

SHINE LIKE STARS

Phil 2.12-18

INTRODUCTION

You will have noticed that the passage we are studying this morning begins with the word *therefore*. And, as someone has said, whenever the Bible uses the word 'therefore' we should see what it's there for!

- The word 'therefore' is like a railway coupling, joining two carriages or wagons together.
- It's like a double-headed arrow, pointing backwards to what has just been written, and onwards to what's coming next.
- In this case, what Paul has just been speaking about in verse 6-8 is *the servant mentality of Jesus* – his mind set, or attitude, if you like.
 - Jesus didn't reckon it was right to try and grasp what wasn't his, even though it was within his reach.
 - Instead, he was willing to let go of what was his - all the rights and privileges that legitimately went with his divine nature, for he was God through and through, Paul has told us.
 - Instead, of trying to grasp at things, Jesus chose to empty himself of what he already had, so that he could pour himself into the role of a true servant for our sakes.
 - He humbled *himself*. He wasn't humbled by someone greater than himself – his self-emptying was something entirely voluntary. He really did want to become a true servant. It wasn't something he was forced into because he felt he had no option but to take on that role; nor was it something he did grudgingly, out of a mere sense of duty.
 - He became a servant willingly; and his willingness to take on the role of a servant led him to volunteer for death – death through the most painful and shameful way ever invented for a human being to die.
- Now, in the light of such an extraordinary example that Jesus has set us, *what are the implications for the way in which we should be living our lives?* That's what Paul is about to go on to expound in verses 12-18. He has already indicated that *our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus* (v5). But what will that mean for us in practise?

Someone has said, "We learn from the Bible not only what is true, but also how we should respond to the truth" [Motyer, p126]. We are told who Jesus is, and what his mindset was, and how it determined his behaviour patterns. But we are also told what it will mean for us to follow the example he has set us.

And to that end, Paul takes us to three different locations in the section we are looking at this morning, three places that would have been familiar to the citizens of Philippi no doubt, as they worked in and wandered around their city.

The first place Paul takes us to is the local

1. GYMNASIUM (vs 12-13) because he wants to tell us that having the same mind-set as Jesus means *working out what God has already worked into us*.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

1.1 Work out

A gym is where people go for a work out. It's where they go to build up their muscles and stamina. And this is the sense in which Paul is calling us to 'work out' our salvation.

- He is not suggesting that our salvation is like a complicated puzzle, that we have to 'work out' in order to understand it properly;
- Still less would Paul ever suggest that our salvation is something we have to work *for* as if it were something we could earn through our own efforts. Salvation is a gift of God's grace, received through faith (Eph 2.8). It is something God imparts to us as we put our trust in Jesus.
- But as with any gift, we need to be prepared to work at it to benefit from it fully – as fully as we are intended to enjoy the gift.

- If a child is given a bicycle for his birthday, he benefits from it by learning how to ride it, and then putting in the effort to go places with it. Similarly with a musical instrument, or even a computer game. The more we get to grips with the gift, working out how it should be used, the more enjoyment we will get out of it.
- The same is true of the salvation God has gifted us, through Jesus. It is a gift that has been given us in order that it might transform our whole being, in the here and now, not just guarantee us a place in heaven when this life is over. This is the sense in which our salvation is to be 'worked out'. God wants the life he has imparted to us to find its fullest expression in a transformed character and lifestyle.

And that requires three things from us. First

(a) Practical Obedience to God's Word

The Philippians had obeyed God's Word when it had been delivered to them directly by Paul, in person, during his visits to Philippi. And now he expected it to be obeyed in his absence, as they put into practice the teaching contained in this letter.

- I am sure we are all familiar with the expression, "When the cat's away the mice will play!" In other words, when no one is looking over our shoulder to check up on what we are doing, we are liable to get up to all sorts of mischief! Now, that shouldn't be the way it is with us as Christians. Paul wanted the Philippians obedience to come from their hearts, just as Christ's obedience to death had come from his heart, from his servant mentality. Paul wanted the Philippians to be genuine in their servant attitude to one another. He didn't want it to be a show, put on for his benefit only when he was around to check up on them, or tell them what they should be doing.
- This is where the transformation of our lives begins – by our obedience to God's Word. That means we must get to know it as well as we can. It means we must be in the habit of reading it for ourselves, day by day, asking God to show us how he wants us to live, through it.
- But merely knowing God's Word, vital though that is, is never enough in itself. We must be prepared to put the Bible's teaching into practise. This was the point Jesus drove home so powerfully at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, through the story of the two builders. The one who was careful to dig a proper foundation for his house stood for the kind of person who not only listened to Jesus' teaching, but carefully worked out how to put it all into practise in his life. Whereas the person who built his house straight onto the riverbed sand is like someone who hears the teaching of Jesus, but it goes straight in one ear and out of the other. They are in church; they listen to the teaching given, and may even enjoy it or approve of it. But they do nothing with it when they get back home. They can't be bothered to work out how it should be put into practise. And the result is ruin – the ruin of their Christian life when it is put under test.

