

Week Seven
Reading

RAW GOODS

QUESTION

There's a question we must consider. Getting to the question, though, will take thoughtfulness. To just ask the question here will diminish the question. The question is too important to be diminished. We'll get to it later.

First, a bold statement from Scripture:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

The statement contains two oddities. First, what's with the "work out your salvation" line? Salvation is apart from works; it is by grace, so why would Scripture say that? And second, what's with the "fear and trembling" line? Does God really want us to walk around scared?

Time to go deep...then we'll get to the question.

WORKING IT OUT

Consider a scenario:

The young man is given a gift. It's something he never expected. Little did he know that his late grandfather had left him a healthy inheritance to be received when he turned twenty-five. It's not a fortune, but it is helpful. He recently finished college. He has a decent job, but the student loan he's paying off is a great challenge. Also, a few years back he had made a few foolish moves on a whim with a credit card. It's not backbreaking debt, but it's debt nonetheless. On the positive side, he sees opportunity. He'd really prefer to go into business for himself, but he didn't want to do so until the debt was paid off. This unexpected gift, this gift of grace, pushes the reset button. He's free from the past and free to move forward with the future.

What does the young man do with his gift?

Very simply, he takes the gift and applies it to areas of need. First, he goes after debt. He wipes out his school loans and his missteps with a credit card. Once the debts are paid, the young man makes his second move. He uses what's left as start-up capital for his new business. These are good moves, wise moves, moves that will serve the young man for years. These actions could be described a lot of ways. One way to describe his actions, as odd as it might sound, is that he, the young man, takes the gift and *works it out*. Or maybe more clearly, he works the gift into the needed areas of his life. The gift is fully received. It's deposited into his account. He then takes the gift and applies it to his life.

But what if he didn't? What if he received the inheritance and did nothing with it? What if a check arrived in the mail, accompanied by a letter from the law firm executing his grandfather's will, and the young man does nothing with it? Let's say he leaves the check in a stack of stuff, and never does

RAW GOODS

anything with it? Never. The check, the gift, it's ready to be used, ready to be *worked out*, but it's never endorsed, never cashed, never applied to blaring needs in his finances. Odd? Very. "Give the check to me," we say. "I'll do something with that check. I'll put it to good use." But he doesn't. He neither uses it, nor gives it, but simply leaves it in the pile for a later date that never comes. One wonders if he understands its value. Did he read the attorney's letter? Did he really even look at the check?

To *work out* a gift, a gift of grace, is not in contradiction to that gift, but is an application of the gift. The working out of grace honors grace by applying it to the very needs of our lives. Why receive the gift in the first place, if the gift remains unused? *Euangelos* has been discovered; we gain depth of insight into the good news. There is forgiveness, and there is more than forgiveness. There is a new heart, a new creation, and this new person is ready to be *worked out*, or maybe more precisely, *worked into* our total selves. To leave the gift untouched wastes the gift. As with the young man, one wonders if we understand the gift's value? Have we read the "attorney's letter"? Did we really even look at the "check"?

So maybe that helps with the *work out your salvation* oddity. How about the other? What do we do with *fear and trembling*? Let's get after this, and then we'll address the question.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

Consider a question. It's admittedly odd, maybe even offensive, but consider it carefully. The question is this:

Does God fear?

Surely not; God is all-powerful. Why would God ever fear? Even more, we are called to purge fear from our lives by putting our trust in God. If God fears, then the call to rid ourselves of fear by trusting in God would be pointless. God would be fraudulent.

True.

But why then does the psalmist say that we are "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14). God is the one who did the making, so he'd be the one who "*fearfully*" made humanity. What's with that? Was God afraid when he made humanity?

Back to the young man:

The young man pays off his debt and uses the inheritance to go into business for himself. He's an engineer. He designs buildings. In time, he lands his first few clients. The clients are pleased. They note his thoughtfulness and rigor as he designs their buildings. The young man is thorough in his planning and leaves nothing to be guessed. He approaches his work with focus and intensity. When asked about this, he explains thoughtfully: "Others will walk through this building. They will spend long hours here. They are counting on me for this building to be safe. Yes, I take this very seriously."

Or one might say, the young man does his work "*fearfully*." The fear is not in the sense that he's paralyzed with obsessive fearful thoughts, but in the sense that the work is done with tremendous care. That building will support lives. Miss something, and it could all come crashing down. The engineer is intentional, focused, and thoughtful. Scripture would call this a healthy kind of fear.

Likewise, when God made humanity, Scripture tells us we were not slapped together. We were "*fearfully and wonderfully*" made. God went about his work with great care. No, he was not frightened in the human sense of being frightened. But, yes, he was thoughtful toward making something wonderful.

RAW GOODS

Which brings us back to the working out of our salvation. As God created us “*fearfully*,” we are called to mirror this focus in our re-creation. We are to work this salvation out into our lives and we are to do so “*fearfully*.” It’s not enough to check the God box and move on. To do so misses the point. Now we get to bring God’s presence into every area of our lives to see this salvation worked out and worked into our lives.

