

# Working Out What God Works In

## *Trusting and Acting*

Salvation is everything that God has done in Christ to rescue us from sin and Satan. Our focal text in the last study, Ephesians 2:8–10, shows us that salvation is *by grace* (the basis) *through faith* (the means) *for good works* (the result). As we think about how salvation is made real in our lives, the next question is this—What is the relationship between faith and works? In other words, whose job is spiritual growth? What am I supposed to do, and what should I trust God to do? Some people believe that God does it all as we simply wait on him to transform our lives. At the other extreme, you’ll find people who focus almost exclusively on willpower and activity. The biblical truth lies between these two extremes of complete passivity and stubborn self-reliance. In Behaving 1 we will explore the habit of trusting and acting and how they work together to connect us to God.

The relationship between faith and works can be confusing. Consider the apparent contradiction between what Paul says and what James says:

### Galatians 2:16

So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

vs.

### James 2:24

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

## 36 Life Essentials

### BELIEVING

- Authority of the Bible
- Triune God
- Great and Good God
- Humanity
- Satan and Sin
- Jesus Christ
- Salvation
- Holy Spirit
- The Church
- Transformation
- Mission
- The End

### BEHAVING

- Studying the Bible
- Fellowshipping
- Worshipping
- Seeking the Kingdom
- Waging Spiritual War
- Following

### ► Trusting and Acting

- Walking by the Spirit
- Serving
- Praying
- Engaging the World
- Persevering

### BECOMING

- Truth
- Love
- Purity
- Rest
- Freedom
- New Identity in Christ
- Assurance
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Humility
- Peace
- Compassion
- Hope

## THE POWER OF WORDS

**“work out”**—This word means to “do” or “produce” or “accomplish” something. In the New Testament we are assured that suffering “produces” perseverance (Rom. 5:3), and we read about what Christ has “accomplished” through the apostle Paul (Rom. 15:18). The word translated “work out” here in Philippians 2 is a command. Although we can do nothing to save ourselves, we are not merely passive spectators. The Christian faith is not an “auto-pilot” kind of faith. Instead, we are to be active and involved in allowing God to do his mighty work in us.

Well, are people justified by faith or by what they do? If you read Galatians and James carefully, you will notice that the context helps to answer this question. In Galatians, Paul is facing a situation where people are thinking about replacing the gospel of grace with a false gospel based on religious works. Paul’s point is that we can be justified only by relying on the work of Christ and not by trusting in our own ability. James, on the other hand, is talking to people who think that faith and works can be separated (2:18). James stresses that real faith results in good works or it is not real faith. In reality, Paul and James are like two soldiers standing back to back fighting the same enemy. You may notice as you read these two letters that both Paul and James use Abraham as an illustration of true faith (Gal. 3:6–9; James 2:21–24). Abraham trusted God and lived out that trust by his actions.

### A Closer Look—Philippians 2:12–13

To get a feel for the immediate context, read a few paragraphs before and after Philippians 2:12–13, our focal passage for this study. The word “therefore” in 2:12 points back to 2:1–11 (Jesus’ humiliation-exaltation), a section we considered in Believing 1.

1. Why do you suppose that 2:12–13 comes immediately after 2:1–11? What is the relationship between these two sections?

Now look carefully at the text below and highlight significant words, important commands, purpose statements (e.g., “for . . .” in v. 13), crucial prepositional phrases (e.g., “with fear and trembling”), and so on. Use the margins to make comments, show connections, or ask questions.

<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 according to his good purpose.

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

## Crossing the Bridge

As you cross the bridge from the ancient world to our world, what timeless theological principles do you see reflected in Philippians 2:12–13?

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## Partnering with God

C. S. Lewis comments on this whole issue of faith and works and Philippians 2:

There are two parodies of the truth which different sets of Christians have, in the past, been accused by other Christians of believing. . . . One set were accused of saying “Good actions are all that matters. The best good action is charity. The best kind of charity is giving money. The best thing to give money to is the Church. So hand us over \$10,000 and we will see you through.” The answer to that nonsense, of course, would be that good actions done for that motive, done with the idea that Heaven can be bought, would not be good actions at all, but only commercial speculations.

