

## Philippians: Joyful Obedience

**Main Idea:** Jesus is worthy of our joyful obedience.

**Purpose:** to convince people that obedience to Jesus is good, life-giving thing.

**Passage:** Philippians 2:12-30

**Verse:** Philippians 2:12

Growing up, I lived in home without many boundaries. It was a fairly undisciplined environment. I had a lot of freedom to do and say more than many people my age. It wasn't a bad home – it was a warm, loving home. My mom was a single mom of 4 kids. She worked multiple jobs to take care of us. Happy Mother's Day, Mom! I really appreciate you a lot. And, I appreciated the freedom to do and say what I wanted.

However, when I came to faith in my 20's and began to encounter all the language in the Bible about *obedience* and the need to *obey*, I kind of bristled at that. There wasn't a lot of language in my home about *obedience*. Obey language has always touched a nerve for me. Dogs obey – I don't need to obey

Perhaps you grew up differently. Maybe you grew up in a Christian home with Christian values and you heard a lot of language about obedience. There were boundaries and a lot of structure. Maybe there was a high expectation that you would follow the rules and *obey* and do what was right. Perhaps you were hurt by that and now you cringe and bristle a bit at being told to *obey*. Perhaps you think, "I don't want anything to do with *obedience!*" I can't assume that that is your story, but I've heard several stories like that

I think both of these instances reveal our humanity. Whether we have felt abused in a situation where we were told to obey, or whether we never really had any significant discipline – we may just have a propensity to resist obeying.

I felt the tension of this tendency not to obey early on in our marriage. Now, you've got to understand that my wife, Stef, is so sweet and wonderful. But if my wife would ever say something to me that even remotely sounded like she was telling me what to do, I would get so tense and irritated. And I frequently said in those early years of marriage, "I don't tell you what to do; you don't tell me what to do." Even when Stef was telling me something I knew I needed to do, I didn't want to be told to do it – and I still don't. There's just something in me that resists it. It isn't a joyful act

I know, you all just lost some respect for me – but there's no use pretending that any of us is perfect. Thankfully, I don't say that to her anymore; hopefully I've grown up a little bit.

And I know that's not just me. I think it's most of us that just don't like be told what to do.

With that in mind, you need to obey my words now and open up your Bibles to Philippians, chapter 2. (Just joking! I would never talk to you like that in real life!)

Philippians 2:12-30

*<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*

<sup>14</sup> Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky <sup>16</sup> as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. <sup>17</sup> But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. <sup>18</sup> So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

<sup>19</sup> I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. <sup>20</sup> I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. <sup>21</sup> For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. <sup>23</sup> I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. <sup>24</sup> And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

<sup>25</sup> But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. <sup>26</sup> For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. <sup>29</sup> So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, <sup>30</sup> because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

We’ve been in our series on Philippians called “**A New Way of Living**” for a few weeks now and we’ve been talking about it in conjunction with a book by Dr. Nijay Gupta, *Reading Philippians: A Theological Introduction*. Nijay is actually going to be preaching on Philippians 3 next week. So, if you can just suffer through me now, there will be something better coming your way!

So far in the letter of Philippians, we’ve seen that Paul wants to change our minds. **If we change our minds, we will change how we live.** Paul wants us to see ourselves as God sees us – saints, holy ones, set apart and called out to a new way of living. We explored Paul’s central challenge of the letter – **that we would live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel.**

What is the gospel? The gospel means *good announcement*. The gospel is the announcement of God’s reign and restoration in King Jesus. Jesus sits on the throne right now. His death and resurrection were His inauguration. His death and resurrection offer restoration for anyone and everyone who looks to Him for life.

**But the gospel is about way more than just my salvation and your salvation.** The gospel is God’s reign and restoration of the entire world. Paul wants us to live as gospel citizens. He wants us to have the mindset of people who serve a King who is making all things right. **We’ve seen that we need to have the mindset of Jesus.** It is a mindset that is not about *ascending* greatness. It is about *descending* greatness. **It is not about going higher. It is about going lower.** John gave us that great challenge last week: **How low can you go?**

### **Tensions of Language**

Now, coming right after the great Christ-hymn, we arrive at our passage today, and there are several bits in there that might raise some eyebrows for us. Paul shifts gears, and right away he says to the Philippians, “**obey**” – and maybe we bristle a little bit, but we keep reading. And then we see, “continue to **work out** your salvation”—and we think, “Work? What kind of work do I need to do?” And then we keep reading, and it says to do that work, “**with fear and trembling.**” Some of us may be ready to put our Bibles down at this point.

This is where we have a choice to make: we can read that, decide it’s not for us, put down our Bibles, and be done with it. Or, we can stop, say, “That’s odd”, but not think about it much and just keep going. Or, we can

take some time to wrestle with the tension of it. I think the better answers will come when we do that. It puts in my mind that image of Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord in the book of Genesis, trying to get to a better understanding of his situation.

