

“God’s Gym” (Philippians 2:12–18)

David Smith of Phoenix, Arizona is a remarkable man. In 2003, at the age of twenty–six Smith weighed 650 pounds. He couldn’t walk 500 feet and couldn’t fit in a car. Worst yet, he was suicidal. How did he get to this point? Smith says his problems began after his family moved to the Phoenix area when he was seven and he was sexually molested by his best friend. Unable to deal with the experience, he cut himself off from everyone and found comfort in eating. A large child to begin with, he quickly became not just one of the tallest kids in his class, but also the heaviest. He became the victim of bullies and gangs who would physically and emotionally beat him up. In his biographical sketch, Smith wrote, “I have been spit on; I have had dirt clots, rocks, bolts, basketballs, books, even feces among other things thrown at me. I started to hate people. Nobody wanted to be my friend. I didn’t even want friends anymore; I just wanted to be left alone.” The physical abuse ended in high school, but the emotional abuse continued. It got so bad, that Smith dropped out of school at the age of seventeen. He didn’t want to take it anymore. And then he got hit with another emotional trauma. His mother, the only person he allowed himself to show any emotion to, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. She fought the disease for five years, but in the end it took her life. This drove Smith to eat even more.

Eventually, Smith realized that he wanted to change the course of his life. So he contacted a local Phoenix television station that had a feature hosted by fitness and nutrition guru Chris Powell. After some initial hesitation, Powell took Smith on as a client. Powell started Smith with baby steps that quickly became giant strides. The weight melted off—a phenomenal average of more than fifteen pounds a month. By 2007, just twenty–six months after he decided to transform himself and his life, Smith had lost 410 pounds from a starting weight of 650. Today, Smith is a cut and confident thirty–two year old stud who has women oohing and aahing over him. Even more impressive is the fact that he is now a certified personal trainer who is helping others transform their physical, mental, and emotional health.¹

David Smith transformed his physical body because he was tired of watching his life waste away. One of the primary motivations for Smith to lose all of his weight was to have a relationship with a woman. Thus, TLC (The Learning Channel) entitled Smith’s story, “The 650-pound Virgin.”² Now, if a young man is that motivated to work out to change his life, how much more so should Christians possess a drive to work out to become spiritually healthy and shapely? Today, God issues the challenge: “*Work out or waste away.*” In Philippians 2:12–18, Paul provides three tips on how to avoid wasting away.

1. Work out the unity (2:12–13). In our fitness-crazed culture, people often refer to working out the chest, arms, or legs. Some work out with weights, others prefer cardio. But in these first two verses, Paul speaks of working out the unity in the body of Christ. He writes in 2:12: “**So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.**” This passage begins with the conjunction “so then” (*hōste*),³ which indicates that Paul is referring back to what he has previously written (1:27–2:11).⁴ Specifically, the term “obeyed”⁵ points back to Christ’s obedience in laying down His life (2:8).⁶ However, before Paul speaks of obedience or issues a command, he addresses the Philippians as “my beloved.”⁷ Paul wants the Philippians to know how much he loves them. Likewise, if you and I want to impact people they need to know how much we love them. Paul follows up his expression of love by encouraging the Philippians to “keep up their good work” (cf. 1:27).⁸ He indicates that they have a history of obedience⁹ in his presence *and* in his absence. The measure of our effectiveness in ministry is greatly determined by how people live in our absence. We have accomplished very little if our disciples and fellow believers only live for God when we’re around and then go back to disobedience or complacency when we leave. Those that we invest in must learn to feel responsible to God, not to us. This entails urging our disciples and mentorees not to cling to us, but to cling to Christ. In other words, they should obey the Lord whether other people are watching or not.¹⁰ Now that Paul has affirmed his readers he is ready to exhort them to further action.

The command that Paul gives is to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12c). It is frequently pointed out that Paul does not say “work *for* your salvation,” or “work *toward* your salvation,” or even “work *at* your salvation.” Rather he says “work *out* your salvation.”¹¹ However, this observation misses the point. Paul is not talking about one’s individual salvation from hell. Instead, he is commanding the church to *corporately*¹² “work out” their “salvation” (*soteria*) or present deliverance¹³ by applying the truths Paul elaborated upon in 2:6–11. This is evident from the grammar and the context. Grammatically, all of the verbs in 2:12–13 are plural in reference to the church. The pronoun “your” (*heauton*) is a reflexive plural, which means “work it out among yourselves.” Thus, Paul is not commanding personal introspection, but that we should look out for each other. Contextually, “salvation” has two nuances: Positively, salvation refers to achieving a unity based on imitation of the mind of Christ (2:1–11).¹⁴ Negatively, salvation is further defined below as doing “all things without grumbling or disputing” (2:14; cf. 2:3).¹⁵ The Philippians, then, are to produce the fruit of their salvation, that is, peace, love, and harmony in the Spirit.¹⁶ Rather than fighting with each other, Paul commands the Philippians, and us, to work out our salvation by encouraging each other to grow in humility and unity. This is also expressed in the phrase “fear and trembling,”¹⁷ which can best be summed up by the word “humility.”¹⁸ Humility is the basis for sacrificial service and unity. Humility is the attitude Paul has called for (2:3–4) and is illustrated by the example of Jesus (2:5–11).¹⁹ So *work out or waste away*.

