

Article: JAW222

DO WORKS CONTRIBUTE TO OR CONFIRM SALVATION? PHILIPPIANS 2:12 IN PERSPECTIVE

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, number 1 (2008). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

"Don't Mormons believe that we have to earn our salvation?" Mary asked the young missionary who stood at her door.

"No, we don't earn salvation," he replied patiently. "We believe that we are saved by grace, after doing all that we can do."

"All that we can do? What does that mean?"

"Well, it includes repentance, baptism, keeping His commandments, making sacred covenants, and enduring 'til the end. One of our prophets, Moroni, put it this way: 'If ye deny yourself of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you' [Moroni 10:32]. Paul says the same thing in Philippians 2:12: '*Work out* your salvation with fear and trembling.'"¹

"Doesn't Paul also say in Ephesians 2 that we are saved by grace and not by works?" Mary queried. "And in Romans he makes the same point: 'To the one who does not work, but who believes...his faith is credited as righteousness.' It seems like your interpretation of Philippians 2 contradicts what Paul says elsewhere."

"Not really," the missionary replied. "Good works were crucial according to Paul, which is why he exhorts Titus to remind believers to 'be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good' [Titus 3:8, NIV]. You see, Mary, to gain eternal life we need both grace and works; that's what Paul and the rest of the New Testament teaches."

"I know that good works are important," Mary conceded, "but I still wonder if you have the balance right. I don't mean that I have it all figured out, but if Mormons believe that works contribute to salvation, as you have explained, then your teaching contradicts Romans 11:6, 'But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.'"

How Important Are Good Works? Few doctrines are more easily misunderstood than those relating to grace, works, and saving faith. In the fictional conversation above, all the words attributed to the Mormon missionary are taken directly from contemporary Mormon literature and the Mormon scriptures.² Mary's most important asset in this discussion was her knowledge of the Bible. She could sense that what she was hearing from the Mormon missionary was different from what she had read in Scripture, even if much of the language was the same.

One of the points that the Mormon missionary got right is that good works are important in the life of a believer. He cites two passages to illustrate this principle, but we easily could list dozens more. Paul sometimes posits an antithesis between faith and works (particularly in Galatians where false teachers attempted to convince believers that law observance was necessary for salvation), but his fullest definition of "faith" actually includes works as a necessity: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith *working* through love" (Gal. 5:6; emphasis added). In Paul's view, true faith is faith that *works*.

We can agree that good works are crucial, but Mormons, along with Jehovah's Witnesses and some other heterodox religious groups, misunderstand the role that works play in the life of the believer. According

to Mormon doctrine, works *contribute* to saving faith; according to the New Testament writers, works *confirm* saving faith. This distinction is critical; salvation is not a matter of having faith *plus works*, but a matter of having a faith *that produces works*. Any other kind of faith, to cite James, is simply “dead faith” (James 1:17, 26).

One of the verses Mormons use to support their understanding of works in relation to saving faith is Philippians 2:12, where Paul says, “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” (emphasis added). In the conversation just mentioned, the Mormon missionary understood the phrase “*work out your salvation*” to be equivalent to “*work for your salvation*,” but is this so? Mary’s skepticism was based on the fact that this interpretation seemed to contradict what Paul clearly taught elsewhere. Mary’s instincts were correct and illustrate another important principle: *be wary of interpretations of Scripture that obviously contradict the teaching of Scripture elsewhere*.

If the New Testament rejects the notion that our own efforts play any role at all in giving us right standing before God and in earning eschatological acquittal before His throne, how should we understand Philippians 2:12? There are two options worth considering.

Corporate Salvation? One interpretation argues that Paul’s command to “work out your own salvation” should be understood in terms of corporate rather than individual salvation. On this reading, Paul is addressing the problems of the church in Philippi (e.g., rivalries: 4:2; selfish ambition: 2:1–11; false teachers: 3:1–3), and “salvation” is referring to the well-being of the community. Bible commentator Gerald Hawthorne states, “The entire church, which had grown spiritually ill...is urged to work at its spiritual well-being...until every trace of spiritual disease—selfishness, dissension, and so on—is gone.”³

The strength of this interpretation is that it recognizes the corporate dimension of Paul’s ethical admonitions, and understands that Paul’s “salvation” terminology may entail more than simply the final eschatological salvation of individuals. Its weaknesses, however, outweigh its strengths.

First, this interpretation posits an unnecessary and un-Pauline dichotomy between the community and the individual.⁴ Paul’s ethical instructions normally embrace both. It is difficult to imagine how the spiritual health of the community could be restored apart from a significant effort from *individuals* within the community.

Second, this interpretation assigns an unusual meaning to the Greek word *soteria*, which is translated “salvation” in Philippians 2:12. Of the eighteen occurrences of *soteria* in Paul’s letters, sixteen refer to final eschatological salvation, and two refer to rescue from harm (2 Cor. 6:2; Phil. 1:19), a common meaning outside the New Testament. Unless Philippians 2:12 is an exception, *soteria* never refers to spiritual well-being in Paul’s letters.⁵

Third, the personal pronoun Paul uses, “*your own salvation*” (*heautijn*) is stronger than the more common pronoun he normally uses (*humijn*, “your”), and purposefully seems to bring the individual into focus. Paul uses this same construction earlier in this chapter, where there is no question that its focus is on the individual: “Let each of you look not only to *his own* [*heautijn*] interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

Personal Sanctification? A closer look at Paul’s “salvation” language sheds valuable light on its use in Philippians 2:12. Salvation in Paul’s letters (both the verb, “to be saved,” and the noun, “salvation”) normally refers to something the believer will receive in the future.⁶ Paul thus could speak of “the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8), and remind the Romans that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). Paul also could describe salvation as a present, ongoing process: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received...and by which you are being saved” (1 Cor. 15:1–2, emphasis added; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15). “Salvation,” then, normally refers to our eschatological acquittal and final blessed state; it sometimes, however, refers to the present outworking of that end-time reality. In other words, Paul uses “salvation” terminology of both justification and sanctification.

The context of Philippians 2:12 deals with sanctification: in Philippians 2:12–18, Paul begins to draw applications from the example of Christ’s purposeful lowering of Himself and His self-sacrifice (2:1–11), continued obedience (2:12), and willing submission (2:14–15). In this context, the present tense command, “be working out your own salvation,” has in mind faithfully living out the self-emptying, other-centered life that Jesus exemplified.

It would be foreign to the context of this passage and the broader contours of Paul’s teaching to interpret “work *out* your salvation” to mean “work *for* your salvation.” If there were any doubt about this, Paul removes it in the verse that follows, where he explains, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13). Not even the effort that we put forth in living the Christian life is our own; it is the result of His enabling presence within.

A Response to God’s Grace. Like the Mormon missionary in the opening dialogue, Christians believe that good works are a necessary component of true faith. As Jesus put it, “A tree is known by its fruit” (Matt. 12:33). Unlike Mormons, however, Christians believe that good works are an inevitable and organic byproduct of faith, in the same way that a tree naturally produces fruit. The motivation for doing good works is not to earn right standing before God, but to express thanksgiving as a response to God’s grace and Christ’s sacrifice: “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

— Moyer Hubbard

NOTES

1. All Bible references are from the *English Standard Version* (ESV).
2. A full archive of primary sources, including the Mormon scriptures, can be found at the official Web site of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://www.lds.org/portal/site/LDSOrg>.
3. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 98–99.
4. Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 235; Markus Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 151.
5. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 136–37.
6. Paul occasionally speaks of salvation as something believers already possess. See, e.g., Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 8.