To drive this point home, Paul highlights the importance of our

(b) Personal responsibility in this regard.

He says literally in verse 12, *continue to work out your own salvation*. No one can work out our salvation for us, any more than something else can increase our muscle bulk or stamina for us down at the gym. It's something we have to do for ourselves. It is something we have to take personal responsibility for.

- The word Paul uses for salvation here could equally well be translated, 'health'. So what he is calling us to do is maintain and build up our own level of spiritual health and fitness, through our obedience to God's Word.
- Many years ago, I read an autobiography of a famous international rugby player. And in the book, he pointed out that the primary responsibility of every rugby player is their own personal fitness level. Without that, the building up of good team moves becomes impossible – if one player can't keep up with the game because he's not fit enough.
- A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. And there's a sense in which a church is only as strong as its weakest member. Paul has been urging us in 1.27 to stand firm, as one man, as we contend for the truth of the Gospel in a hostile world. And our solidarity in this regard is only as strong as our weakest member.

And so our spiritual fitness level is something that should be worked at with

(c) **Proper seriousness** - with fear and trembling, in fact.

A lot is at stake: the unity of the church; our witness to Christ in the world; as well as our own transformation, to become more and more like Jesus. It's the honour of God that's at stake ultimately. As citizens of heaven, we are his ambassadors on earth, called to represent him well.

- The phrase *fear and trembling* here doesn't mean that we should be in a continual state of anxiety of agitation. It basically carries the idea of respecting someone for who they are, and for the position they hold.
 - It's used in Eph 6.5, for instance, where slaves are told to *obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ*.
 - It's also used in 2 Cor 7.15, to describe the way in which the Corinthians greeted Titus, Paul's envoy to them. *His affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.*

When we realise everything that's at stake – the unity of the church, our witness to the world, and the honour of God – we will want to take the outworking of our salvation very seriously. The Christian life is not an 'add-on' to everything else we're about – it is what we're about! It's not like a woolly hat or scarf that we put on when the weather is cold, and discard when the sun comes out. It's more like our skin, that we should take good care of, whatever the weather!!

Now, all of this is only possible because God, in his grace, has already worked his salvation into us.

1.2 In worked.

God has worked his salvation into us by granting us a new life – his own divine life, residing within us in the person of his own Holy Spirit. *God himself is the one operating in you*, Paul writes in verse 13. Literally, *God is the one who is energising you from within – both at the level of your will (what you want to do) and in your actions (the outworking of that will)*. And all of this springs from the great pleasure God takes in you, so that you might fulfil his good purposes for your life (cf 2 Thess 1.11, where Paul prays that God will bring all our good intentions to positive fulfilment). That's what verse 13 is telling us.

And so we see here the perfect balance between divine initiative and human responsibility. Paul isn't calling us to achieve something that's beyond us. He is calling us to live out what God has already made us, *his very own children* (v15). This is the secret and the wonder of Christian ethics. In every other moral and ethical system in the world, whether religious or secular, we are called to become something we are *not* by nature – better than the way we were born. But in the Gospel, God recognises that we were born with a corrupted human nature, that is forever pulling us downwards; and so he imparts a new nature to us – his very own divine nature, to live within us in the person of his Spirit. Our role is then to allow this implanted life to find its fullest expression in our characters and behaviour patterns, as God energises us from within.

Perhaps the most significant part of what Paul is telling us in verse 13 is that God operates at the level of our *wills*, because that's the part of us that needs transforming most of all. Sin has corrupted both our power to choose what's right, and our ability to do what's right. We are born as *wilful* human beings. We are born with a self-centred human nature, whose desire is to pursue its own ends. It is forever asking, "What's in this for me? What will be to my greatest advantage? How can I advance my own cause?" Self-determination is the essence of sin – doing our thing, instead of God's thing. The essence of sin is my self-centred nature ruling my life. It's about me taking my own decisions, according to what's in my own best interests. It's about me seeking recognition, and attention, and admiration for myself.

And all of this is at complete variance with the servant mindset of Jesus, which Paul has been expounding in verse 6-8.

- though by nature he was fully God, through and through, he didn't consider it right to reach out to grab the prestige that would have brought him equal recognition with his Father, prematurely, by by-passing the cross.

- He didn't consider it right to cling onto to all the rights and privileges he enjoyed as a fully paid up member of the Godhead, the trappings of deity – his place in heaven and the worship of countless angels.
- He emptied himself of all these things so he could pour himself into the role of a servant, for the benefit of others. And in that role, he was willing to pour out his life in death, in the most shameful and painful way imaginable.

