

Work Out Your Salvation

- - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.
Philippians 2:12b NIV

What does it mean to “work out your salvation”? Does the Apostle Paul say that one has to struggle “with fear and trembling” to be sure we are saved? Christians often act as though that is true.

We make countless rules with the hope that faithfully keeping our list of "Do's" and "Don'ts" will qualify us for salvation. Each church has its own list, 'tho frequently unspoken.

Good works beckon us, offering to become the basis of our eternal presence with Jesus. Don't we all know that doing good to others is like adding weight to the "in" side of the scales?

There are the Christians formulas that we love so much – the 1-2-3 kind of fix for typical human weaknesses. Theological precision shouts at us too. In order to feel secure we become precise about our theology, majoring on the minors and distancing ourselves from fellow believers.

None of the above can bring eternal life. Good works are a necessary evidence of salvation, but while they may impact the measure of our eternal reward they are never its source. Christian formulas do a better job of selling books and making authors rich, than making Christians holy. And most of the stuff we fight about across the Christian church won't be worth didly in the end.

The greatest tragedy is that all of these approaches give false security. When they become the supposed basis of our salvation they actually draw us *away* from God. Eternal life is His gift*, to be received gratefully by faith and felt deeply enough that it changes us on the inside and reshapes how we look on the outside.

You probably didn't notice that I used the NIV at the top, which is similar to the King James and others that so easily convey a misconception here. The New Living Translation has it right, I think, so I didn't use it until now! It says, "- - put into action God's saving work in your lives, obeying God with deep reverence and fear."

Paul is not saying that we need to figure out how to *get* saved. He is saying that now that we *are* saved, we need to apply it in our everyday life. In relationships, finances, physical needs, areas of temptation and more. "It is a whole new way of life – work out how your salvation applies to your everyday experiences. And take it seriously!"

It's a bit like this. We can teach someone principles, but their benefit will be limited until they are worked out in practical situations. It is similar to teaching someone to fly. I can give them all kinds of theory about how to handle a crosswind on takeoff or landing, but ultimately they must develop their own sense of feel and timing. I can't impart that to them. They must work it out for themselves.

To a certain degree you can teach swimming strokes in the classroom, but they will need to be applied in the water before they are of any use. If you read the first part of Philippians 2 you will see the incredible challenge that Paul had laid out for them. He was reaching deep into their hearts and attitudes and was calling them to apply their salvation in the most difficult situations of life.

James carries it a step further in James 2:14-26. He says we must *prove* our salvation by the way we work it out in life. Throughout the book he offers one scenario after another in which to do that.

We are called to the same. If we are Christians, our salvation will profoundly shape relationships; our work ethic; driving habits; giving to others – and every other setting we are part of such as family, school and more.

Our embracing the principle of Philippians 2:12b is what will confirm Christianity to the skeptics and unbelievers around us who are looking for something authentic and practical to believe in. All else turns them away from our Lord Jesus.

* See John 1:12, John 3:16-21, 3:36, Romans 3:22-28, Galatians 2:16, Galatians 3

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