“Work Out Your Salvation,” Philippians 2:12-18 (Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, July 14, 2024)

**12**Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, **13**for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**14**Do all things without grumbling or disputing, **15**that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, **16**holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. **17**Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. **18**Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

There’s a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that I’ve seen on tee-shirts, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, even billboards. It says, “Preach the gospel continually; use words if necessary.” Almost certainly St. Francis didn’t say that. None of his disciples, early or later biographers record him saying these words, nor do they show up in any of his writings. Plus, St. Francis was a powerful preacher and believed in the importance of preaching.

But it’s easy to understand why that quote is so popular. At the end of the day, while words are necessary in Christianity, ***they aren’t sufficient.*** Words are good, ***but they’re also cheap***. If your Christianity only consists of words, and does not change your life, ***what good is it?***

There’s a podcast I listen to occasionally. It’s hosted by a comedian, and he’ll bring celebrities on his show an interview them. In one episode, he was interviewing another comedian. The guest had been extremely sick for a couple of years, and she talked about how close to death she was. Then he asked her, “Are you spiritual?” It was surprising, because they both made it clear they were atheists. She said, “No, I wouldn’t say that I am. But if people get something from religion or spirituality and it’s a positive experience ***and they’re doing good***, I’m all for it.” And the host said, “Yeah, that last part’s the important part, the doing good part to that experience.” The implication was that they’d known a lot of so-called “people of faith” who didn’t do good, and it was one of the things that turned them off to religion.

It is easy to claim to a religious or spiritual person or, and in our little slice of the world in Mississippi, claim to be a Christian, yet be no different from anyone else. It’s easy to claim to follow God yet not love and care for others.

It’s always been an issue. After all, we read in James 2:14-17: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? **15**If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, **16**and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? **17**So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

In our text for today, the apostle Paul talks about this relationship between Christian profession and Christian practice, between our faith in God and our works. Another way to think of it is, “What is holiness? How does a Christian become holy? And why should we be holy?”

We’ll look at that subject under three headings: *first, in Christianity, holiness flows from acceptance.* *Second, holiness is also a calling.* *Third, our holiness is a witness.*

First, in Christianity, holiness flows from acceptance. Paul says in verse 12, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling …”. The average person hears that and thinks, “That verse means the only way I’ll ever be acceptable to God ***is if I’m good***. If I pray and go to church, if I stop drinking and looking at pornography, if I start giving my money away and serving at the food pantry, then maybe I’ll be good enough to get God’s salvation.”

Why is that the default understanding of God in so many human hearts? Because that’s how the rest of life works!

Everywhere else we have to earn our acceptance. How do you make a varsity team at one of the high schools? Only by earning it. You’ve got to be a good athlete. They don’t let just any kid on those teams. Only the best who have proven themselves get to play.

How do you get into the best colleges? Only by earning it. The best grades, the best test scores. How do you get the best jobs? A flawless resume. You even have to earn the right to be in a romantic relationship. This other person has to find you attractive, think you’re funny or kind or smart or some combination of the three, and also that you have the potential to earn significant income to take care of them one day.

We have to earn our acceptance in every other area of life so, of course, we just assume that must be the way it works with God. Therefore, to the extent the average person thinks of God, they think of him as an old man in the sky with a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other, and he’s constantly taking notes, evaluating and judging our behavior to see if we’re worthy of his acceptance.

We think God is saying, “Oh, look at what he just did. Points off.” Or, “He had an opportunity to help an old lady across the street and he selfishly just kept on walking. Points off.” We assume that God is always judging us.

No, no, no. That’s not God. Do you know who that is? It’s Santa Claus. He’s the old guy in the sky (or at the North Pole) and he’s the one who’s making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.

God doesn’t do that. You know why? Two reasons. *First, he’s smart.* He knows something about you and me that we don’t want to admit. ***He already knows there’s nothing we can do that will make us acceptable to him.*** God doesn’t waste his time by even entertaining the thought that we could ever, by how we live, make ourselves acceptable to him.

The first thing you’ve got to wrap your mind around if you’re ever going to be a Christian is that you will ***never make yourself acceptable to God by how you live, the choices you make, the things you do.* Never.** You are a sinner. You have repeatedly broken God’s laws, and his standard of holiness and perfection are completely, totally, and forever unattainable for you. You might as well try to fly to Jupiter as try to earn God’s acceptance.

But, once you own your utter moral poverty before God, then you can hear what Paul says in verse 13: “for ***it is God who works in you***, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

You can’t make yourself acceptable to God … but God can. God can work in you to make you not only acceptable to him ***but perfect.***

Because God isn’t just smart. *Second, he’s love.* Even though you are a wretch, God loves you. God became a man in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ ***no matter what you’ve done with your life you are acceptable to God.*** Jesus lived a perfect life you could never live. On the cross, Jesus died the death you deserve to die for transgressing God’s laws. Jesus did it all in your place, as your substitute, and if you will only trust Jesus then ***in him, by virtue of being united with Jesus through that trust,*** you are acceptable to God.

