

Treasures in Clay Jars

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[0 : 00] This evening to look back at the passage we read together in Philippians chapter 2. And the theme is joy in obedience. And we're going to look at the importance of being obedient Christians, recognizing that nothing we can do in terms of obeying God earns us favour with God for our salvation.

We know that. We saw that very clearly this morning. We are saved by grace. But having been saved by grace, we see the goodness, the glory of the law. And we seek to obey God's law. That's very important. And we should do joyfully. Philippians is probably the most joyful of the New Testament epistles. It's full of joy. And Paul writes with amazing joy about obeying the Lord.

But I'd like to ask a few questions by way of structuring our thoughts this evening. And begin with a very basic one to put it into context, which is the question, what is a Christian?

[1 : 17] Now I know that's a very basic and simple question. But nonetheless, it's worth restating. And it's worth restating because it's the previous verse to the section we looked at from verse 12, which speaks about confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

That is a good definition of a Christian. Someone who confesses that Jesus Christ is their Lord, their personal redeemer, who they have come to for salvation, in whom they trust. And the Christ who becomes the Lord, the governor, the commander, the leader, the guide of their lives.

And that we do what we do to God's glory. A Christian then is someone who has Jesus Christ as their Lord.

It's a disciple. It's a learner. We never get beyond this stage as Christians of having airplates attached to us.

[2 : 27] We never become advanced drivers in the kingdom in the sense that we are always learning. We're always growing. We're always finding out about God.

We're always following on behind Him. We are children of God. He's our Lord. He's our Father. He's our King.

He's our God. He's healed us. He's redeemed us. He's bought us back. So we want to obey Him and we want to follow Him, not out of a grudging heart, not because somehow we feel it will earn us favour with Him, but rather out of gratitude.

Because we've seen He's a good God. He's a lovely God. He's a beautiful God. He's a worthy God. He's our hero, as we saw this morning.

A legend in our eyes. And we want to obey Him and we want to follow Him because of who He is. And because we know it's the best way to live.

[3 : 32] Now, I don't for a moment think that it's not a struggle for us. I don't for a moment think we always skip happily behind Christ and obey Him with ease. We know there's a battle.

We know there's a contradiction in our hearts. We know we struggle with other desires and other attitudes and other Lordships. And we recognise that battle.

But fundamentally, if we lose sight of the beauty and the enjoyment of being a Christian, we lose sight of everything. And we need to keep that focus and recognise that focus, even in difficult times as Christians.

Because Paul and his followers, as they followed and obeyed Jesus Christ, didn't do so from feather beds. They didn't do it from the life of ease.

They had struggles and difficulties yet. They were able because they could see the glory of God in their lives. They could obey with joy. He was their Lord. He was their God.

[4 : 32] So in setting this in its context, I want us to remember that Jesus Christ is the bread of life for us. He's not an after-dinner mint.

So he's not an added extra, a kind of just tested at the end of our lives that we just add on, that we can take or leave. But he's our Lord, you know?

That's why we obey him, because he's our Lord. He's the bread of life to us. We have taken from the bread today and the wine. And it's a reminder to us that he's absolutely basic to our lives as our Lord and Master.

And our obedience stems from recognizing that he's the bread of life, not this after-dinner mint that we take or leave. He's the one who has treated us spiritually in intensive care to redeem us, to buy us back, to heal us.

He's not someone who's given us a vitamin pill supplement. Can you see the difference between the two? He's someone who is crucial to our lives.

[5 : 35] He doesn't just give us an extra zing or zest in our life that we could maybe do without. He's our Lord and our God. And our obedience is linked to that.

It's linked to recognizing the centrality of him that he's worked in us critical heart surgery spiritually. And he's brought us to life. And we gratify him by our obedience because of that.

He's not something that's a supplement, that's an extra, that's a luxury, that's an add-on to our lives. He's there right at the core. So we're looking in our life and in our eyes and in our thinking and in our attitudes to be obedient children.

As we rise from here, as we go to our workplaces, as we're faced with choices, who do we obey? Who do we serve? Who is our Lord and who is our King?

What is a Christian then? It's a child, a disciple, a learner, a follower of Jesus. But what does obedience look like?

[6 : 38] What does obedience look like? Well, there's a couple of descriptions here that help us to remind ourselves of what obedience looks like in verses 12 and 13.

Paul says, encourages the people of Philippi to obey, to obey their Lord, not just when Paul's there, but when Paul isn't there as well in my presence and also in my absence.

