

Rethinking Your Work

A Study of Philippians 2:12-13

Characteristic of Completeness: Disciplined Life

Big Idea: The Christian life is a sailboat, not lifeboat or a rowboat.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 127:1-2; Matthew 11:28-30; John 14:15; 15:4-5;

Romans 7:18-19; 12:2; 14:19; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 15:10; Philippians 1:6; 1 Timothy 6:12;
James 1:22-25; 1 Peter 1:14; Revelation 3:20

Introduction:

- A. A few months ago, I received an email from a person who attends Moon Valley. I got his permission to read the email to you because it sets up my sermon this morning so well. He writes,

Bob,

. . . In our Life Group last week, . . . I requested prayer that my diligence or self-discipline might be better. I asked the group where they thought the ability/power to be diligent/self-disciplined originates. Does one simply choose to be diligent? Does the power to be diligent come from God? The group didn't really seem to know.

My life experience suggests it comes largely from the individual himself. I say that because my observation of Christians and non-Christian reveals no perceptible difference in self-discipline although the areas that one concentrates on might be different between those 2 groups. If my conclusion is right, I find that really distressing because it means it's all up to me and I'm just plain weak.

For me, it's easy to know what areas of my life lack diligence and for me to yearn for diligence in those areas. However, I find it incredibly difficult to be diligent, try as I might. My success is inconsistent and frankly, seems to be waning as I age. I had hoped it would be the opposite.

I'm guessing that there are many in the congregation just like me. . . .

I appreciate the author's candor, and I think he's right. There are many of us who struggle just like him.

- B. When it comes to spiritual growth, what is our part and what is God's part? Is it all up to us? Or do we just let go and let God? Where does the power to be disciplined come from, God or us? In the process of becoming more and more complete in Christ, what is our role and what is God's role?

This deals directly with one of our ► Characteristics of Completeness: a Disciplined Life.

C. I find there are two common perspectives among Christians.

1. The first perspective views the Christian life as ► a lifeboat. Having believed in Jesus for eternal life, we are saved from drowning spiritually. So we're in the lifeboat on earth, waiting to one day be rescued to heaven.

The lifeboat people rest in their salvation and rely on God to take them wherever He wants them to go, according to the current. As for the question, "What is our part and what is God's part?" the lifeboat people would say our part is to simply believe or trust in God; God's part is to do the rest. They like the saying, "Let go, and let God."

- a. The lifeboat people appeal to some wonderful Scriptures in support of their lifeboat perspective.

The lifeboat people love ► Psalm 46:10, where God says,

^{NAU} Psalm 46:10 "Cease *striving* and know that I am God . . ."

The lifeboat people like ► Psalm 127:1, where it says,

^{NAU} Psalm 127:1 Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it . . .

They like ► Matthew 11:30, where Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 11:30 ". . . My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

They take to heart the words of Jesus in ► John 15:5, when He says,

^{NAU} John 15:5 ". . . apart from Me you can do nothing."

The lifeboat people identify with the Apostle Paul when, in ► Romans 7:18-19, he describes the weakness of his old nature to be disciplined in doing good, saying,

^{NAU} Romans 7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. ¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

- b. The ► lifeboat people can be a breath of fresh air. They're not on some religious treadmill and don't expect you to be. They can be very gracious and easy going.

That's the people who tend to view the Christian life as a lifeboat.

2. Then there's the ► rowboat people. They are the people who have the perspective that the Christian life is a rowboat.

They're like the lifeboat people in that, having believed in Jesus for eternal life, they are saved from drowning spiritually. Only, from their perspective, they are saved into a rowboat, not a lifeboat. So, in this life, we have a responsibility to row, to work hard, to labor, to strive for God until God rescues us to heaven.

As for the question, "What is our part and what is God's part?" the rowboat people would say that God's part was to save us into the rowboat; our part is to take it from there.

- a. The rowboat people appeal to some wonderful Scriptures in support of their rowboat perspective.

They are inspired by the words of Jesus in ► John 14:15:

^{NAU} John 14:15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

They are motivated by the Apostle Paul, who says, beginning in ► 1 Corinthians 9:24,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 9:24 . . . Run in such a way that you may win. . . . ► 26 . . . I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; ► 27 but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

The rowboat people keep ► James 1:22 close at hand, where it says,

^{NAU} James 1:22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

And they say, "Amen" when, in ► 1 Peter 1:16, the Old Testament is quoted, where God says,

^{NAU} 1 Peter 1:16 . . . "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."

