

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 6, 2008**

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK

Philippians 2:12-18

Did you have a good Independence Day celebration? The parades, the music, the fireworks that we enjoy on our national birthday remind us of the blessings we have as a nation. God has been good to us. But, as our presidential election draws near, some observers say that “a culture of complaint” has infected American society. They may be right.

We complain against oil companies for the high cost of gasoline. We grumble about the cost of health insurance, our grocery bills and the rising costs at our favorite restaurant. Most don't like overcrowding in schools, bad traffic, low paying jobs. You name it and someone will complain.

Do we have a right to this concern? James Glassman says no and cites these statistics:

- In 1955 the ratio of students to teachers was 30 to 1. Today it is 19 to 1.
- Adjusted for inflation, compensation has tripled since 1947, but the cost of necessities has actually lowered.
- Food in 1950 represented about one third of a family's total expenditures; today, it's one seventh.
- The U.S. Gross Domestic Product is more than the total of the next five countries.
- The U.S. unemployment rate is lower than the average rate over the last 30 years and lower than most countries, including industrialized countries.
- Americans work fewer hours, and have more cars, cultural institutions, and children in college than ever before.

He warns that “the United States may jeopardize her prosperity if too many citizens demand and expect an easy road through life and complain about the smallest obstacles and setbacks.” (James K. Glassman, “*Whine, the Beloved Country!*”)

Many of us are like that, aren't we? We forget the blessings we have as Americans and worry and complain. We concentrate on our little troubles and fail to see what God has given us. The apostle Paul gives a similar warning in today's passage: *Do everything without complaining or arguing*. It is a continuation of his command in 1:27 to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Literally, it means “to live as a good citizen.”

We are to live in a way that reflects our belief in the gospel without complaining or arguing. To be honest with you, I had difficulty preparing this sermon, because complaining is something I struggle with a lot. Paul's words were helpful for me. I hope they are for you. Let's take a few minutes to understand this passage.

You may recall that at the time he wrote this letter, Paul is suffering in Rome. I mean that his conditions are not very good. He had been arrested for telling people about Jesus, brought to Rome to wait for liberty or death. But he doesn't complain. He rejoices because he knows the character of God. His circumstances did not slip through the fingers of a sovereign God. Instead, God used Paul's imprisonment alongside Roman guards to spread the gospel across the city. So Paul is thankful and rejoices.

Paul's confidence was not in his present circumstances but in the sovereign purposes of God. He was a man who would submit himself to God's plan and humble himself under the Lord's mighty hand, knowing that in due time God would exalt him. Paul's motivation for humility came from the example of Jesus Christ. The Son of God willingly emptied Himself and obeyed even to death on a cross. The Son's self-humiliation was followed by His exaltation by His Father,

In our passage today, Paul applies the story of Christ's self-humiliation to the Philippians' situation. We notice that at the start of our passage is the word "therefore." The old adage is true, we need to find out what the "therefore" is there for. Here, it signals that we are to get a practical application from the example of Christ's obedience

WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

First, Paul tells his readers to *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*. These are interesting words and are linked to Paul's instruction to do everything without complaining or arguing. They are often misunderstood, so it is essential that we understand what Paul means.

The question we must ask is, "Does Paul's command to work out our salvation contradict what the Bible says elsewhere about the believer's justification by faith through God's grace?" In other words, does Paul command here a "self-help" salvation; where we do some kind of work to be saved? Does it mean God does His part, and we do our part? Not at all!

So what does Paul mean when he says that the Philippians should work out their salvation? We need to look at how Paul uses the term salvation and compare it to justification. The two words are not synonymous.

When Paul uses the word "justification," he refers primarily to the condition of peace and righteousness that He gives to sinners at the moment of faith. Because we have violated God's commands and rebelled against His holiness, we deserve His wrath. But justification meets the demands of God's justice by placing the penalty of our sin squarely on Jesus Christ who died in our place. It comes entirely through God's grace and not through human effort.

Romans 5:1 teaches us, *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. Our justification comes entirely through God's grace and not through human effort. For those who have put saving faith in Jesus Christ, it is a past event, something God has already done for you on your behalf. If you have trusted in Christ and Him alone before God, you are justified. God treats you "just as if you had never sinned."