In 2:13, Paul explains the reason (“for”) that we can work out our salvation: **“for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”**²⁰ I love this verse! Paul places *theos* (“God”) first in the sentence for emphasis. He doesn’t just say, “God works in you”; he says, “It is *God* who is at work in you.” In other words, God doesn’t work and has not worked because man has worked. He is at work regardless! Paul uses two little phrases “to will” and “to work” to describe God’s activity. Both the desire and the deed belong to God; both the prompting and the performing are attributed to Him. Nevertheless, it is only as we cooperate with Him that we see the true potential of our lives realized.²¹ Both sides of the coin are needed: dependence (God’s sovereignty) and discipline (human responsibility).²² We are responsible to live and work in the power of the Holy Spirit. However, we must always recognize that it is only because God works and has worked that man is capable of any eternally significant work. This verse is one of the most comforting in the New Testament. Sometimes we want to do right but seem to lack the energy or ability. At other times, it can seem that we don’t even want to do right. This verse assures us that God provides the desire to do His will when we do not have it. If we find that we do not want to do right, we can ask God to work in us to create a desire to do His will. This verse gives us confidence that God desires both to motivate and to enable us.

When my kids were younger, whenever we went grocery shopping as a family, they always wanted to push the cart. Now they could barely push a grocery cart because their hands barely reached the bar. Furthermore, their vision was blocked by the wire mesh and the accumulation of boxes and bags. Nevertheless, I would let them push the cart while I stood behind them with my hands resting on the bar, guiding their every move. As the cart wove in and out of the aisles it was obvious to everyone who was making our cart move. But what was obvious to me and every onlooker was not always known to my children. They were proud of their efforts in controlling the cart. Nevertheless, my children were able to move what they could never move because of their father’s strength. Similarly, in the Christian life, it is God who works.²³ You can move things for the Lord that are way beyond you because of your Heavenly Father’s strength. So keep pushing the cart, keep walking, but remember that your cart will stay on course and move a heavy load because of the powerful hands above you.²⁴ Today, you may be suffering and encountering hardship. You may feel weak and miserable. If so, call on God. He will hear your cry and respond to you. In our time of need we must recognize that God alone can give us the necessary desire and energy to do what He has called us to do. *Work out or waste away*.

[When we work out what God has worked in, we can work the unity. A second tip is...]

2. Light up the night (2:14–16). Paul challenges the church to brightly shine Christ’s love to a world that desperately needs to see a visible expression of Him. In 2:14 he writes, **“Do all things without grumbling or disputing.”** At first glance, this verse appears to mark a shift in Paul’s train of thought. But a closer look reveals three reasons why this verse is bound up with the passage that precedes it. First, Paul has been exhorting his readers to develop a spirit of likemindedness and unity and the key offenses against this unity within the community of believers are grumbling and disputing. Second, to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” as individuals and as a community requires nothing less than the grace of God, and this is the point of 2:12–13. This command is so contrary to natural human inclinations that it is unattainable without the work of the Holy Spirit. Third, grumbling is precisely the opposite of the Christlike attitude in 2:5–11 that the Philippians were encouraged to model. The central point of that passage is the Lord’s willingness to renounce His rights and become a servant of others. Grumblers, on the other hand, proudly cling to their “rights” and expect others to serve.

Paul begins 2:14 with “all things” (*panta*). This adjective is placed first in the Greek sentence for emphasis. Paul’s point is that absolutely positively nothing is to be done in a spirit of grumbling or disputing.²⁵ Therefore, we must encourage those who have the gift of grumbling and disputing to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (2:12). Interestingly, an often overlooked observation is that the opposite of “fear and trembling” is “grumbling or disputing.”²⁶ What exactly is grumbling?²⁷ It isn’t loud, boisterous, grousing, but rather low-toned, discontented muttering. It is negative, muted comments, complaining, and whining.²⁸ You can identify a grumbler from yards away by their body language. Grumblers often wear frowns, appear visibly weary, and incessantly shake their head. They also like to sigh deeply. This typically causes caring persons to ask, “What’s wrong?” The grumbler then responds with a list of grievances. Logically speaking, grumbling leads to disputing. “Disputing”²⁹ is vocal, ill-natured argumentation, verbal expressions of disagreement that stir up suspicions and distrust, doubt, and other disturbing feelings in others. Obviously, there is nothing good to say about either grumbling or disputing. Whimpering, whining, and complaining Christians are sinning, because they are being disobedient to God’s clear command in 2:14.

