

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Obedience and Responsibility

Scripture: Philippians 2:12–13

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Sanctification is work. *Hard* work. But *whose* work is it?

For the biblical answer to that question, we've been examining Paul's teaching in Philippians 2:12–13, in which he highlights the cooperative nature of sanctification.

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.

Clearly the believer bears the responsibility for his spiritual growth. But that work is impossible apart from the power of God. Paul's point is that it is cooperative work, and he highlights several vital truths that sustain believers as they "work out [their] salvation."

[Last time](#) we looked at the first two of those sustaining truths that growing believers must understand. Today we'll consider two more.

Understanding Obedience

The third crucial element of believers' working out their sanctification is understanding the need for obedience to the Lord. Paul encourages the Philippians to continue in faithful submission to God's will. "Obeyed" translates a compound verb composed of the preposition *hupo* and the verb *akouō*, from which we get the word *acoustics*. The compound verb has the basic meaning of placing oneself under what has been heard, and therefore of submitting and obeying. A believer obviously must listen to God's Word if he is to be obedient to it, so this is indirectly an appeal for believers to continue to study and obey Scripture (cf. Matthew 28:19–20).

God's command to Peter, James, and John on the mount of transfiguration is His command to everyone: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5). To preach the gospel is more than merely sharing one's faith and offering an invitation; it is to call sinners to obey God, "to bring about the obedience of faith . . . for His name's sake" (Romans 1:5). To be saved is to "obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1:8), a point emphasized by Christ's exhortation in John 3:36: "He who *believes* in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not *obey* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (emphasis added).

Believers are to "be careful how [they] walk, not as unwise men but as wise" (Ephesians 5:15). Paul wrote to Titus:

Concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.” (Titus 3:8)

The writer of Hebrews charges fellow believers: “Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11). Jesus’ Great Commission includes the command to teach converts from “all the nations . . . to observe all that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). Obedience is essential to sanctification. True spiritual growth cannot take place without it.

Understanding Responsibility

In addition to understanding the need for obedience, believers must also understand *to Whom* they are responsible.

Because believers are sinful, they are inclined to be self-justifying, blaming circumstances or other people for their problems and failures. Paul commends the Philippians for their faithful pattern of obedience to Christ while they were in his presence. But he goes on to say that they were just as obligated to obey during his absence.

The believers at Philippi enjoyed the great privilege of knowing Paul intimately. He was perhaps the greatest teacher of God’s Word the world has ever seen—except, of course, for the Lord Himself—but Paul was also their friend. It’s safe to assume that many of the Philippians developed an exceptionally strong dependence on him.

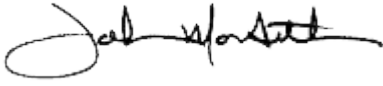
But at the time of this writing, Paul was hundreds of miles away, incarcerated in Rome. The only means of contact were letters (including the epistle before us), and occasional reports from mutual friends. But as disappointing and challenging as the situation was, Paul reminds them that their spiritual responsibility was not to him but to the Lord. Paul expected them to obey in spite of his absence.

The apostle repeats an admonition he made earlier.

Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

His point is that there is never a time when a true believer is not responsible to obey the Lord. Believers must never be primarily dependent on their pastor, teacher, Christian fellowship, or anyone else for their spiritual strength and growth.

That dependence on God is the essence of the cooperative nature of sanctification. We can’t manufacture true spiritual growth on our own. Only through His power can we break old sinful habits and grow in the likeness of His Son. And these five crucial truths from Paul’s charge to the Philippians help sustain us in that self-disciplining work. Next time, we’ll look at the last sustaining truth.



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

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