

How to “work out your salvation”

1. Trust that God is doing the work
2. Hold fast to the word of life
3. Rejoice in the light and as a light

May the word of life and light in our Savior, Jesus, be your guide as we begin our remembrance and study of holy week, when He went to the cross for us. In that thought we read from God’s holy and inspired Word today:

Philippians 2:12-18 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. 14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

“Did you hear what he said?! It’s ridiculous! There’s no way! I don’t believe it!” Those are some expressions we give or hear when someone says the unbelievable. A common trend nowadays seems to be that people say the most unbelievable statements just to get some attention. They know it’s outlandish and ridiculous but it shines the spotlight on them for a bit.

Anyone who follows sports has seen this recently through the comments of Lavar Ball. Lavar is the father to three sons who are high profile basketball players. His oldest son, Lonzo, just finished his freshmen year at UCLA and is projected as a top three pick in the upcoming NBA draft. No expert doubts the abilities of Lonzo on the hardwood but some of his father’s comments border on, and dive headfirst, into the insane. Things started off by his father claiming he could have beaten Michael Jordan in a game of one-on-one. There’s a reason you’ve heard about Michael Jordan before, and you haven’t heard about Lavar Ball. Lavar played his college ball at WSU, having an illustrious career in which he averaged a whopping 2 points a game. He never played professionally. Michael Jordan is the greatest player ever. Pretty ridiculous.

But, he didn’t stop there. Next, Lavar said that if any shoe company wanted to endorse his sons, it would cost \$1 billion dollars. No worries, though, he said they could pay him in \$100 million installments annually.

Finally, just this past week, Lavar put his still non-endorsed foot in his mouth once again by claiming that the reason UCLA lost in the NCAA tournament was because of the three white players on the team; that, in his words, they couldn’t keep up with the black players on the court, even though two of those white players actually outscored his son in the final game.

What’s the point of all this? Some may argue it has no point. But, what’s happening is that Lavar Ball is gaining attention. It’s not always good publicity, but it’s publicity nonetheless. News outlets carry these ridiculous stories. Television and radio shows interview him. For today’s wanna be celebrity, they need to break the glass ceiling of normality in order to be recognized.

Now take a step back and look at our text for today. As Lutherans, we immediately are drawn to the phrase of verse 13, **“work out your own salvation.”** How can that be? To our minds it seems to be an utterly ridiculous statement which breaks the very moral fiber of what it means to be a good Lutheran. And so, it's easy to disregard. It's easy to ignore. It's easy just to block this passage out of our memories. But, it's still God's Word, and there's a very valuable point to consider here.

Sometimes for a statement to make the greatest impact, it must go right to the edge of what is considered normal or acceptable, in order to make an impression. It's kind of like the Lavar Ball fascination, although to a lesser extent and for a much greater purpose. Paul writes something that perks up our ears and raises our defenses, and then steps back immediately to clarify what he means. He wants us to know how important it is to be busy working in the realm of our salvation. This is not a treatise on salvation by our own efforts, rather it is a challenge against laxity and laziness in the Christian faith.

We ask the Holy Spirit, who inspired this Word, to guide us in understanding of How to “work out our salvation.” And we start by trusting that God will do the work.

Part 1: Trusting that God will do the work

Now, skeptics of justification by faith will say that we only interpret this phrase how we like. Let's not write that accusation off, let's seriously consider it. As with any word or phrase in the Bible, especially something that is questionable to other passages, we take a look at the context. The first point we see is stated immediately after, **“for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** What an important piece of information! This happens to be the passage often left out by those who *would* emphasis works-oriented justification. But, let's understand the two thoughts together.

Paul first tells us to work out our salvation, but then qualifies that by reminding us that God is the one who does the work. He walks us right up to the edge of the unbelievable, and then steps back. This helps drive home the point of the section, namely that we shouldn't take salvation for granted. The unique aspect of our Christian faith is that we *are* involved. We are not the source of our faith, but God does include us in receiving faith. It is a personal thing. God also doesn't ignore the will that He created us with. Yes, our human will is tainted by sin, but it's still there, and when sanctified by the Holy Spirit it absolutely does produce fruits of faith before God. If God dropped the human will out altogether, we would all just be mindlessly led to whatever outcome He ordained. Instead, to preserve true freedom, God allows us to operate by our will. But, when that is all we have, we will only be led to reject God's promises. Paul said elsewhere, **For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.**

Thanks be to God that verse 13 is true: God is present to work faith in us. That alone, really answers any questions, but God adds even more.

