

I would like to address our reading from Philippians today. When I first went to Bible College back in the late 80s—hidden somewhere up in the Santa Cruz Mountains in California—I took a class called Hermeneutics. The class was about principles for Biblical interpretation—understanding the text—and even understanding ourselves—what we bring to the text.

And Philippians 2 was my text for this class. I spent the whole semester working on this massive paper—more than two hundred pages. Yet in all that time invested, researching and writing, I am not sure I really understood this passage. Let's see if we can do a little better today.

Spirituality is a difficult thing to define these days. Historically, spirituality has been grounded in the work of the Spirit in Word and Sacrament. But it has come to mean a very private form of religion.

People often express this by saying they are spiritual but not religious. And that usually means they are still religious, but in their own self-made way. It also means they don't go to Church. They don't read the Bible—or at least not well.

In the early days of the Church, spirituality expressed itself by separation from the world. The holiest of monks lived in religious communities—out in the desert—up on a mountain—deep in a cave. They prayed for the world. They memorized the Scriptures. They took seriously the idea of holiness—of being set apart. And there is something to this.

More recently, Rod Dreher wrote *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. And although I don't agree with all of his conclusions or recommendations, it is an interesting read. America is post-Christian.

A recent Barna poll suggests most professing Christians don't hold to a Christian worldview. And most don't even know what they don't know. They don't confess Christian doctrine. They lack the grounding of creeds and confessions. They live in opposition to the clear teachings of Scripture.

Dreher tells Christians to be more aware of worldly influences in education, culture, entertainment, and politics. He invites Christians to give themselves more fully to a monastic style of existence, although at work, at home, and in our churches. Our religion should be practiced—with Scripture—with traditions, hymns, prayers, liturgies, creeds, and godly habits. We should give more thought to our spirituality. And it should reflect the cross of Jesus Christ.

In our epistle reading today, we have Paul telling us this. “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.”

Now this verse has been used to support the idea of a self-help kind of salvation—as if God helps those who help themselves—as if salvation is my choice, my decision—giving my life to Jesus. People who see salvation in these terms take this verse as a statement that salvation has a human component. We must do our part. We must work towards it.

But this goes against the clear teaching of the New Testament. Ephesians 2 might be the easiest way to refute this. Maybe you have this one memorized—and good enough. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

But even just reading the context is so helpful. Here, Paul first gives us a beautiful picture of Christ taking the humble road for us. Christ—as eternal God—took on a human nature for us to go to the cross—all for our salvation.

And now that He has been exalted—as God and Man—to the right hand of the Father—we are simply left to bow before Him and confess that salvation is by grace alone in what Jesus has accomplished. God chooses His own in Jesus Christ. And His own are saved.

So, salvation is not a self-help project. Religiosity is not something we assemble on our own. We should not take a mosaic approach—piecing together our own views. We should not take a cafeteria approach—picking and choosing according to our tastes.

And if spirituality is not just life in the desert—or in your backyard staring at the stars—what does it mean to work out your own salvation? What is Paul talking about?

The nice thing here is that Paul explains himself. Paul is pretty good about this generally. When he says some difficult thing—if you just keep reading—all will start to come together.

Unlike the Proverbs, Paul’s Epistles are not a loose collection of sayings. That is why it is always best to keep reading. Context, context, context. And this is why our lectionary is structured the way it is. We are in the middle of four weeks in Philippians in our readings. What we do in Church really is meant to make sense—even as we dig deep.

Paul wants us to give our salvation our utmost attention. This should be our most fundamental concern—our highest goal. And in the verses that follow Paul’s statement, he makes several comments worthy of our attention. First, he wants us to be aware of his generation, and by extension, our generation as well.

In his words, he wants us to be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.” We must recognize that, however normal it has begun to look to us, the world is crooked and perverse.