Some of these words may not cause too much of a pause for you, but I think for many they do.

Obedience, which we already talked about, touches on this gut feeling of not wanting to be told what to do. Besides, didn't Jesus say that His yoke was easy and His burden was light?

Then the idea of *working* in connection with salvation touches a nerve for many of us Protestants—aren't I saved by grace and not by works so that no one can boast? What kind of *working* do I need to do, and what happens if I don't work? And, *fear and trembling*, come on! Is that what my relationship with God is supposed to be like—that I cower before him trembling with fear? Isn't God my loving Father?

Maybe some of you read this, and you think, "I don't want that!"

I think part of the challenge comes when we try to understand or imagine God and our relationship to Him in a singular way. **He is this, but not that.** Or because He is this, He cannot be that He's the best aspects of what I would want Him to be, but not those things that are less appealing to me.

The reality is that God is far more complex than I can imagine, and so, my relationship with him is far more complex. The gospel, the good announcement of God's reign and restoration through Jesus, is complex. It wasn't as easy as the Jews thought it was going to be when they anticipated the Messiah who would come and liberate them. But wait – I thought the gospel was really easy to understand, and that's part of the beauty of it. But you see, even in that statement there is tension. Yes, the gospel is simple and accessible to everyone, and yet it is so profound that I feel like I'll never fully grasp its depth.

We have to live in the tension of that. So, to go back to our troublesome phrases:

Yes, we do need to obey and work out our salvation. Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light; he provides rest for the weary; he offers freely to little children. And yet he demands our whole life. Paul wrote in Romans, "*What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*" God's grace is there abundantly and yet it isn't an open door to do whatever we want when we want.

Is my relationship with God one of fear and trembling? Well, I think it started out that way, and in some respects it still is. After all, we're talking about God—the One who made us. And about Jesus, to whom every knee will bow, as we saw in last week's passage. He's an authority unlike any other. The disciples said, "Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him." And, yet, the Apostle John wrote, "*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love,*" (1 John 4:15).

So, do I fear God? Well, I certainly respect who He is and know that I'll stand before Him someday. Do I fear punishment from Him? No, I don't, because His perfect love has cast out that fear. It's like the song "Amazing Grace": "*T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.*"

These are the tensions that we live in when we live a life with God. I take the time to say all of that because I don't want these phrases to create distance between you and God, but I want you to see that they are true and valid within a greater context of understanding who God is and what the nature of our relationship to Him is. And those two things—who God is and the nature of our relationship to Him determine so much of how we perceive obedience.

**The result of being able to live in the tension of that is a *new way of living* characterized by joyful obedience.** Not painful obedience; not reluctant or compulsory obedience, but willing and joyful obedience. And that's at the core of what this passage is about—because of what Paul has already written about the truth of who God is, and the unstoppable gospel, he now says, in light of that, "Obey". Without the understanding of who God is and how the gospel has worked in my life, obedience is not pleasant. That's the natural, human way of obedience; it's reluctant obedience.

My son, Caleb, is three years old. Which means he's at the perfect age for me to use him as an illustration of obedience. Because at three, a child knows well enough how they should obey in most basic circumstances, but they are also clever enough to be reluctant and try to resist obeying.

Caleb doesn't always have joy when he obeys—and, frankly, neither do I—but **when I understand who I am obeying and why, it becomes a joyful obedience.**



## **Obedience**

Who we obey, who we're putting ourselves under, makes all the difference. I think most of us understand that intuitively. Think about the people in your life who have either been worthy of being followed or those who have not.

At one time in my life, I was the assistant manager at a Safeway. I worked under a manager who was a sweet, kind man. He was always smiling and chuckling. He loved to laugh – until you crossed a line – and then he would snap! He would yell, make threats, throw things. And then, in a flash, he would go back to being cheery and jovial. It's not easy to follow someone like that. There's certainly no desire to follow; just a sense that you have to. Maybe you've got your own examples of someone like that.

Would you rather obey someone who is out for himself, or someone who looking out for others' interests? Would you rather follow someone who's out to acquire as much as they can, or someone who is willing to give in order to bring others higher?

Who is it that Paul is pointing us to? He's pointing us toward Jesus!

Paul is directing the Philippians to follow and obey the One who was described last week, who was described in the passage just before this—Jesus, the Son of God, who humbled Himself, lowered Himself, gave Himself, sacrificed Himself for our benefit. He didn't seek His own; He went to the lowest rung in order to pull us up with Him.

**We joyfully offer obedience to Jesus because He's worthy and He's good.** Because He isn't a tyrant, because He isn't cruel. He is the highest authority, but He's also the best authority. He wants what is good and lifegiving and best for you. He's not out to hurt you; He's not out to watch you fail; He's not going to snap. He will only ask of you what will be good for you and those around you. That doesn't mean it's always what we want in the moment, but we can trust that it is good.