But when Paul uses the word "salvation," he refers to the whole process of being removed from the effects of our sin. Most of the time, when Paul talks about salvation, he deals with the past,

present and especially the future. Salvation is ongoing in the life of a believer – it means that we are saved from the penalty of our sin, we are being saved from the power of sin, and someday we will be saved from the presence of sin. Those who have been justified are assured that salvation awaits in the final day!

So then, to work out our salvation does not mean that we work “for” salvation. Rather, it means that we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel as we await the final day. Our involvement is a response to the work of God in our lives, His causing us to be “born again” by the Holy Spirit. Pastor John Ortberg describes it this way:

Think of the difference between a motor boat and a sail boat. In a motor boat, I’m in control. I start the engine, control the speed, and go wherever I want. Sailing is different. When I’m sailing, I’m not passive, I have a role to play. I hoist the sails and steer the rudder, but I’m utterly dependent on the wind. There’s no room for believing I’m in control, because if the wind doesn’t blow, I’m dead in the water. When the wind blows, on the other hand, amazing things can happen.

In John 3:8 Jesus says, “The wind blows where it chooses. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (“Spiritual Growth; My Job or God’s?”)

When we work out our salvation, we are acting on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is actually God doing the work. Just so that we don’t miss that point, Paul makes it clear in verse 13: *for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.*

God’s work begins with our wills – He works in us first to will, then to act. Only when God changes our wills are we free to act according to His will. We cannot do that apart from His action. Apart from heart change through Jesus Christ, we do not have the ability to choose the things of God. We have free will, but we do not have the free will to choose spiritual good.

The Bible says, *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God* (Rom 3:10-11). Unless we experience the saving work of God in our lives, we cannot choose Him.

But, if you have come to God, He has first entered your life by His Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the truth and change your will. When He does that, you are then free to act according to His commands. You have the power to choose to obey. That’s what Paul means when he says to *continue to work out your salvation.*

DO NOT COMPLAIN OR ARGUE

Look at verse 14. Paul writes, *Do everything without complaining or arguing.* Paul explains how the Philippians are to work out their salvation in their specific situation. It was a struggle with disunity in the church, so bad that later in this letter, Paul singles out two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who were involved in a feud that affected the whole church.

That's why he urges them to be *one in spirit and purpose and do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*

They are complaining and arguing and that destroys their ability to advance the gospel. It is a bad witness throughout the church and to everyone in Philippi. They are busy at grumbling and petty bickering, and like people do when they focus on themselves, they call everything into question. People like this argue with each other and in effect argue with God. Nothing seems to be OK.

It is a reminder of the rebellion of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness after the Exodus. That is probably what Paul had in mind as he penned his letter. Pastor James Boice writes:

When they were in Egypt, they grumbled because they were in Egypt, when they were out of Egypt, they grumbled because they were out of Egypt. They complained because they had nothing to eat and when God provided manna for them they complained because they did not have meat. They grumbled for forty years. Most of us are like that. God blesses us, but there is always something we do not like about it. He blesses us more, but there is something we do like about that, and then there is something else (*Philippians: An Expository Commentary*).

Friends, we are often like the Israelites. We have a problem in being submissive to God's will. We trust in our own understanding of our circumstances instead of trusting in Him and joyfully submitting to God's plan for our lives. We complain about our circumstances, and whenever we do that, we are arguing with Him.

What if Jesus Christ had responded to the Father's will for His life the way that we do? What if He had complained about becoming a man and going to the cross and argued with God? Where would we be? Lost in our sins, that's where! Living without the hope of heaven but with the promise of God's almighty wrath.

I am sure glad that Jesus didn't argue with the Father! I am glad that He humbled Himself and obeyed the Father even to the point of death! It is this Jesus who is our example.

So what happens when we obey? When we adopt the same attitude as our Lord? In verse 15 Paul continues, *so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.*

We will be blameless and pure before a crooked generation, shining brightly like stars in the universe! Wow! In other words, we will be a witness to the nations, used by God to advance the gospel.

