

# GOD'S COMMUNITY

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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Philippians 2:12-18  
Fifth Message  
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## *Philippians 2:12-18*

It's difficult to overestimate the desire that most of us have to be part of a group. Our desire for community, however, is often thwarted for any number of reasons. Many sociologists have commented on the increasing fragmentation in American life. In his groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam shows how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, and neighbors. People are lonely and isolated.

The apostle Paul takes note of our God-given desire for community, and the difficulties that come with it, and he instructs us how we might go about living in community.

In Philippians 2:12-18, Paul applies the story of Christ, which he presented in poetic fashion in verses 5 through 11, to the church in Philippi. Paul wants his readers to respond to the story of Christ, so he begins verse 12 with the word “therefore.” The story illustrated obedience (verse 8); now he wants the Philippians to be obedient, just as they have always “obeyed” (verse 12).<sup>1</sup>

## Work out your salvation

### Philippians 2:12-13:

**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, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

Paul addresses his readers tenderly, as “my beloved”—loved by him and loved by God. He grounds his appeal to obedience in the tenderness of affection. He speaks from his heart—and from God's heart—to their hearts.

Paul's appeal is also based on their history of obedience. He wants them to obey “as you have always obeyed.” Their obedience began with their acceptance of the Gospel when Paul first visited Philippi (Acts 16:14, 31-34) and has continued to this point (Philippians 1:5).

His readers' obedience has remained steadfast whether Paul has been with them or away from them. He wants them to see his current absence as even greater incentive for obedience. Obedience is easier when the one calling for obedience is present; it is more difficult when that person is absent. Yet, Paul wants them to demonstrate that their obedience is sincere and not dependent on his presence. Thus he expects his absence to inspire them all the more.<sup>2</sup>

Paul has just proclaimed that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10-11). Obedience does not mean following rules. Obedience means coming under the lordship of Christ and following him. If you start out looking at obedience as a set of rules to follow rather than a Lord to love and follow, you'll follow a well-worn path that leads to spiritual deadness. Jesus is our Lord. He loves us. We love him. If he tells us to do something, we do it because he loves us and because we love him. He speaks from his heart to our hearts. The story of Christ, in which he demonstrates his love for us, is both the inspiration and the pattern for our own obedience.

## Defining obedience

Paul defines the obedience he's looking for in this case. He wants his readers to “work out your own salvation.” Paul is writing to people who he believes are saved. He's not appealing to them to somehow, either by works or faith, get themselves salvation. He has already equated obedience with working out their salvation. This is what saved people do: they obey God; they work out their salvation. In so many words, Paul is saying: “God has saved you. Now get on with it.”

But what, specifically, does Paul have in mind? His concern throughout Philippians 1:27-2:18 is unity in the church for the sake of the Gospel. He further expands on this in verse 14, where he tells his readers to “do all things without grumbling or disputing.” God has saved people in Philippi and created his community within the city. Now, these people have to work out this salvation. They have to learn to be a community: to live together, to serve one another, to love one another.

They must do so “with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). This phrase is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to convey the response of people when they’re in the presence of God.<sup>3</sup> The Philippians are to work out their common life before God. Paul may be absent, but God is present. The proper response when one is in the presence of God is “fear and trembling,” which means a posture of holy respect and reverence and awe and wonder.

Why would Paul invoke this phrase at this point, when he is speaking about community life? Because one of the most awesome and holy things that this awesome and holy God does is create a people through whom he displays his glory to all creation (Isaiah 49:3, Ephesians 3:10). To create a worldwide people through whom he displays his glory, he creates communities of his people all over the world. When God creates one of these communities, and if it’s his work, not his presumed work, it’s an awesome thing. Although it is true that God dwells in individual believers, the greater biblical truth even in the new covenant is that God dwells among the community of believers (1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22).

Paul bases his appeal to obedience on the love of God, but he also includes the fear of God. This love is coming from one to whom every knee will bow. We are to work out our community life together with the knowledge that we are in the presence of a holy God. God, especially where his community is concerned, is watching. How we view and treat each other within this community, and how we view and treat the community itself, is serious business.

