**God’s Part – My Part: How Spiritual Life Works.**

**Part 1 – Examples from the Old Testament**

**Deut. 28:1-2; Phil. 2:12, 13** –Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. NIV

Most Christians (and even some non-Christians) understand that we are saved by grace, not good works. And though we know that when the Spirit comes to live in us, we’re changed, we also know we’re still not perfect. We still have ignorance, weakness, and temptation, and we all fail at times. We’re still human, just like non-Christians, right? Since we’re saved by grace, we understand that there is nothing we can do to merit God’s favor or to earn our salvation. But some Christians seem to think all you have to do is “pray the sinner’s prayer” and you’re in for life, there’s nothing more to it than that, and you can never lose it. Others seem to think Christian life is more demanding, and you have to really follow strict guidelines, or you can fail to experience all God has for you, and you might even lose your salvation. Which position is correct? Is it all one-sided, and God does everything, or is it a two-way street, where both sides have a part to play?

Over the next few Sundays, I want to talk about these sorts of things, and try to find the balance. Because I’ve come to understand that, though we cannot *earn* our salvation, we do have to *receive* it and learn to walk in it. We do have a part to play in it, and this needs to be better understood. It’s so very important for us to know what God has done for us in Christ. That’s the message of the Gospel we’re to preach in all the world! But at the same time, I’ve found that ignoring or missing what the Bible teaches about our part, how we appropriate and experience His salvation day-to-day, weakens the body of Christ, keeps us from what God has for us, and hinders our witness and mission in the world.

In this series of teachings, I want to demonstrate that the Bible teaches human beings *always* have an important role to play in spiritual life, whether we’re talking about how we get saved in the first place or how we’re filled with God’s Spirit, how we witness to people, influence society, or just live out the life God calls us to. To accomplish this goal, we’re going to examine key biblical passages which teach the importance of human agency and also consider what Christian leaders from many persuasions have said about this important subject throughout the ages.

In doing this, I certainly don’t want to take anything away from the message of God’s grace. I don’t want anybody to hear what I’m saying as just an exhortation to “try harder.” I’m not trying to say we can save ourselves by fervent efforts, or any such thing. Everyone who’s been saved has been saved by God’s unmerited favor, His grace. Jesus did for us what we could never have done for ourselves! The reason God became man is because man was so hopelessly lost, so weakened and sickened by sin that he could never have restored himself to the image of God, raised himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak, to please God. God Himself had to come here to do that for us! Only God could restore the image of God in man. Only a man could die for the sins of man, but only a perfect Man (without his own sins to atone for) could do such a thing, and as John says in the Book of Revelation, no one in heaven, earth, or in all space and time was worthy to do that. Only the God-Man, Jesus, 100% Man, yet 100% God, was worthy or capable of saving us. He lived the life we could never live, then died the death we all deserved, so that we could be forgiven and have a new start. The Son of God became the Son of Man, so that we, the sons of men, could become sons of God! This teaching is not intended in any way to lead to any other conclusion. Spiritually dead people could never raise themselves to life!

What it is intended to show, however, is that all that God has done does require a response from human beings. There is a part we must play in this cosmic drama. If we don’t understand that, and don’t understand the difference between God’s part and ours, we can become confused, disillusioned, and we can miss out on the fullness God intends for us to experience, because we’re waiting for God to do what He intends us to do. So in this series, that is my goal; to look at our part, to look at what human beings must do to experience what God has provided. This is not so that we can earn our salvation or so that we can get God to love us more than He already does. God loves us because He is love! He saves us because of what Christ has done. He just wants us now to understand that and fully receive it and walk in it. And that requires us to understand our part of the bargain, our side, our response, to what God has done for us in Christ. In other words, how this spiritual life is meant to work.

To do that will take the next several Sundays. We’ll start out today looking at human response to God in the Old Testament. Then, in our second teaching, we’ll look at how Jesus Himself modeled this for us. After that, we’ll look at how His disciples demonstrate this in the gospels and Acts. Last of all, we’ll look at this teaching in other parts of the New Testament. We’ll conclude the series with one final look at how we should apply the whole main teaching of this whole series. I hope you’ll be here for the entire series, to get a full and balanced view of the truth I’m trying to present.

Now then, for today, let’s begin by looking at what part peoples’ choices played in Old Testament times.

A quick review of the Old Testament easily proves the importance of human agency in God’s mission on earth. God created Eden, but He put Adam and Eve there to tend it and care for it. R. T. Kendall mentions how the Spirit does the supernatural, but usually requires a human action or response. Moses had to lift up his staff, and then the Spirit parted the Red Sea. When Moses’ hands were raised, the Israelites were able to defeat the Amalekites. When the Israelites marched around Jericho and then shouted, the walls fell down. When Joshua pointed his javelin towards Ai, the Lord fought for Israel. When Jehoshaphat put singers in front of his army, the Lord defeated the Ammonites and Moabites who came against him.

