

Working Out What God is Working

By David de Bruyn

I once read an interesting remark. The writer said, "One of Satan's best strategies for defeating a Christian is to confuse them as to what part God play and what part they must play." If we do not understand what our responsibility is, and what God has promised to do – we can get really confused.

If the Christian life was totally passive – there would be no confusion. You could just lie there, and God would do everything through you. Like a puppet, you would have no part to play at all. In fact, if that were true, there would be no need for preaching, teaching or instruction. God would do everything, and learning about it would be simply out of interest.

On the other hand, if the Christian life was all of us – there would also be no confusion. We would know that it's all up to us, and we'd better get busy. God would have no part to play – good or bad – it would all be your choice. If this were true, then there would be no need for prayer. No need to ask God for grace if there is none.

Now in our Scripture today, in one verse, Paul gives us the Biblical balance. With this balance, we can approach all the element of the Christian life – prayer, the Bible, fellowship, evangelism, obedience, praise.

Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: whereunto I also labour, striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily.

Colossians 1:28-29

Paul has been describing the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He now says his aim is to present every man mature in Jesus Christ, doing so in preaching. But now in verse 29, Paul backs up, and says, it's toward this goal of maturing Christians that all my efforts are pointed. This is why I live my Christian life. And in one sentence, He also describes how: 'I strive according to His working which worketh in me mightily.'

Now before we see what he means, let's look at some Biblical and historical examples of people on both extremes.

- **Passivists**

Passivists believe that God will do it all, and man doesn't have to do anything. It's 100% God, and anything less makes it of the flesh, or gives man the glory, they say. In fact, it is 100% God, but that does not mean man has no part to play.

- **Fatalists**

The fatalist believes that man has absolutely no free will. You cannot do anything. You just think you wanted to do something, but God made you do it.' They have an idea of God's sovereignty that makes man's will just an illusion. Effectively, God then becomes the author of sin. But this contradicts Scripture: *"Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man"* (**James 1:3**).

- **Quietists**

This other passive approach has some good points in it – it stresses being still before God. It emphasises your walk with the Lord. But quietism so stresses being meek and peaceable that it often leans towards doing nothing. You may have heard the phrase 'Let go and let God.' The thinking is, 'Just stop trying altogether, God will do it all.'

However, this is not true either. We see in our Scripture tonight that Paul was striving – working hard. And when God said to Moses, *"Stand ye still and see the salvation of the LORD"* (**Exodus 14:13**), we must understand – that is a principle of trusting God, not of doing nothing.

- **Pietists**

On the other end of the scale we have pietists, who also go to an extreme. They put all the emphasis on man. 'It's up to us!' Pietists refer to people who believe in great strictness of life and practice. Now, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. But in this group, you often have things such as legalism.

- **Legalists**

Legalism is determining external rules to try and create righteousness. It tries to control everything from a measurable human standpoint, thinking, 'God has a bunch of rules and if you keep them, you're okay, but if you don't, you're not.' The legalist ends up discounting the Spirit of God by relying on the flesh – because you don't require the Spirit of God to keep man-made rules.

Legalists work in their own power to keep a set of human standards, and when they have kept them, they are satisfied with themselves. The Pharisees are an example of this. So were the Galatians. That's why Paul emphasised walking in the Spirit to the Galatians, who were depending on the flesh.

Now both these extremes are off the Biblical balance. The passive approach will see little growth, because they don't do much. And the pietistic approach will often stifle growth because they do not allow the Spirit of God to be in control. So what is the Biblical balance? Let's unpack **Colossians 1:29** and see how God wants it to work.

1. The Master's first move

Firstly, where does it all begin? How does one even start doing something for God? Well, Paul doesn't say anything about that in verse 29, so we trace his thought back to verse

Colossians 1:25: *"Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God, which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God..."*

Notice the words *"made a minister"* and *"given."* If Paul was made into something, and if he was given something – it suggests that this whole thing began outside of him, with Someone else. Who made Paul a minister, who gave him this assignment? God.

God always takes the initiative. Any move towards God comes from God. Whether it be a desire to pray, to read His Word, to obey Him, to trust Him, to thank him, to witness for Him – God places that in the heart. **Philippians 2:13** says, *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."*

God gives you not only the power to do what pleases Him – He gives you the desire to please Him. This is what God meant when He explained the new covenant to Israel:

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

See, man in and of himself does not make a move toward God. **Romans 3:10** says, *"There is none that seeketh after God – no, not one."* Man's desires are all, because of sin, toward himself. And Paul knew this. He said in **Romans 7:18**, *"For I know that in me [that is, in my flesh] dwelleth no good thing."*

After we are saved, God creates a desire to please Him. That's why Paul goes on to say, *"For to will is present with me – but how to perform that which is good I find not."* So anytime you find within your heart a tug, a pull, a conviction, a desire to move toward God in some way – that's God taking the initiative.