And he goes on to explain that, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it's God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure. So we have obedience here, bedded in this description from Paul.

And there's two elements about obedience that we look at here. The first is that it's hard work, sorry, it's hard work. And the second is that it involves spiritual insight.

Obedience to Christ is hard work. Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. The word that's used for working out here is an intense verb and it means speaking about effort, energy, tremendous input into working out your salvation in obedience to Jesus Christ.

[7 : 59] Do you notice he doesn't say work for your salvation? He's not saying, obey the law of God and that will work towards your salvation.

He's not saying work up your salvation, work up by hard effort or work for your salvation. He's not saying that, but he's saying work out the salvation you've already been given, the gift that you have, the grace, the glory that we spoke about this morning.

Work that out in your day to day life. And in other words, he's saying obedience and salvation, or salvation's not just about conversion and then you stop.

Oh yeah, you can mark the hour and the day and the year that you became a Christian. And my life changed and became a Christian and that's it. I became a Christian. Now I'm a Christian, then I wasn't a Christian.

And that's it, as if it's just a once-off act, why we know that's part of it. We know we come and we've brought and we change and we're redeemed and we're taken from death to life.

[9 : 01] It doesn't stop there. A baby is in born and then just stays like that. It's not just a one-off event, a birth. It's the beginning of a lifelong growing process.

And so in Christ, it is a case of being transformed and growing up and developing and obeying and serving and working out this gift.

He's given it to us freely. We're redeemed, we're righteous, we're children of God. We have got an eternal home with him. We have his spirit.

We share in his glory. And now he says, work out, children. Work out what it means to be a Christian. You work out in your unique life.

Don't be a Christian once removed. You work out what it means to serve Christ in your place of work, in your place of study, in your home, with your unique character, with your unique gifts.

[9 : 59] Work out what it means to be a Christian and live it that way. There's this hard effort, this energy this engagement that God wants us to be doing for our service as we obey him.

And we know that it's a battle. We know it's a struggle every day. It's a struggle not only to know God's will, but to obey what God wants for us.

It's a struggle. It's a struggle because we've got this remaining sin for nature that says, no, no, no, I just want to do my own thing. I want to go my own way. I can't be bothered with Christ.

Can't be bothered with obedience. It's too difficult. I just want to enjoy myself my way. And so the battle's there.

But he gifts us grace. And he wants us to work out grace in practice. Submission to him, obedience to him, counter-cultural living, because it's the best way.

[11 : 04] Because as we do so, recognizing who he is, there's joy in it. There's fulsome love in it. There's contentment in it. There's blessing in it when we obey God, not just the bits we like.

That's our biggest battle, isn't it? Just obeying the bits we like. And they're easy. And then we can maybe look at others and say, well, they're not so good at doing that.

And we can move from obedience out of gratitude to obedience somehow because we think we're better than others or because we're going to earn favor by so doing.

But we take obedience not just in the easy law of God, but we take all of God, loving Him with all our hearts, souls, strength, and mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

That could be a great challenge to our obedience. Well, if it was only the God bit, it would be quite easy. Maybe, we think. But our neighbors are so objectionable.

[12 : 14] And our fellow Christians are so poverty-stricken. And yet I'm asked to love and to forgive and to serve and to care for.

We recognize it's hard work. But the great thing is it's not just hard work. And we're not just left in our loan to work out our salvation because obedience recognizes, has a spiritual sensitivity to it, because we recognize that we obey with a sense of awe and reverence, fear, and trembling.

Why? Because it is God who works in you to will and to act, according to His good pleasure. Now, that links in very beautifully with this morning's text, which talked about the Lord, who is the Spirit.

And the Spirit indwells as a Christian. So God's Spirit, Jesus Christ, Spirit works in us. And He is working to make us more like Himself and conforming us what to, to His will.

Because uniquely, that will be what makes us complete as people. And so we serve and we engage energetically and work hard as Christians to follow Jesus.

[13 : 37] But we do so knowing we've got a wonderful companion. We've got God with us. And God is molding us and directing us. And He is a purpose. He's got an end in view. He knows what He wants to make us.

He knows what we'll be like when we're complete. And He helps us to be like that. He's the architect who's working with us in our lives.

And He's cooperating with us. God is working in us. It's a great encouragement to us that our sanctification, to use a theological term, or becoming more like Jesus, isn't something we just do on our own.

