

Book: *Philippians*
Series: *Rejoice in the Lord!*
Lesson 8: *Acting the Miracle: God's Part and Our Part in Sanctification*
Text: Philippians 2:12-13
Date: October 27, 2013 (SF)
November 3, 2013 (ABF)

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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Next Lesson: Philippians 2:14-18



TEACHING TIP

In this lesson, we will pause on just two verses—Philippians 2:12-13—in order (1) to more fully understand the mysterious and powerful truth discovered here and (2) to use these verses to empower our application of everything we've considered in 1:1-2:11.

The brunt of this lesson (including our title) is taken from a sermon preached by John Piper on February 24, 2011 entitled, "I Act the Miracle."¹ We won't study these verses "word by word" as much as we will simply let Piper's guidance hone us in on the point of this passage and its application to our lives. Quotation marks will be used whenever Piper is being quoted directly (which may be frequently).

INTRODUCTION

Paul wrote in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ." That verse reminds us that there is a "gospel walk." There is a way of life that is (or is not) "in step with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14). The reason for this is that "what happened on the cross of Christ not only cancels the sin and completes the perfection that grounds our justification but, in doing that, also unleashes the power of our sanctification." Put another way, the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), not only from sin's penalty (justification), but also from sin's power and practice (sanctification). So, the "gospel walk" is living in such a way that activates and enjoys the gospel's power to rescue from sin's ongoing influence.

Thus, a tension appears in sanctification, between my part (letting my manner of life be worthy) and God's part (accomplishing the power of the gospel within me). According to MacArthur, "From the earliest days of the church, the relationship between the power of God and the responsibility of believers in living the Christian life has been debated. Is the Christian life essentially 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?"²

Our passage (and many others) addresses that tension. Again, MacArthur writes, "In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul presents the appropriate resolution between the believer's part and God's part in sanctification. Yet he makes no effort to rationally harmonize the two. He is content with the incomprehensibility and simply states both truths, saying, in effect, that, on the one hand, sanctification is of believers (v. 12) and on the other hand, it is of God (v. 13)."³ Therefore, Jim Berg calls sanctification "a cooperative venture between God and man."

The purpose of this lesson is to delve a little bit deeper into this mysterious cooperation, to fully understand our part in it, and to recognize how that applies to the areas already addressed by Paul in this epistle. Our lesson will not follow an outline, but will rather build one thought upon the next, helping us progress in our understanding of these two juxtaposed verses.

CANCELLATION FIRST, THEN CONQUERING

Charles Wesley writes in his hymn, "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing," "He breaks the power of cancelled sin." In that phrase, he teaches us a fundamental Bible truth about the connection between Christ's cross-work and our battle against sin. That truth is underlined when contrasted with a different writing of that phrase. Wesley didn't write, "He cancels the guilt of broken [conquered] sin." Says Piper, "There would be no gospel and no music if we tried to sing [that]." No, according to inscripturated gospel, summarized by Wesley in his hymn, there is first the cancellation of sin and then the conquering of it!

MY EMPOWERED WILL

As we build upon that happy reality, we discover that the connection between Christ's cancellation of my sin and my conquering of that sin is my empowered will. "The way the cross becomes effective in my conquering cancelled sin is by *empowering my will to oppose sin in my life.*" Ephesians 2:1-3 paints the picture of a deadened will, completely enslaved to the directions of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Such a corrupted, enslaved, deadened will had no ability to fight and conquer sin. It was powerless against that which, remaining uncanceled, reigned with dominion within the heart.

Ah, but when "the power of God unto salvation" was brought to bear upon that individual, cancelling his debt to that master (Colossians 2:13-15) and reconciling him unto God (Colossians 1:21-22), what life and power was breathed into him (Ephesians 2:4-10), and his will, now made new, benefitted thereby! He can now willfully follow Christ, side with obedient righteousness, and turn away from evil (Romans 7:25).

Consider some key passages that illustrate how our wills have been empowered to conquer sin due to the cancellation of such sin at the cross.

- "We have been united with Him in a death like His" (Romans 6:5; see also Romans 7:4; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3). Therefore, "You also must consider yourselves dead to sin" (Romans 6:11), and "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body" (Romans 6:12).
- "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Therefore, "Glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20).
- "God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Therefore, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another" (Ephesians 4:32).

