

The Truth about our Tendencies

Humility, Part 7

Philippians 2:12-13

A paradox can be defined as two seemingly contradictory statements where both happen to be true.

Nowhere does that seem to cause so much confusion than with statements that show up in the Bible.

In his commentary on Philippians, John MacArthur writes these interesting words: from the earliest days of the church, the relationship between the power of God and the responsibility of the believers has been debated. Is the Christian life a matter of passive trust or of active obedience? Is it all God's doing, all the believer's doing, or a combination of both? The same question arises, he writes, about salvation itself. Is it all God's doing, or is there a requirement on man's part in response to the command to believe the gospel? Scripture [emphasizes both]; it's clear that salvation involves both God's sovereignty and human response. In John 6:44 Jesus declared, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him"; but then in Acts 16:31, we have the command, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." [Clearly, salvation is the initiation of God's but it always reveals itself in the faith and confession of man]. Salvation is not by human works, yet it is always through personal faith.

He goes on to point out other doctrines that involve seeming paradoxes; such as:

- that Jesus Christ is fully God, yet fully man;
- that scripture was written by human authors, yet it claims to be the inspired word of God;
- that the gospel is offered to the whole world, but applied only to the elect;
- that God eternally secures the believer's salvation, yet the believer is commanded to persevere.

Then he makes this incredibly important observation – and I quote once more; Christians who try to reconcile every doctrine in a humanly rational way are inevitably drawn to extremes.ⁱ

I've found that to be so true over the years. It might be prophecy or election or free will or

evangelistic methods or the gifts of the Spirit – one side of the coin can become so much a person's passion that imbalance is the net result.

And it seems to so often tie into a person's attempt to get rid of any sense of paradox – doctrinal tension – and people tend to emphasize one aspect of God's word at the expense of another.

- So that scripture in its entirety isn't God's word, it only contains God's word;
- Or, the gospel isn't really offered to the whole world after all;
- Or, effective evangelism is the result of training and technique;
- Or, eternal security is really all up to the believer – and perseverance means you make sure you hang on.

And as challenging as these issues are to the Bible student, none is perhaps more challenging than the issue of sanctification – growing in your faith and walk with Christ.

I mean, is it up to God to make you grow in your walk and in your faith – or is it up to you?

Which is it?

And the answer is – both.

In a nutshell you can understand sanctification – or spiritual growth – this way: the growth of a believer requires your diligent effort – and it'll never happen without it; but your diligent effort is enabled by the power of God – and it can't happen without that either.ⁱⁱ

This is exactly the paradox presented by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians as he begins to take the attitude and actions of Christ's humility and apply them to the Christian and the church.

So get ready to hear two statements presented in a unanimous voice – let's quickly overview the issue Paul raises in *Philippians 2:12* – notice the last part of the verse – ***work out your salvation with fear and trembling – verse 13. For it is God who is at work in you . . . both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***

Work out your salvation . . . and, God is at work in you.

How's that for a paradox?

So the question remains: Is your Christian walk and growth and service up to you or up to God? And the answer is . . . Yes!

Paul will make no attempt to reconcile these two seeming paradoxical statements in Philippians chapter. But what he will do is move from the example of Christ's humility and begins to apply it to our own lives and hearts.

It will require every ounce of diligence on our part to follow Christ's example. It will require every bit of power on God's part in order for us to follow Christ's example.

One side of the coin will not eliminate the other side.

And Paul happens to know that it will take more than an example on the outside; we're going to need power on the inside. We've studied the example of Christ – we agree with it – we are amazed and moved by it – but now – how do we go about practicing it?ⁱⁱⁱ

The very next verse begins to provide that answer.

So then – verse 12a.

This opening particle in the Greek language, *hoste* (ὥστε), is used to draw a conclusion (or application) from the preceding verses.^{iv}

In other words, the example of Christ's humility and obedience – given to us in verses 5-11 are now going to be Paul's primary application.