Grumbling and disputing is rampant in the church. Let’s face it, in the flesh we are all attracted to the “poison of pessimism.”³⁰ We enjoy negativity, conflict, and a good fight. So we will verbally drive a brother or sister under the bus or at least listen to the travesty happening at the mouth of another. Either way you are guilty of sin: either as an instigator or as an accomplice. Seriously, if you knew what I know that you’ve said about me or our leadership, you would not be here in church today! You would be too ashamed! What you may not recognize is people love to share with their pastor or other leaders the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is some fleshly prestige in doing so. Consequently, I know what you’ve said about me...and if I don’t know now, I will in the next few days or weeks.

Perhaps, you’re saying, “Keith, you’re scaring me!” Of course, I am...and you should be frightened! But even more disturbing than *me* hearing what you’ve said, please realize that Jesus hears every word that you utter, and He will require you to give an account for it in the day of judgment (Matt 12:36). Now that’s scary! However, I want you to know that I, too, struggle with grumbling and disputing. Like you, I am guilty of gossip, slander, and a multitude of sins of the tongue. My greatest strength is also my greatest weakness. Knowing this about myself, my goal is to keep short accounts and confess my verbal sins when they occur. As much as I want to be perfect in my speech, I know that I am not, and while I am in this body, I never will be (Jas 3:2). I don’t expect more from you than I do myself. I hold myself to the highest standard, and as a teacher, whether I like it or not, God holds me to this standard as well (Jas 3:1). So we are in this battle together. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we must seek to overcome sin together as a church family. We must do everything we can to promote health and holiness among ourselves. We must keep short accounts and seek to go to every length possible to avoid grumbling and disputing. *Work out or waste away.*


In 2:15–16, Paul provides the purpose behind not grumbling or disputing: **“so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless [external purity³¹] and innocent [internal purity³²], children of God above reproach³³ in the midst of a crooked³⁴ and perverse³⁵ generation,³⁶ among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.”** Whenever he preached this passage, the late, great Ray Stedman used to say, “Ours is a world of crooks and perverts.” How aptly put! In these verses, Paul draws upon two primary Old Testament passages. First, when Paul refers to “a crooked and perverse generation,” he is alluding to the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:5. In the bittersweet song Moses gave to the assembly of Israel just prior to his exodus from this earth, he sharply contrasted the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of His people. In a sense, the Israelites were working out their salvation in the wilderness. Unfortunately, there is a whole lot of grumbling and complaining.³⁷ Consequently, Israel disappoints the Lord and disgraces His name in the eyes of others. Moses’ words refer to Israel, but in Phil 2:15 Paul universalizes this phrase to refer to the unbelieving world. His point is simple: We too live “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation”³⁸ that is filled with the sins of grumbling and disputing. We must not make Israel’s mistake and sin with our tongue. Second, Paul uses an analogy from Daniel 12:3, where Daniel likens the “wise” to stars that shine in the universe.³⁹ Paul’s point is that we are shining stars. He isn’t commanding us to shine; he is saying that we *do* shine!⁴⁰ We *are* “lights [or stars⁴¹] in the world!”⁴² There’s no need to shout, scream, or make a scene. Just shine!⁴³ Live a life free of grumbling and disputing. Look for other stars, for Christians shine best not as individual stars but in clusters.

In 2:15–16, Paul also shares three consequences that stem from grumbling and disputing.

- ***First, when we grumble and dispute we waste the opportunity to share Christ (2:15).*** If we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we shine as lights in the world, allowing people to see the goodness of God through us. On the other hand, if we grumble and dispute, we waste the opportunity to show off God by blending right into the darkness of the world. No one likes “bad advertising.” Life is discouraging enough as it is! This is why Paul writes that we are to be characterized by “holding fast (*epechontes*)⁴⁴ the word of life,” by enduring persecution in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.⁴⁵ This relates to the subject of walking worthily of the gospel (1:27). To prevent disunity from extinguishing the testimony of a church, we must “hold fast the word of life.” That is, we must obediently achieve Jesus’ unity. A true gospel witness demands a true gospel lifestyle.⁴⁶
- ***Second, when we grumble and dispute we waste an opportunity to be rewarded at Christ’s return (2:16a).*** The phrase “the day of Christ” refers to the judgment seat of Christ when believers will be rewarded by Christ.⁴⁷ Paul lived his life bearing in mind a day of future accountability. He lived today in light of tomorrow. Today he was with them; tomorrow he may be with Him, and he did not want to be ashamed. He longed for his life’s work to abound to God’s glory.⁴⁸ Like Paul, you and I must keep the day of Christ on the forefront of our minds. For on that day, we will all give an account for how we have worked for unity in the local churches that we have served.
- ***Third, when we grumble and dispute we waste the investment of godly leaders (2:16b).***⁴⁹ Paul acknowledges that it is possible for leaders to “run in vain” and “toil in vain” when their followers fail to walk in a manner worthy of Christ. Think about the leaders and servants that have invested in your life. How devastating would it be to hear such faithful brothers and sisters feel that their investment in you was wasted? Paul commands you and me to “count others more significant than yourselves” (2:3b ESV). When we undermine the unity of the body, we fail those who should matter most to us in the spiritual realm.

