

## THE BRIGHT LIGHT OF GRATITUDE

Philippians 2:12-15

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Each January, I choose a Bible verse or passage for the year. I try to memorize it, reflect on it, study it and meditate on it all year long. My 2019 verse has been vv. 12-13 of our text. I love the balance and paradox—work out your own salvation (v. 12), but it's God who works in you (v. 13). FIRST, To work out our own salvation is to bring something to its goal. What is that goal? Someone once told me, "When you see the word 'therefore,' you should read what comes before it to see what the therefore is there for." What comes right before our "therefore"? It is vv. 5-11, the cruciform shape of life: suffering love, surrender, the pattern of Christ in all relationships and actions. This is what we are to work out.

SECOND, for it is God who works in us..." Notice this is not works salvation, There is a working out because there is a work within. A dad was leaving the house early one summer morning and as he exited the door, he remembered a job his son needed to do. He hollered to his wife "Tell Scott to mow the lawn today if he feels like it. And tell him he'd better feel like it." This is no externally imposed work of God's. Free will is maintained. But God works through our desires. To will and to do.

But guess what gets in the way of God's work in us and our working out of our salvation. Grumbling, complaining, arguing, disputing, wrangling (v. 14). I heard about a very negative man. At a café, he ordered one egg fried and the other scrambled. When his meal came, he sent it back because the cook had scrambled the wrong egg. Have you ever noticed how complaining and negativity drag us down and poison the environment around us? And have you ever noticed how tired it makes us?

Now, are you following Paul's logic? Caving into a grumbling spirit harms our witness for Christ (v. 15). We're surrounded by a crooked and perverse culture. Our best witness for Christ is ruined by complaining. Our best witness for Christ is achieved by gratitude. In fact, Paul says when we are grateful, we will shine like stars. Stars do two things: 1) They point the way. Mariners navigate by the stars. People can find their way to Christ through our positive attitude. 2) Stars shine the brightest at night. Paul was writing from prison. If anyone had a right to complain, it was Paul. Yet he kept writing in this letter, "rejoice!" (4:4). Gratitude opens us to the work of God and it energizes us for the work of God. Gratitude really is a bright light.

So I'd like to send us out today with a Thanksgiving challenge. 1) Look at gratitude as a discipline to be practiced, not an emotion to be felt. Neuroscience research reveals that we become what we practice. The same principle that says you get better on a key board by practicing over and over applies to virtues like tithing or being grateful and not complaining. Henri Nouwen reminded us that we always get to choose gratitude or complaint and that the choice of gratitude rarely comes without effort [*The Return of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 85-86].

2) Take the no-complaint challenge. Richard Rohr introduced this idea of spending an entire day in thanksgiving without complaining. If we're feeling strong, we might expand that by balancing every complaint with ten points of gratitude, every criticism with ten compliments [*Prayer*, Richard Foster, p. 89]. We are basically taking our thought life and our words and flipping the script.

Several of us in the church have read *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. She tells the story of Gita and Lale who survived the death camps of Birkenau and Auschwitz. They later married and established a successful clothing import business. But a jealous acquaintance reported their work and fabricated stories against them. The Soviet Union took their business and deported them. When their son Gary came home from school one day, his dad was watching their car being towed away and there was a "for sale or rent" sign in the yard. The boy went inside and found his mother Gita packing and singing. Why sing? Her reply: "When you've been in a death camp and not knowing if you will live or die five minutes from now, all other problems seems small."

Together, we are working out our salvation because God is completing a work within us. Do all things without murmuring. Practice gratitude. Let your lives shine like stars.