

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

June 21-27, 2020

Sermon Series: The People Called Methodists

Week Two: “Wesley and Salvation”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, through the power of Your Holy Spirit You enable us to do and be more than we can think or imagine. Come now, dwell within us, and make us strong to do Your work and will. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

What makes United Methodism different? While sharing in the fundamental beliefs of broader Christianity, there are certain beliefs of “the people called Methodists” that make us unique.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

Salvation isn’t just about the afterlife – it’s a journey toward who God calls us to be.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:12-18 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What does Paul encourage the Philippians to do “with fear and trembling”? (2:12)

What is God working in the Philippians to accomplish? (2:13)

With what kind of attitude should we do God’s work? (2:14)

Why should we have this attitude – what is God’s goal for us? (2:15a)

How is this goal contrasted with the rest of the world? (2:15b)

What does Paul want to boast about on the day of Christ’s return? (2:16)

What is Paul willing to undergo if it means the increase of the Philippians’ faith? (2:17)

How does Paul want the Philippians to feel about this? (2:18)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We might ask why “work out your salvation” or “carry out your salvation” makes it sound like we have to do something to be saved.

We might also ask how exactly God enables us to both “want and live out” God’s purpose for our lives.

We might also wonder about the connection between doing things without complaining or grumbling and being blameless, pure, and innocent. Is that really all it takes to be blameless?

We might ask whether Paul really believes that everyone else who isn’t Christian is “crooked and corrupt.”

We might feel like Paul is trying to guilt the Philippians into doing better – as if all his work will be for nothing if the Philippians don’t stop grumbling. Why does Paul take that approach, or think it will work?

And finally, we probably wonder if Paul really believes the Philippians will be able to rejoice even if Paul dies as a result of his service to for their faith. Why should such a thing make them glad?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Philippians 2:1-11; Philippians 1:28; 1 Corinthians 2:3; Exodus 15:16; Isaiah 19:16; Exodus 16:7-12; Numbers 14:1-38; Daniel 12:1-4; Philippians 1:29-30

Whenever we have a passage that begins with the word “therefore,” it’s important to take a look back at what has come just before it. In this case, the argument of the passage we’re looking at now really flows directly from the words of the great “Christological Hymn” in Philippians 2:6-11, which itself has used Jesus as an example of the kind of attitude Paul has encouraged all the Philippians to have in 2:1-5. There, Paul has encouraged the Philippians to adopt a spirit of humility in order to achieve a greater level of unity in mission and message among the members of the church at Philippi.

Now, Paul says, even though I can’t be physically with you, I expect you to continue in your obedience. Paul appeals to their long-standing relationship by praising them for the way they have historically been “obedient” whether he is with them or away from them, as a way to encourage them to continue to be obedient. The NIV here (“as you have always obeyed”) is closer to the original language than the CEB (“just as you always obey me”). The CEB editors have made the assumption that Paul is writing about the Philippians’ obedience to Paul himself, while the original language and other translations leave open the question of just who it is the Philippians have always been obedient to – suggesting that it is more important that they are obedient to Christ, than merely to Paul. To be

obedient to Christ means to have placed one's self truly under the Lordship of Christ, which is the only obedience Paul ultimately cares about. Paul praises the Philippians for always having done this, whether he is present with them or not.

And yet, Paul seems to be concerned, in 2:1-5, that they are in danger of lapsing from this kind of obedience because of differences that have arisen among them. The point he needs to make now is that they need to work this out. The language Paul uses, though, has often been a source of consternation for Christians who pull this verse out of its context, and then try to make sense of it on its own. Christians know well that Paul always emphasized that our salvation is a gift from God that we can do nothing to earn. We can do nothing to achieve it by our own efforts. What then can Paul mean by encouraging the Philippians to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling"? On its own, that sounds like we have to do something to achieve our salvation! But it's important here to go back and remind ourselves that Paul has not changed his tune (or his theology)! In 1:28, only thirteen verses prior to this, Paul has emphatically written of "your salvation, which is from God." We need to recognize that the salvation Paul encourages the Philippians to "work out" is something they already have received! The passage is not about working to receive something they don't have – it's about figuring out how to live with each other in light of the fact that they are saved people! How are they going to carry out, in their corporate life together, the salvation God has so graciously given them already? Here is a place where the CEB states the intent of the passage more clearly – it does not translate the phrase "work out your salvation," but "carry out your own salvation." The Philippians are implored by Paul to live out their salvation by continuing in their obedience to Christ.