Two small children were not happy about being on a plane. Their cries of complaint filled the cabin. Just before takeoff, a flight attendant stopped next to them and said with a big smile, “What is all this squawking up here?” After charming the fussy three-year-old and his younger sister for a few minutes, the flight attendant bent down and whispered very seriously, “I must remind you this is a non-squawking flight.” The little ones became unbelievably quiet, which made everyone feel better. Let’s face it; it’s a long journey when you have to sit in the squawking section.⁵⁰ Likewise, the church’s journey to glory can be painful and laborious when there’s squawking. That is why I would like to call EBF to become a non-squawking church! This doesn’t mean I’m trying to use brute biblical force to shut people up. Far from it! I just want to make sure that we aren’t unnecessarily whining. If you do have a concern, share it with *one* pastor or elder and then sign up for being a part of the solution to your concern. *Work out or waste away.*

[Light up the night by refusing to grumble or dispute. Paul’s third tip is...]



3. Rejoice in the ministry (2:17–18).⁵¹ Paul insists that we should have joy in the ministry. In 2:17–18, Paul writes, “**But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.**” Paul sees himself as a drink offering—one that has been poured out for Jesus and others.⁵² In the sacrificial system under the Old Covenant, the priests would take the animal sacrifices and spread them on the altar to be consumed by fire. Then they would take a drink offering and pour it on top of that searing hot flame. Inevitably, the liquid would turn into steam and it would go up in a wisp of smoke. Paul is saying: I love people, and I am here to serve people and to sacrifice for people so much that, if necessary, I am willing for my life to just go up in steam to the Lord that I may be a blessing to other people.⁵³ But please note: Paul’s focus is upon the sacrifice of the Philippians. His sacrifice is a modest drink offering.⁵⁴ In other words, the ministry of others is more important to Paul than his own ministry. He yearns for the success of others. Consequently, in 2:17b–18, Paul uses a form of the word “rejoice” four times!⁵⁵ If your ministry is currently a burden or an obligation, you may be in the wrong ministry. God wants you to rejoice in your ministry and the ministries of others. He wants you to offer yourself to Him and to others as a pleasing sacrifice. As you do so, you will find the fulfillment that God intends for you to have in ministry.

This past week I read a story about Madonna. You know Madonna, right? Well, I am referring another Madonna—78 year old Sister Madonna Buder. Buder began competing in triathlons after she turned fifty! Since that time she has completed more than 320 triathlons. Even more impressive, Buder has even completed 40 Ironman class events which consist of a 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride, and a 26 mile run. This is astonishing! When asked about her exploits, Buder responds: “Well, you know, as long as God is giving you your health, there’s no reason to stop.” How does this relate to her work as a nun? Buder answers, “There is no limit, no boundaries to when and where you can commune with God. It doesn’t have to be in church all the time.”⁵⁶ WOW!

Today, God wants you to live a life characterized by perseverance. While you may not choose to complete triathlons and Ironman events, you are called to work out and grow in Christ. May you look for any and every opportunity to promote health and unity in the church. *Work out or waste away.* Those are your only choices.

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Scripture References

Philippians 2:12–18

Exodus 15: 22–25

Psalm 73

Psalm 95

Nehemiah 8:9–10

John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13

Romans 14:17–18; 15:13

Study Questions

1. In what specific ways have I sought to work out my salvation in my church family (2:12)? How have I sensed God working in me (2:13)? In what ways has He increased my desire and obedience? How have I responded to Him in the past several weeks? In what practical ways have I grown spiritually in the last six months? What dominant truth has the Lord taught me? What step of obedience have I taken?
2. Why is it so hard for me to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” (2:14)? How have I violated this command this week? Have I confessed my sin of whining to God and the person I shared with? What one person can I talk with about my legitimate concerns or issues? Read Romans 1:18–32 (1:21–22); 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 (10:8); and 2 Timothy 3:1–9 (3:2). How do these verses categorize grumbling and ingratitude? What difference does this make in shaping my perspective on whining?
3. Paul exhorts Christians to be “children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (2:15). Billy Graham once said, “Every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the past generation, and we cannot bear full responsibility for the next one; but we do have our generation. God will hold us responsible as to how well we fulfill our responsibilities to this age and take advantage of our opportunities.” Do I agree with this statement? Why or why not? What can I do to ensure that I am a wise and responsible steward of my generation? How am I currently fulfilling this mandate?
4. As Christians, we are to hold out the word of life (2:16). How is my life functioning as a “light” that brings pleasure to my leaders and my God? In what way has the world noticed my godly behavior? How has this served as a witness? Where can I improve? Who will hold me accountable?
5. How do I sacrifice myself for my local church (2:17–18)? When did I begin serving in the church? What brought me to this place? Was it an experience, a person, or something I read? What has God taught me through my service? How has serving in ministry brought others joy? How has my service brought me joy? What would I say to others who are contemplating whether or not to serve?

