

Same Mind, Same Love, Same Joy (Part 6)

Philippians 2:12-18

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So far in Philippians Paul wants to direct our thoughts to focus on the progress of the gospel that tells us that Jesus is the King, to focus on that which is eternal rather than temporal, to set aside petty differences, and to act humbly towards each other, putting others before ourselves. It's a tall order, and while Paul exhorts us to take responsibility to think this way, he also stresses that it's not by our own strength but by God working in us. It's God who convicts us and enables us to obey, but we must also allow Him to work in us without resisting, submitting ourselves and committing to this transformation. We must work with God, who works in us.

In Philippians 2:12 we get the sense that although the Philippians have obeyed this command to be humble when Paul was present and also absent, Paul encourages them to continue in obedience. Obedience requires first listening to the word of God, and then submitting our lives to it in response. In this specific case, it means living out the humility that Jesus exemplified for us. In v. 12 Paul tells them to continue working out their salvation with fear and trembling. This is not saying that we need to work in order to be saved, or that we need to fear losing our salvation if we fail to do good works. Rather, it is simply telling us that we must take seriously the work that we are called to, the work that comes from already being saved. We aren't saved by good works, but rather for good works. Good works are the response and product of our salvation. Let us take seriously the new life we are given in Jesus and live accordingly. When we first accepted Jesus, most of us probably had a strong desire to be transformed, molded like clay in the hands of a potter. But over time the clay dries out and hardens. We must rekindle this desire to live a changed life.

However, we are not working alone. In v. 13 Paul says that it is God working in us. We need His power to change because humility is not natural to any of us. It is our default to look out for number one. At my first job there was high turnover, which burdened the team with having to retrain new hires frequently. But it had become accepted, much as it is today, that people will always be moving to new jobs looking for advancement, regardless of the consequences for their previous employers. People naturally think of themselves first. It's just like on the plane when they instruct you to put your oxygen mask on before helping others. Although there is a practical reason for this, it just highlights how counterintuitive Paul's

command to put others first is. We need help to do what is counter to our instincts. And this help comes from God. He works in us, energizing us by changing our will and our ability. He both convicts and enables us. Let us subject ourselves to His working in us.

Earlier Paul gave Jesus as the ultimate example of humility. Now in vv. 14-16 he gives an example of how not to behave. Through the phrases “grumbling or disputing” and “crooked and twisted generation” Paul alludes to Israel’s rebellion in the desert (from Exodus 16:7 and Deuteronomy 32:5 respectively). Whereas Jesus served as the perfect example of obedience and humility in the midst of unjust suffering, Israel was the example of disobedience and stubborn pride when they were suffering in the wilderness. We must follow Jesus to succeed where Israel failed. Israel was a very poor witness to the nations because of their constant disobedience and rebellion. In order to witness for God, to shine like stars in this dark world, we must follow the example of Jesus’ humility, not the example of Israel’s stubborn disobedience. Here Paul combines all his previous exhortations. When we humbly put others before ourselves, with our eyes focused on eternity, we will advance the gospel. The gospel progresses not only by proclamation, but by how we live. Our lives should not undermine the message we proclaim. We must both tell people about Jesus and also show them who Jesus is. The world will see God’s power working in us as we follow Jesus’ example by putting the needs of others first. In our weekly bulletin we have a new section where we can post our needs and our capacity to meet others’ needs. I encourage you to let me know if you have anything to offer, so that we can use this as a practical way to live out this humility that we are called to, to serve each other in love. Allow God to convict and empower you to put each other before yourselves.