

The Model and Motivation for Spiritual Growth

Scripture: Philippians 2:5–13

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There is a raging debate about sanctification—where it comes from, what its nature is, and how it is achieved. Some people will tell you that spiritual growth is entirely *optional*—that a believer can live whatever lifestyle he or she might choose after a simple confession of faith. Others will tell you that spiritual growth happens by virtual *osmosis*, as believers reflect on God's grace in their lives and live accordingly.

The truth is that legitimate spiritual growth takes *work*. In fact, Scripture teaches that true sanctification is the product of God's enabling power and the believer's godly self-discipline. Here's how the apostle Paul described the cooperative work of spiritual growth:

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. (Philippians 2:12-13)

As we saw [last time](#), sanctification is essentially the believer's work of mining out the spiritual riches that God placed within him at salvation. It is the active and aggressive pursuit of obedience.

In Philippians 2:12, Paul suggests five truths that believers must understand to sustain such a pursuit. We'll consider the first two today.

Understanding Christ's Example

The first element of believers' working out their sanctification is understanding Christ's example. The phrase "so then" is translated from the Greek particle *hōste*, which was used to draw a conclusion from a preceding statement. Here it refers back to the example of Jesus Christ, whose perfect model of humility, submission, and obedience was described earlier in the epistle (Philippians 2:5-8).

In His incarnation, Jesus did not cling to His equality with God the Father, but emptied Himself. Taking the form of a humble bond-servant, He was obedient to His heavenly Father, even to the point of dying on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. It is also true that the self-emptying of the Son of God placed Him in the role of a servant to the will of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, one of the greatest realities of the incarnation was that everything Jesus did, He did in the Spirit's power (cf. Luke 4:1, 14, 18; 5:17; Acts 10:38).

Christ's life, then, is the perfect example of how we are to live and grow as believers. The essence of living the Christian life is being obedient like Him: "The one who says he abides in [Christ] ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

Understanding Christ's Love

Paul's next words in Philippians 2:12 suggest a second element of believers' working out their sanctification—understanding that they are greatly loved. “My beloved” was unmistakably a word of comfort and encouragement. The apostle knew that the Philippians would face many disappointments and failures as they sought to follow the Lord's example in living for Him. Paul's love for them reflected Christ's love for His church (cf. Philippians 1:8).

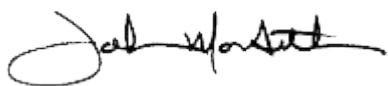
Paul was well aware of their weaknesses and shortcomings. But just as the Lord did with him and does with all of His children, the apostle made allowance for their failures. They did not serve a hard, merciless deity, as did their pagan neighbors. They served a merciful, forgiving, gracious Lord who was always willing to restore them to fellowship with Himself.

Despite their imperfections, the Philippian believers were Paul's and the Lord's “beloved” brothers and sisters, for whom he longed “with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:8). Not only does Paul consider them beloved, he speaks of them as his “joy and crown,” whom he longed to see and entreated them to “stand firm in the Lord” (Philippians 4:1). He understood that, like himself, they had not yet “become perfect,” that they, too, were pressing on to “lay hold of that for which [they had been] laid hold of by Christ Jesus,” not regarding themselves “as having laid hold of it yet; . . . forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,” and were faithfully pressing “on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12–14).

Paul's charge for them to work out their salvation was not an indifferent directive. It was rather an affectionate call to follow Christ's example in confidence of His love by practicing the things they had “learned and received and heard and seen” in Paul (Philippians 4:9).

God's love recognizes and understands the frailties of its object. It's a forgiving love that makes room for failure—not for open, unrepentant sin, but for the struggle of breaking old sinful patterns and establishing godly new ones.

Understanding Christ's example fixes in our mind both the goal and the means of spiritual growth. And understanding God's nurturing, parental love brings encouragement through the process of spiritual growth. Paul still has three more vital truths that sustain and stimulate our sanctification. And that's where we'll pick it up next time.



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

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