

### Shine like stars

When you watch different groups of people, whether it's a social group, a group of people on TV, a group at work, what kind of groups stand out? Which groups do you find the most attractive to be a part of?

Speaking of work, I remember in a previous job how much I hated being there because there was frequently yelling matches between the CEO and the second in command. There was a sense of discord and unease because the boss kept trying to establish his control by yelling louder, and in an open plan office it was very distracting and disheartening. It was one of the reasons I left there.

I contrast that now with my current job, working at the Church Missionary Society. Sure we have our bad days, and there are still problems, but the overall culture is much more friendly and you can see the unity of the people in the office. Over the past couple of weeks there has particularly been great comradarie and openness in how we help and deal with each other that makes me very thankful to God for the opportunity to work in such a place. Not saying that my current job is perfect by any means, it's full of sinful people as well, but that difference, that unity is one of the best things about the job.

So why am I telling you my work history? Not because I'm looking for a job, or because I want you all to think CMS is wonderful just because of its great staff. I'm telling you this because just like we watch groups of people and find them attractive or not, the world watches us as a group of people who say they follow Christ. And if we want to show Christ best, how should we be living?

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In Philippians 2, Paul is challenging his readers to live without grumbling or complaining so as to 'Shine like stars' to the people around them. One of the most powerful ways we can witness to those around us, is in how we act with each other and how we go about our life. So today I want to explore how we can show to those watching, that God's power is at work in us.

We are in the second part of Philippians Chapter 2. We have just had the section that gives one of my favourite descriptions of Christ and the great challenge to be like-minded, to live as he did since we are united with him. Then we come to verse 12 and Paul starts off with the command – obey.

It's a simple word, but there is so much here that is behind it. The first thing you might notice is that Paul says the Philippians *have* been obeying in his presence, and now he wants to encourage them to keep obeying always, even in his absence.

Obedience is not something that should only happen when we think people are watching. There is always someone watching, God if no one else is physically present. The reason that Paul wants them to obey is tied very much into the section from before. Christ was obedient; therefore, they are to be obedient.

But what are they to do in obedience? The verse says 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling'. There are a couple of really important things here. As soon as people see the word 'work' and 'salvation' together there can sometimes be this reaction that the passage might be telling us that we have to work *for* our salvation, or that there is something that we have to do to be saved as opposed to Christ's saving work being sufficient. That idea could also be drawn from verse 14 where it talks about becoming blameless and pure. It could be saying that. But it's not.

I think one of the best descriptions I had for this verse is the fact that we are working out the salvation that God has already put in. By that I mean, if we are followers of Christ, if we have accepted his lordship, then we are saved. But that doesn't mean we are granted instant understanding, or that we are will stop our disobedient lives and be perfect from that point on. What Paul's challenge here is to work out, try to understand our salvation, and then live the life of salvation since we have it already!

For example, I win \$1,000,000. Now I need to 'work out' what to do with it, how do I spend it? I already have it, but there needs to be the working out of what I have. If we are followers of Jesus, we already have salvation, now we need to show the outworking of that in our lives! This idea is re-enforced by verse 13 which tells us that God works in us, but I will get more into that in a moment.

The other key thing that I want clear up about this verse, and in fact is pretty much the main point of my sermon today, is that the verse says 'work out *your* salvation' ...'*your* salvation'. If you read it to quickly you might think that Paul is talking about an individual. So you work out your salvation, I'll work out mine, Bruce will work out his. But it isn't that. When it talks about working it out here, it means as a group, it's a collective word. So we, together, are to work out our salvation! It's not something that you just do by yourself. Living together, working together, allows some of the best examples of God's work in us of the great nature of salvation through Christ.

So often in our lives, I think particularly in our western culture, we can get stuck on the idea of focusing on ourselves. How can I improve *myself*, how can I change me, what do I get. But here Paul is talking to a group of Christians and challenging them to get on with working out the salvation they have received together. Salvation is not just something they receive and can then continue about their life as 'normal' individuals, it is something they must act upon.

It's like when you discover a new hobby or sport. You can only ever find out so much about it by yourself. Say for instance you wanted to start collecting stamps, or playing table tennis.. you can't really do it by yourself. You get a lot more out of it in a group than as an individual.

It's a hard task to work out your salvation as a group, and it's one that has to be done with care and consideration. Paul uses the words 'with fear and trembling'. It doesn't mean that we should be timid and quiet when we deal talk about our

salvation and how we live, as though we were afraid of it. We should be acting wholeheartedly, with a great reverence and awe, because it is God who is working with us.

It's a big ask. But God himself will help us. That's the encouraging thing here, that God works in us 'to will and to act' in order to fulfil his good purpose. So by obeying, we are fulfilling the good purpose of God. It was interesting to note that Paul identifies that God works in us 'to will' and 'to act'. The will and the act. Sometimes it's easy to choose the right path, the will, but hard to act.

We might realise it's really important to go greet someone at church, or help someone out, but then, we don't follow through, we don't act. Then there is the other side, sometimes we may do the action, that is, we help out. We do music, we clean up, but we do it and grumble about it how we might rather be somewhere else. Sure we can have our bad days, but grumbling about it is not helpful for the building up of others and the church. And if our goal is to show how great Jesus is to the world, and how his love has changed us, grumbling is not a great way to do it.