That kind of mindset is totally contrary to the one we are all born with. Our natural instinct is for self-preservation and self-advancement, self-advantage and self-promotion. So it's at the level of our will that we most need to be changed. We need to be changed in our heart and mind so that we *want* to be a servant to others – not something we are forced into, or feel we ought to do – but something we genuinely want to do, because of the new nature God has implanted within us.

- Only the mind of Jesus, at work within us, can effect this sort of change – reshaping our wills and empowering our actions.
- This is what is unique to being a Christian. We are not being called to observe an external code of conduct. We are called to live out the new life God has implanted within us. We are called to give full expression to what God has already worked into us.
- Some has said that the Christian life is a balance between rest and activity. We rest content in what God has made us; but actively seek to live out all he has made us. We rely on what he has already created us to be, whilst striving to become all he designed us to be. The old slogan, “let go and let God” used to be popular in some circles, but the Bible knows nothing of an effortless sanctification. We have been gifted a new nature, thank God. But that new nature needs to develop and grow stronger through our practical obedience to God's word, through our personal application, a responsibility we must take seriously.

Now, in verses 14-15, Paul takes us from the gymnasium, where he called us to work out what God had worked into us, to the

2. PLANETARIUM (vs 14-16) where he calls us to *shine like stars* in a dark and dismal world.

How to we do that, in practise? In three ways.

First, by living

2.1 A non-contentious life

Do everything without complaining or arguing, he writes. There is no place for grumbling or bickering in the life of a true servant.

- The first word Paul uses here means to murmur. It was one of the besetting sins of the Israelite's as they journeyed from their slavery in Egypt to the liberty of the land God had promised them. Given their past, and the hardness of their life in Egypt as slaves, they had no right to grumble. But grumble they did, about anything and everything – the food and water God provided for them, and the leadership he had set over them, and eventually the Promised Land God had brought them too. Their constant grumbling was the cause their eventual downfall and destruction. And it's like that for us too. There is nothing more destructive of a church fellowship than a spirit of discontentment – people complaining about each other. It makes for a very unattractive church, a very off-putting church, both for newcomers and for old-stagers (cf Acts 6.1).
- And so Paul reminds us here that *grumbling has no place in a Christian's life* – especially when we consider everything God has rescued us from in our past and everything he has set before us for the future. In view of the incredible blessings we have received from God, what grounds do we have for any complaints against him? Our life should be characterised by thanksgiving, not grumblings. And when we do complain, we are often betraying a lack of trust in God, as well as a spirit of ingratitude towards him, given the fact that he has promised to provide us with *everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness*. (2 Peter 1.3).
- We have no reason to grumble against God, and there's no justification for grumbling about other people, either. Our complaints often surface because we are dissatisfied with other people in one way or another. They are not all we would want them to be. Perhaps they have let us down. Perhaps they disappoint us. Perhaps we don't feel they are pulling their weight – and so we grumble about them. And in so doing, we

betray our lack of a true servant's heart. You see, all of those attitudes that I have just mentioned arise from us thinking that other people exist to serve us – to meet *our* needs, or to fulfil *our* dreams and ambitions. The *true* servant doesn't grumble, because he has willingly poured himself into meeting *other people's* needs. He has come to accept that he exists to serve them, not the other way about. He epitomises what Paul has instructed us back in verse 4: *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* If we considered other people's interests more than our own, there would be less grumbling, wouldn't there? When we complain about another Christian, we are setting ourselves up as a judge over them, instead of assuming our role as a servant towards them.

- Now, I would suggest that if our life is free from grumbling and bickering, murmuring against other people and complaining when things don't work out the way we want them to – in our place of work, and amongst our friends, and within our family circle, as well as in church – our lives will shine like stars, in a world that's so full of grumbles and complaints, strife and arguments. And then people will start to ask us why we're so different from everyone else they've met. And that will give us an opportunity to speak about the new life God has given us, and how we are seeking to live it out, with his help, and to his glory.
- A non-contentious life is a powerful witness in a world of so much strife and bickering. It's why we picked this verse as our first memory verse for the Friday Club this year. Some of the children come from backgrounds where complaining and bickering is all they know, sad to say. And we want our clubs to be very different from that.

Paul also speaks about us living

2.2 an innocent life (v15)

That's the thought behind the words *blameless, pure and without fault* that Paul uses in verse 15.

(a) Blameless

If *complaining* is about us finding fault with other people, being *blameless* is about other people finding no fault with us. It's not suggesting we can ever be perfect; it's speaking about other people having no valid grounds for criticising us (1 Thess 5.23; 2 Thess 2.10). It's a word he uses later on in the letter to describe the way in which he kept the Jewish laws so carefully. He was above reproach, *faultless* in the eyes of those laws (3.6).