THE QUESTION

So, now the question:

Scripture tells us we were “*fearfully and wonderfully*” made. We then see God giving the same kind of intentionality and focus in our re-creation. God did not slap together a cheap and sloppy grace. He sent his Son. The Son died on the cross and rose from the dead. The Spirit did a mighty work. We were raised from the dead and given new hearts. We now have eyes that see and ears that hear. There is life, real life, pulsating through us. More, much more, could be said. This is just the beginning. There is an eternity of grace awaiting us. It’s stunning. It’s profound. And it leads to our question:

God’s taking his work very seriously; are we?

Or put another way, does *our* focus and intentionality on our re-creation reflect *God’s* focus and intentionality on our re-creation? Or put another way still, let’s say our friend’s grandfather worked the night shift for thirty-six years to earn the money our friend then inherited. Let’s say the grandfather stewarded that money wisely and thoughtfully, investing it so it would grow for future generations. Let’s say the grandfather did so in hopes that the grandson would experience a better life than he himself experienced. But then, let’s say, the grandson treats the inheritance flippantly. Let’s say he shrugs his shoulders with a “no big deal” look on his face. Let’s say he gives it little attention or maybe squanders it all in Vegas. Tragic? Something like that.

To be sure, such a question could be misunderstood, easily read as a guilt trip. Such is not the case. Rather, the actions of God, the weight he puts on our re-creation, underscores the value and the stakes. Consider our passage in greater context:

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 (Philippians 2:12-13).

Why work out our salvation with fear and trembling? Because it is not just anyone at work in us. It is the God of the universe at work in us. If this work is weighty enough for his heightened focus and sacrifice, then the working out of his grace must be of utmost importance to us. He has modeled the seriousness of the cause.

SIXTH IMPERATIVE

Which leads to our sixth imperative...

What follows spiritual birth? Spiritual birth, in healthy situations, is followed by spiritual nutrition and spiritual activities that mature the spiritual infant to adulthood. Spiritual birth, in unhealthy situations, is followed by a lack of spiritual nutrition and spiritual activities and growth is stunted at best. The spiritual self at spiritual birth has all the components of spirituality, but they must mature. New life is truly possible. There is a new disposition, a new heart, a new creation, and we can genuinely expect to see change in our lives.

But birth is a beginning.

Spiritual birth is real and miraculous, and for the miracle to mature, it must be followed by spiritual nutrition and spiritual activity. To live in accordance with the new heart, the new creation, we must strengthen the new creation in a manner not unlike strengthening an infant toward adulthood. Put these thoughts together and we discover a new reality for our new lives. The new reality is that new life is possible and expected, albeit not instantaneous. Pillars of the faith, like Paul, were clear that they were not yet complete (Philippians 3:12), but the new birth gave them a disposition, which they fed and matured. Paul said as much when he led us to our sixth imperative for living in accordance with the new heart.

Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

Train.

I must recognize the real me.

I must fight for my life.

I must trust.

I must walk by God's Spirit.

I must worship.

And a sixth imperative:

I must train.

RAW GOODS

Scripture makes a stunning statement about the new creation: “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9).

How are we to understand a statement like that? It's a bold statement. A person born of God “will not continue to sin”? A person born of God “cannot go on sinning”? Are we to understand that the genuine Christian experience is one that is completely void of sin? If so, what would this say to pillars of the faith, like Paul, who late in life spoke of their imperfection (Philippians 3:12); and what do we make of our own experience that so often feels like a struggle? What is this bold passage really saying?

Consider the last line. The person “cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” A new birth has taken place. There's an implicit message in this played out in Scripture and in our daily lives. Birth is the beginning. Birth is not the entire experience. Birth is the starting place.

Or put another way, birth is raw goods for life.

There's a new creation, a new disposition, new longings, new desires—a new heart. Recall what we discovered early in our journey about our hearts, our desires. The heart “is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23), and “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). This statement in 1 John, that we “cannot go on sinning,” points us to a reality we already know: We live in accordance with our hearts. When a person experiences new birth, a new heart, a changed life will inevitably follow. That person cannot persevere in living against the new heart, the new creation, or the new reality. It's not that the person experiences heavenly perfection. Rather, John writes that the new creation cannot “go on sinning,” or put another way, the new disposition is one that won't allow us to persevere in the downward spiral toward attitudes and actions we know to be destructive and displeasing. There is a

RAW GOODS

new disposition and this new disposition “*has been born of God.*” The new birth gives this new disposition. There will be ups and downs, but the trajectory is one of ever-increasing passion for the greatest of things, the greatest of loves, the greatest of purposes. But we must remember, this is simply a disposition. This is a new heart from a new birth. This is raw goods. Like physical birth, we must be matured intentionally. We must work out our salvation by working the gift into our lives.

SPIRITUAL TRAINING

Spiritual training is a lot like physical training. The physical body grows in strength by training. Likewise, we must train the new creation, the new heart. The new creation must engage the practices and disciplines that give the new heart the nutrition needed to bring it to full maturity. Leave that heart immature, let the new creation go without healthy spiritual nutrition and spiritual practices, and the new creation will not be trained into maturity. Positively speaking, engage that new heart, exercise that new creation, feed it and give it the activities needed for growth, and inner transformation follows.