## **Desire for community**

Why should we obey God and work out our salvation? Because God is working in us—in the community. God helps us. He takes great interest in the community he creates. It makes sense, then, that he would help his community do what he wants it to do.

Paul says that God works among us “to will and to work” (Philippians 2:13). He puts the desire for community in every human being. Everyone, even a hermit, desires a community. It’s just that hermit is trying to kill the desire. Virtually everyone wants, in his or heart of hearts, to be part of a group. God gives followers of Jesus a desire for a spiritual community. Then, through his Holy Spirit, he gives us the desire to work out our salvation within a spiritual community. Our minds are being renewed by the Spirit.

If you are a follower of Jesus, God resides in your heart through his Holy Spirit. That means God is doing great things, beautiful things, in your heart. Did you know that? Sometimes you’ll feel those desires. Sometimes, perhaps, you have to search your heart for them. Sometimes, because you don’t see them so well, someone else will point them out to you.

One of those beautiful desires is the one to be part of a spiritual community and thereby to be part of something much bigger than you. The biggest thing you can be part of is a spiritual community through which God displays his glory to the world. In spiritual community, we seek to live together, serve one another, and love one another.

God works in us “for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). It pleases God to help us. His ultimate pleasure is to display his glory through the community that he is working among. God exalted Christ for the sake of his glory (Philippians 2:11). He lifts up his people for the same reason.

## **Join a community**

If we are to work out our community life together, we must, of course, be part of a community. We don’t know exactly how large the church in Philippi was, but we know that it was a lot smaller than ours. They probably didn’t need to have small groups because they were a small group. In a community of this size, you must seek out and be part of some community within the community. There are many and various smaller communities within our community. We have, for example, Community Groups that meet at different times and places and even have different purposes.

My wife Karen and I have hosted a Community Group in our home that meets twice a month on Sunday afternoons. Soon after we formed our group, two other groups spun off from ours. As of now, we have ten adults and a whole bunch of kids. The adults meet separately for an hour, while the kids, with adult supervision, play at a nearby park, and then we all share a meal together. At our last gathering, it was an absolutely gorgeous spring day. The adults were sitting together outside, and each of us took turns sharing what we were seeing—or not seeing—of God in our lives.

I felt that the Spirit gave me a striking moment of clarity. I realized that our group has been meeting together, sharing life together, rearing kids together, for ten years. We’ve watched children be born, and we’ve watched parents die. Four couples had been there since

the beginning. One couple moved overseas for five years, then moved back, rejoined our group, and reintegrated immediately. In some ways, it felt as if they'd never been gone.

Each of us has been committed to this community for ten years. Lots of other people, including some seekers, have come to our group and left our group through the years for various reasons. The vast majority of the couples who have been involved in our group over the years, for whatever reason, have been interracial couples.

I guess I had one of those “this-is-what-it’s-all-about” moments. I love these people. I feel loved by them. We’ve been through much together. I thought, “What an awesome thing God has done here.” God is present with us. He has been present with us—for going on a decade now. We all made a commitment to the community, and God has been, and is, working in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure. And when the Spirit enabled me to see that, with striking clarity, it brought me pleasure.

Life in Silicon Valley, as we all know, has its challenges. It helps to face those challenges in community. Part of the problem, though, is that it’s hard to find community when life here is so intense, and everyone is so busy. But if life here is so intense and everyone is so busy, doesn’t that make community all the more necessary?

Indeed, some feel that they’re too busy for community. Some have searched far and wide for community and haven’t found it. Some have expectations for community that don’t take into account that even the best community is made up of wounded sinners and that they’re among them. If you haven’t found community, consider creating your own. Start a group. Invite some people. You may have to invite a lot of people before a few say yes.

Living in community is beautiful, but it can also be difficult. Usually, difficulties arise, not least because people are different, because people are wounded, and because people are sinners, and because people have expectations. What to do?

## **Without grumbling or disputing**

**Philippians 2:14-16:**

**Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 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, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.**

When Paul says to “do all things,” he seems to have in mind the working out of our salvation, our life together in the community of God (verse 12). When you work it out (with the knowledge, of course, that God is working in you), do it without grumbling against each other or disputing with each other.

