

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

God's Purpose and Pleasure in Your Sanctification

Scripture: Philippians 2:12–13

Code: B140728

This post was originally published in July 2014. –ed.

In Philippians 2:12-13, the apostle Paul highlights the paradoxical nature of sanctification—that it sits at the crossroads between man’s responsibility and God’s empowering.

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.

Paul’s point is that true spiritual growth is not one-sided. No amount of man-made effort can produce righteousness, nor does the Lord sanctify His people by osmosis. Only when the two work in concert is sanctification possible.

We’ve already looked at man’s responsibility, and some of God’s characteristics that inform His role in our spiritual growth. Today we’ll consider the final two: His purpose and His pleasure.

God’s Purpose

The phrase “both to will and to work” is best interpreted as referring not to God’s will and work but rather to that of believers. The will to do what is right before God must precede any effective work that is done toward that end. A genuine desire to do God’s will, as well as the power to obey it, originates with Him.

“To will” is from *thelō*, which refers to thoughtful, purposeful choice, not to mere whim or emotional desire. It is what the psalmist had in mind when he prayed, “Incline my heart to Your testimonies” (Psalm 119:36; cf. 110:3). Proverbs declares that “the king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Proverbs 21:1).

God uses two means to move believers’ wills. First is what might be called *holy discontent*. It is the humble recognition that one’s life always falls short of God’s standard of holiness. When Isaiah beheld “the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple,” he could only exclaim in reverential fear, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:1, 5). Like all righteous people, he was dissatisfied with his spiritual state—a dissatisfaction immeasurably intensified by that awesome experience. Paul’s holy discontent led him to lament in his letter to the church at Rome, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24).

The second means God uses to move believers’ wills is *holy aspiration*, the positive side of holy discontent. After He instills a genuine hatred of sin, He cultivates a genuine desire for righteousness.

After He makes believers discontent with what they are, He gives them the aspiration to greater holiness. Above all, it is the desire to be like Christ, “to become conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Romans 8:29).

In Philippians Paul brings together his own holy discontent and holy aspiration when he confesses:

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12–14)

Holy resolve leads to holy living. A godly will produces godly work.

It cannot be overemphasized that only God can produce in believers the will or the work that He commands of them. Just as believers are not saved by good works but wholly by God’s grace working through their faith (Ephesians 2:8–9), so also they are sanctified by His grace working through their obedience. They are God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that [they] would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Just as believers are sovereignly predestined to salvation, so also are they predestined to sanctification.

God’s Pleasure

The final essential reality about God’s part in believers’ sanctification is the overwhelming truth that God works in their sanctification “for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). His will for believers is that they think and do what pleases Him. Although that is accomplished primarily by His own power, when His children seek His will and do His work, it brings Him great pleasure.

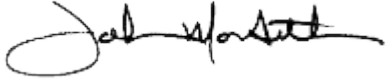
“Good pleasure” translates *eudokias*, which expresses great enjoyment and satisfaction. Because God is infinitely self-sufficient, one cannot but wonder how anything or anyone, especially a sinful human being, could add to His satisfaction. Yet that clearly is what Paul is saying. Even when they were weak, vacillating, and fearful, Jesus assured the disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Giving a place in His kingdom to His children brings God great pleasure.

Because believers’ sanctification brings Him satisfaction, God grants them the resources to pursue it. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ . . . [and has] made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him. (Ephesians 1:3, 9)

Believers’ supreme purpose is to obey, worship, and glorify God, and by fulfilling that purpose they bring pleasure to Him. Faithful, godly character and behavior pleases Him. That magnificent truth is one of the many unique realities of Christianity. The sovereign God of the universe takes *personal* pleasure in what He Himself inspires and empowers His redeemed children to be and to do.

Every Christian should understand that sanctification takes the most strenuous effort, but is nonetheless totally dependent on God's power. Like many other truths of Scripture, those seemingly irreconcilable realities are hard to understand. Having done all they can, believers are to give God all the credit. Just as the Lord instructed, after they have done "all the things which are commanded," they are to confess, "We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done" (Luke 17:10).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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

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