He doesn't just give us a bare command in Him. Walk back into the Holy of Wollies. And say, well, I'll see you at the end of your life and see how you've gone. No, He comes with us.

He comes alongside us. He indwells us. And it's wonderful that He does so. Why? Because Jesus Christ was man, was a person.

[14 : 37] And He knows exactly what perfect obedience looks like. And so He can help us. And He understands the frailty of human beings.

And He knows what we need. And He indwells us. And He is with us. And it gives us a sense of, oh, what does He give us? It gives us a sense of awe and reverence just about living as Christians and about obeying as Christians.

It speaks about the magnitude of consciously disobeying. When we disobey, how do we do it? Do we do it in the dark?

Do we do it in no other Christian's watching? Do we do it in our Bibles closed? The strange thing is, we disobey, but Christ dwells in us.

And we're just grieving Him as He lives in us and as we choose deliberately to go against Him. But it's wonderful to have Him with us.

[15 : 36] And He brings us a sense of life and direction and guidance and hope and ability to live for Him. Now, you'll know that I am a bad footballer.

But I do like football. And my favorite player of all time was George Best. And I know he was a bit of a fallen hero in many ways, but he was a magnificent football player.

And for me as a footballer, it would be a dream to have been able to have George Best, or train with George Best, to learn from him, to see his skills firsthand, to be there learning, as it were, from the football master, and to be beside him.

And the kind of blessing that would have been. And yet God is saying that He is with us in our attempt to live our lives for Christ.

And He is the master. He's the expert. But not only that, it would be not just that George Best was alongside me, but it would be actually as if George Best could have morphed into me.

[16 : 53] And I became like him. And I became as skillful as him. And I got his gifts. And I got his abilities. And that's what God's saying. He's not just saying that He comes alongside us.

He's not just saying that He's there to come for us. And that's all we can ever be to one another. He actually says, I dwell in you. And I give you the gifts and the abilities. And not only that, I'm actually directing you in your life to holiness.

I'm the one who is working in you to will and to act according to my good pleasure to make me the kind of people, to make you the kind of people I want you to be.

That's great. That's encouraging. And I hope that gives us a sense of joy in our lives. But I've just spoken about obedience and what it looks like. What practically, how can we obey Jesus Christ with a sense of joy?

Well, it's all about the choices we make. And all about the choices you make and that I make. And we can choose to do different things. And I'm asking you to do two things that we're encouraged to do here to enable us to obey with joy.

[18 : 04] And the first thing I want you to choose to do on a regular basis is to reject the negative. Reject being negative as Christians and obeying negatively.

I want you to obey positively, but reject the negative. He says there at verse 14, do everything. He's speaking about obedience here as Christians. Do everything without complaining or arguing.

He wants us to reject the negative. He doesn't want us to be living our Christian lives mourning and grumbling and complaining about it. Our terrible job is to be a Christian and grumbling about that and arguing about what is right and wrong and judging everybody else, serving with a skill.

Just having this negative attitude, complaining all the time, well, it's such a misery to be obedient. It's so awful. But I guess I ought to do it. I would much rather be doing my own thing because it will invariably spill into a kind of self-righteous obedience.

And it will spill into something that is like the elder brother who obeyed his father all his life with a miserable, miserable spirit, with a scowl in his face, with a sense of heavy leadiness.

[19 : 21] He wasn't serving out of love. And we have to reject the negative. We have to reject obedience as a chore, as a burden, as a favor.

We have to reject the idea of being conscripts for Jesus Christ, of doing it out of pride, of doing it simply out of duty.

Reject that. And it's the choice we'll make. It's the choice we'll make when you are asked to obey. Every moment of every day we have choices to make.

And we can choose to either obey or disobey. Or we can choose to obey. And then we can choose to obey with a scowl. Or we can choose to obey recognizing Jesus Christ and grace and joy in our lives.

So I'm asking you, as I ask myself, to reject the negative. And I'm also asking you, through God's word, to embrace the positive. Because he goes on to speak about how we can serve with a positive attitude, how we can obey with joy.

[20 : 32] And he does so by reminding us that we are to be blameless and pure as children of God. That's what helps us to obey with joy, because we're children of this God, this glorious God that we were looking at this morning.

We're forgiven. Do you know what it means to be forgiven by our judge? To be loved, to be both confident in Christ and competent in God.