By the tone of his letter, and in view of his plea that two women in the church “agree in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2), it is evident that there was friction among some of the believers in this church. We don’t know the nature of it. Paul has tackled the problem thus far by urging humility and unity for the sake of the gospel. Now he seems to be addressing the particular problem but does so in a positive way. Instead of telling them to stop grumbling and disputing, he tells them to do everything without grumbling and disputing.

In most cases, we don’t set out looking for conflict. We run into it. We go about our business, we do “all things,” and in doing all things we bump into someone—or hear about someone—who does things differently. Whenever and wherever people meet, whether it’s 2,000 years ago in Macedonia or today in the Silicon Valley, differences will arise. Then the question is how do you deal with those differences. Many people fight wars, either with bullets or words. That seems to be the way of humanity. That is not the way of the church. Or, Paul doesn’t want it to be the way.

We are to work out our differences, and we are to do so in a certain way—without grumbling against one another or disputing with one another. To do so, we must begin with a worldview that goes something like this:

Each person has been created by God in his image and is, therefore, from Christ’s perspective, worth dying for. Then we see each member of the family of God as a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Each is a brother or and sister “for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15). The body of Christ needs eyes and ears and hands and all sorts of members (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Our brothers and sisters—even those whom we disagree with—are precious and necessary. Such a worldview gives us the perspective we need in order to work out our salvation.



## Work out differences

For God to display his glory to the world through the community, those in the community must work out their salvation: They must learn to live together, serve one another, and love one another despite their differences.

Some of us conclude that this community life stuff is just too hard, so we disobey the command. We wear our wounds proudly, and we snipe at the community and certain individuals in it. We remain bitter and factious and aloof. Some would agree with the famous words of Jean-Paul Sartre: “Hell is other people.”

Others of us try to obey the command but think it’s all up to us. If there’s a problem, we think we can fix it. If someone’s attitude needs to be changed, we think we can change it.

There is a better way. That way is to believe that God through his Holy Spirit is working among us and to act on the belief and to look for signs of his work. God wants us to work out our life together, and he helps us work out our life together. Stop fighting him. Let him work. Let him have his way.

Paul says God is working among us to will this and to do this—to want it and to accomplish it. It can therefore be said that God is working in your heart to love even someone you’ve been in conflict with. This “will” is in your heart. In recognizing that God is working among us, we let him have his way. He is working among us by working in each of our hearts. Stop fighting your heart. Let your heart have its way.

God not only gives us the will, but he gives us the way. He gives us the ability to act on our desires. He blesses the acts. He adds to them. He encourages us to keep acting. He fans the spark into a flame.

## Listening and identifying

Then what do we do? The antithesis to grumbling and disputing is listening and identifying. We listen to another’s plight not least to identify with him or her. We devote our hearts to trying to understand someone. We can’t do this while our minds are devoted to how we feel and to finding words to state our case. We must give the ears of our heart to understand the plight of another, even one with whom we’re in conflict. If we listen closely enough and drop our guard for a few moments and seek to put ourselves in that person’s shoes, we’ll probably be able to identify with him or her. There is, of course, a

place for communicating our feelings, but in order for us to be understood, we must seek to understand.

Paul would have us do all this without grumbling or disputing. When have you crossed the line between talking about someone and grumbling against someone, and when have you crossed the line between discussing and disputing? Paul publicly talked about people in a negative light (2 Timothy 4:10, 14). He rebuked people and urged the church to do so as well, when necessary (1 Timothy 5:20). Luke says Paul himself engaged in a “sharp disagreement” with Barnabas (Acts 15:39). If there was a problem, it was not that they disagreed; it’s that their disagreement was sharp.

It is therefore difficult to know what Paul means when he says to do everything without grumbling or disputing. At the very least, it means to strive to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” by appreciating the value and necessity of other people in the body of Christ and to act with such appreciation in mind (Ephesians 4:3). What we are saying when we think and act this way, then, is that everyone is important.