Imagine you’re a high school student preparing to take the ACT to make yourself acceptable to some college. As you’re about to sign in to take the test, someone stops you and say, “I will take the ACT on your behalf, and I will make a perfect score, a 36. And I promise you won’t get caught. My fake ID’s are flawless. No one will ever know. I’ll take the test, I’ll make the grade, but you’ll get all the credit.”

Of course, in real life that’s cheating. It’s probably a crime. But it’s a good analogy for what Christianity is all about. Jesus Christ got a perfect score in his life, when you trust him ***you get the credit,*** and ***it’s not cheating!*** It’s the way God set it up to love you! If you trust Jesus, then for all eternity you’ll be treated by God as if you are Jesus. In fact, in some sense, once you trust Jesus, then whenever God sees you, he sees Jesus, so completely does Jesus take your place.

And that means ***the pressure’s off.*** You don’t have to watch your step, you don’t have to look over your shoulder, you don’t have to wonder what God thinks of you. You can rest because ***your holiness flows from your acceptance, not the other way around.***

You remember the movie *Annie*, the original one that came out in 1982, with Albert Finney and Carol Burnett? I know there’s a newer version with Jamie Foxx and Rose Byrne. In the original *Annie*, she’s a little girl living in squalor in a New York City orphanage during the Great Depression, but the richest man in the world, Oliver Warbucks, needs help with his public image, so he brings Annie to live with him. When Annie first gets to the mansion, they show her everything, all the rooms, the food in the pantry, the indoor swimming pool and tennis courts, and say, “Annie, what would you like to do first?” And Annie says, “I’ll think I’ll clean the windows first, then I’ll do the floors,” and she grabs a rag and a bucket because of course she’s got to earn her keep.

But then they tell her, “Annie, you don’t understand. You don’t have to clean. You’re our guest.” And then a servant comes by to measure her for new clothes, and another to make her bed with satin sheets, and another to draw her a bubble bath, and what does Annie say? She doesn’t say it; she sings it: “I think I’m gonna like it here.”

Friends, before you ever worry about your holiness, your behavior, how you live, you must hear God through Jesus Christ say, “You are my guest. In my house there are many mansions. One of them is yours. I’ve prepared a place for you and you’re gonna like it here!” Wrap your mind around that, and then holiness will come.

Second, holiness is a gift. Once you are a Christian, you do have work to do. You must work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Your life is not your own. You were bought with a price.

You are called, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:22-24, “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, **23**and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, **24**and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” You are called to be ruthless in hunting down and killing all the sin in your life and to make no provision for the flesh.

You will have to give up certain things when you’re a Christian. Maybe it’s some secret sin. Something you tell yourself makes you happy, but you know you’re a slave to it. Or maybe what you need to give up is something your family has been after you about for years. Maybe it’s that you’re too determined to live for your own comfort, and it’s time to take some risks. Or, perhaps it is some dream you’ve been chasing but it never seems to pan out, and it’s time to let it go.

But don’t make the mistake of thinking that being a Christian is ***primarily*** defined by ***what all I’ll have to give up.*** That’s where Christians and people exploring Christianity go wrong.

Your salvation and the holiness that flows from it is a gift from God, and ***God certainly knows how to give good gifts.*** Good gifts, the best gifts, aren’t things for which you say, “Thank you,” then throw in a closet somewhere, never to think about it again. The best gifts are things that you ***explore***, and you find new uses in them and new joys from them every day.

Paul says, “Work out your salvation.” Imagine someone says to a husband, “You should work on your marriage.” The average husband’s initial reaction is probably, “Oh no. There goes my freedom. This means no more football on Saturdays. No more hunting trips. I’m going to have to talk to my wife and open up to her. I’ll have to buy her presents, and she never likes what I buy her. This is going to be no fun.” And to be fair, the average wife probably thinks similarly.

But that husband would be thinking about it all wrong. ***He’s forgetting that his wife is a gift from God.*** If you are called to be a husband, that means you are called to say no to all kinds of things so that you can have the time to say yes to your wife. ***But*** you’re called to say no … to working too much, which is killing you and if you’re honest isn’t making you happy anyway. You’re called to say no … to too many organized activities for your children, which are taking up every weekend and vacuuming all kinds of money out of your bank account. You’re called to say no … to a lot of social engagements with people you don’t want to be around anyway.

You’ll to give up a lot of things to work on your marriage, but once you do give them up you find ***you’re glad you did.*** And yes, it probably does mean less football, less golf, less TV, less reading, but you don’t miss those things because after working on your marriage you find that in your wife you once again (or perhaps for the first time) have your best friend. You find you have the contentment, the intimacy, and the joy you had when you first got married is back, except better, deeper, more meaningful. You appreciate one another so much more now, and it’s possible because you’ve given up other things now you have time and space to ***explore*** this gift God has given you.