- b. The ► rowboat people can be energizing and inspiring to be around. Their zeal for doing good can be infectious.
3. So ► which perspective is right, the lifeboat or the rowboat? Or can I do both? Maybe the lifeboat is for when I'm tired and the rowboat is for when I'm inspired. Is that possible?
- D. The Apostle Paul addresses the issue in the text we're studying today. The text is ► Philippians 2:12-13. It says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

1. First off, I want to tell you that Paul is talking about how we live as Christians, not how we become Christians. Paul is writing to those in the Philippian church who had already believed in Jesus for eternal life. They are already saved. In our metaphor, they have already been saved into the boat. Paul is now talking about what to do in the boat.
2. There is only one command in the text. Everything else relates to it. The command comes in ► Verse 12. It says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:12 . . . work out your salvation . . .

So, the rowboat people are correct. Right? *We* do the work. After all, this is the only command in the text: "Work out your salvation!"

3. Not so fast. Then Paul says in ► Verse 13,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:13 . . . it is God who is at work in you . . .

The form of this statement makes it emphatic.¹ Paul doesn't just say something like, "God works in you." He says, "it is *God* who is at work." The clear implication is that it is *not* you. And Paul has already said in Philippians 1:6,

^{NAU} Philippians 1:6 *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

So, maybe the lifeboat people are correct. *God* does the work.

¹ Frank Thielman, *Philippians, The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 138.

4. Which ► is it? The lifeboat or the rowboat?

I believe Paul's answer is, "neither." The Christian life is not a lifeboat or a rowboat.

The Christian life is a ► sailboat.² In fact, that's the big idea of my ► message: The Christian life is a sailboat, not a lifeboat or a rowboat.

We are the sailors and God is the wind. We sailors do have some work to do on the sailboat. If we don't do some things like hoist the sails, we're not going anywhere in the Christian life.

But at the same time, we sailors are utterly dependent on the wind. We can work feverishly, 24-7, and the sailboat of the Christian life is just going to drift without the wind of God.

In both Hebrew and Greek, both in the Old Testament and the New, the word for spirit and wind are the same. The Holy Spirit is like the wind of God, powerful, unpredictable, unseen.

We cannot manufacture the wind. We don't know when it's coming. We can't control it. Our job is to catch it—to catch the wind and go where it takes us.

I take the command to "work out your salvation" to be essentially a command to catch the wind. And our text gives us some important insights into our part and God's part in sailing the Christian life.

- I. First and foremost, as sailors, ► we must be responsive to the wind. That is, we must respond to the wind of God's Spirit. Self-discipline is required. But it's the discipline of preparing for the wind to move us. It's not the discipline of rowing. From our text, I find that this responsiveness involves a certain process.

- A. In ► Verse 12, Paul tells the Philippians to "work out your salvation" in a certain way. They are to do it, "just as you have always obeyed."

When we think of obedience, we think of doing something. Our focus is on the end result, the bottom line. But obedience is more like a process that *culminates* in doing something. Some important things must happen before the doing occurs.

In its most basic sense, the Greek word used here for ► "obey" means "listen."³ And it's not just listening for the sake of listening. It's listening with a view to responding.

² The sailboat metaphor is not original with me. I've heard it before, then ran across it again in John Ortberg's sermon, "Spiritual Growth—My Job or God's?" from *Preaching Today*, Tape 190.

In fact, the term was sometimes used in a technical sense to describe, “a door-keeper, whose duty it is to listen for the signals of those who wish to enter, and to admit them . . .”⁴

This brings to mind ► Revelation 3:20, where Jesus says,

^{NAU} Revelation 3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

We do not answer the door unless we hear the knock. And we do not hear the knock unless we are listening. So the act of obedience is first an act of listening. If we do not listen, we cannot obey.

B. The second and third parts of being responsive come in ► Verse 13, where Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 2:13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

1. The ► second part is “to will.” That’s deciding to do something based on what you’ve heard.
2. Then, the ► third part is “to work.” That’s following through by doing what you’ve decided to do.

C. The process of responding to the wind of God’s Spirit is very logical. First listen. Then will. Then work.

And I want you to notice that God is at work in us every step of the way. When Paul says, “it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work,” he means that God is at work not just in telling us what He wants done, but He is also at work in both our deciding to work and in our doing the work.