Who do we obey? **We obey a humble King who is out for our good.** Understanding that can shift our whole perspective on obedience. What we do when we obey isn't based on the need to follow a bunch of irrelevant commands – it's based on having an encounter with God where we discover that He wants to be close to us and to form us, to shape us, into His people.

This is connected to *why* we obey. Our obedience comes about because it's actually God who is doing this work in us. Paul says, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*"—which means to *obey*. These two ideas are parallel. He says, "*Just as you have always obeyed...continue to work out your salvation;*" that is, continue to obey. **Continue to live in such a way that is in line with your salvation.**

This goes right back to what Paul wrote in chapter 1, which John highlighted as a key verse in the whole book: "*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*" (Philippians 1:27) He's saying the same thing now in a different way—to work out your salvation is to live out the life of someone who has been saved.

Why do we obey? **We obey because we're free to obey.** Because God has already taken care of the hard part. We're not working **toward** our salvation or **for** our salvation—we're working **out of** our salvation that is already there. Do that work.

But then, in the same breath that Paul says to work out our salvation, he says in verse 13, "*for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*" The Greek word for "act" is the exact same word as "to work". Go ahead and work, because it is God who is actually *at work in you* to work.

This is like the tension that I mentioned before. We are told to do something—to work the life of someone who is saved; but it's God who is actually *doing* the work in us. It requires us to move forward, but it starts with God's movement in our own lives. In fact, it starts even before any action takes place on our part.

Why do we obey? **We obey because God is working in us a desire to do so.**

Paul says, "It's God who works in you **to will.**" To *will* something is to desire it, to want it. So, God is at work in us to change our desires so that we want to do the working out—the living out—of our salvation. He is participating with us, actively involved in our lives.

And that is a *work* that God is continually doing and not an instantaneous thing. And for some of us, He's got more work to do, but this is part of the process of our transformation into the image of Christ. God is the one who is doing the work, and He's doing that work internally in us, with our desires, in order to bring about this *working out*—this outward obedience. We don't have much hope of doing the things God wants us to do without Him working that desire in us.

But we play a part in it as well, as we offer ourselves to God for that work to be done by Him. Paul wrote in Romans, "*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" (Romans 12:1-2) We offer ourselves to God, and then God transforms our wills and our desires, to come into alignment with His, so that we will live the life that is worthy of the gospel.

I guess the question now is: **How do we obey?** What does it even look like to live this gospel life, to work out our salvation?

**We work out our salvation together.**

Everything in Philippians is geared toward the church community. Terms like *fellowship, sharing, partnership* are woven throughout the letter from beginning to end. And in verse 14, Paul says, "*Do everything* (that is, obey or work out your salvation) *without grumbling or arguing.*" We'll see in chapter 4 of the letter that there is conflict within the Philippian church. And these terms seem to be addressing that conflict. Working out your

salvation is not an isolated practice of holiness, but involves the whole church doing what Paul said earlier in chapter 2: “*being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.*” It doesn’t take place in a monastery (not that I have any problems with monasteries), but it takes place hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm, as we follow Jesus together. (Maybe today that just looks like proper Zoom etiquette.)

How we relate to other people is a primary indicator of whether we’re walking in obedience with Jesus.

Paul gives us examples of people who live this out: **Timothy and Epaphroditus**. They are described as having concern for others, looking out for the interests of Jesus, working for the gospel, and worthy of honor. They are the examples to the Philippians and to us of what it looks like to work out your salvation with others.

### **We set ourselves up to live a life of obedience.**

Following Jesus and working out our salvation happens **one choice at a time**. Dallas Willard said, “Choice is where sin dwells.” And let me tell you, I’ve messed up a lot of those choices. But again, I don’t fear punishment from God in that; I shouldn’t even fear disappointing God when I make a poor choice, because my life is **in Christ**. So, God looks at me—looks at you—as He does His Son, Jesus.

And yet we are called to obedience. **The choices that I make set a trajectory in my life for future choices**. So, the further down the road I go in bad habits, the stronger (and often more severe) those habits become in my life. Similarly, the more choices I make toward good habits and practices, the stronger those become in my life. I’m setting myself up for future choices.

This is where spiritual rhythms or disciplines (maybe, again, some terms that you don’t like) can be of great benefit to us. They become the environment and the framework that allows us to make better choices in individual circumstances. They set us up for success. They train us in times when we’re not making a choice so that, when the time comes, we are prepared.

To channel my inner John Rosensteel, *you put in hours and hours of practice, so that, when the game is on the line, you make the shot.*

This would be my biggest challenge for you today. Once you’ve wrestled with the tension of the language in this passage, and can trust that following and obeying Jesus is a good thing, think through how you need to *work out your salvation*—how to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ—and then introduce a new rhythm in your life that will, over time, set you up well to do that. Give yourself plenty of grace in it all. You probably won’t mess it up any worse than I have.

And trust that God is at work in your life, both to will and to act. He hasn’t given up on you; He’ll never forsake you. He constantly has an invitation open to you to step further into the life of Christ.