Notice how tenderly Paul adds the term – ***So then, my beloved.***

Paul isn't saying, "Hey you . . . yes, I'm talking to you people in Philippi who need to grow up and work it out."

No . . . ***my beloved.***

Paul models a kind shepherd who understands the disappointments of the Philippian believers – he knows the conflicts they're facing; he knows their fears and their needs and he fully understands an adversarial culture where the gospel is anything but appreciated.

One author writes, Paul is not delivering some sort of indifferent, uncaring directive – he is affectionately calling them to follow Christ's example of humility and obedience.^v

As I have read and reread and reread these two verses of Paul's opening application, it struck me that Paul is insightfully pulling out the challenges we face in growing up in Christ – he's actually drawing out, in a very kind manner, the truth about our tendencies.

We all have certain tendencies that get in the way of humility and obedience; so as we go through this text, the points of my outline will put into words what Paul is kindly and affectionately, yet carefully pointing out – and what Paul points out effectively provides solutions to our sanctification process as we grow in humility and obedience.

First, Paul is implying the truth that:

1. We have a tendency to stray

Look at verse 12 again, So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence . . .

Stop there for a moment – can you hear what is graciously suggesting – you have obeyed my authority when I was with you – now be very careful and even more diligent to be obedient while I'm away.

Like an experienced mother or father . . . it's one thing for children to obey when you're around . . . it's an entirely different challenge when they aren't around.

It is one thing for a child to share his toys and behave when Mommy's standing at arms-length . . . even at that it isn't a perfect score.

It's another thing to behave when Mommy leaves the room

Listen, Paul implies here to these believers in Philippi – grownups have the same problem.

Is anybody watching?

I flew to Florida this past week to speak at a Bible college and noticed just when you're supposed to slow down to a crawl before entering the terminal parking area; they've parked a patrol car right there at the intersection. It's happened to me several times. I mean, you're coming around that corner not even thinking and all of sudden your heart skips a beat because right there is a patrol car. But then you realize the patrol car is empty. That's just not right!

They've got another one parked right over here at the pharmacy . . . it's as if they know where I'm going to be driving!

And it isn't fair . . .

I read this past week where one State Trooper was sitting on the side of the interstate aiming his radar gun – it was resting on his arm, while he just sat there . . . cars everywhere were slowing down . . . he admitted to a reporter that it wasn't a radar gun after all – it was his wife's hair blower. He'd

forgotten his radar gun and just wanted to slow traffic down so he brought the hairdryer from home.

There's just something wrong about that.

No . . . it's a good thing!

It happens to be what one author called "the pressure of presence".^{vi}

And that's a good thing. The pressures of authorial presence has a way of keeping us in line – or reminding us when we haven't.

Like one author who retold an incident one morning as she was hurrying their 11-year-old daughter to school. She writes, "I stopped at a red light at an intersection and then turned right on red where it was prohibited. "Uh, oh," I said out loud, realizing my mistake. "I just made an illegal turn."

My daughter looked behind us and then up at me and said, "Oh it's all right, the police car behind us just did the same thing."^{vii}

A reminder was on the way.

Paul effectively says to the Philippians, you've been *obedient* in my presence, but now I want you to obey while even more so when the pressure of *my* presence isn't there in Philippi.

The word Paul uses for obedient here is a compound word that has to do with listening. In fact, the word is used for someone answering the door – to act as a result of hearing, or listening.^{viii}

In other words, Paul says, "You've always been careful to listen to the truth – make sure you obey it even if I'm not there telling you all over again."

He's not patronizing them . . . he's just pointing out something that happens to be the truth.

And unlike little children, or misbehaving motorists, we evidence spiritual growth by how we behave when no one's looking – or to put it even more crudely, we behave even when we can get away with misbehaving.

- A growing reputation is based on how you act when people are watching
- Growing in sanctification is how you act when people are not watching

As we mature in our sanctification, the pressure of presence moves from an external authority like a parent or a policeman, to an internal Authority who happens to be the Spirit of God.