Notes

¹ “Looking for love, 650-pound virgin loses 410”: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31845266/ns/today_relationships/.

² TLC aired Smith’s story on 7/12/09. I suspect it will run again.

³ Paul uses *hoste* (“so then”) in Phil 1:13 and 4:1.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 273–74; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. New International Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 231.

⁵ Paul doesn’t explicitly say who the Philippians are obeying, but the context implies that they are obeying him. Jerry L. Sumney, *Philippians: A Greek Student’s Intermediate Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 52.

⁶ The word translated “obey” (*hupakouein*) contains the ideas of hearing, especially the divine word as proclaimed, and submitting to what is heard. The Philippians had received the word of God from Paul and were encouraged to translate that into action in their everyday lives. So we, too, are responsible to hear the word of God and put it into practice in our lives (see Matt 7:24–27; 1 Thess 2:13; Jas 1:22–25).

⁷ Paul uses the term “beloved” (*agapetos*) often to describe those converted under his ministry (cf. Rom. 11:28; 12:19; 16:8, 9, 12; 1 Cor 4:14, 17; 10:14; 15:58; 2 Cor 7:1; 12:19; Eph 6:21; Phil 4:1 [twice]; Col 4:7, 9, 14; 1 Tim 6:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Phlm 1, 2, 16). This intimate friendship and bond of love permeates the entire letter to the Philippians (see 1:3–11, 12; 2:20; 3:1; 4:1, 10).

⁸ He is not calling for repentance, as we see him doing with the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:9–10; 12:21), or as our Lord does in Revelation (2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19). As far as Paul was concerned, they had “always” obeyed (cf. 2 Cor 7:15; 10:6; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 3:4; Phlm 21).

⁹ They had obeyed not only in the initial reception of the gospel (Acts 16:14, 32–33), but ever since that time as well (approx. ten years).

¹⁰ See Bill Hybels, *Who You Are When No One’s Looking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987).

¹¹ The translation “work out” (*katargazomai*) is potentially misleading since one meaning of “work out” is to exercise something we already have (e.g., “he works out three times a week”). That is not what the Greek word means. It can only legitimately be translated “work out” in the sense of accomplishing something (as in “he worked out a solution to the budget deficit”). The idea that the “work out” is the key to understanding this verse is unsupported by the meaning of the Greek word in question or the context.

¹² See Ralph P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 115–16; Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*. Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 43 (Waco: Word, 1983), 98. Various English versions include the word “own” (“your *own* salvation”). See ESV, HSB, NRSV, NKJV, and KJV. However, this word is not in the Greek text. The focus is on corporate salvation.

¹³ The other usages of “salvation” (*soteria*) in Philippians have a temporal, present tense meaning (1:19, 28). This sense is also used in Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25; 1 Pet 1:9, etc. Working out our salvation is a life-long process, as can be seen by the present tense of the imperative (*katargazesthe*).

¹⁴ It is virtually the same thing as “conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). Paul had in mind the present aspect of our salvation in which we are laborers together with God (1 Cor 3:9; cf. Titus 3:8). See Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Philippians* (www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/philippians.pdf, 2009), 32; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*: New International Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 235.

¹⁵ Swift writes, “This is consistent with the two previous occurrences of *soterian* in the book where the context suggests ‘deliverance’ (1:19, 28).” See Robert C. Swift, “The Theme and Structure of Philippians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141:563 (July–Sept 1984): 245.

¹⁶ In justification and glorification God does all the work (Eph 2:9; Jude 24). We “work out” our salvation (i.e., sanctification) by keeping in step with the Holy Spirit who leads us in the will of God (Gal 5:16). In Phil 2:12–13, the particular aspect of sanctification in view involves achieving unity through humility. Paul is not concerned here with the eternal welfare of the soul *of the individual*. The individual believer is not now being called to self-activity, to the active pursuit of the will of God to a personal application of salvation. Rather the context suggests that this command is to be understood in a corporate sense. The entire church, which had grown spiritually ill (2:3–4), is charged now with taking whatever steps are necessary to restore itself to health and wholeness (see Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 98). Admittedly, since individuals make up the local church there is certainly relevance to the individual as well (see Moisés Silva, *Philippians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. Edited by Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005], 118–22.) Nevertheless, Paul’s primary intention seems to be the corporate body.