Grace makes us radically different, because we're His children. We are safe. We're protected. We belong.

We're in the light. We have a future. We have an inheritance. We are incomparably rich. And so we can serve Him and please Him with joy, because we are His children.

Embrace that positive and embrace not being hypocritical, but being pure and blameless.

[21 : 45] That is just relying on His righteousness, not speaking about perfection there, but simply relying on His righteousness and coming to Him constantly for cleansing and for renewal.

Embrace the positive with His children, but also embrace the positives, because as His children, He wants us to shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.

You don't need to be the world's policeman. We don't need to be the world's policeman. We don't need to be the moral temperature of everybody else.

He asks us to shine like stars in the universe. He doesn't want us to condemn this crooked and perverse generation.

He wants us to hold out the word of life, the word of life. That's what we have. We have the good news. We don't go with the law of God and condemn and walk away in some kind of self-righteous bubble.

[22 : 53] We have the word of life, the pure word of life, and we want people to have what we've been gifted. We want people to have that.

And we will only be able to hold out the word of life as we are living that word ourselves, as we are living and shining for Jesus Christ.

And yes, that involves moral imperatives. Yes, that involves us being pure and upright. That involves us living for Christ. Paul says, don't spend all your time condemning what's happening in the world.

Because they're outside of Christ. They're spiritually dead. But let us look at our own lives, look at our own morality, and look at our own obedience, and shine for Christ, and hold out the word of life.

So he wants us to be positive by recognizing that we're children of God and that he has a task for us to shine in our day-to-day living, where you are, where I am, we are asked to shine, and hold out the word of life.

[24 : 02] That's what we do. And that's what's positive. Can I close just by giving some practical examples from whom we can learn in this passage? And there's three guys that are mentioned here, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

They were obedient. They were joyful in their obedience. And we can learn from them. Paul in verse 17 says, even if I'm being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I'm glad and rejoice with all of you.

So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. And he's reminding us there that he was one who rejoiced in absolutely wholehearted, outpoured obedience for the people of God.

He was pouring out his life in service. He didn't say, oh, these Philippians, I'm fed up with them. Fed up with the mistakes. I'm fed up with the demands.

I'm fed up with being a pastor to them. Fed up with writing letters to them. He didn't have that attitude. He was joyfully pouring out his life like the wine that was poured out on the sacrifice.

[25 : 15] It's a drink offering. He was recognizing his life was being drained from him in service to these people. And he rejoiced in that. And he wanted them to rejoice in the same partnership for Jesus Christ.

And so we joy in obedience when we are serving one another in the community of Christ. Let's get over the personality clashes.

Let's get over the cliques and the taking offences and the moving away from a company that's Christian because, well, they simply don't understand me.

Let's forget looking for the perfect Christian community and get on where we are and serve Jesus Christ with all our failings and faults. And all the failings and faults of those around us.

And may we do it joyfully bearing the fruit of the Spirit, being glad and just rejoicing that we have this privilege, fruit of the Spirit.

[26 : 20] And may we not always be looking for everyone else to be better, everyone else to change so that it makes our life easier to serve as Christians. But maybe that we're looking to ourselves to change.

And that really often changes the perspective with which we look at others. The more we understand grace, the less we are content to want everyone else to be made in our own image. Paul's a great example. But so is Timothy. We have a lovely description of Timothy in verses 19 to 24. I have no one else like him, says Paul, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare for everyone looks out for his own interests, not for those of Jesus Christ.

But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father, he has served with me in the work of the gospel. Great picture of joyful obedience, isn't it? Family service. He's just like Paul's son.

He just serves him just willingly. And not only that, he has a genuine interest in other people and a genuine interest in Jesus Christ.

[27 : 29] What a great description. What a great epitaph that would be to have on our tombstone that we had a genuine interest in Jesus Christ and a genuine interest in one another.

You see how counter-cultural joyful obedience is, because Paul recognizes that the tendency is for us to look out only for our own interests.

Self-preservation, looking just after number one. And the devils always whispered that into our hearts. That's really my huge son, daughter, just look after number one, look after yourself.

Jesus says, joyful obedience comes when we are able to have a genuine, not a fake, but a genuine interest in other people and a genuine interest in Christ.

That is joyful obedience. There's a picture beginning to develop from these personal examples, I hope, because then we come to Epaphroditus verses 25 to 30.

[28 : 35] I think it's necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, who is your messenger. He longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill.

