

First Presbyterian Church
Phil. 2:12-18, “Time to Work Out – No Grumbling!”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/31/2026

It’s good to work out, right?

Whatever our age or whatever type of body we’ve got,
it’s good to work out, walk, run, swim, garden,
whatever it is for you.

We all know it’s good, and we all feel better when we’ve done it,
but it’s still surprisingly difficult for most people to do.

That’s when friend of yours who is in an incredibly busy season of life
saunters up and says, “Oh, wow. Had a great work out today.”

You reply, “Really? I can’t imagine how you
had time with all the things going on in your life.”

“Well,” they reply, “I guess I didn’t *technically* work out,
but I thought about it for a while.”

... “What? You thought about it?”

“Yeah, you know, I thought about *if I was at the gym*,
what exercises I might do first, how many reps,
what the best order would be to work various muscle groups,
how long I would run for, what stretches I would do,
and by the time I got done...
felt like a great work out.”

As much as we might relate to these sentiments,
I think we can all agree that, no, it wasn’t at all like working out.

It was, however, a lot like *thinking* about working out.
Working out is an inherently embodied activity.
It cannot be done in the theoretical.

Even when we use the phrase figuratively, like,
“We’ve got a problem we need to work out,” we mean
“actively pursue a solution,” not
“think about possible solutions without doing anything.”

And so when Paul says to his friends in Philippi,
“Work out *your salvation* with fear and trembling”
we know that he refers to *how they actually live*
rather than *the ideas they ascribe to in their minds*.

Now, working out our own salvation could bring up the specter
of the old “works righteousness” debate
revolving around a question like,
“Is salvation something *we* accomplish by good works
or is it a pure gift of God’s grace?”

But we don’t need to go down that well-worn path.
Because Paul isn’t saying the Philippians have saved themselves,
he’s saying something more like this:
“Given that you have received salvation
through Christ’s self-emptying love”
(which is overwhelmingly emphasized
in the preceding verses),
“express that salvation in your daily living” (that is, ‘work it out’)
“with fear and trembling.”

A second factor that we 21st Century people will fly past
is that this is not a task for *individuals* in the Philippian church.

This is about the whole community.

As the British theologian GB Caird once put it,

“Salvation in the New Testament
is always an intensely personal matter,
but never an individual one.”

The emphasis is on the way in which this church as a community
lives into their salvation as God’s redeemed people.

When we lack a community of faith that we can trust,
then salvation is just my individual connection to God.
It’s me and Jesus.

There’s nobody else to help discern what obedience to God
ought to look like in a given situation.

The work of the Spirit is to form communities *of* faith,
not merely individuals *with* faith.

But moving past one difficult phrase only leads us to another:
because the way they are to do this is “with fear and trembling.”

What a dreary and anxious kind of picture that is.

I could almost picture a group of people
furtively and apologetically going through life,
like the family of an abusive parent,
walking on eggshells, perpetually worried
that they might make God upset.

And you might know some people who do take on that attitude.
But this phrase is not meant to point us in that direction.

“Fear and trembling” is a phrase that Paul uses a few times in his letters.

For instance, in 1 Cor., he tells the Corinthians

that he came to them “with fear and trembling,”

and then in 2 Cor., he praises the Corinthians for receiving

his young colleague Titus “with fear and trembling.”

Do you think they were actually afraid in these situations?

Given those examples, a better way for us to understand this is

“with proper humility and respect,” or

on the other hand, “without thinking you’re better than...”

The reason we should cultivate a reverent communal ethic is found in

V. 13: for it is God who works in you

to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

This isn’t just a cultural nicety. This isn’t an optional extra.

When we live out our faith, we are making contact

with the power of God who is at work within us.

I met a guy last week who is a pilot for NetJets,

the biggest private jet company in the nation.

One of the stories he shared was about a time

he was helping out the crew,

and he personally carried Paul Simon’s guitar

into the cabin of the airplane.

Are you kidding me? Paul Simon’s guitar?

One of the greatest song writers of all time?

A person should be careful when handling any instrument,
but it's a little different when someone says,
"Be careful with this – it's Paul Simon's guitar." Wow.

But actually, no. To really connect with the meaning of this verse,
we have to go further than that.

Forget about carrying the guitar – imagine you are a guitar player
and you're hired to play on a recording.

You're in the studio, and the producer walks over
and hands you a guitar. The producer looks you in eyes and says,
"When you play this guitar today,
I want you do so with fear and trembling.

This is Paul Simon's guitar.

His NetJets plane broke down and he can't be here today.
So he sent along a demo tape of how this song will go,
and he is entrusting you to carry out his vision
for this song on the actual recording."

Not a realistic scenario, I grant you, but go along with it
and try to imagine the sense of responsibility.

We are called to express the gift of salvation we receive through Christ
with all humility and respect because in our life as a church
it is God who is working through us
to accomplish God's own purpose.

If we really believe that, then when we serve food to people in need,
when we offer our time and energy on a Ministry Team,
when we pray for one another, when we join a small group,

when we sing or play an instrument,
when we are here participating in worship,
we are working out our salvation and
it is God who works in us to will and to act.

Or when we're at school or with our friends,
when we're at home or at work,
we never stop being the people of God,
and we always have opportunities
to work out our salvation.

We shouldn't take ourselves too seriously,
but we should take what God is doing through us seriously.

From this most central teaching, Paul shares an implication:
do everything without grumbling or arguing.
Which means...Christians don't grumble
while they work out.

Okay, be honest, how many of you grumble when you exercise? (I do!)

Just as we can be prone to grumbling when we do physical exercise,
walking in the way of Jesus can promote grumbling
when we exercise our faith.

So when the time comes to forgive those who have done us wrong,
we say, "Are you kidding me? That's ridiculous."
Or when we volunteer for a role at church
and then other people don't follow through
on their responsibility.

Any number of things that happen in our relationships
and ministry together can make us want to grumble about it.

When we feel that coming on, we can reframe the moment
like Paul does. This isn't my church. This isn't my ministry.
This is an outworking of God's purpose in the world,
and the Spirit will empower us to share
in the mindset of Christ
who took the form of a servant.

When that happens, then as we connect with others in the neighborhood,
as we collaborate on earth care events
or advocate for people who are suffering injustice
or raise money to support disaster relief –
whatever it may be, our neighbors will notice something unique.

Paul says the Philippians will shine like stars in the sky
when compared to the warped and crooked generation
they belong to.

Which is not that *they* are so wonderful, but that God is doing
something wonderful among them that is distinct from the corrupt,
mean-spirited, and power-hungry world around.

So this is my final encouragement:

God has brought us into a community of faith for a purpose.

Let's pursue that together whole-heartedly, no grumbling,
no complaining.

The changes we're seeing the world around us present real challenges.

We can't waste time and energy

fighting with each other over stupid stuff.

We've got to lock in and support each other.

Because it's time to work out – no grumbling.