When Paul says, “Work out your salvation,” he’s telling the Philippians to ***explore*** this loving, accepting relationship they have with God, because ***working out your salvation means working God into your life.***

You will have to say “no” to other things … so that you have time and space to say “yes” to prayer, but in those times of prayer you’ll find you know God exists, he cares for you, and he’ll provide for all your needs. You’ll find so many of the things you are so worried about are taken care of by the Lord. You’ll kick yourself and say, “Why haven’t I been praying like this for years?”

You will have to say “no” to other things so you can say “yes” to reading your Bible, so that you can learn for yourself who God is, his love for you in Jesus, and experience his presence in ways you never thought possible.

You will have to say no to other things so that you can say “yes” to the church and be reminded of God’s love through the preaching and be encouraged by the singing and get to know other people who want to walk this pilgrim way with you.

And you will have to say no to other things so you can say “yes” to serving others and then you will see that Jesus was right when he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Paul says, “Work out your salvation so that you can work God in. Create space in your life to explore this gift of holiness and, if you do, you won’t regret it.”

Third, holiness is a witness. A witness is someone who testifies, who tells the truth about something or someone they know. For the Christian, our holiness is a witness in two ways.

*First, your holiness is a witness about God’s goodness to the world.* To call someone “holy” in our culture usually isn’t a compliment. My guess is that if you were about to meet someone for the first time, and the person introducing you two said, “This is a holy person,” you wouldn’t look forward to it. You’d think, “I’m not going to like this person. She’s either going to be holier-than-thou, and I’ll feel judged, and who wants to meet someone like that? Or they’ll just want to talk about God stuff the whole time and I won’t know what to say and it will be awkward and uncomfortable.”

But that’s not what Paul says holiness is like. He writes, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, **15**that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, ***among whom you shine as lights in the world*** …”. Philippians 2:14-15. A truly holy person is someone who does not grumble or complain, they are blameless (which means no one can say anything against them) and, when you meet them, it’s refreshing. It’s like light shining in the darkness.

True holiness, biblical holiness, is an attractive quality. It’s a magnetic quality, for it draws people in. You find that you can’t help but want to be around them.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* writes about a different Christian quality, but it applies to holiness. He says, “Do not imagine that if you meet a really [holy] man he will be what most people call [‘holy’] nowadays ... Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent [person] who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him.* If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about [his holiness]: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

Friends, if you claim to be a Christian yet there is no holiness in your life, there’s nothing distinctive about your love, kindness, and concern for others, it’s not just that you’re not a witness for the Lord. It’s not just that you are kind of neutral and not doing anything to help the kingdom of God advance. You’re actively working against it. ***You’re lying about who God is.***

But when there is holiness in your life, it is a powerful witness to the goodness of our God. It’s a powerful thing to have enough spiritual ballast in your own life that you genuinely care for others with no thought for yourselves. Some of you are so good at it. I see you do it at church on Sundays. I know you do it with your family, at work, and among your friends.

It’s also a witness to those who don’t know the Lord. It’s the kind of witness we need to have in a culture that is already extremely skeptical about all religious claims and where it seems every week there’s a new headline about some pastor’s moral failure. This kind of witness will get the attention even of the atheist podcasters and make them wonder if there was something to this Christianity stuff after all.

*Second, your holiness is a witness on my behalf.* I admit this last point is personal. It applies to only me and to the other elders at Grace Bible, but all the members of this church have a role to play in it. Paul writes in verses 16-17 that he wants the Philippians to shine like lights and hold “fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud [or as other translations put it, “boast”] that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. **17**Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.”

Remember, Paul is in prison as he writes this letter to the Philippians. As we saw when we studied chapter one, he does not think he’s about to die. He believes he’s going to be released from prison and will see them in person again.

But death is never far from Paul’s mind, nor is what waits for him on the other side of death: judgment day. Paul calls it “the day of Christ” in verse 16.

On judgment day, when all mankind from all generations is gathered into one vast assembly, Paul is convinced ***he will boast.*** He will brag. Why? Because of the holiness of the people he shepherded on earth, which in heaven will produce in them a radiant, glorious beauty.

And Paul says, “I will get credit for their holiness.” In Philippians 4:1 Paul says that the Philippians are those “whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.” In 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, Paul writes to that church and says, “For what is our hope or joy ***or crown of boasting*** before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? **20**For you are ***our glory and joy***.”

On the day of Christ, Paul will be gathered with all the people he shepherded on earth. He will know them, they will know him, and Paul will say to the Lord Jesus, “Lord, look at them. They are more holy, more glorious, and more in love with you, Jesus, because you deigned to use my teaching, oversight, and love to make them over into your image.” And on that day, Paul is confident the Lord Jesus will look at him and say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

We’re not done at Grace Bible, not by a long shot, there is much work to be done, but I trust that on the day of Christ I’ll be able to boast. I’ll hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” I’ll get credit and I won’t be ashamed, I won’t have to try and hide from the Lord Jesus (not that anyone can) ***because over these more than thirteen years I’ve seen the change in you, I’ve seen the love and growth in so many of your lives.***

Therefore, my dear friends, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for your sake, for the sake of the kingdom, and for my sake, knowing all the while it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure. PRAY