, work will be required of you. When you work at something, it normally requires a step-by-step process. God's work in creation is the model for our work. Though he could have created everything instantaneously with a mere word from his mouth, he created instead in six days. Our growth in obedience will be a process that requires of us effort and patience.

This kind of work requires motivation, so Paul adds the words **"with fear and trembling."** The phrase "fear and trembling" describes our response to danger. There is real danger involved in our sanctification, the danger of drifting away into disobedience. Our work will be far more robust and energetic when we appreciate such dangers. In 2017, Eric Honold successfully free soloed up the 3200-foot granite face of El Capitan. Free soloing describes a rock climber without ropes or any other safety equipment. He reported that such a climb requires thousands of individual moves, and a mistake on a single one would lead to his death. So he spent years practicing for this climb with ropes, memorizing each of the thousands of moves that would be required during his ascent. It was a massive amount of work to prepare for the climb, motivated by the obvious danger of a mistake.

If verse 12 urges upon us the need for hard work that is motivated by an appreciation of the danger involved, verse 13 reassures us that we have a great resource in God. **"For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."** We "work out" our salvation as God "works in" this salvation. Both are required. God's work is described here as providing for us both the will to obey and the ability to do so. He works in us, both to will and to work. We often don't obey because we don't want to. So God's Spirit helps us with our "want to." And when we undertake to obey, we find that it is beyond our ability to do so, so God gives us the power to do so.

As you seek to obey God, which of these two areas is the greater challenge for you, the working out of your salvation, or the trusting God working it in?

Have you perhaps fallen into the trap of understanding either of these as nullifying the other? Some nullify the need for work by saying, “Just let go and let God.” Their approach to obedience is overly passive. Others make the opposite mistake, forgetting the resources they have for their sanctification in God’s Spirit. They say, “God helps those who help themselves.” Either of these relieves the tension between these two, but that is like relieving the tension on a guitar string. It’s not going to make music in that case, and our souls will not make the music of humility, obedience and unity without this tension.

## II. Unity and the Tongue – v. 14

The tongue is a powerful force for good or for evil, for encouraging unity or bringing harm to it. So Paul addresses one specific sin of the tongue that harms unity. **“Do all things without grumbling or questioning.”** This is a direct reference to the sin of Israel during their wilderness years when they repeatedly complained about the difficulties of their situation. For example, the Lord led them to a place called “Rephidim,” **“but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’... ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’”** (Ex. 17:1-3).

These two words, “grumbling” and “questioning,” describe how disunity often arises in a church. To grumble means to complain. When a Christian complains, the complaint is ultimately against God. A complaining spirit is basically saying to God, “I disapprove of the way you’ve allowed things to go in my life. If I were in charge, I could do a better job of it.” Complaining does two things for the complainer. First, it strokes his pride because the assumption is that I could do better. Second, it’s easy. You don’t actually have to do anything to address whatever problem is being complained about. A complainer is playing the role of victim. It is a misappropriation of one’s resources. Instead of helpfully channeling one’s efforts toward a proper response to difficulty, effort is spent in the unhelpful response of just grumbling and criticizing. How might things be different in our nation if Christians were to replace complaints about politicians with prayers for them?

The result of grumbling is described in the next word, “questioning.” This word doesn’t refer to the healthy questioning of the curious, but to the argumentative questioning of the rebellious. It’s the kind of question they asked Moses, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” This was no mere question, but an accusation. It’s like the rebellious child asking his parents who’ve just placed on him an unwanted restriction, “Why do you always make my life so miserable?” It’s often those in authority who are attacked by this questioning, whether it’s politicians in the civil realm or church leaders in ecclesiastical circles. This attitude is toxic to unity. Here’s a challenge for us all. See if you

can go one day without complaining, even a complaint that is just in your heart and never gets verbalized.

### III. Unity and Outreach – v. 15

Paul again links unity with outreach in verse 15. Like Jesus, he wants the church to be marked by unity in order that the gospel might advance. As they control their tongues through no grumbling or bickering, their distinctiveness as God's children will be evident. They are in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, making them stand out even more. In doing so, they will **“shine as lights in the world.”** This phrase is another reference to the Old Testament. God's plan for his servant Israel was expressed in Isaiah 49:6. **“I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”** The church, as the new Israel of God, is here called to be a light to the world by the quality of our love and by our unity.

We have all become more painfully aware of the darkness and crookedness of our world as seen in the growing polarization of our nation. The positive side of this is the opportunity it gives us to “shine as lights in the world” by a love and unity that transcend politics, race, education, and economic status. If we let the divisions of the world enter the church, it is more than a minor problem. For the sake of the advancement of the gospel, we dare not divide over such things as mask-wearing, vaccines, and political preferences.