These verses validate two conclusions:

1. “*The decisive impulse* for my holiness and my sin-killing is the death of Christ. Which means that the decisive power for our conquering sin is Christ’s canceling sin.”
2. “The link between the cross and my conquered sin is *my empowered will*—my will, engaged to fight sin with blood-bought power. I say that because in each of these three cases the statement of my death, my purchase, and my forgiveness was made the cause of a command addressed to my will....Those commands are addressed to me. They engage my will.”

Other passages in Scripture make it clear that the way in which the cross empowers our will is through its blood-bought, New Covenant gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5-6). Thus, “the link between the cross and my conquered sin is a Holy-Spirit empowered will.”

- “Romans 7:6—‘We died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.’ *I serve in the newness of the Spirit.*”
- Romans 8:13—‘By the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body.’ *I put sin to death, by the Spirit.*”
- Galatians 2:20—‘I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.’ *The life I now live . . . Christ lives in me.*”
- 1 Peter 4:11—‘Whoever serves, let him do it as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.’ *I serve, but in the strength that God supplies. And it is a blood-bought supply.*”

- 1 Corinthians 15:10—‘By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.’ *I worked, but it was the grace of God that was working in my working.*”

Thus, “the link between the cross and the conquered sin in my life is my Holy-Spirit empowered will.”

“GOSPEL VIGILANCE”

What all this means is that “God intends that part of our experience of sanctification be the conscious, willed opposition to specific sins in our lives” (the other part being God simply taking away some desire and temptation). “None of [the commands in the verses above] would be in the Bible if God did not intend that some sins be defeated by conscious opposition from our wills in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This parallels what we saw in 2 Peter 1:5-7. Verse 5 is a command addressed to our will (as all commands are, for we chose whether or not we will obey them). We are commanded to “make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue” etc. However, this command is headed with the phrase, “For this very reason,” reminding us that verses 1-4 serve as the grounds, the reason, the cause for verses 5-7. It is exactly because “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” and because “He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature” that we can and should add to our faith excellence.

These several passages, then, including our text in this lesson, call us to a “gospel vigilance”—what Peter O’Brien calls a “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” against besetting sin.⁴

Contrast such a gospel-produced approach to battling besetting sin with the mindset that many of us easily default to. We often think, mistakenly, that our sins “should be defeated more spontaneously [in the moment when they appear as temptation],

[that] it should all happen naturally from the inside out.” The process, as we imagine it, is that in the moment of temptation, we should have enough spiritual fortitude to boldly refuse sin out of a greater love for Jesus Christ—that our new hearts should more naturally respond like a new creature and turn from sin to God (cf. Psalm 97:10; Romans 12:9). Otherwise, we think, if we try to attack these sins with our will, “it [will] produce external conformity, not internal change.” Many of us have discovered, however, that instead of naturally responding to temptation with a heavenward look that says, “I love You more,” we have often pushed aside heaven because our affection for sin is still greater.

What a wonderful blessing, then, to remember from the verses we already looked at that God can “break the power of cancelled sin” and that He does so in part through the empowering of our will to oppose sin.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

Philippians 2:12-13 is yet another passage that challenges our will to engage aggressively in sanctification. And it does so with stunning language (even as some of the previous verses). Yet, “As dangerous as this language is, it is biblical.”

1. Man’s part in sanctification (v. 12)

Paul calls us to “work out your own salvation.” This command exhorts our wills to “bring about our salvation,” to “accomplish our salvation,” to “effect or produce our salvation.” While the word “salvation” is probably used here similarly to 1:19 and 28 (and Romans 13:11) to convey an eschatological, climactic sense (i.e., our future and complete salvation), the phrase “work out” demonstrates its daily implications (i.e., salvation from specific sins). O’Brien summarizes the daily dynamic this way, “It involves continually living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27) or ‘the continual translating into action of the principles of the gospel that they had believed’. Paul has in

mind a ‘*continuous, sustained, strenuous effort*’, which is elsewhere described under the imagery of a pursuit, a following after, a pressing on, a contest, a fight, or a race (Phil. 3:12; cf. Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 9:24–27; 1 Tim. 6:12).”⁵

Clearly, our wills are to be “all in” in our “working out” the gospel in every dimension of our lives. The gospel should affect, revise, inform, and change every aspect of our lives, and our Holy Spirit-empowered wills should drive such transformation. This obviously involves perseverance (i.e., “as you have always obeyed” [cf. 1:5] and “not only as in my presence but much more in my absence” [cf. 1:27]) and requires a concentration on our personal conduct, the stakes of which couldn’t be higher (this is the focus of our next lesson in 2:14-18).