¹⁷ The phrase “fear and trembling” is also used in 1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 7:15; and Eph 6:5. In 2 Cor 7:15; Eph 6:5; and Phil 2:12, and the expression is closely associated with “obedience.” Notice that Paul has just pointed out that our Lord’s humility was demonstrated by His obedience (Phil 2:8). “Fear and trembling” are also used together in the Greek OT (LXX) in Ps 2:11: “Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling.” This Psalm is in clear reference to the millennial kingdom and the King’s exaltation in it. Thus, I believe we are being exhorted to emulate the life illustrated by Christ in Phil 2:5–8 in order that we may also be exalted in the same way (though not to the same degree!) as He was.

¹⁸ The Greek words *phobos* (“fear”) and *tromos* (“trembling”) both imply fear in a negative sense. Yet, Paul’s use of the terms in other contexts refers to “awe and reverence in the presence of God” [O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 284; see discussion on 282–84]. The translation “awe and reverence” was chosen to portray the attitude the believer should have toward God as he considers his behavior in light of God working through Jesus Christ (2:6–11) and in the believer’s life (2:13) to accomplish their salvation. See NET Study Notes.

¹⁹ Our faith should be worked out with humility because we know that no good work is truly our work; rather it is God’s work. He is the One working in us prompting us to desire and to carry out His will. How can we be proud of any good thing we do when we know that anything good really has come from God (see 1 Cor 4:7; Jas 1:17)?

²⁰ Herrick writes, “Though he doesn’t specifically mention it, the apostle can be thinking of none other than the Holy Spirit who lives in us in fulfillment of the new covenant (Jer 31:31–33; 2 Cor 3:4–18). The Spirit indwells us permanently (2 Cor 1:20–21; Eph 1:13–14), fills us for worship (Eph 5:18), enables us to surrender our lives (Rom 7:6), delivers us out of sin (Gal 1:4; 5:16–24; Rom 8:2–3, 13), and generally enables us to understand Christ (Rom 1:16; Eph 1:18; John 16:13–14). He is a Spirit who is constantly working to glorify Christ and create unity in the body of Christ—undoubtedly one of his primary efforts within the Philippian church (cf. Eph 4:3). Thus the Philippians were to come in ‘humility and dependence’ upon God as they worked out their salvation. They were to be careful not to become arrogant as if some of them were better than others (cf. Phil 2:3–4; 3:7–11). The Spirit is the One who would work in them to carry out God’s will; they were totally bankrupt in and of themselves (cf. Eph 2:1; John 15:6). He not only gave them the desire to do God’s will, such as seeking the needs of others ahead of themselves (as Jesus did in 2:6–11), he also gave them the energy or will to do it. God has provided such a complete salvation! One of the primary means that God has established for us to experience such empowerment is prayer. Paul has already mentioned this in connection with his desire to exalt Christ in his body (1:19–20), but he will mention prayer again near the close of the letter (4:6–7).”

²¹ Sam Gordon, *An Odyssey of Joy: The Message of Philippians* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, 2004), 89.

²² Deffinbaugh notes, “All too often Christians try to distinguish between ‘our work’ and ‘God’s work,’ as though they can be neatly isolated and compartmentalized. In my opinion, this is like trying to distinguish between our Lord’s humanity and His deity. Since the incarnation, He is the God-man, and I don’t think we do well to try to distinguish between our Lord’s deity and His humanity.” Bob Deffinbaugh, “Fleshing Out Your Faith” (Phil 2:12–18). *To Live Is Christ: A Study of the Book of Philippians* (www.bible.org: Biblical Studies Press, 2000).

²³ The informed Christian, who knows the Lord through His word, and in prayer, will say with the apostle Paul: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor 15:10).

²⁴ Vogel, “Working Out What God Has Worked In” (Phil 2:12–13): my.execpc.com/~crrnrstn/sermons/phil2_12-13.htm.

²⁵ “Grumbling” looks at the initial activity and “disputing” is what results (2:2; 4:2; cf. 1 Cor 10:10).

²⁶ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 291.

²⁷ The term *goggusmos* occurs only three times in the NT outside of Phil 2:14. In John 7:12 the term is used to refer to the whispering or secretive talk engaged in by the people regarding the person of Jesus: “There were many in the crowd grumbling about him, some said he was a good man and others said he was a deceiver.” In Acts 6:1 the Grecian Jews “grumbled” against the Hebraic Jews (i.e., strife was developing) because widows among the Grecian Jews were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The complaining and divisiveness was quickly cut off, however, when the apostles dealt with the issue. They understood that such attitudes are lethal to church unity and witness. In 1 Pet 4:9 the apostle commands the various Christians in the churches to offer hospitality to one another and to do so without grumbling. One can see from the examples in Acts 6:1 and 1 Pet 4:9 the close connection between this word and selfishness/ambition which we saw in 2:3. The verb occurs eight times: Matt 20:11; Luke 5:30; John 6:41, 43, 61; 7:32; 1 Cor 10:10 [2x]. The great warning of what grumbling and disputing can lead to is Israel’s ten instances of complaining in the wilderness. That behavior culminated in the Israelites’ refusal to enter and occupy the Promised Land from Kadesh-barnea (Num 13–14). We frustrate God’s work of producing unity, which He does by reproducing the mind of Christ in us (i.e., humility), when we complain and argue (cf. 1:19, 28).

