

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

Last week we saw that the greatest gift we could ever receive is the “gift of God that is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). This precious gift is salvation itself, as by God’s grace, goodness, and love you’re rescued from a life marked by 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 God’s own Son, Jesus, Who lived, died, and rose from the dead, Who reigns in glory at this very moment, for you. As you and I have received this gift, our passage tells us that we’re to use it, take this salvation and work it out in our lives, that is, bring it to completion, make this celebration of God’s power, love, peace, and joy more and more prominent and pervasive in our lives.

This is a key way that God’s purpose is going to be realized in our lives in the year ahead. Let me call your attention to the fact that verse 12 begins with the word, “Therefore,” which means “as a result of this” or “for this reason.” What’s before the 12<sup>th</sup> verse is important to working out our salvation. In verses 5-11 we read that the Son of God emptied Himself and He came to earth as a man, but He went even further, He became obedient to death, He submitted to death on the cross. Whatever the Father asked Him to do, Jesus did it. That’s what precedes “Therefore.” So following the example of Jesus, you and I are to work out our salvation doing whatever the Father asks us to do. He wants us to demonstrate the same submission, the same obedience that Jesus demonstrated by His life. God has the right to demand this because of this gift He’s given us. Does He demand submission and obedience in order to make our lives miserable, to punish us? No, He does it out of His love and care for us! It’s for our good and His glory! So before we begin to do anything in our life, we need to ask ourselves, “Because of what God has done for me in saving me, am I following the example of His Son? Does what I’m going to do show my appreciation to Him? Will it give my God honor and glory?” If I truly believe God Himself has done this astounding thing in saving me, isn’t it inevitable that I should commit myself to Him in this way? I think so. It’s the reasonable thing to do. Today, I want to get really practical and apply working out our salvation to three key areas of our lives.

First, there’s our use of time. Ephesians 2:10 says that we have been “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” One benefit of receiving God’s gift of eternal life is knowing that He has a plan, He has work for you to accomplish in your life. In fact, each one of us has been given the time to do the whole will of God for our lives. That plan won’t exhaust you or overwhelm you or burn you out. In fact, Jesus promised that in that plan you will find rest for your soul. The question is: How will you invest your time? I still occasionally see on refrigerators that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which a very frustrated Calvin mutters, “I know God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now, I’m so far behind I will never die!” Not quite an orthodox view of eternal life, but I think it addresses a problem we all face: there never seems to be enough time in the day to do the things we think need to be done. But if it’s true that God gives us the time to do His will, to work His plan, then we need to be wiser and more decisive about how we use each day. We get to choose: we can give our time to pursuits of lasting, eternal significance or to pursuits that are not. Here’s a good reminder of the value of each day and the opportunity each day presents to us: “This is the beginning of a new day. You have been given this day to use as you will. You can waste it or use it for good. What you do today is important, because you are exchanging a day of your life for it. When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever; in its place is something you have left behind. Let it be something good, something that lasts.”

A second way you work out your salvation is through the use of your talents. The world’s principle about how people participate in group dynamics is the Pareto Principle, also known as the “80/20 rule:” Twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work, which means that eighty percent of the people do little beyond watching and benefiting from the work of the twenty percent. God says a different principle is operative for His people. First Corinthians 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ.” Ephesians 4:12 tells us that God gives gifts “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Everyone who is a part of the church is a part of the body of Christ, and if you’re a part of the body of Christ, there’s at least one ministry, one “works of service” God’s equipped and prepared for you to do. We have an incredible number of people in our church who are leaders when it comes to using their talents. They’re leading by their example in

serving. There's children's ministry leaders and Sunday School teachers, nursery care workers, Wonderful Wednesday Dinner workers, Care ministers, people ministering to World Relief refugees, hosts and greeters on Sunday morning, men and women involved in our jail ministry, coffee servers, ushers, sound booth staff, Mission Quilters. I'm sure Anthony has additional spaces for people to sing in the choir. There are C-group leaders and program staff in our Student Ministries department. Some of these "works of service" require training, most require that you care and want to get involved. Every person engaged in one of these ministries is working out his or her salvation in a way that honors and glorifies God and helping to build up this body of Christ! You'll recall that we held a Ministry Faire last fall. The purpose of that event was to let you know the incredible variety of ways you can get involved in the life and ministry of this church. We're planning another Ministry Faire this spring that will have a different emphasis. At the upcoming Faire we really want to encourage you to make a commitment to a ministry God's already equipped and called you to. Let me note that when all our members join our church, we respond "yes" to the following question: "Do you promise to serve your Savior and Lord in the life and ministry of this church to the best of your ability?" Wouldn't it be great if by the end of this year, every person who's a part of our church could say, "Yes I am, I'm serving to the best of my ability!"

A third key area where you work out your salvation is in your use of your treasures. In Malachi 3:10 God says, "Bring me the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." I know this can be a challenge. A man came to see his pastor. He said, "When I was making \$500 a week, I tithed. When the Lord blessed me and I was making \$1000 a week, I still tithed, but it got harder. Then I started making \$2000 a week and it got even harder. Now I make \$3000 a week and I can't tithe anymore. Pastor, will you please help me?" The pastor replied, "Let's pray," and he began, "Lord, when he was making \$500 a week my friend was able to tithe. Now he's making \$3000 a week and he can't. Reduce his income to \$500 a week so he can tithe again."

I'm occasionally asked, are you afraid to talk about money and tithing? My response is no, God talks about it, and I'm being faithful to Him and to you when I address what God says about money and giving. When I address this subject, I usually hear from people who do tithe, and they're always excited about how God is not only using and blessing their giving, but also using and blessing their lives as they commit at least 10% of their financial resources to the Lord. Their excitement confirms what studies have shown for years: there's a direct relationship between an individual's spiritual intensity and commitment to Christ and their giving. Preaching from a different translation of Malachi chapter three, the preacher promised that God would "open the windows of heaven" for those who tithe. Someone in the congregation asked, "What about five percent instead of ten?" "No!" the preacher replied, "God doesn't do windows for less than ten percent!" I share this story as a response to those who say if you can't tithe right away, you should work your way up to it. For example, you start at five or six percent, then add a percent each year until you hit ten. That sounds perfectly reasonable. There's only one problem. It's not what God says. He says, "The tithe is mine. Don't rob me. Return to Me what is mine, trust me, and watch how I bless your life!" If you're not currently tithing, I challenge you to test God as He tells you to test Him in Malachi 3:10. Please understand what is happening in that verse. That is the only place in God's Word where He says, "Test Me." Everywhere else in God's Word when He speaks of being tested He's talking about sinning. We are sinning against Him, we are testing His patience, we are testing His grace, or we are testing His love. Here you are encouraged to test God in this very thing. Give Him a tenth of your income and see what He does. Do that starting today, and test Him for six months. And see if your life is not enriched and blessed beyond your expectations in doing that. In my 25 years of ministry, I've never heard of anyone who said, "I tested God and He failed." It's never happened and I know it never will, because God is faithful, He is faithful in keeping His promises. He's always faithful.

Time, talents, treasures. How you use them has a direct impact on whether you're truly applying the precious gift of salvation in Jesus Christ to your life. And that's the challenge. It's one thing for you to say "I believe Jesus is my Savior and Lord. He saved me; I'm His." It's another thing to live it. As we submit to and obey God and His Word in these important areas, we know we're following the example of our Savior and Lord. I trust that that will be the story of our life, our faith, how we work out our salvation in this coming year!