The word “therefore” that heads verse 1 once again depicts for us the link between our conquering sin (v. 12) and Christ’s cancelling sin (vv. 5-8). It is only because Christ became “obedient to the point of death...on a cross” (v. 8) that we can “obey” and “work out our own salvation” (v. 12). Thus, verses 5-8 serve both as the enablement and motivation for the “gospel vigilance” of verse 12.

Paul concludes this verse by qualifying his imperative. We must “work out our own salvation” “with fear and trembling.” Our “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” against sin should be done in a spirit of awe, reverence, wonderment, fear, and trepidation. “Fear and trembling” was the response that characterized the Israelites in Exodus 19ff when they were confronted with the undeniable and overpowering power of God on display at Mount Sinai. Why should we have such a sober-minded spirit in our sanctification? The answer lies in verse 13.

2. *God's part in sanctification (v. 13)*

"Fear and trembling" is an appropriate disposition when we fight sin, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Literally, verse 13 reads, "God is the One working in you both the willing and the working for the sake of His good pleasure."

O'Brien again explains the link between these two verses, "This point comes out clearly and explicitly in Phil. 2:12-13: the readers are to fulfil the injunction to work out their own salvation with the utmost seriousness, precisely because God is mightily at work in their midst."⁶ Piper adds,

Why should there be "fear and trembling" as I attack my sin and bring about salvation from [it]? The reason given in the text is not a threat. It's a gift. Work and will to kill your sin, and do it with fear and trembling, because God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, Redeemer, Justifier, Sustainer, Father, Lover is so close to you that your working and willing are His working and willing.

Tremble at this breathtaking thought. God Almighty is in you. God is the one in you willing. God is the one in you working. My "continuous, sustained, strenuous" effort is not only being carried out in the very presence of all-holy God, but is the very continuous, sustained, strenuous effort of God Himself. I am not waiting for a miracle. I am acting a miracle. My action is God's action in fighting my sin. My willing is God's willing.

In another article, Piper writes:

Pick up your sin-killing sword, because God is picking it up with your hands. Wield it because God is wielding it with your hands. Thrust sin through with it, because God is thrusting him through with it. Act the miracle of sin-killing sanctification, for God is willing and doing it in you. This is the mystery of sanctification. "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with

me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). The work of Paul was a wonder of grace. Oh did he work! And when he was done, he said it was all of God. All of grace.

These two verses, then, speak of a cooperation that is much more organic than we typically think or dare hoped.

Illustration: Just as a shadow moves integrally with its object, so our transformed willing and transformed working are the shadow of the willing and working of God Himself. We cannot accomplish any good thing or refuse any evil thing except that God Himself has done it within us; and as our will made that godly decision and action, we witnessed the activity of God Himself accomplishing salvation!

Application: Have you ever worked with a slacker? Perhaps in your workplace or in a class? Do you remember how frustrating it was to have to accomplish that assignment in "cooperation" with someone who wasn't doing their part? Verses 12-13 picture a partnership between you and God. God's part in verse 13 is always being accomplished (cf. 1:6). Are you fulfilling your part? Or, are you slacking? Does your will shadow and mirror God's? Or, is it passive, disengaged, and failing to "work out" the salvation He seeks to "work in" to your life?

APPLICATION: A REVIEW

In its context within this book, these two verses come at an appropriate time. Paul has given several commands, both expressed and implied, many of which are rather tough to obey and really go against the grain of how we are wired. To hope for "naturally arising" victory when we are tempted in these areas is unwise. Instead, Paul here encourages us, "Work out your salvation in those areas. Engage with continuous, sustained, strenuous effort to see the fruits of Jesus Christ characterize these areas."