He is the Author and the Finisher of our faith. As Tozer put it, God is always previous. He is always behind anything that will glorify Him.

2. The man's movement

Now God has put it into Paul's heart to do something for Him. What is Paul's response? Does He say, 'Well, God wants me to do this, but if I get involved, it will be of the flesh – so I'll just let go and let God'? No, his words are *"I labour..."*

The word here for labour carries the idea of labouring unto weariness – to the point of exhaustion. Peter used it when replying to Christ's command to put their fishing nets out one more time, saying, *"Master, we have toiled all night"* (**Luke 5:5**). Paul uses it in **1 Timothy 4:10** when he says, *"or therefore we both labour and suffer reproach."*

So Paul responds to God's initiative not with passivity, but with toil. Isn't this a contradiction? No, Paul understood the balance in **Philippians 2:12-13**: *"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."*

Note the word 'for'. Why should we work out our salvation? Why should we toil when God creates the desire? Because – *for* – it is God who works in you. Paul understands that his working is just a response to God's working. He is not creating, initiating, pioneering. He is responding. God still gets all the glory.

Paul sees that He is joining God in what He is doing: *"For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building"* (**1 Corinthians 3:9**). Notice, in context, Paul says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. He says, this is not my work, it's not my ideas, or my vision. It's God's.

This is a crucial thing to understand in the Christian life. Everything of value that you will ever do for God – God initiated that thing. You do not have to dream up ideas of what to do for God. You do not go to God and say, 'This is what I'll do for you, God.' God is already at work, and comes to you and me with what He wants to do through us.

God told Noah, 'I am about to flood the world, and I want you to build an ark.' Noah did not go to God and say, 'Lord, how about sailing – how can I be used of you in the area of sailing?' Most often, our plans and ideas are far beneath what God is already doing around us. Amazingly, you find this concept expressed by the Lord Jesus Himself.

But Jesus answered them, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill Him, because He not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. Then answered Jesus and said unto them, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise."

John 5:17-19

Take note: Jesus realised His Father was at work around Him. He saw what His Father was doing, and worked in that way – He joined His Father's work. So, if you see something or desire something good, that can only be of God.

You have a desire to pray. You have a desire to read the Word. God opens a door of conversation to share the Gospel with someone. God opens a door of service in the local church, and your heart desires to serve in that capacity. That is God working in you to will. He has created the desire. The desire did not come from you.

The response is to join God – to go at it with all your heart. To toil at the thing which God gives you. The response is to jump on what God presents to you with all your heart.

3. The measure

Notice Paul elaborates on how he toils with the word *"striving."* This word is the word from which we get our English word 'agonise.' It means to struggle with all that is in you, to contend, to fight for. Paul liked this word. He used it in **1 Timothy 6:12** to say, *"Fight the good fight,"* in **2 Timothy 4:7** to say, *"I have fought a good fight"* and in **1 Corinthians 9:25** to say, *"And every man that striveth for the mastery..."*

Paul uses this word to emphasise the disciplined, incredible effort he puts in. He almost always uses it in the context of speaking about a race or a fight. He says, 'I am trying to win.' When you fight, you want to win. When you race, you want to win.

Now, winning in the Christian life is not beating other Christians. Winning in the Christian life is beating sin, self, the world and the devil – to gain the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The prize is Christ Himself.

Paul says that when God initiates, he responds with all his heart. Look at David's response in **Psalms 27:8**: *"When thou saidst, 'Seek ye my face;' my heart said unto thee, 'Thy face, LORD, will I seek.'" See, this is where all the commands come in to be disciplined, to pray earnestly and fervently, to work diligently, to go forth with weeping bearing precious seed.*

God initiates, God gives the desire, but God wants the response to be wholehearted. **Jeremiah 29:13** says: *"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."* **Ecclesiastes 9:10** starts, *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might..."* But here is what is interesting. Paul now qualifies how he strives with another phrase, *"according to His working."* And this brings us to the means.

4. The means

So Paul says, God initiates. I respond with all my heart, toiling to the point of exhaustion. But the actual power, the energy, to toil in this way – comes from who? God. 'According to' means literally 'with'. So he says, 'I strive, I struggle with.' With what? His working. The word there the direct root of our modern word 'energy'. 'I strive with His energy.'