Remember that Jesus is our King. Christians are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Our first allegiance is to Him. We are children of God. Through Baptism—received by faith—we are adopted into the family of God. And as His children, we hold fast to the Word of life. The systems of this world should not define us. We must live in the world—and we want to seek God’s best for the world in which we live—but we are not of the world.

I like the shape of this that we hear from the Prophet Jeremiah. “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

But let me move on to Paul's next point. It may offer a more precise critique of the world's dysfunction—and maybe a little of our own. He says, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning.” Some translations render this first word as *complaining* and the second as *arguing*. Do all things without complaining or arguing. And specifically, he has in mind our submission to God.

Working out our salvation is an attitude of life before God. And it means we aren't to grumble—about each other—but also about God's work in our lives. In the Old Testament, the word grumbling often describes the people of Israel during their years in the wilderness. Their discontentment reveals a lack of trust in God.

But what if we were the sort of people who didn't grumble and complain and question and argue? What would that mean for our lives? What would that mean for our witness to the world? It is clearly what God would have for us. It is His good will for our lives. And—as we see—it is an expression of trust in Him.

So, this is another verse to set to memory. Write it on your bathroom mirror. Put it on your fridge. Philippians 2:14, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning.”

So, our generation is crooked and depraved. And God calls us to reject the ways of the world. Here, most specifically, we are to reject grumbling, complaining, questioning, and arguing—with one another—and against God. These are not healthy activities for us. Nobody really wants to listen anyway.

And connected to this is our witness to the lost world. Paul calls us to shine as lights. We hold fast to the Word of life. To put this together, let me return to the text, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, 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, holding fast to the word of life.”

We are to shine as lights. No, this text is not suggesting we can reach sinless perfection. But we have a beautiful Christ-honoring life that flows out of our relationship with God. We are to be like Daniel. He lived in the midst of ungodly Babylon. You think your culture is depraved—you should have seen that one.

But Daniel did not live off in a corner somewhere. He served in the king's palace. His life was quite public. And yet, he was noticeably set apart. He didn't eat the king's food. He wouldn't bow down to the king's idols. He prayed—even when others were watching. His faith was open and honest. He talked with everyone about the God He served. His life was a bright light in the darkness of the world around him.

Now, darkness often opposes the light. There are a couple of different stories in Daniel worth noting. But his interaction with Darius later in life ended with Daniel being thrown to the lions. Now, God kept him that day. Sometimes the faithful are thrown to the lions. And sometimes the lions may even devour us.

But the charge his enemies bring against him is so key, “We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.” Daniel lived without blame before the world. He was God's light to his generation. Many would come to know the truth through his work.

Finally, Paul would have us see God's hand at work in all of this, as we work out our salvation. He says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God

who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” He is the one who rescues us from the darkness and depravity of the world—the darkness and depravity inside each one of us.

Galatians 2:20 is another favorite verse of mine. This verse really helps us bring together what Paul says here. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Of course, in our own power, we are incapable of living the kind of life that God requires. On our own, we end up mimicking the world. We get catechized by the world. Left to ourselves, we will just grumble, complain, question, and argue—and we will self-justify our actions.

But God produces the life of Christ in us. So, this isn’t just about moral reform or progress on our goals to be better humans. It is about death and resurrection. He kills and makes alive. God puts to death our sinful nature, and we find new and abundant life in Him. This is baptismal. Our lives came to an end at the font, and now we live in Christ. This is the spiritual life we all should seek.

And so, as those who bear the name of Christ in our world—we are set free from our crooked and twisted generation. We are set free from grumbling and complaining—as a lifestyle—and especially against God. We shine as lights in a dark world as we hold forth the word of life. We go and work in His vineyard. We heed the call of Christ.

This is what holiness looks like. And although we don’t have to go live in a cave—and we don’t have to join a monastery—we are called to be holy—set apart. And God is at work in our hearts, making us what He has already declared us to be—we are His saints. He sanctifies us.

Let me wrap things up by repeating our text. Let these verses shape your life. Let them shape the way you view the world.

“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, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, 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, holding fast to the word of life.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*