²⁸ BDAG s.v. *goggusmos*: “utterance made in a low tone of voice, *behind-the-scenes talk*.”

²⁹ The term “arguing” (*dialogismos*) occurs 14 times in the NT and is never used in a purely favorable light (cf. Luke 2:35). It appears in conjunction with the antagonistic thinking of the Pharisees as they opposed the ministry of Jesus (Luke 5:22; 6:8) and the self-centered arrogance of the disciples (Luke 9:47) as they “reasoned” about who would be the greatest in the kingdom (i.e., immediately after Jesus had predicted his death [Luke 9:45]). Further, James refers to those who despise the poor as “judges with evil *thoughts*.” In Luke 24:38–39 the term refers to “doubts” in the minds of the apostles regarding Jesus’ resurrection. Further, Paul tells Timothy that men are to lift holy hands in prayer and to do so without “disputes” (1 Tim 2:8). Thus, the term signifies contentious behavior probably connected in some way with an arrogant attitude. The Philippians, Paul says, are to do everything without this kind of attitude.

³⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Laugh Again* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 98.

³¹ “Blameless” (*amemptos*) means “without blame” (cf. 3:6) because we deal with our sins as we should. It does not mean unblemished (*amomos*) nor unblameable (*anegkletos* and *anepileptos*). The term *amemptoi* occurs five times in the NT. In Luke 1:6 Zechariah and Elizabeth’s piety is regarded as “blameless” in terms of the manner in which they kept “all the commands and righteous requirements of the Lord.” In 1 Thess 2:13 Paul prays that the love the Thessalonians have for each other may overflow so that their hearts will be strong, blameless in holiness before the Lord. In this passage *amemptoi* is inextricably bound up with love for other Christians. The term is also used twice in Philippians. In 3:6 Paul refers to his former Pharisaic way of life under the Law as “faultless” or “without blame.” The sense of the term in 2:15 is “to be beyond reproach” (cf. Job 1:1; 4:17). Cf. BAGD, 45, s.v. *amemptos*. If the Philippians continue to grumble and complain they will give occasion for outsiders to find fault with them and their gospel. Instead they are to give no reason for accusation; they are to be blameless.

³² “Innocent” or “pure” (*akeraioi*) means unadulterated, unmixed with anything defiling (cf. Rom 16:19). The term *akeraioi* is related to the verb *kerannumi* which means to “mix” or “mingle.” The noun *akeraios* (note the negative prefix *a*) was used to refer to undiluted wine or unalloyed metals. It occurs only three times in NT. In Matt 10:16 Jesus wants the disciples to be as wise as serpents and as “innocent” as doves. In Rom 16:19 Paul says that he wants the Romans to be wise about what is good and “innocent” about what is evil. In Phil 2:15 it refers to the opposite of grumbling or disputing. The “innocence” that Paul has in mind in Philippians is broad and covers every area of their lives, but it specifically has in focus the need to refrain from in-fighting and divisive behavior. Thus, as the Philippians—and therefore all Christians—grow in blamelessness and purity they will truly reflect their lineage as children of God (*tekna theou*) above reproach (*amoma*; see Eph 5:27; Jude 24). They are to reflect the attitude and values of their Father (cf. John 1:12; Rom 8:16; Gal 3:28; 1 John 3:1, 2) without blemish. It should be noted: Some commentators argue that the terms “blameless” and “innocent” refer to the future when Christ returns to judge. This interpretation is ruled out, however, on the grounds that Paul is talking about their present character in light of their role in a crooked and depraved generation. Paul is not referring in this text to some future eschatological period, but instead to the “here and now.”

³³ Paul then added the idea of being unblemished (*amomos*). Above “reproach” is a description used of sacrificial lambs offered on the altar and means “free of blemish,” which connotes both internal and external purity. The children of God are to be free from defilement and so not chargeable with justifiable criticism even though living in the midst of a twisted and perverted generation (cf. Deut 32:5).

³⁴ The term “crooked” (*skolia*) is used three other times in the NT. In Luke 3:5 it is used metaphorically (i.e., morally) to refer to the straightening of crooked roads, i.e., the crooked state of affairs, so that the coming of the Messiah to Israel would not be hindered. The generation of Jews who rejected the Messiah were regarded as a corrupt (*skolia*) generation of people under the judgment of God (Acts 2:40). In 1 Peter 2:18 Peter refers to certain masters as “corrupt,” meaning that they are unjust and harsh in their treatment of slaves (cf. 2:19). See BAGD, s.v. *skolios*, #2.