How? What does this process look like? What is God’s part and what is our part?

1. Start with ► listening. God’s part is to speak. Our part is to listen.

How do we listen to God? We must first ask the question, how does God speak? The primary way God speaks to us today is through the Word of God. God can and does also speak through other people; He speaks through our

³ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “ὑπακούω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

⁴ Ibid.

circumstances; and He speaks through the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. But His primary form of communication is the Bible.

How do we listen to the Bible? Traditionally, we equate listening with reading and studying the Bible. After all, we're a Bible church. For example, we open our Bibles to John 13:34 and we hear Jesus say,

^{NAU} John 13:34 “. . . love one another . . .”

And we do a little word study on the word, “love.” We find that there are a number of Greek words for love. We discover that this one is remarkable in that it means loving others sacrificially and unconditionally. And we think, “Boy, that’s good. I should probably be more disciplined about loving others.” And we stop there, thinking that we have listened to the wind of God, when all we’ve really done is say something like, “Nice breeze.” Our sails aren’t even up. We’re still dead in the water.

Remember, biblical listening always has a response in view. Biblical listening always looks to apply what God says. The sails are always up, and the sailor keeps prayerfully asking, “Lord, *where* do you want *me* to go with this? *Who* do you want *me* to love? *When* do you want *me* to love? *How* do you want *me* to love?” And the sailor waits patiently and attentively to get some specific sense of which way the wind is blowing right now.

2. That’s when God works in us ► “to will.” At this point, God’s part is to show us what to do. Our part is to decide to do it.

When we seek to apply His Word to our lives, He gives us specific direction, if we are prayerfully patient and attentive to receive it. And when the direction comes, we have a decision to make.

God has never spoken to me audibly. But as I seek to apply His Word to my life, I find that things come to mind and situations arise and conversations with others happen to give me clues as to where God is at work and how He wants me to join Him. I sense which way the wind is blowing and how I’m supposed to catch it. And I decide to go where the wind wants to take me.

It’s not as mysterious as it sounds. A couple of weeks ago, we studied Philippians 2:1-4, and the big idea was the love shown to you must flow through you. You may recall that the text indicates that this kind of love includes encouragement and consolation and fellowship and affection and compassion. So, I asked God to show me how He wants me to apply this. I was listening.

That's when I got an email from God. Somebody else signed it, but it was from Him. It was an email being circulated among some ASU employees and then forwarded to me. It was about an ASU employee whose struggle against cancer had taken a turn for the worse, and she was in the hospital.

She doesn't attend Moon Valley, but I performed her wedding about six months ago. I'm the nearest thing she's got to a pastor, so even though I hadn't heard from her in months, the email was forwarded to me.

I sensed that God had done His part to bring this woman to me, and the wind seemed to be clearly blowing in the direction of the hospital. I had a decision to make. Do I go or not?

In these moments there always seems to be a crisis of faith. I don't know why, but the last few weeks have been the busiest ever for me and Cathy. When I got the email I was feeling tired, a little overwhelmed, and way behind. It seemed like God was calling me to spend some time I could not afford, to use some energy I did not have, to offer some consolation I could not muster. And there is the crisis of faith: I doubt if I can do what God calls me to do.

But I decide to go.

3. That's when we get ► to work with God. At this point, our part is to obey Him. God's part is to empower us.

When I decide on where God wants me to go, then He works in me to give me the power to follow through. He clears the way to make it happen. That's what Paul means when he says, "God is in you . . . to work."

I visited the woman and called her husband, praying all the while that God would help me pull this off. He did. He always does.

The woman explained that she and her husband had been hoping to reconnect with me. We reconnected. A few days later, I followed up by phone. Doctors had just told her that she has six months to live. She wanted me to come over and talk to her and her husband last Friday. Of course I visited them. That decision was pretty easy.

But at the same time, I was scheduled to turn in a big project for my doctoral class that was not yet finished. The due date was October 1 which is today. So I was going to turn in the project last Friday.

I had been working day and night, everyday, all week and now with the scheduled visit to the people on Friday, I didn't think I was going to make it. So I emailed my professor, asking sheepishly if he wanted the project to be

turned in the Friday before or the Monday after Sunday the first. I was hoping that he would say Monday the second so I could squeeze in just a few more hours between sermon preparation and Life Group to complete the project.