The revelation of Sinai clearly demonstrates the importance of human agency. When God called Israel to Himself at Sinai, He ordered them to build a tabernacle so He could dwell with them. He provided the blueprint, and a system whereby sins could be atoned for and Israel could have fellowship with Him. Their part was to donate the materials needed and construct the tabernacle in exact accordance with what God had revealed. A priesthood was also instituted with all sorts of regulations, special garments, and special rituals. A sacrificial system required the Israelites to offer all sorts of animals and other items as God directed them. Even though it was God who wanted Israel to have fellowship with Him and took the initiative to provide all that was necessary, He clearly did not do everything unilaterally. Clearly Israel had to carry out their responsibilities as well, to make the divine-human relationship possible, and they would never have experienced it had they not done their part.

Israel’s history as a nation is the clearest evidence of the role that human agency plays in relationship with God. If everything in Israel’s history had only depended upon *God’s* actions, the nation would have been happy and blessed forever. God never fails. But Israel’s history also depended upon *Israel’s* actions and responses to God. Their responses as a nation of fallible human beings are what kept them from continuing under God’s blessings. Our text in Deut. 28 lays out the blessings Israel would experience if they were obedient, but also lays out the curses for disobedience! Their history shows the mixture they experienced, culminating in their defeat and exile to Babylon, they restoration, but only in part, and their second destruction under the Romans after Christ’s time.

Their failure to obey God and fulfill their part of the bargain diminished their potential and changed their experience. It took them much longer than necessary to take the Promised Land, and they never did possess it as fully as God had intended. Compromises they made caused God to allow enemies to come against them. At times they suffered defeats from these enemies and were forced to submit to them. Eventually the whole nation was sent into exile in Babylon. Biblical history proves that Israel’s responses to God played a very real role in how things turned out for them. These things are a lesson to us, reminding us that relationship with God (spiritual life), is always a two-way street. It is not only dependent upon God. As creatures of free will, humans must cooperate with God for anything to happen according to His will. It is obvious that man is not an automaton. He is capable of making his own decisions and has a very important role to play in spiritual life.

I’ve always thought the very fact we have the Bible proves we have a part to play. I mean, why even have a book that teaches us what to do or what to avoid, if God just does everything in us, the way He causes salmon to swim upstream? Why even have such a book, if God just blesses or curses, no matter what we might do?!

It’s important to notice two dimensions in the life of Israel too; the corporate dimension and the individual dimension. We see this throughout biblical history. God promised great things to Israel, but that didn’t mean all individual Israelites experienced them. Only the obedient ones did. And Israel went astray and had to be punished, banished, and even destroyed several times, but that didn’t mean there weren’t some individuals who stayed true. When everyone else died in the desert, Joshua and Caleb didn’t. They inherited their part of the Promised Land. During the time of the Judges, when most of Israel went astray, we also find the Book of Ruth, about a faithful woman who wasn’t even from Israel, and a godly Israelite named Boaz who was faithful and blessed because he was obedient to God. When most of Israel wanted a king, and eventually got Saul, who went astray from God, Samuel stayed faithful to the end. When Ahab and Jezebel led Israel astray, Elijah stayed true to God and was mightily used by Him. All of Israel was so sinful they were defeated by the Babylonians and carried into exile, but Daniel and his three friends didn’t compromise. Neither did Esther or Mordecai, Nehemiah, or Ezra. What makes the difference in life is always our individual response. Everyone else in society, or even in the church, might make wrong choices, but we can still choose God! That is our part, to choose God, to prepare our hearts to seek Him, to make up our minds that we’re going to avail ourselves of all He has for us, and practice the disciplines that make for a strong spiritual life.

I hope you’ve also noticed in all we’ve talked about so far, that God’s part is always preeminent. He takes the initiative. He works the miracles. He sent His Son. His Son lived the life we could never live and died the death we deserved to die. God is always perfect. God is always good. God is faithful and true. The human response is always about responding to God, availing ourselves of what God has done. We work out our salvation because He’s working it in us. I compare it to the valves we had in big pipelines on my ship. The valve doesn’t supply the water, fuel, gas, steam, or whatever. It doesn’t create it, produce it, supply it, or pump it. No, all the valve does is open the line to it and allow it to flow. That’s our part, primarily. We just need to respond, to receive, to say yes to God, like the Virgin Mary who simply said, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” I hope we can all see that and can all agree to say yes to God and let His Word and His Spirit work in us!

Final hymn: #542, When we all get to heaven?