But we might ask, why does that require "fear and trembling"? Paul first used this same phrase in 1 Corinthians 2:3, where Paul talks about how he, himself, first presented the gospel to the Corinthians with "fear and trembling," relying on God, not his own self-assuredness. This seems to suggest at least some continuity to the idea of humility from 2:1-11 again – in working things out with each other, he is encouraging the Philippians not to do it with self-assurance and aggression, but from a place of vulnerability and defenselessness. But at the same time, the language of "fear and trembling" is also prominent in the Old Testament to describe the kind of emotional response Israel's enemies undergo in the presence of the God of Israel (see Exodus 15:16 and Isaiah 19:16) – so it is entirely possible that the meaning Paul wants to convey is for the Philippians to work things out with a sense of holy awe and wonder before the God of the universe who has given them their salvation. After all, this is the God who has empowered the Philippians to be obedient in the first place, and Paul doesn't want them to forget it (see verse 13)!

So how should they begin? Well, first of all, Paul says, stop grumbling and arguing with each other. The language here recalls the kind of grumbling and complaining that the Israelites did during the wilderness wandering in Exodus 16:7-12 and Numbers 14:1-38, even though they had just been saved from slavery in Egypt through the Exodus across the Red Sea. God held the Israelites to blame for such an attitude – and Paul wants it to be obvious that the Philippians are not "those kind of saved people." People who have experienced God's salvation should be distinct from the crooked and corrupt people of the world. They should be people who are blameless (who do not behave in ways that others can find fault with) and who are pure (who act from innocent motivation). If they can stop their bickering, the Philippians will be the opposite of blameworthy (like the Israelites in the wilderness), but will truly be "children of God" (like the Israelites were supposed to be), "shining like stars in the world."

Notice in that last phrase how Paul picks up the apocalyptic imagery from Daniel 12:1-4! He would like nothing more than for the Philippians to be the perfect example of how he “carried out” his own salvation when the day of Christ’s return arrives. Even if his present circumstances (most likely, he is in prison) lead to his own death, he knows he can rejoice because the Philippians are a shining example of what it looks like to be “children of God.” He and the Philippians have both suffered (see 1:29-30) – now, he wants them to be able to rejoice together, too. The truth of the gospel will continue to be propagated even while Paul suffers in prison if the Philippians will only go through with this “carrying out of their salvation.” As their lives demonstrate the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially in the overcoming of their internal difficulties through humility and obedience, Paul will rejoice – and he invites the Philippians to rejoice with him even knowing what he is going through.

The bottom line is this – even people who have been saved, people who have received God’s gift of salvation, have to figure out how to live with each other, and with the world around them. God has empowered them both to *want* to live as children of God, and to actually live out being children of God. Figure out together, Paul says, how to make your salvation an example for the rest of the world – an example that will draw others to the gospel.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

How are you “carrying out your salvation”?

What examples could you cite of how being a recipient of God’s salvation has impacted the way you handled a disagreement?

Which interpretation of “fear and trembling” from the discussion above do you identify with most? Why?

Are you becoming someone who is recognizable as “blameless,” “pure,” and an “innocent child of God”? Do you want to be that kind of person?

What was the last thing you grumbled or complained about? How much grumbling and arguing do you do? Who do you do it with? Why do you do it? Why do you think Paul uses that as the specific example of something blameless and pure people don’t do?

What do you think it is about Paul’s understanding of salvation that allows him to be glad, to rejoice, even from prison, knowing that the Philippians are “working out their salvation”?

Can you think of anyone right now who you would suffer anything for and be glad, if only you could know that they were recipients of God’s salvation? Who? How can you let them know?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy and loving God, help us to live out our salvation with fear and trembling. Empower us to live pure and blameless lives, to stop arguing and complaining, and to truly live as Your children. We thank You for

the grace that enables us to both want and to accomplish Your good purposes. We pray in the holy name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.