

“Using the Indescribable Gift”
Philippians 2:12-13

Do you ever receive a gift at Christmas that you’re not too excited about and really have no use for? I came across a “Top Ten Things to Say about a Christmas Gift You Don’t Like:” 10. “Hey! There’s a gift!” 9. “Well, well, well.” 8. “Boy, if I had not recently shot up four sizes that would have fit.” 7. “This is perfect for wearing around the basement.” 6. “If the dog buries this, I’ll be furious!” 5. “I love this gift, but I fear the jealousy it will inspire.” 4. “I really don’t deserve this!” 3. “To think I got this the year I vowed to give all my gifts to charity.” 2. “Gosh! I hope this never catches fire!” 1. “Sadly, tomorrow I enter the Federal Witness Protection Program.”

There’s one gift that always generates excitement and appreciation. It’s the greatest, most precious gift you could ever receive. The Apostle Paul calls it “indescribable” (2 Corinthians 9:15). It’s “the gift of God [that] is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). That indescribable gift is salvation, as by God’s grace, goodness, and love you’re rescued from the doom and darkness of sin, death, and hell, rescued to the acceptance and approval and light of abundant and eternal life, all because of the gift of His own Son, who lived, died, and rose from the dead, who reigns in glory at this very moment for you. Now what are you to do with this precious gift? Is it something that we hide away, keep safe in a vault? Is this gift something we prominently place on a shelf in our home to admire? Our passage gives us the answer to this question: we’re to take it and use it. As we look to the future in the beginning of this new year, we know that using this gift, working it out in our lives is a key way that God’s purpose is going to be realized in our lives. There are five brief points I’d like to make.

First, the Greek word used here that’s translated “work out” means to bring to completion, to finish what’s been started. Having received this gift of salvation, our responsibility is to finish what God has started. The relationship between what God does and what we do is similar to what happens when we become ill. We get sick and so we go to a doctor. He diagnoses our ailment and prescribes the proper treatment. He writes out a prescription, and we take it to the pharmacist who fills the prescription and gives us the medication. So far, everything has been done for us—diagnosis, prescription, medication. It now becomes our responsibility to follow the doctor’s orders exactly as stated. By working out the process that has been put in place for us, we enjoy the benefits of the doctor’s and pharmacist’s contributions to our health and well-being. It’s the same way with the salvation that’s been given to us! At the outset, everything has been done for us: through Jesus Christ God calls us, forgives us, justifies us, saves us. Our response is to take what God has done and bring it to completion in our lives. As we do that we enjoy the benefits of God’s work in our lives.

Now, are we left to do this all alone? Is it our task to grit our teeth, gut it out, to exhaust ourselves doing this work? Not at all. While we’re responsible, we have a part to play in this process, we’re not “going it alone.” As we work, God is working, too! Remember Philippians 1:6: “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Knowing that God is also investing His resources, His power, His love in your life, He tells you to work out your salvation with “fear and trembling” (verse 12). Does this mean that we’re to be scared, afraid of God? No. He’s the God of love. It’s out of His great love for us that He gave us His Son, gave us this gift of salvation. The fear and trembling to which we’re called has three elements. First, this salvation, and this work God has given you to do is sacred; it’s from God Himself. It deserves the commitment of your heart, mind, body, and soul. Fear and trembling also tell us that without Him, we

can do nothing. This doesn't push us away from Him, instead, it draws us closer to Him in reliance, commitment, faith, and trust. Lastly, fear and trembling says we don't want to disappoint the God. We want to bring pleasure and honor and glory to the one who has given His life for us, this gift of salvation.

Next, working out your salvation means that your life in Jesus Christ is one of forward movement. It's like a car. Most cars have three or four forward gears and only one reverse gear. Why is that? Although there are times when you have to go backwards, a car is designed to move you forward. As you're working and God's working, there's forward movement in your life. God doesn't want you stuck at the same point you were eight years ago, three years ago, even one month ago. He doesn't want you perpetually working over the same old struggles in Christian living. He never said it would be an easy life. In fact, it's a battle, a struggle. But you should be moving forward, making progress, growing.

While I want to apply these truths to a number of areas of our lives in the next few weeks, today I want to address a problem a number of you have raised with me in the past few months. I'd describe the situation this way. As a believer in Jesus Christ you know right from wrong, you know what is pleasing to God and what is sin. You know you're saved, and you have God the Holy Spirit alive and working in your life. In spite of all this, you continue to sin, to think and say and do things you know are wrong and evil. And you wonder and then you doubt if you're making any progress, if you're growing as a Christian. You feel guilty, defeated. If you've felt this way sometimes, realize that you're not alone. This is part of the struggle we all face. This is how the Apostle Paul experienced it: "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me, waging war against me, making me a prisoner of sin" (Romans 7:21-23). Then he writes, "What a wretched, miserable man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" If that was the end of the story there'd be no hope of forward progress as we work out our salvation. And we would have no hope, no peace, no confidence or joy at all. Is that any way to live? Of course not! The good news is that "What a wretched, miserable man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" is not the final word. The final word is this: "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25) You look to Jesus, knowing that by His death and resurrection, He has won the victory over sin, and His victory is your victory! So when your forward progress is stopped by sin, you can confront it and confess it to God, and He will forgive it and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9). And in that forgiveness and cleansing there is liberation from doubt and guilt and defeat, and the opportunity to move forward again, to grow, to progress spiritually in working out the indescribable gift that is the great salvation that is yours in Jesus Christ:

As we come to this Table to celebrate the Lord's Last Supper and all that this sacrament has for us, we:

- Celebrate the great and sacred work God has given to each of us as individuals, and as a church of Jesus Christ.
- Use this indescribable gift to bring to completion the glorious salvation He's graciously given us.
- Are aware of and yearn for and receive into our lives the supernatural riches God makes available to us as He's committed to working in our lives as we commit ourselves to this great work.