Paul casts the Philippians in contrast to the Israelites who grumbled in the wilderness (Exodus 16:12, Numbers 14:1-38). Although the Israelites grumbled in a different way (against God and against Moses, not against each other), we can say with confidence that Paul has such a comparison in mind because of his surrounding references to the exodus story.

The way we relate to each other in God’s community has an impact beyond our community.

## Children who shine like stars

Paul wants the Philippians to do everything without grumbling or disputing so that they may become “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.” Paul is ultimately concerned with their witness to the world.

The witness, in this case, is our relationships with one another. If this commandment is fulfilled, those outside the church would be able to look at the way we relate to each other, differences and all, and find our behavior blameless and our hearts pure. This is a process. We are learning how to relate to one another and thus becoming blameless and pure. As we do so, we, as his children, are showing the world what our Father is like. Some observers, then, will recognize us for what we are: children of God. They’ll see God’s likeness in us.

Those who were watching, and those who the Philippians lived among, were part of a “crooked and depraved generation.” What Paul particularly must be thinking of is the societal fractures among the pagans. It is no different in this generation, or any generation, for that matter. If we obey this command and thus become children of God as such, we will stand out among the surrounding world, which is ruled by violence, be it actual or emotional, and division, but in many ways is looking for love and peace.

As we learn to love one another and be God’s community, we “shine as lights in the world.” Israel was called to be the light to the world by revealing God to the world. Jesus said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:5). He has passed on his vocation to the church, his body in the world. Thus Jesus also said, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). How we relate to one another says a great deal to the world about who God is.

How we relate to each other also has a lot to do with the unity necessary to reveal God to the world. Jesus was speaking of us when he prayed, “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:20, 23). As the light of the world, we show this crooked and depraved generation, particularly by the way we love, that there is a better way of being human. Then the people dwelling in darkness will see a great light.

As we shine, we also hold fast to “the word of life.” We hold onto the Gospel and present the Gospel to the world. We serve up Christ. In that it is the word of life, the Gospel offers the life of God to the world. The crooked and twisted generation is not only dwelling in darkness, but it is also dying. It needs the light and life of the Gospel. It needs to see that Jesus is Lord and receive the life of God.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God is watching (verse 12). We are to do everything without grumbling or disputing because the world is watching (verse 14).

## **Transformation of lives**

Our unity of purpose, created and nurtured by humility and our common love for Christ, which motivate us to stop grumbling and disputing, gives us the ability to offer Jesus to the world and the credibility when we do so. If the people in our world are “bowling

alone,” so to speak, maybe they can see something different in us.

M. Craig Barnes, who has been both a pastor and a professor and is now president of Princeton Theological Seminary, writes this in his book *Pastor as Minor Poet*:

*... I am convinced that sustained transformation of human lives occurs best through these small circles of Bible study that meet in living rooms, dorms, conference rooms, and coffee shops all over the world. ...I have a strong hunch that they are more significant than is generally appreciated. What is actually occurring in each of these small groups is the creation of missionaries. These are not necessarily Bible-thumping evangelists who are crazed with passion to convert the world, but they are believers who are passionate about witnessing Jesus Christ’s conversion of every corner of the earth, including the little corners ...<sup>4</sup>*

In the end, Paul makes a more personal appeal to obedience.

## **Do me proud**

For Paul, the Philippians’ holding onto and holding out the Gospel will result in his being able to in the day of Christ literally “boast” that he did not run in vain or labor in vain. The day of Christ is the day when Christ returns to establish his eternal kingdom. Paul has already noted that he has every confidence that the Philippians will persevere until that day (Philippians 1:6). Paul’s boasting, then, will be about “what Christ has accomplished through me” (Romans 15:18), for he says in Galatians 6:14, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” He also says, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” (1 Thessalonians 2:19). The boasting Paul expects to do combines joy for their eternal reward and satisfaction that his work had something to do with it.

It is good for us to desire fruit from our labor. Moses, lamenting the fleeting nature of life, prayed that the Lord would “establish the work of our hands” (Psalm 90:17). We want our work to count for something and to last. Can you imagine what it will be like, in the presence of the Lord Jesus, to look into the eyes of a brother or sister in Christ and know that you had something to do with the way he or she will spend eternity? It makes all our strivings for earthly rewards, and all our boasting in earthly things seem pathetic. Let’s save our boasting for the day of Christ.