- Some people go through life saying, I don't care what other people think of me. But that wasn't Paul's attitude. His reputation mattered to him, especially his reputation amongst non-believers. He didn't want them to be able to point the finger at him and accuse him of any crimes against humanity. He wanted his reputation to be a good one in the world. And so should we. It's important for us to be known as honest, reliable, hardworking people, so that others can't point the finger at us, and have grounds of complaint against us.

(b) pure

The other word Paul uses here, translated *pure*, referred to metals free from corrupting alloys; and to wine that hasn't been watered down in any way. In other words, it refers to us being the real thing, a full-bodied child of God, not a watered down or diluted one. (It's the word Jesus uses in Mat 10.16, where he tells us to be as *innocent as doves*. Paul uses it in Rom 16.19, *where he tells us to be innocent about what is evil*).

(c) without fault

The phrase *without fault* means 'blemish free' like the Old Testament sacrifices.

And all this is so we can *shine like stars in a crooked and depraved generation* (cf Dt 32.5; Acts 2.40). It's comforting to know that the world in which Paul lived and witnessed was not so very different from our own! The word *crooked* indicates a society that has strayed from God's norms; and the word *depraved* refers to the consequences of doing so. When people stray from God's ways, the result, inevitably, is depravity – all manner of evil practices. So our innocence and purity is very important in such a society. We won't be able to shine like stars if we're all mixed up in compromising ourselves.

So our lives are to be non-contentious, innocent of wrongdoing, in order that they might be truly

2.3 Radiant lives (v15c-16a).

Shine like stars in the universe, as you hold out the word of life, Paul urges us.

- The world we live in is a morally dark one. It has strayed a long way from God's ways. But our calling is not to retreat from the world. The solution is not to cut ourselves off from it. We are urged to be a radiant light within it. Our calling is not to hide in the comfort of our own little Christian circle. Our calling is to be out and about in society, radiating the sheer goodness of Jesus within it. *Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*, Jesus urged us in Mat 5.16. Our lives must shine for Jesus, through their sheer goodness.
- And all this as we hold out the *word of life* to people – the message of the Gospel that speaks of life, and brings new life to people as they embrace it. People are seeking a fuller and more satisfying life than what they've got. And we know that that fuller and more satisfying life is to be found only in Jesus (John 10.10;14.6).
- What Paul is saying here is that our witness must be both seen and heard.
 - A good life without any words of explanation as to why it is so good remains a mystery to those who see it.
 - But equally, a message about the best life to be had that that isn't backed up by a radiant lifestyle and character, rings hollow and has no impact on people. The Gospel message needs to be both seen and heard from us.
 - People need to be able to see the difference Jesus has made to us; then hear how he can make a difference to them.

And so finally, Paul takes us round to his local

3. ATHLETICS STADIUM (vs 16b-18) pausing to glance at a clothing factory and a temple en route. *In the gymnasium, we learned to work out what God has worked into us; in the planetarium, we learned we should shine like stars.* And now in the athletics stadium we are taught the importance of **running well**, right to the end of our race. Paul pictures himself as a marathon runner, eager to complete the course and collect his prize – otherwise he knows his efforts will have all been in vain. The prize he is so eager to collect are the Philippians themselves. He wants to be able to present them to his Lord as his joy and crown. His stated ambition in Col 1.28 is to be able to *present everyone perfect in Christ*. This is the prize he was always working towards. This is what all of his labours were about; and he didn't want to reach the finishing line, only to discover that the Philippians had let him down.

- His phrase *labour for nothing* may have been borrowed from the **textile industry**. Paul himself was a tentmaker, you will remember. It's the picture of a weaver spending hours making up a piece of cloth, only to find that it has a fatal flaw in it, so the buyer won't accept it. All that effort has been wasted, and the piece of cloth is discarded.
- Paul didn't want that to happen to the Philippians. No pastor wants it to happen to those entrusted to him by the Lord. He wants the people entrusted to his care to be his joy and crown on the day of Christ's return, when the race is over.
- Paul pictures his own life *being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from their faith*. Paul had the same kind of servant heart that was so evident in Jesus. He was willing to pour out his life in death, for the sake of the Gospel.
- Paul isn't being morbid in using this imagery, for he speaks of his *gladness and joy*, and encourages the Philippians to be joyful with him. For the sacrifices we make for Christ and for each other are not to be grudging ones, but willing ones (Rom 12.1). *In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, as our logical response and spiritual act of worship.*
- God has worked into us his great salvation; it's our responsibility to give full expression to it.
- God has called us to shine like stars for him, as we offer hope to those in darkness.
- God has called us to run the race set before us well, so that we can be someone else's pride and joy, on the day of Christ's return. May we be just that, to the glory of our great God and Saviour!