In a very real sense, growing in our sanctification means we are coming to understand and submit to the *pressure of the presence of God*.

He's watching. And that's a good thing – because we have a tendency to stray.

Secondly:

2. We have a tendency to stall

Look at verse 12b again, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling

By the way, make sure you understand that Paul is writing to Christians. He isn't defining how you get salvation; he's referring to how you demonstrate salvation.

Did you notice that Paul does not say here, "Work *for* your salvation" or "work *up* your salvation" or "work *toward* your salvation"; no, he writes, "work out your salvation".^{ix}

Live it out!

Paul is effectively saying, "Growing as a Christian is going to require a daily *work out* – are you willing? God is! In fact His willingness is already at work within you so that whenever you're prepared to engage, His power is prepared to enable.

Paul specifically tells the growing believer to work out their *salvation*.

Keep in mind that throughout the New Testament, we are given three dimensions of salvation.

- a. The **past dimension** for every believer is that of justification – our redemption and inclusion into the family of God by faith in Christ alone. That is past tense and forever settled and secure.
- b. There is a **future dimension**, John writes, where after our death or perhaps sooner by means of the rapture of the completed church, we will see Him face to face and become like Him in perfected glorified bodies (*I John 3:2*).
- c. Now the time between our past salvation at our new birth – and our future salvation at our glorified eternal state – there is this **present salvation**.^x

We can call this present dimension of salvation – sanctification.

This is the process of spiritual growth Paul is referring to here in *Philippians 2:12*.

I have heard these three dimensions referred to in a manner worth repeating:

- Our past salvation saved us forever from the *penalty* of sin – He bore our penalty on the tree
- Our future salvation will save us forever from the *presence* of sin – that'll be gone forever.

- Our present salvation is saving us from the *power* of sin; one temptation at a time where we have the ability to say “no”; and that’s an ongoing process with ups and down, forwards and backwards, mountain tops and valleys, homeruns and strikeouts along the way.

This **present salvation** is the process of sanctification where the believer is being challenged to demonstrate his growth in Christ, having been redeemed in the past and on his way to being glorified in the future.

Paul compels them to work so *much more*. In other words, don’t slow down – don’t stop.

Now, the reason Paul is encouraging these believers from stalling, is the use of his verb – **to work**.

The verb Paul uses (κατεργαζομαι) literally means to work on *to the finish* . . . it has the idea of making progress *toward completing the goal*.^{xi}

And what is the goal Paul would have in mind here? Within this application context, Paul is exhorting them to demonstrate the humility of Jesus Christ, and obedience to the will of God the Father.

And don’t stop, he urges them onward, don’t stop halfway. Finish!^{xii}

The goal is the attitude of humility in Christ and the finish line is the completion of His work in us when we are glorified in Christ through death or the rapture.

Again, Paul is a gracious encourager. He knows that finishing something is lot harder than starting something:

- A lot of Christians decide to read through the Bible in a year; which is why the Book of Genesis is the most read book of the entire Bible. It isn’t long until you hit the Book Staying at it is different.
- People can enter a graduate program – nearly 50% never graduate. Finishing is difficult.
- People can start violin lessons at the age of 8 – not very many are still playing at the age of 38.

If you want to explore an illustration of this tendency, the biography of Nehemiah, the Jewish leader who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem that had been entirely destroyed for generations provides an excellent example. You will discover in reading his memoirs that the greatest threats from his enemies along with his most discouraging moments in his

service occurred when the walls of Jerusalem were halfway built.

Halfway!

Perhaps like no other time in the completion of any project, the temptation to quit is never stronger than when you’ve worked so hard and yet you are only halfway finished. There’s no more likely time to throw in the towel . . . or to simply stall than after you’ve accomplished something for the Lord, or you’ve taken steps of faith, or you’ve weathered one storm and you see yet another storm approaching.

Perhaps this is why Paul uses this verb – to work out – as a present tense imperative. Paul is literally commanding us to *continually* keep at it . . . keep on working, all the way to the finish line, our walk with Christ.