That's when I got another email from God. This time the professor signed it. He said that he thought the due date was Tuesday, October 3. And then he went on the say some very encouraging things to me that I needed to hear. God put fresh wind in my sails. He cleared the way for me to obey. That's what He does.

If this sort of thing happened once or twice, I'd probably chalk it up to coincidence. But it happens over and over again. God speaks; I listen. God directs; I decide. I obey; God empowers. And in the middle, there's a crisis of faith. And it's not just me.

"Hey Noah, build an ark."

"Hey Abraham, offer up Isaac."

"Hey Moses, talk to Pharaoh."

"Hey Jonah, preach to Nineveh."

"Hey David, take on Goliath."

"Hey Don, encourage Jim."

"Hey Alice, forgive Liz."

"Hey Bill, give more."

"Hey Judy, make it right."

"Hey Jeff, confess it now."

- D. Let ► me tell you where I think the lifeboat people and the rowboat people miss the boat.

The lifeboat people tend not to think about application at all. They're not listening. They don't want to invite a crisis.

The rowboat people tend to impatiently contrive their *own* application, not listening and waiting for *God's* application. They're not listening either. They make up God's agenda for Him.

Both end up in the same boat, adrift. The one is checked out. The other is burned out because God empowers His agenda, not ours.

We must be responsive to the wind. That's the first thing and the main thing to know about sailing the Christian life. Let me very briefly mention some supplementary points I draw from the text—points that fill out the idea of responding to the wind.

- II. The first supplementary point is this: Sailing ► is a dynamic, ongoing process, not a one-time event.

The verbs describing our work in ► Verse 12 and God's work in Verse 13 are in the present tense, suggesting continuous action.⁵ There is no Christian cruise control, no auto-pilot.

And sailing is learned. People don't become skilled, seasoned sailors in a fortnight. It can take years to get the feel of it. And when you're just starting out, you can bank on feeling clumsy and awkward, like you're never going to get it. This, too, is a crisis of faith.

We can expect to spend the rest of our lives learning to sail the Christian life. It's a dynamic, ongoing process, not a one-time event.

- III. Here's another thing about sailing the Christian life: It's ► not a one-man sailboat; it requires a crew. The Christian life is to be lived in community.

A. The terms ► "you" and "your" in the text are plural, not singular.

B. And in the preceding context, Paul has talked about being unified and unselfishly others-oriented. It would be inconsistent to now exhort the Philippians to work out their salvation individually, on their own.⁶

C. The truth is we all have different levels of experience and we're all uniquely created to play different roles on the crew of the sailboat. And so we need each other. We're supposed to catch the wind together. We need all hands on deck.

- IV. Here's another thing that's easy to forget: We're ► on a mission, not a cruise. In ► Verse 13, Paul says God enlists us . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 2:13 . . . to work for *His* good pleasure.

⁵ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians, Black's New Testament Commentary*, ed. Henry Chadwick, (London: A & C Black, 1998), 152; Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2ed. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), 122.

⁶ Ralph P. Martin and Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 43, rev., Bruce M. Metzger, ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 139-140.

This ain't "The Love Boat" and I'm not Captain Stubing. We do not measure success according to the size of our boat or the comfort of its appointments or the calmness of the weather.

We're on a mission, not a cruise—a mission to love God in a way that reaches another generation—a mission to see more and more people become more and more complete in Christ.

V. And sailing ► can be hard work.

In ► Verse 12, the word for "work out" describes "thoroughly working at something."⁷ One scholar points out that Paul has in mind, "continuous, sustained, strenuous effort."⁸

But it's not rowing; it's sailing. God gives us the power. Paul is careful to point that out in ► 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, where he says,

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but ► I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

In sailing the Christian life you can expect to work very hard, yet not you, but the power of God with you. You're sailing, not rowing.

VI. And finally, we ► sail with an awesome respect for the power of the wind and the importance of our job in catching it. In ► Verse 12, Paul says we are to work out our salvation . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 2:12 . . . with fear and trembling

It's the fear and trembling of every crew member who knows that Christ the Captain will be coming again. He's coming to evaluate and decorate each sailor. We're going to have to give an account for our sailing.

And so, mates, let us work out our salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in us.

You say, "Where do I start?" Go ► back to the process. It starts with listening. Listening lifts the sail.

The Christian life is a sailboat, not a lifeboat or a rowboat.

⁷ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "κατεργάζομαι." (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

⁸ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 279.