Right out of seminary, I served as an assistant pastor in a church in Center City Philadelphia. It was quite a diverse church in many ways, including an elder who became the Surgeon General of the United States, as well as numerous homeless people. One of my friends owned an ad agency there, and he told of a time when he and his wife entertained one of his clients at a very nice restaurant. After dinner, they were walking through the streets of Center City when they saw a homeless man with most of his upper body in a trash can attempting to retrieve something discarded by someone else that he saw as having some value. My friend's client made some negative remark about it. Then the homeless man straightened himself, saw my friend and his wife and greeted them by name. Their wealthy client asked, “Do you know that man?” to which my friend replied, “Sure, we go to church together.” Where else would the owner of an ad agency and a homeless man get to know one another except in a church? When things like that happen, it is a strong testimony to the power of the gospel to begin to restore things to the way God intended them. That is Paul's burden throughout this letter, and he sees church unity as a key ingredient to such effective outreach.

### IV. Unity and Joy – v. 16-18

In these final three verses, Paul mentions that he longs for the Philippians to obey what he has been saying about humility and unity in order that on the day of judgment, when all things are brought to light, Paul will boast in the fruit of his labor. He says that he is willing to be poured out as a drink offering to see this happen. This is a way of speaking of his death. If you have a drink and pour it on the ground, there is no hope of recovering it—it is gone. Paul is willing to be poured out, to die, in order that unity might be a mark of the church. He then adds that this will give him joy.

There are two important points to appreciate here. First, the pursuit of unity in the church will require a kind of death. It will often mean that you don't get your way. If you're a leader in the church, it may mean that you will suffer unfair criticism. Or it may be that the criticism is fair but unkind. If you are not in a position of leadership, it may mean that you will sometimes suffer from decisions by leadership that aren't as wise as they could be. To maintain unity in the presence of these challenges requires a type of death. You have to die to self, to the maintenance of a good reputation and to the desire to be right and look good.

Second, this is the path of joy. This is the paradox of Christianity that Jesus spoke of repeatedly. The way to find your life is to lose it. The way up is to go down into humility. Death is the path to life. Paul could say, even if he poured out his life for the Philippians, **"I am glad and rejoice with you all."** Further, he wanted the Philippians to be marked by this same joy. **"Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me."**

## **CONCLUSION:**

I want to close by returning to this idea of shining as lights to a dark and broken world. What does light provide? It provides guidance, since it's almost impossible to find your way if it's completely dark. Lights are used as warnings. Think of the lighthouse warning ships of dangers to avoid. Lights provide comfort, since we would all prefer sitting in a well-lit area than one completely dark. There are security lights that have the effect of restricting man's evil nature. And lights also serve to be able to see clearly what's wrong, that it might be corrected. The church, as it is marked by unity, brings all these benefits to the world. The most foundational is the last one, showing people what's wrong that it might be corrected. What's wrong with the world is sin. The only solution for that is Jesus. Both of those truths are illuminated as we love one another in the unity given by the Spirit.

**Community Group Discussion Questions**  
**Philippians 2:12-18**

1. Since humility is necessary to unity, and since obedience is necessary for humility, Paul urges obedience upon the Philippians. In doing so, he introduces the tension of verses 12-13, saying that this obedience will come as they work out their salvation, and then assuring them that God works in them. What do we learn by the idea that obedience to God requires work-like effort on our part?
2. Paul says that this work should be done with “fear and trembling,” words that indicate some danger. In what situations in your life do you tend to be motivated by an appropriate fear and trembling? What are the positive effects of such a healthy fear and trembling?
3. What kind of dangers should a Christian respect and allow to work into the heart a healthy fear?
4. Christians are also to trust God and look to him for our sanctification, as verse 13 says. Paul says that God gives us both the motivation and the power to obey (“to will and to work for his good pleasure”). Can you think of an example in your life where God has given you the will to obey? The power to obey?
5. The tension in these verses highlights the two dangers of being too passive (“Just let go and let God,” which denies the importance of effort in our obedience) and of being too self-dependent (“God helps those who help themselves”). Are you prone to one of these errors over the other?
6. Paul says to “do all things without grumbling or questioning” (v. 14). What is the attraction of grumbling and complaining? Why is it so common?
7. Read Exodus 17:1-4, which is the background of this verse. What is the harm of grumbling and complaining? How does it harm church unity?
8. The church is called to shine as lights in a crooked and twisted generation. Paul is here once again tying church unity to the advancement of the gospel. How might God be calling the church in America today to shine as lights in our crooked and twisted world? Pray with one another that God would help us to do that.