By the way, this verb was used in Paul’s day for someone working in a mine, deep below ground in order to reach the precious gems; it was also used for working a field – in order to win the greatest harvest possible.^{xiii}

An idle farmer who stalls after planting and wants little to do with weeding and fertilizing and guarding his crops should never expect much of a harvest.

A miner who shrugs off the hard work in the dim light of those cramped conditions in that thankless cavern will never expect to find gold, or silver, or diamonds.

So, don’t give up as you work through the redundancy of planting and weeding, don’t stop digging no matter the cramped conditions of a thankless cave.

Eugene Peterson calls this the long obedience in the same direction. [Staying at it]; when the path of obedience becomes steep and [difficult] or even dangerous, pleasure seekers look for an easier way; religious tourists hunting for entertainment, instantaneous enlightenment, emotional excitement will jump on the newest rides and take the quickest shortcuts; but they will not be found with [those believers] on the long, hard road following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who – as Paul applies here – was obedient to death, even death on a cross.^{xiv}

Death to self – obeying Christ over the long haul – waiting on the final resolution of all things in the glorious kingdom of God; with humility and obedience, waiting and still working on toward the goal of His glory? Is that what growing in our sanctification means? Yes!

And as soon as you take a step or two in that direction, the Enemy in your flesh hears the Enemy

from Hell whisper in your ear – aren't you something!

I mean, how rare you are in the body of Christ . . . there aren't a lot of Christians nearly as dedicated as you! They aren't even off the dime yet – and you get it – you see the big picture.

Aren't you special!

With that tendency in mind, Paul moves on to remind us that we not only:

- have a tendency to stray;
- and a tendency to stall;

3. Thirdly, we have a tendency to strut

We tend to showboat and swagger . . . especially when we're advancing or accomplishing something good.

So Paul adds here a perspective that will help us from getting too caught up with our progress in sanctification; *verse 12 – work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*

He didn't write, with gloating and self-congratulation, but with *fear and trembling.*

This is Old Testament terminology that references God as our audience. Fear and trembling is another way of saying to be in awe of and in deep respect for the glory and holy perfection of God.

The word *fear* here is phobos which means terror and the word for *trembling* is the word tromos which gives us our word – tremor.^{xv}

Isaiah used this for the humble person who trembles at God's word (*Isaiah 66:2*).

To *fear and tremble* carries the idea of reverential fear and a holy concern to treat God with the honor He deserves.^{xvi}

One Greek scholar centuries ago wrote that this phrase "to fear and tremble" means that you have a trembling anxiousness to do right.^{xvii}

You simply want to get it right . . . and because of the greatness and holiness and majesty of God; you want to depend upon Him in just the right way.

One of the things I do around the house is to change the light bulbs. I'm not very good at fixing things, but I've got to do something to get my allowance, so I change the light bulbs. The problem is, sometimes the light bulb sticks in the socket and it doesn't want to come out and as I'm turning it, the glass bulb separates from the base of the light bulb – and now I've got a real problem on my hands.

I've learned by experience that I can't touch the base of that bulb unless the power is off. That is,

unless I want to become a brighter testimony than ever imagined.

So I've come to understand over time that it's a good thing to have a healthy respect for electricity. I don't know about you, but I have a sense of fear and trembling anxiousness to get it right.

Now I also happen to appreciate electricity. It has revolutionized the way I live – and I happen to be incredibly grateful for it; but I don't ever want to approach it in the wrong way; or treat it casually; or handle it without a sense of humility and respect.

It has more invisible power than I can ever imagine.

Paul effectively writes here, work out your salvation with that same kind of awe and respect and humility before God, who is your audience; He has revolutionized the way you live; you greatly appreciate Him but you never want to be disrespectful in approaching Him – or walking with Him.

He's far more powerful than we can ever imagine. And so with trembling anxiousness to live right, you work out your salvation before Him.

This kind of attitude effectively combats any temptation to strut, doesn't it?