Application: What are some of these commands—either expressed or implied—that Paul has shared with the Philippian church? Review 1:1-2:11 and list the commands that you find particularly pertinent for yourself. The point is that we ought to be “working out our own salvation” in these specific areas with “continuous, sustained, strenuous” effort, even as God Himself is accomplishing the willing and achieving of sanctification in these areas.

- 1:1-8 — We should have “the affection of Jesus Christ” for brothers and sisters.
 - We should regularly remember our fellow believers.
 - We should regularly pray for our fellow believers.
 - We should regularly thank God for our fellow believers.
 - We should maintain optimism about our fellow believers.
 - We should enjoy an emotional attachment to our fellow believers.
 - We should enjoy partnership with our fellow believers.
 - We should defend and confirm the gospel with our fellow believers.
- 1:9-11 — We should have rich (and discerning) love and practice righteous so that the Lord’s reputation will be exalted. We should also pray those things for other believers.
- 1:12-18 — We should maintain a godly, gospel perspective in challenges.
- 1:18-26 — We should maintain a commitment to purpose in the face of unknown, exalting and enjoying Christ and helping and heartening Christians. Such purpose should be all consuming (i.e., “in your body,” “in life or death”).
- 1:27-30 — We should walk worthy of the gospel with resolve, unity, ministry, and boldness.

- 2:1-11 — We should enjoy unity through humble ministry. We should adopt a lowliness of mind that enjoys one mind, love, and purpose with fellow believers. We should esteem others as more important than ourselves. We should look out for the things of others, sacrificing our rights and rightness. We should have the mind of Christ, humbly obedient unto death.

Each of us is responsible for “working out our own salvation,” for practicing “gospel vigilance,” for applying “continuous, sustained, strenuous” effort in these and countless other areas. But, we have cause to expect victory and not fear defeat, for such willful effort is the shadow of the working of Almighty God within us (cf. 1:6). So, cooperate with God—eagerly, energetically, enduringly—in your sanctification.

APPLICATION: A MODEL

Before we conclude this lesson, we must take our considerations a step further. We have learned (1) that the cancellation of sin at Christ’s cross is the basis for the conquering of our sins, (2) that the link between that cancellation and conquering is our Holy Spirit-empowered will, (3) that God therefore intends for part of our sanctification to be the “conscious, willed opposition” to personal sin, what we could call “gospel vigilance” and describe as “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” against besetting sin, and (4) that any gospel-provoked and godly desires, decisions, and doings we discover in our lives are simply the shadow of the workmanship of God Himself (cf. Ephesians 2:10).

To this point, then, we’ve climaxed our personal responsibility and application with that phrase “‘continuous, sustained, strenuous effort’ against besetting sin.” But now we must take that a step further. Left worded generally that way, with three simple adjectives summarizing our role in sanctification this week, it is still a bit vague as to what that actually looks like or how we actually war a “continuous, sustained, strenuous” warfare against sin. We need a model here, a format to follow, an example of

how some believer actually “worked out their own salvation” with “continuous, sustained, strenuous” effort. Had we started with such a model, format, or example, our obedience probably would have been merely external and legalistic. But, having learned what we have about the nature of the cross and sanctification, we simply desire a model to help our weak and complacent flesh identify what “‘continuous, sustained, strenuous effort’ against besetting sin” looks like in the daily grind.

Elsewhere, Paul provides a striking model for us (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:27). But for our purposes here, we’ll simply consider a contemporary example and a biblical format.

1. *A contemporary example*

While we all recognize that John Piper is just a man, and therefore as sinful, weak, and erring as the rest of us, his personal battle against sin models the “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” that this text elicits. Throughout the years, he has transparently revealed how he pursues God and fights sin by way of acronyms that he calls to mind in the moment of need.⁷ One of those acronyms is ANTHEM, and it reminds us that all sin begins with the mind (i.e., the will, a choice) and must be fought there first.

- **AVOID.**
- Say **NO** within five seconds.
- **TURN** to something magnificent, like Christ crucified.
- **HOLD** the righteous thing in the mind until the sinful thing is gone.
- **ENJOY** the greater pleasure of the blood-bought promises of God.
- **MOVE** on to meaningful Christ-exalting activity.

Thinking this way requires discipline; it requires “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort.” But having a plan like this helps us know what that effort looks like and apply it in the moment when salvation is practically needed.