This is why in the next verse Paul declares *how* people should act – by doing everything without grumbling or arguing. He brings up a reference to Deuteronomy here because he wants to contrast how the Philippians should be acting with how badly the Israelites did in the Old Testament, grumbling against Moses and God constantly.

If we are meant to be demonstrating to the world the work of Christ in our lives, it means that we should be modelling Christ's love in *all* aspects of life. Paul isn't dictating a course of action, but a kind of action. It's not saying in this one aspect of your life, like at work or school, do it without grumbling or complaining, but do it in all of your life.

Again, I want to emphasize the fact that we are talking not just about your own personal life, but the life of the church. Pauls' goal here for the Philippians is that they have wholesome relationships, that they act in unity in the likeness of Christ, and the way they are to do that is to live without grumbling and arguing. There is this focus on selflessness and unity. We've all seen the negative impact that people who grumble and complain can have on a group, let alone the impression it gives outsiders of that group.

Having looked at how we are to act, now we are going to look at why we should act this way. I've already said it, but now let's delve a little deeper. Why is Paul focusing on the fact that people need to live without grumbling and complaining? Verse 15, it's 'so that you may blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky'. The way that they live as children of God is to be a witness to the world around them. The gospel of salvation that God is working in them should be so evident in their lives that it will be a light, a beacon to the world so that they can know God.

Our lives aren't meant to be about being happy and content within ourselves, enjoying our salvation just as an individual. We are called to *witness* to the world, to share of God's great love and one of the *best* ways to do that is in fellowship and community with fellow believers. We can shine more brightly in a group together.

For example, some of you may have seen the opening ceremony? At the lighting of the torch, all the countries walked in with this small part of the torch that by itself wouldn't have given much light. But when they were all pulled together it created a giant torch that stood out in the stadium. Together, we are to act in unity, being blameless and pure so that we show Christ to the world clearly.

It's important too that the unity in the church has to be more than just a passive unity. Being together doesn't necessarily mean that you will shine like stars. We aren't just to sit around and rest quietly in our own church – The world must be able to see the unity of the church and draw conclusions about Jesus from what they see (John 17:21,23). The church's unity should be just as clear as a star shining in the night (Phil 2:15).

It's a big ask, but I don't want you to be disheartened. I put forward the challenge at the start of the sermon asking how should we act if the world is watching. This passage tells us that we need live a life without grumbling and complaining, being unified in our witness of Christ as a community. It's a hard thing, a hard thing to maintain. But again I want to encourage us that we are doing it in God's strength. God works in us to will and act in order to fulfil his good purpose. Our unity in the church can be so encouraging to each other when we *share* about the great things that God has done in our lives.

I love it when I see everyone pulling together in a church to make things happen. People who wouldn't be doing things like this if they didn't have a common purpose in Christ. For example I think of things like thousands of Christians up at conferences up in Katoomba, I think of things like the showcase that the church put on a few weeks ago. When we work together in unity, we are not only providing a witness to the world, but we are encouraging our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ so that they will shine all the more brightly.

Paul also gives some examples of people who are living the way that he is challenging the Philippians to.

- **He has given them the objective** – that they should obey Christ and do everything without grumbling and complaining.
- **He has given them the incentive** to do it – God is working in them, that they should look forward to the day of Christ.
- **Now** to encourage them in this task he is sending them some brothers in Christ to encourage them in person, Timothy and Ephaphroditus.

The thing that stands out about Timothy most is that he 'shows genuine concern for your welfare'. It's Timothy's way of showing his concern for the interests of Christ in the community around him.

When we are living with the gospel, and living in unity like Paul is challenging us here, it should show in how we act.

If we are only looking to our own interests, then inevitably we will grumble and argue. But the challenge is to have our eyes focused on the interests of Christ. If we are to imitate Christ, then we need to have a gospel focus, and when we do, we will witness to each other and the world.

Epaphroditus is similar to Timothy. He went to serve Paul and take care of him all for the work of Christ. He was prepared to give his all, even his life for Christ.

That's a pretty big challenge isn't it? To give our all to Christ in such a way that it could even mean our life. Now I think for us here in Sydney, the idea of giving your life to Christ is abstract. We read about the martyrs and things like that, but for most of us, we haven't experienced anything like that.

We may not be called to give up our lives for Christ here in Sydney, but are we prepared to give up our convenience? ...Our comfort? ...Our pride and reputation?

Giving your life to Christ, acting in the interests of Christ also means being prepared to live everyday, all the time in a way that promotes the gospel. Today the challenge is to live in unity with the people around you, to encourage them so that together we may all shine brightly for Christ in this world.

So how are you going to live this way in the coming week? What can you do to stop yourself if you find yourself grumbling or arguing with a fellow believer. How can you promote unity in the church so that the greatness of God's work in you, in us, is evident to all? Does it mean that when we pack up the church, we do it all with a smile? Does it mean that we treat the kids in C4K with respect including them in the unity of Christ? Greet each other joyfully, encourage the musicians...It's hard to live a life without grumbling and complaining. But the difference it makes in how people see us, how much stronger the witness of Christ is through a unity of such diverse people, and how encouraging and sustaining it can be for the people in the church is amazing. I pray that you will listen to God's voice, see his work in you and that you may shine like stars in the world.

Amen