The other set were accused of saying, “Faith is all that matters. Consequently, if you have faith, it doesn’t matter what you do. Sin away, my lad, and have a good time and Christ will see that it makes no difference in the end.” The answer to that nonsense is that, if what you call your “faith” in Christ does not involve taking the slightest notice of what He says, then it is not Faith at all—not faith or trust in Him, but only intellectual acceptance of some theory about Him.

The Bible really seems to clinch the matter when it puts the two things together into one amazing sentence. The first half is “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”—which looks as if everything depended on us and our good actions: but the second half goes on, “For it is God who works in you”—which looks as if God did everything and we nothing. . . . You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate into water-tight compartments, what exactly God does and what man does when God and man are working together. And, of course, we begin by thinking it is like two men working together, so that you could say, “He did this bit and I

## What Is Spiritual Formation?

Remember our definition of spiritual formation from the introduction?

Spiritual formation is the process of allowing the Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.

Try to put into words why each element is vital:

- “process”
- “allowing”
- “Holy Spirit”
- “conform”
- “image of Jesus Christ”

## No Verb for Faith?

Have you ever noticed that there is no English verb that corresponds to the English noun “faith”? We don’t say “I faith God.” We have to say “I believe in God.” Do you think this language difference has contributed to our confusion about the relationship between faith and works? If so, how?



### Smooth Sailing

Think about the difference between a motor boat and a sailboat. In a motor boat I'm in control. I start the engine, control the speed, and go wherever I want. Sailing is different. When I'm sailing, I'm not passive, I have a role to play—I hoist the sails and steer with the rudder—but I'm utterly dependent on the wind. There's no room for believing I'm in control, because if the wind doesn't blow, I'm dead in the water. When the wind blows, on the other hand, amazing things can happen. . . . The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is powerful and mysterious [like the wind]. We can't control or manufacture it. It's not about us coming up with a program with predictable results we control. On the other hand, we're not passive. Our job is to discern where the wind of the Spirit is blowing and know how to catch it.

—John Ortberg,  
"Spiritual Growth" sermon

did that." But this way of thinking breaks down. God is not like that. He is inside you as well as outside. (*Mere Christianity*, 131–32)

God is at work within us, and he invites us to join him in the process. Make no mistake, spiritual growth is a lifelong process rather than a one-time event. In Philippians 3:1–14 and especially in verses 12–13 Paul talks about the process of spiritual growth. "I have not arrived," Paul says. But one thing he has learned to do—forget the past and press on toward the future that God has for him. The greatest danger as you take the journey is simply giving up or quitting. But be warned, spiritual formation is not optional. Everyone is being formed by someone or something. Because God has given us freedom, we can choose who or what will form us. Will it be the triune God who made us and loved us in Christ even while we were completely unlovable, or will it be forces opposed to God?

### So What?

1. Has there ever been a time in your life when you knew that God was "at work in you"? How did you know?
2. Where and how is God at work in your life right now?
3. At this point in your life, what are the biggest obstacles to "working out your salvation" (i.e., allowing God to work in your life)?

4. What helps you “work out your salvation” without drifting into legalism? How do you *work out* your faith without that growing feeling that you have to *work for* certain things or God will no longer accept you?
5. As a community of believers, what specific things can you do to help individual members grasp and experience even more the reality of “working out your salvation”? What about the reality of God being at work in you?
6. What is the ultimate goal of spiritual growth anyway?

### Faith?

There are three dimensions to biblical faith:

1. Intellectual faith, or belief (head), as in 1 John 4:1: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”
2. Emotional faith, or trust (heart), as in 1 Peter 1:8: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”
3. Volitional faith, or action (hands), as in Romans 1:5: “Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”

### Cross-References

Rom. 6; 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; 15:10; 2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:12–14; 1 Thess. 1:3; 4:3–7; 2 Thess. 2:13–17; Heb. 10:9–14; 12:14; 13:20–21; James 2:14–26; 1 Peter 1:15–19; 2:1–3; 2 Peter 3:18; 1 John 3:2–3

### For Deeper Study

Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. *How People Grow*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline*. 25th anniversary ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

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