Part 2: Holding fast to word of life

This next thought is a favorite of Paul's. It's sort of a staple of his advice to fellow Christians. **“Hold Fast to the word of life.** Another way of stating the thought of “holding fast” is to make it a top priority. The same word is used of the crowds who held fast, or pressed upon, Jesus in His ministry. He was the most important thing to them in that moment, and they did all they could do to be with Him. Paul uses the same thought when writing to Timothy, **“Take heed to yourself and to the**

doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” And to Titus, using a slight variation of the same word, **“Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”**

It’s interesting that both Timothy and Titus were pastors, and Paul gave them the same advice, hold fast to the Word of God. When people usually talk about what they like most about their pastor, how he handles the Word is seldom mentioned. *Is he easy to listen to? Is he nice? Is he relevant?* These thoughts usually come to mind first, and it’s the same in pastor’s mind too. All too often I focus more attention on those details and I feel that my work will be worthless if it doesn’t have such and such. It’s not that those qualities are unimportant, but they are not of greater priority than the word of God. God wants all Christians, especially their leaders, to hold fast to His Word. Make it top priority. Cling to it. Stress it’s truths in all matters, whether popular or nor, whether accepted or rejected. That’s a difficult thing to do, both for the preacher and the hearer, but it is absolutely part of **“working out salvation.”**

The call to God’s Word is also another indicator that the power rests in His hands. The word of life is His product. He was the one who fulfilled its requirements and He alone disperses its blessings. Only after the Word has taken effect do we produce fruits in our lives. Paul describes what some of those fruits look like in our third part:

Part 3: Rejoice in the light

This letter was one of the ones written while Paul was in captivity in Rome. The reality of pouring out his life as an offering to the Lord was near at hand. These were probably his final words to these Christians. Yet, in such a morbid setting, Paul rejoices and tells the Philippian Christians to do the same. It is a well-established Christian doctrine to celebrate the death of a believer, even of a martyr. But, long-standing teaching or not, it is not an easy thing to accept, especially when your head is the one on the chopping block.

The more common reactions are mentioned earlier, *grumbling and disputing*. What a contrast here. We usually complain because we don’t have what we want. Yet, Paul was stripped of everything and rejoiced. These sins aren’t to be taken lightly either. Grumbling and disputing are usually the first signs of lack of contentment in God’s grace. If we find ourselves in their trap we should recognize the danger, because it means we are focusing too much on ourselves and not on God. Grumbling and disputing are really the opposite reaction that faith produces. Faith says, “God, Your will be done. I will submit to Your Word. I will obey. I need not have everything I want. I will follow You.”

Can we take Paul’s advice and apply it to our lives? It’s not difficult. Follow what God says and you will be joyful. It won’t always look like joy from your perspective, but either God works things out for our good or He doesn’t. What we know makes no sense is to say that we trust in Christ and we believe in His promises, and then spend our days complaining and arguing about everything. Truly, what a crooked and perverse path that is indeed.

Here, Paul was looking death in the eye, and he was abundantly happy. Each of our lives are better than his in many ways, but where is that contentment? Paul’s telling you it’s okay to let go of the attachments to this world. It’s okay if you make mistakes. It’s okay if you are an outcast. It’s okay if you’re admonished for your sins and you confess them. You won’t lose out on anything, in contrast,

you'll gain joy in Christ. Sometimes it helps to have as little as possible, because we look to what is really important. Fear and trembling push us to Jesus. That's a blessing.

And so **“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”** It's a bold statement, especially for a Lutheran. But it's also a blessed truth. God calls us to this end in three steps. 1) He is the one who does the work 2) He uses His Word of life and 3) He produces joy in our hearts. It's as easy as that.

Paul put it another way to the Ephesians: **I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.** He encourages us to walk (think work) toward our salvation but only with the trust that it is God who calls (works for us).

One scholar puts it this way, in a somewhat scholarly way, **[work out your own salvation] lays stress on the result, as distinguished from the process, of the action.** In other words, God wants you to focus on the result (free eternal life in heaven), but to do that you can't ignore the process (Christ working in you through the Gospel). Because you are free to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear, He sent His prophets and apostles, like Paul, to warn you with strong, sometimes outrageous sounding language. When we use His Word with care and increase our understanding, these troublesome sections prove very valuable to our faith.

And so we do not shy away from them, but we accept the Father's challenge to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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