And therein lies a great challenge.

THE CHALLENGE

Like physical training, spiritual training sounds great in theory, but actually doing it is an altogether different thing. Most don’t neglect the gym or basic nutrition for lack of knowledge. Understanding may not be advanced, but most carry at least a basic idea of the kinds of things that help or harm our physical health. This knowledge can always be improved, but improvement in knowledge means nothing if there’s no implementation. Far more effective is good and basic insight *applied* than advanced and specialized insight left unpracticed.

Proverbial wisdom gives important insight for lasting implementation: “*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty*” (Proverbs 21:5). Translation? Planning matters. The imperative of *training* is best preceded by intentional *planning*. Planning leads to profitable living, Proverbs tells us, while hastily implemented inspiration has very little staying power.

What happens when a person gets brief inspiration for physical fitness, rushes to the local gym, hands over the credit card to cover monthly dues, and slaps together a training program? The training peters off in days; the credit card is charged for months.

This journey is nothing if not followed by meaningful implementation.

Which means we must be thoughtful; we must plan.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT INFLUENCES

Thoughtfulness for physical health begins with an honest assessment of current practices. Everyone has a nutrition plan; it just may or may not be a plan that’s helpful. It’s not that we don’t eat anything or don’t do anything with our bodies; it’s that the eating and activities may not build strength and health. They may do just the opposite. What’s true physically is, here again, true spiritually.

If we are committed to authentic transformation, if we genuinely want to live according to the new heart, the new creation, then we must take seriously Scripture’s exhortations addressing our inner person. We must “*not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will*” (Romans

RAW GOODS

12:2, TNIV). We are transformed by *the renewing of our minds*. Which leads to a critical question for honest assessment:

What currently feeds our mind, our inner person?

Something is shaping us. Something is influencing us. It's not a matter of deciding to have a nutrition plan. It's a matter of deciding to have a *good* nutrition plan. So what's currently in place? What's currently feeding our hearts, minds, and dreams? Just as great strides can be made in our physical health by identifying and eliminating unhealthy influences to our body, so can great strides be made in our spiritual health by identifying and eliminating unhealthy influences to our soul. Paul said as much when he wrote his friends in Philippi: "*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things*" (Philippians 4:8). How are we to meditate on the best of things? No doubt, by first identifying the sources of garbage filling us with the worst of things.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT NEEDS

A second critical factor to lasting implementation for spiritual training is honest assessment of current needs. The needs of one person will not directly mirror the needs of another. In the world of physical training, one person's greatest need will be to lose weight while another's will be to gain muscle. These are two legitimate needs for two very different people. Their training will have plenty of similarities, but they will have distinctions as well.

In the world of spiritual training, distinctions for the individual are incredibly important. Scripture points us to a reality we all know from experience: "*There is...a season for every activity under the heavens*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, TNIV). Life has seasons. The realities and needs of one season are different from the realities and needs of another. The young and single college student with no kids has needs distinct from the realities and needs of the mother of three kids under three years old. Spiritual training will contain essential elements common to all. But to be effective, the training must match the current season of our lives.

Similar to life seasons are the seasons of spiritual maturity. This, too, is highly critical to a person's spiritual training. The person walking the first few miles of a life of faith will have different needs and realities from the high-mileage Christ-follower well into his or her journey. The new Christ-follower will likely have a greater need to develop depth of insight into prayer, Scripture, and walking with the Holy Spirit. This person may enter into a season of more rigorous study. They may have a more aggressive reading plan, maybe they take a few classes, or maybe they meet regularly with a mentor. These needs are not entirely unique to new followers of Christ, but there are certainly distinctions of emphasis for those young in their faith.

The high-mileage Christ-follower will likely be in a season where their spiritual training will have similarities but likely different emphases. They also will spend important time in Scripture, but the nature of their time may or may not be around rigorous study. Their emphasis may be spiritual replenishment or training for a specialized area of service. Maybe they're gearing up for a new season of service, or maybe they are in a season of rest. It's not that their spiritual training is entirely different than the person new to the faith—there are common practices that last a lifetime, but the nature of the training must be tailored to the need of the person's season of spiritual growth.

DOING IT

If we are to morph, if we are to build character, we must “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*” Or put another way, we must train. We must assess our influences and needs. We must consider what shapes us and make, at times, the tough calls toward training for godliness. We have a new heart, a new creation, and this heart beats for God. The new heart yearns for God and rejects the temptation to turn life’s gifts into gods. To truly do this, we must embrace this imperative for true living. We must *train to be godly*. Talk of training is good. Talk of training is important. Talk of training must happen. But talk of training is cheap if it is just that—talk. Implementation is where we discover the true difference.

What influences you? What shapes you? What trains your thoughts and actions? The exercise that follows takes courage, boldness, and humility. Engage it fully and authentically, and you may very well discover critical insights that will influence the days and years to come.

RAW GOODS

Week 7, Reading, p. 180