³⁵ The term “perverse” (*diestrammenes*) occurs in Matt 17:17 where Jesus refers to his generation as “perverse” because of their lack of faith and stubborn unbelief. Paul accused Elymas of perverting the right ways of the Lord because he tried to turn the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, from the Lord (Acts 13:10). He also warned the Ephesian elders about men who would arise in their midst to pervert the truth or teaching about the Lord in order to draw men after themselves (Acts 20:30). The two terms crooked and perverse together in this context are taken directly from Deut 32:5. The difference in Phil 2:15 is that Paul refers to the unsaved world in Philippi as “crooked and perverse” whereas Moses referred to the Israelites (i.e., God’s people) as “crooked and perverse.” Paul probably has in mind the people in Philippi who are trying to oppose the church (1:28) or the legalists of chapter three who are perverting the gospel (3:2ff).

³⁶ The word “generation” (*geneas*) can refer to a group of people several generations long, not just to one generation

of people (e.g., Matt 12:39). Here it probably refers to unbelievers as a whole (cf. Matt 17:17; Acts 2:40).

³⁷ See Exod 15–17; Num 11; 14; 16–17; 20–21.

³⁸ The root of the terms “crooked” and “perverse” is related to the OT concept of the righteousness of God which is described as a “measuring reed” (a straight edge or ruler). Any deviation from His standard was described in terms of “crooked” or “bent.” These terms are translated by “sin,” “iniquity,” or “trespass” in English. Notice that in this context it is the Church who is called on to be the light in a darkened world.

³⁹ See NET alternative reading in 2:15.

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 295–96; Silva, 127.

⁴¹ Various English versions render the Greek word *phosteres* as “stars” (e.g., HSB, NIV, NRSV).

⁴² Christians are lights in a dark world (Matt 5:14; cf. Dan 12:3). The Light of the World now indwells us (John 8:12). Paul wants his readers to bear a strong witness rather than having their light shaded by sin or uncleanness (cf. Matt 5:15–16).

⁴³ Jesus said as much in Matt 5:16: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

⁴⁴ BDAG s.v. *epechontes* 1: “to maintain a grasp on someone or something, *hold fast*.”

⁴⁵ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 297; Thielman 140.

⁴⁶ Swift, “The Theme and Structure of Philippians,” 245.

⁴⁷ There are allusions and direct references to the judgment seat of Christ throughout the epistle (e.g., 1:19; 2:12, 15–16; 3:12–14; 4:15–17).

⁴⁸ As Thielman says: “Here and elsewhere, Paul describes his apostolic labor as a race in which he runs and which, if stumbling blocks do not intrude, will result in a prize (1 Cor 9:24–27; 2 Tim 4:6–8; cf. Gal 2:2). These stumbling blocks may include Paul’s own faithlessness to his call (1 Cor 9:24–27), hindrances placed before him by other Christians (Gal 2:2), or, as here, the faithlessness of the churches whom God had placed in his care. Paul enriches this metaphor with one drawn from Isaiah. In Isaiah 49:4 the Servant of the Lord expresses dismay that he appears to ‘have labored to no purpose,’ to ‘have spent [his] strength in vain for nothing’; but he also expresses his confidence that his reward is in the Lord’s hands. Later the prophet promises that in the final day, when God creates new heavens and a new earth, his people ‘will not toil in vain’ (Isa. 65:23).” Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 140–141.

⁴⁹ A similar idea can be found in 1 Cor 3:6–15; 9:26; Gal 2:2; 4:11; and 1 Thess 3:5.

⁵⁰ David C. McCasland, “Thank You For Not Squawking,” *Our Daily Bread* 5/9/1996:

www.rbc.org/devotionals/our-daily-bread/1996/05/09/devotion.aspx.

⁵¹ Swift 246 suggests that Phil 2:17–18 are a hinge, a transition between 2:12–16 and 2:19–30.

⁵² Paul used the same metaphor in 2 Tim 4:6. “The sacrifice and service” employs only one article with the two nouns, and probably is a hendiadys meaning “sacrificial service.” The apostle is thinking of their various Christian ministries performed as a spiritual sacrifice to God (4:18; Heb 13:15) and springing from their faith.

⁵³ Gordon, *An Odyssey of Joy*, 94.

⁵⁴ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 310.

⁵⁵ Paul says that even if he was being poured out as a sacrifice as a result of their faith, he has joy (*chairō*) and rejoice[s] (*sugchairō*) together with [them]. And in the same way, [they] also should be glad (*chairete*) and rejoice together with [him] (*sugchairete*). Thus, we return to the example of Paul himself who, no matter what the circumstances, experiences joy and calls others to rejoice with him.

⁵⁶ SermonNews illustration: “78-Year-Old Nun Competes in Triathlons”: www.sermonnews.com.