I mean, how or why in the world would anybody even begin to showboat and swagger in the body of Christ. That would be like trying to show off how good you are around the house by sticking your finger in an electrical socket.

Work out your salvation with humble respect and awe . . . no one struts in the presence of the glory of God.

But since we do have the tendency . . . Paul delivers the reminder.

We have a tendency to stray;

We have a tendency to stall;

We have a tendency to strut;

4. We have a tendency to steal

In other words, we have a tendency to take the credit – to craft idols out of our accomplishments.

Paul reminds us here that the credit and the glory must never be stolen or claimed by any of us – *why? Because, verse v.13. for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

Pride – which is nothing more than stealing the credit from God – was already nibbling away in the church at Philippi. Paul is attempting to cut it away by showing the example of humility in and through

the life and death of Christ; he will deal with selfish contention later on as well.

And Paul reminds them, here, *it is God who is at work in you, both to will and do of His good pleasure.*

Here's the paradox – we are commanded to work outwardly – but now we're told that what we work outwardly as a result of God working inwardly.

Which, in the context of humility, is Paul's way of reminding us that God *alone* deserves the credit because ultimately He was at work in us – *both to will* (to want) *and to do* (to act).

I mean how humbling is that?

“How'd you accomplish that?” The right answer is, “God did it through me.”

“How'd you come up with that idea?” “God impressed that on my heart.”

“Where'd you get that wonderful desire from?”

“God gave it to me.”

Come on, isn't that just religious jargon? Isn't that Sunday morning vocabulary? I mean, do you really believe that?

Paul would say, “Oh yes, I do!”

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me (Colossians 1:29).

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Can you say that with Paul? It happens to be some of the most telling evidence of your growth in sanctification.

Anything good that I desired was a desire He put in me. Anything good that I did was something He did through me.

Ultimately, it is *God who is at work.*

I love the word Paul uses here for *work* to clearly make this point.

It's a different word than when he told us earlier in *verse 12* to *work out* our salvation.

Here, in this phrase – *it is God who is at work* – the word changes to *energeo* (ενεργεω) which gives us our word energy.

Which again, creates this wonderful paradox. God the infinite Worker, empowers you to do His work. And, as one author put it, when our work is empowered by His work, our work becomes an expression of His work.^{xviii}

Herein lays the tension:

- God isn't going to make you open your Bible and study it;
- He isn't going to kick you out of bed and into a discipleship group;
- He isn't going to fill out the form and drive you to a meeting for youth leaders or to choir practice or to volunteer in the nursery;
- He isn't going to make you save money for a trip overseas;
- He isn't going to make you testify of His grace to your neighbor.

His work in us and for us does not eliminate our responsibility to work for Him.

And yet,

- When we do work – it is through His energizing strength to do what is right; which doesn't make obedience easy, but it does make it possible;
- And when we desire to act – we understand that it was first and foremost His desire
- And when we accomplish it – it is for His good pleasure and for His glory.

And as a result, we steal none of that for ourselves; but humbly thank Him for the privilege of laboring for Him and with Him and by means of Him.

This is the truth about our tendencies:

We have a tendency to stray. So stay alert!

Paul isn't here to whisper in your ear – your close friends in the Lord aren't seated with you in front of the television or in front of the computer.

When you aren't pressured by the presence of an authority – how will you act? Stay alert to that greater danger.

We have a tendency to stall. So stay the course.

In fact, put on more coal and add more steam – don't slow down – don't throw in the towel – work through the half-way challenges of redundancy and weariness; keep up the daily work-out of your salvation

We have a tendency to strut. So stay fearfully respectful in His presence and aware of His unimaginable power and greatness.

We have a tendency to steal. So stay grateful that He has chosen to work in you and through you for His good pleasure – and the energy came from Him and glory belong to Him alone. This happens

to be one of the reasons we will take our rewards at the Bema and place them at His feet.

It was His work, after all. He alone deserves eternal, unending praise and honor and glory.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/12/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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