

Who Is Responsible For Your Spiritual Growth?

Scripture: Philippians 2:12

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The Christian life is anything but a passive pursuit. The New Testament commands believers to “be all the more diligent” (2 Peter 1:10), to take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5), to “strive to enter through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24), to “run” that we may obtain the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24), and to “work out” our salvation (Philippians 2:12). Our spiritual growth clearly involves human exertion. But what, then, are we to make of God’s sovereignty over our growth?

In recent years, that question has fueled intense theological debate on the driving force behind sanctification. Is spiritual growth produced by the believer or is it sovereignly performed by God?

In Philippians 2:12–13, Paul lays it out as a paradoxical truth:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling; for *it is God who is at work in you*, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (emphasis added)

Who is responsible for our sanctification? The answer is more complex than some make it out to be.

Paul sees sanctification as a two-sided coin. He focuses first on the believer’s role in sanctification. Some misguided interpreters completely misread this exhortation as if it said, “work *for* your salvation,” “work *at* your salvation,” or “work *up* your salvation.” But both in the immediate context of this letter and the broader context of the New Testament, none of those interpretations is correct. Paul is not speaking of *attaining* salvation by human effort or goodness, but of *living out* the life God has graciously granted.

Alive by Faith

To the Ephesians Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Faith alone has always been the way of salvation. Noah was a righteous man by faith (Genesis 6:9; Hebrews 11:7). Abraham was saved by God’s grace working through his personal faith: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). The Mosaic law did not alter the way of salvation. It was only by faith that Moses and all Old Testament saints were saved (Hebrews 11:23–38). All those believing men and women “gained approval through their faith” (Hebrews 11:39), by which God granted them His righteousness—salvation—in advance on account

of the future death of His Son.

Working Out What God Worked In

So, salvation is from God alone, yet in Philippians 2:12, Paul focuses on the responsibility of believers to live lives that are consistent with that divine gift.

Strabo was an ancient Roman scholar who lived about sixty years before Christ. He recorded an account concerning some Roman-owned mines in Spain. He uses the very same verb that Paul does in Philippians 2:12, *katargazomai*, when referring to the Romans as *working out* the mines. Strabo's point was that the Romans were extracting from within the mines all their richness and value.

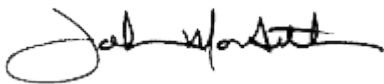
That's a fitting expression of what *katargazomai* (work out) means in Philippians 2:12. *I am to mine out of my life what God has richly deposited there in salvation. I am to produce such precious nuggets of godly character from what He planted when He saved me.*

Working by the Spirit

Everything in life requires energy. It takes energy to walk and to work. It takes energy to think and to meditate. It takes energy to obey and to worship God. Where does the believer get the energy to grow as a Christian, to live a life that is holy, fruitful, and pleasing to the Lord? Philippians 2:13 makes it clear that God is the necessary source of that sanctifying energy we are commanded to expend. In the words of Galatians 5:25, since "we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."

So who is responsible for your growth as a Christian? God is responsible for supplying everything you need for life and godliness, and you are responsible for actively using that power to grow in sanctification for His glory. The paradox is found in the believer being both fully responsible, and yet fully dependent on God's supply. We may not fully comprehend the paradox, but we can exercise faith that it is resolved in the infinite wisdom of God and respond in obedience to His commands.

Paul's words suggest five truths that believers must understand to sustain the pursuit of working out their salvation. We'll examine each of them in the days ahead.



(Adapted from [The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians.](#))

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