Paul is telling them about the boasting he hopes to do in order to inspire them. He's like a father who tells his son, "Do me proud."<sup>5</sup>

The end of verse 16 could leave the impression that Paul is pessimistic about the Philippians. If such an impression were left, Paul goes about eliminating it in verses 17 and 18.

## Rejoicing together

### Philippians 2:17-18:

**Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.**

The grammar indicates that Paul is, in fact, being poured out like a drink offering. This does not mean that Paul expects to be executed. It means that he is suffering for the faith. A drink offering involved pouring wine on top of another offering (Numbers 28:7). The Philippians also are suffering for their faith. Paul has already noted their common experience in suffering for the Gospel (Philippians 1:29-30).

The Philippians, then, are making their own offering, which Paul calls "the sacrificial offering of your faith." Paul sees his suffering combined with their suffering as a joint offering to God. Paul sees this common suffering and joint offering as cause for celebration. He rejoices as an individual and with them, and he urges them to do the same.

The Scriptures present suffering for Christ as cause for celebration. Acts 5:41: "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." Suffering as an individual is one thing. Suffering with others who are committed to the same cause raises it to a different level. All those who want to follow Jesus will suffer in some way. When we follow Jesus, we take up a cross (Matthew 16:24).

Those who suffer together have stronger connections. Those who suffer together for a common cause have stronger connections still. Those who suffer together for Jesus have the strongest connections possible, because those connections are eternal. To have some fellow sufferers to share Christ with is cause for rejoicing indeed. Look for some brothers and sisters who share your passion for Christ. Pray with them. Serve with

them. Suffer with them. Rejoice with them. You will cherish these relationships for all eternity.

Don't horde it.

Join a community and work out your differences in community.

One more thing: Don't horde community. If you have found community, recognize that many are hungry for community. Take note of how you've been blessed, and seek to be invitational. Be generous. Open up your community to others. Or take part of your community and start a new community.

Karen and I have always considered our Community Group open to newcomers. Lots of people, including seekers, have come and gone for various reasons through the years. We've never gotten too big, but we've always had the sense that if we did get too big, God would help us figure out what to do. Recently, we said goodbye to one family who moved to another state, but we've also added two new people. Not long after we started, two groups spun off from us. We could do that again, or something like it.

Join a community, and work out your differences.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout verses 12 to 18, much of Paul's phraseology is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the story of the exodus. Even the story of Christ, the way Paul tells it, contains allusions to the exodus. Christ's exodus from the grave, so to speak, resulted in his enthronement (verse 9), just as the exodus from Egypt resulted in God's enthronement in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35). The exodus is probably invoked in verses 12 through 18 in order to convey that the church, having been freed from sin, is now the wilderness people of God.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, he expects them to be quite different from the nation of Israel after the exodus. When Moses was absent, the people became disobedient (Exodus 32:1-10). Paul sees himself in the Moses role, as presenting the commandments of God and as being at times present with the Philippians and at times absent.

<sup>3</sup> Paul uses the phrase elsewhere of response to the presence of others (1 Corinthians 2:3, 2 Corinthians 7:15, Ephesians 6:5), although in Ephesians 6 the presence of Christ is ultimately in view. Inasmuch as Paul in the next verse speaks of the presence of God, most likely the phrase in verse 12 is used to communicate human response to God's presence.

<sup>4</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Verses 15 and 16 are full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures. Deuteronomy 32:5, which calls forth the exodus, is particularly noteworthy. In that verse Moses said of the Israelites in the wilderness: “They have dealt corruptly with him; / they are no longer his children because they are blemished; / they are a crooked and twisted generation.” After being released from Egypt, the Israelites in the wilderness wandered from the Lord and were, in Moses’ words, no longer God’s children. On the other hand, Paul sees the Philippians as “children of God.” Whereas Moses calls the Israel in the wilderness a “crooked and twisted generation,” Paul says the Philippians shine like lights in the world in a “crooked and twisted generation.” We are the wilderness people of God. Paul is telling us, “Get it right this time.”