2. *A biblical format*

Last summer, we studied through *The Armor of God* together and discovered that in that illustrative list God Himself had actually provided us with a mnemonic aid⁸ in our “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” to stand in our spiritual warfare (cf. Ephesians 6:10-18). It’s easy to remember the pieces of the armor, and we summarized the point of each piece as follows:

- **Belt of Truth:** be prepared with truth – *What am I thinking?* THOUGHTS
- **Breastplate of Righteousness:** be practicing righteousness – *What am I choosing?* CHOICES
- **Shoes of the Gospel of Peace:** be proclaiming the gospel – *What am I saying?* MISSION
- **Shield of Faith:** be persuaded in God – *What am I believing?* BELIEF
- **Helmet of Salvation:** be persevering in hope – *What am I seeing?* HOPE
- **Sword of the Spirit:** be permeated with Scripture – *What am I doing?* WORD

From that, we formed our own acronym — TCMBHW or “Through Christ My Battles Have been Won.” The concept is that in the moment of spiritual temptation, when I need to “stand” but am struggling to do so, I need to strengthen myself in the Lord by putting on His armor. The way I do that is by evaluating my thoughts, my choices, my mission, my beliefs, my hope, and my exposure to God’s Word. Again, this kind of effort is not passive, complacent, or intermittent. It is an diligent approach to one’s sanctification that mirrors the very active commitment of God within us.

Philippians 1:12 frees us to be aggressive and strategic in our battle against sin—the sins alluded to by Paul throughout this epistle, and all the other besetting sins that you and I face on a regular basis. Benjamin Franklin is attributed with the proverb,

“Failing to plan is planning to fail,” and this lesson’s consideration of sanctification would agree. We must, with “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort,” “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the One working in us both the willing and working for the sake of His good pleasure.”

APPLICATION: AN ILLUSTRATION

Piper shares a personal illustration of applying “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” to one of his besetting sins.⁹ As he shares it, you’ll notice him using ANTHEM.

Last Sunday evening, it was cozy and snowy and Noël and Talitha and I were home alone. I was looking forward to something we would all do together. Talitha came in from the dining room and said, “Mommy and I are going to watch Super Nanny on the computer.” They set it up on the stool across the room in front of the love seat and started watching. Without me.

*Now at that moment the temptation for anger, self-pity, blaming, and sullenness were as dangerous to my soul as a sexual temptation. So I immediately said **NO** to the rising temptations and quietly went upstairs without any flair of woundedness.*

*In my study, I waged war. I **TURNE**D my mind and heart toward the promises of God, and the surety of the cross, and love of the Father, and wealth of my inheritance, and the blessings of that Lord’s day, and the patience of Christ. And I **HOLD** them there. I beat down the anger and self-pity and blaming and sullenness. And I kept beating till they were effectively gone.*

Later that night I mentioned to Noël in a non-condemning tone, that I was surprised that we didn’t do anything together. We worked it out. It had been largely a miscommunication. And compared to the way things used to go, it was a great victory.

CONCLUSION

With our understanding of this passage both compelling us to fight sin and convincing us that it will be effective, we have great reason to “chase joy” in the long battle of sanctification, even as is the theme of this letter.

Yes, it would be far better if there did not have to be any war at all. That will come. But until then, I thank God that He cancels sin at the cross and that He breaks the power of canceled sin and He does it sometimes through my Spirit-empowered will that fights with all its might, trembling, because it is God Himself willing in my willing.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://bit.ly/1akH2eF>. Also, The 2012 National Desiring God Conference was dedicated to this theme, and those messages are available here — <http://bit.ly/1akHMRd>.

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 151.

³ MacArthur, 153.

⁴ O’Brien, 279.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁷ <http://bit.ly/14hxDIU>

⁸ “A device such as a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations that assists in remembering something” (New Oxford American Dictionary).

⁹ Piper starts the sermon that we’ve been alluding throughout this lesson with these statements:

Let me give you a summary diagnosis of some of John Piper’s most besetting sins. I have fought them, and I think my wife would say that I am winning more battles in the last year than in a long time.... My characteristic sins are selfishness, anger, self-pity, quickness to blame, and sullenness. Let me describe them in their ugliness one at a time. And hear me not as coolly analytical here, but sorrowful and remorseful and thankful for the cross of Christ and for grace.