The power that He provides gives me the strength to give it my all. Now we begin to see why this is in many ways a paradox. It is 100% God and 100% man. You give it your all, but God does it all. But if we go at it half-heartedly, God does not empower in the same way. Someone put it well when they said: 'God gives power proportionate to the strain.'

In other words, give 30%, and God will give you 100% of your 30% effort. The more you respond, the more power there is. As Jesus said to the centurion in **Matthew 8:13**: *"Then touched He their eyes, saying, 'According to your faith be it unto you.'" God gives*

power proportionate to the strain, to the desire, to the effort. As the old missionary saying goes, "Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God."

And Elisha said unto him, "Take bow and arrows." And he took unto him bow and arrows. And he said to the king of Israel, "Put thine hand upon the bow." And he put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands. And he said, "Open the window eastward." And he opened it. Then Elisha said, "Shoot." And he shot. And he said, "The arrow of the LORD'S deliverance, and the arrow of deliverance from Syria: for thou shalt smite the Syrians in Aphek, till thou have consumed them." And he said, "Take the arrows." And he took them. And he said unto the king of Israel, "Smite upon the ground." And he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, "Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice."

2 Kings 13:15-19

That might sound strange – but King Joash understood the metaphor here. The arrows represented God's power and judgement on Syria. Joash showed a somewhat slothful, less-than-zealous approach to this matter, and Elisha was angry.

As strange as it sounds – God's power relates to our effort. It is not that God's hands are tied. God will choose to do whatever He wants to do. *"Our God is in the heavens; He has done all His pleasure"* (**Psalms 115:3**). God won't lose out, or be behind schedule. You and I will lose out, as we miss the blessing of seeing God's power in our lives – of being used as vessels for His glory.

Instead, God will simply use something or someone else to achieve what He wants. Paul was hungry to see God at work in and through Him. That's why he gave himself wholeheartedly to whatever God called him to do. He wanted to see God work mightily in Him, and that is what God did. That's why Paul told his disciple Timothy, *"Give thyself wholly to these things – that thy profiting may appear to all"* (**1 Timothy 4:15**).

Paul also expresses the fact that no one has the power to accomplish what God wants to do through them on their own: *"And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God"* (**2 Corinthians 3:4-5**).

Part of the reason Paul emphasises this is that apart from God's power, we cannot achieve the things He wants. The standard is too high. And we have to see that God does this on purpose. If God gave us man-sized assignments, if God asked us to do things that we could achieve – where would be the place for God to work? Where would be the necessity of His power, of His action?

God would not even be a variable if the assignment was man-sized. But sadly, you know what Christians do? We reason God's demands down to where they are manageable, to

where we can handle them, to where it does seem possible. And so we dumb down the Word of God, we take its teeth out – and what remains is just dead religion.

Instead of doing that – we need to take God's Word as it is; embrace its high and perfect standards, and the wholeheartedly, seek to obey a high and perfect standard – according to His energy that works within me.

Seemingly conversely, he says in **Philippians 4:13**: *"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."* When God achieves through us what a human cannot otherwise do – who gets the glory? And who gets the joy and blessing? Finally, Paul sums up by explaining how it all comes together.

5. The manifestation

In the phrase 'which worketh in me mightily,' Paul now uses the verb form of 'God's energy.' He says, 'As I toil, as I struggle with His energy – He powerfully works within me. He energises me with incredible power. The might of heaven flows through me.'

Here is where God produces the fruit. He initiates, we respond with all our heart, we give 100%, He then gives the energy for the 100%, and He completes the work. He works in us both to will and to do. In this way, God gets all the glory – for being the Source of both the desire and the power – and yet we get the joy of seeing God working in and through us.

Paul knew what a vital role this plays in the Christian life. Part of his prayer in **Ephesians 1:18-22** was the following: *"And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power..."*

Paul wanted the Ephesians to know the exceeding greatness of God's power towards Christians. He knew that when Christians operate like this, they see God work mightily, and are blessed and encouraged, they rejoice like nothing else. There is no feeling to match it in earth – than to know you have been a tool in the hand of the Creator.

What happens to you after such an experience? Your faith is strengthened. You're ready to trust God more. You're thankful. You know Him better. You love Him more. You worship and rejoice.

This is not an optional extra – it is how the Christian life was meant to work. God initiates – we respond with all our heart – God gives you the power to do it with all your heart, and He then completes a work in and through you that you otherwise would not have had the power or grace to do. And so you are strengthened and deepened in your walk with God.