So here we have this guy, Epaphroditus, who was known to the church in Philippi. They heard he was seriously ill. They were distressed and worried because they heard he was ill.

And how does he respond? He's concerned that they're distressed about his illness because he is a love for them and he doesn't want them to be distressed on his account, on his illness.

And so we have again someone, a brother-in-arms, who is in the work with Paul and with this people, and who is a fellow soldier, a fellow worker.

Great language speaking about obedience, isn't it? It's not, go out there, individual, and serve God as a solitary Christian.

[29 : 39] Just do your own thing, just work away. Now God wants us to see the outworking of our obedience in community, in gospel partnership, together, not as islands, that we're there to help one another in obedience, to encourage one another in obedience, to learn from one another, to teach one another in obedience.

That's what he is encouraging in us. That's what makes it joyful, because we see and are supported by one another in obedience.

It's tragic, isn't it, when we turn Christ on his head and we share together in disobedience, that's not good, is it? When we choose to, rather than be brothers-in-arms for Christ, we become brothers-in-arms, she kind of just hurt Christ by together showing each other up, by being gossiping, or by being hurtful together, or by being sinful in our actions together.

See, well, it doesn't matter because what, we're all Christians together, isn't it? And he says, no, shouldn't be. Brothers-in-arms, again with that concern for others, a great concern for the church in Philippi, for his fellow Christians, and the last thing about him that gives a great sense of the character of joyful obedience, is that he was a risk taker.

Welcome him in verse 29, the Lord with great joy on our men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ risking his life to make up for help. You could not give me. He was a risk taker for Jesus' sake.

[31 : 22] He was willing to risk everything for the sake of Christ, and that's great, isn't it? Why? Because obedience is always about taking risks. It's about breaking new ground.

What's the trouble with us? The trouble with us is we always want to stay on terra firma. We always want to be in safe ground. We always want to be in our comfort zone, doing the things that doesn't stretch us spiritually, where we're comfortable and safe, and we're not taking risks for Christ.

But what's the glory and joy about taking risks and obedience for Christ, doing things, speaking the gospel, standing up for Christ? What's the great thing about that?

Because we're testing God, and we'll find him to be faithful. That's great, isn't it? Because we test him, and we find that as we come out of our comfort zone, as we step over the cliff edge, he cups us up in his hands, and he doesn't let us fall.

And so we learn new things about ourselves, and we learn new things about God, and we learn the kind of God he is, and that brings us joy, because it shows us that we can do what we didn't think we could do with God's help, and because he's right and true to his promises, he doesn't give us up, and he doesn't let us down.

[32 : 44] And that's great when we're asked to obey him. How am I speaking about great big obedience here? Not speaking about massive, massive obedience. I'm speaking about tiny obedience, the tiny obedience of every day, the tiny obedience of every choice, the tiny obedience of put in Christ first, for you will be tomorrow, and the conversations you will have, and the things you will say for Christ or against Christ, and that will help us to live life to the full.

So in these practical examples, they were given by the Holy Spirit, and you see a common thread, and the common thread comes through that old adage with regard to joy spiritually, when we take the first letters, joy, Jesus first, others next, yourself last, and it's a good, whatever it is you call them, I've forgotten what you call them, but it's good to recognize joy and see joy as the Lordship of Christ, the service of others, and then we will find true fulfillment and joy in our own lives.

May that be our experience with God's help, knowing that tonight as we leave here, God is in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure.

You will not leave as a Christian this building this evening on your own. Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord God, we thank you for who you are.

We know this truth, but we recognize that so often we don't feel this truth, and we don't sense this truth.

[34 : 42] We know that often we feel in darkness, or we feel absolutely without feeling spiritually, and it's all just words.

We ask and pray this evening in our lives that the words of truth by the Holy Spirit will be brought to life, that they will be meaningful and that they will be true as we test them, as we take ourselves out of our comfort zones, which are often, personally speaking, comfort zones of unbelief, and as we move forward by faith, as we stand up for Christ, as we shine, as we hold out the word of truth, may we not hide our light under a bushel, may we not be ashamed of Jesus, may we not look of ways to squirm out of obedience as if it was something heavy or burdensome or to be avoided, but may we see your grace and your glory, even the glory of your law revealed in the person of Jesus, and may we want to be like Jesus.

So bless us, and bless us as we sing a couple of Psalms together to the glory of God, as we conclude our worship, we return our praise to you, for we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.