

3. In the World

Philippians 2:12-15

National's Mission

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Real Audio (2 MB)

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure—so that you may shine like stars in the world. Philippians 2:12-15

If you ask my nine-year-old grandson to name stars in the world of baseball, he will talk your ear off about A-Rod, the Texas Rangers' Alex Rodriguez, and wax eloquent about his favorite team, the New York Mets (he knows all their names and life-time batting averages). If you ask me about stars in the world of Hollywood, I will nominate Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts. If you ask the Emmys about stars in the world of television, they will open envelopes with the names of Allison Janney and Michael Chiklis.

And if you ask the Apostle Paul about stars in the world of Washington, he will open an envelope with—(I know whom you're expecting me to name, but you're wrong) he will open an envelope with your name in it. You shine like a stars in the world, he tells members of the First Presbyterian Church of Philippi and by extension, members of National Presbyterian. You reflect the glory of Christ in the family rooms and class rooms and board rooms of this city.

What's that you say? The long hours in your office and the undiminished stack of assignments on your desk have all but smothered your light? You're so deep in diapers that your star is little more than a smoldering candle? After fighting traffic on your daily commute you have no energy left to shine anywhere? If your star is fading, if you're losing luster in your world, Paul recommends three things, all containing the word work and all attached to a preposition: work out, work in, and work for.

First, begin with a good work out: Work out your own salvation, he writes in vs. 12. He doesn't say work for your salvation, but work out your salvation, meaning, work out the implications of your salvation. Let the Savior work his way into every nook and cranny of your mind, heart, and body. And that won't happen without a good work out--regular worship, generous stewardship, rigorous Bible study, and consistent prayer, all in concert with other believers.

Yes, that's a demanding regimen, but you don't have to do it all at once. Carol and I joined a gym three years ago. A hundred years ago we were joggers, then long distance bikers, and more recently, when our knees and backs started talking back to us, early morning walkers. But walking is tough under the Arizona summer sun, so after learning that the city of Scottsdale charged only \$70 a year to join its gym, we signed up. Yet when I walked in that first morning and saw a room full of machines that would make a medieval torture chamber look like Disneyworld in comparison, I almost turned tail and ran. How could I possibly master those mean machines? But before I could bolt for the door, the trainer was at my side explaining everything I had to know to turn torture into training. And the most important advice he gave me was this: start slow and work your way up.

That's also good advice for pale Christians who nevertheless want to shine like stars in the world. Start slow and work your way up. Rise fifteen minutes earlier tomorrow morning and read the lectionary texts on the back of the Sunday bulletin. Then go on a time diet: give up Wednesday evening TV so you can take a class here at National. Do some stretching exercises: stretch your arm out to your checkbook and boost your faith giving by one percent of your income. When you're ready, speed things up a bit by joining a mission team at work here or abroad. But don't try to do it all at once. Take it a step at a time, but do take the first step: work out your own salvation.

And I have good news for you: you have at your side the finest personal trainer in or out of the universe,

for God is at work in you (vs. 13). When you read the Bible tomorrow morning, insights will spring seemingly out of nowhere, but in fact it's God's Spirit shaping your spiritual muscles through biblical exercise. When you pray and can't find words to express your deepest needs, the same Spirit will pray for you in words that no human can decipher. When you're exhausted and can't take another step, the Spirit gives strength to the weak, energy to the frail, and courage to the faltering.

Does it seem improbable that God is at work in you? Are we not self-contained beings, so isolated in our self-consciousness that there is no room for anyone else? But if depth psychology teaches us anything it is that we carry within us a whole host of helpers--parents and forebears all the way back to the beginning of the race, not to mention teachers, neighbors, and close friends. I still hear the voices of persons long deceased: Frances Learned, my fourth grade teacher; Paul Haggard, my college president; Jim Morgan my seminary classmate and confidant. And if they who are dead are still shaping my life, why should it be thought absurd that the living God is at work in me? Take it from the Apostle Paul: God is at work in you. And for this important reason: to work for God's good pleasure (vs. 13).

And what, do you imagine, is the kind of work that gives God good pleasure? Preaching, you say. Evangelism and missionary service. Worship and prayer. Yes, but listen to Gerard Manley Hopkins: It is not only prayer that gives God glory but work. Smiting on an anvil, sawing at a beam, whitewashing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in his grace you do it as your duty. To go to communion worthily gives God great glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, give him glory too. He is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should.

Were Hopkins alive today he might say that people who collect your garbage give God glory; and window washers outside your tenth story office window. And I would add to the list your job, your profession, your career. Labor at legislation that benefits society and you will give good pleasure to God. Change diapers with love in your heart and you will give good pleasure to God. Teach children the alphabet and you will give good pleasure to God. Serve your clients with integrity and you will give good pleasure to God. Do an honest day's work, strive for excellence, give good value for the dollar, and you will give good pleasure to God. For Hopkins was right: God is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should.

I'm not suggesting that your name will ever appear on the cover of TIME magazine, or that you will be inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame, or someday receive an Emmy. I'm suggesting something far more illustrious: work out your salvation, let God work in your life, work for God's good pleasure in your bit of the world, and in God's eyes you will shine like stars in the world. And no Emmy winner, no Hall of Famer, no TIME Man of the Year can hold a candle to a star like you!