Paul had Deuteronomy 32:4-5 in mind as he wrote these words. In the days just before they enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds Israel that God had delivered them. Forty years have passed by and because of their complaining, none of the people who left Egypt would enter the land – except Joshua and Caleb. Moses is now at the end of his life and he leaves these final instructions.

[God] is the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He. They have acted corruptly toward Him; to their shame they are no longer His children, but a warped and crooked generation.

Israel was chosen by God to enter the Promised Land. Moses warns them to not abandon their faith, to not grumble and argue with God about their circumstances, but to be a shining light of His grace to the Gentile nations.

They were to demonstrate the righteousness and grace of God to the people around them. And through Israel would come the Messiah, the Anointed One, who would take away the sins of the world.

Just like Moses, Paul believes he will soon die and so leaves similar instructions to God's people. God has delivered the Philippians (and us) as the new Israel, so we are to work out our salvation and be a shining light to the world.

Old Israel did not heed the admonition of Moses and in the end, they faced deportation and destruction and could not even recognize the Messiah when He walked in their midst. Paul does not want "to run or labor for nothing" and see the new Israel – the Philippians and us – come to the same end.

He wants them to experience the same joy that he has in directing his life for the sake of God's kingdom. A verse later, he brings up another Old Testament illustration: *But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.*

In Old Testament days, when a priest sacrificed an animal, he would often pour wine or oil over the animal. The drink offering would complement the sacrifice with a sweet aroma that was pleasing to the Lord.

Paul sees his ministry in the same way. He was so excited about his role in advancing the gospel among the Philippians that he saw his circumstances – his imprisonment and even his very life – as a complement to their faithful service. He had real joy and he wanted them to have the same joy. The joy that comes from being linked together for the advancement of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

That is the lesson that I hope we can go away with this morning. Our part in the advancement of gospel depends on this. Paul understood that God's purposes were more important – and more joyful – than his personal comfort, his safety and his very life. I don't mean that he sought out suffering, that he wanted to be in prison or to lose his life.

But, while he was in the midst of his suffering, he did not complain or argue with God. He rejoiced and looked for God's sovereign and loving hand in the middle of it. He believed that God ordained his circumstances in order to advance the gospel amidst a crooked and depraved generation that desperately needed to hear about Jesus. That gave him real joy.

In the same way, we are to work out our salvation by not grumbling, by not arguing with God about the circumstances He has ordained for us. That is the example we have in Paul and, even more, it is the example we have in Jesus Christ. When we work out our salvation, we show off God's work in us in front of a crooked generation. And that will give us joy.

A few years ago, Chuck Colson was standing in a long line in the airport in Jakarta, Indonesia with a couple of his colleagues. The terminal was hot and steamy and they were tired from a night of travel and exasperated at the long, inefficient line snaking ahead of them. They thought that they would miss their next flight and their important meeting. But they decided to trust God and not to let the frustration get the better of them.

Two years later, Colson received a letter from a businessman who lived in Singapore. The man had been a follower of Confucius, but he sent his children to Sunday school at a Presbyterian church for moral training. One Sunday, as he picked up his kids, he heard the end of the sermon. A visiting missionary held up a copy of Chuck's first book, Born Again. On the cover was a picture of Colson.

A few months later, this businessman was stuck in a long line in the steaming Jakarta airport. Glancing over into the next line, he spotted the same face he'd seen on the cover of Born Again. He was so impressed with the calm demeanor and cheerfulness of Colson and his friends that when he got back to Singapore, he got the book, read it, and committed his life to Christ (Mark Earley, "*BreakPoint*").

Do you want to have that kind of impact in your life? You can. Do you want to be used of God to advance the gospel? You will be if you keep up the good work that God has begun in your life. He will make you a shining light and show off what the gospel has done in you.

If you are like me and struggle everyday with complaining, remember Paul's words today. *It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.* If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God has given you the will to obey Him. He has given you that power and motivation through the life and example of Jesus Christ.

Let your motivation be to follow Christ's example. Jesus was in very nature God, but He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. He humbled Himself to His Father's plan and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, God has given the life of His Son to dwell in you. He is your power.

So friends, keep up the good work. It will show off God's work in you.