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**A Workout**

**Philippians 2:1-5, 12-15**

In my house growing up, exercise was a four letter word. Taking the time to work out your muscles each day was not only not a priority but it seemed like a punishment. A workout was what you did when all other options had failed. It was certainly not something anyone in my home wanted to change their life or lifestyle or, God forbid, become a regular event! The spiritual version of this attitude would be those faith conversions at the end of a person's life. One of the most famous of these has to be that famous emperor, Constantine.

By the time of his death in 337, Emperor Constantine had executed both his wife and son, and he had a string of defeated, and sometimes murdered rivals in his wake. Just before dying he asked to be baptized into Christ. He was baptized. He became a Christian. His previous sins were forgiven and he died. Of course, his life was far more complicated than all of this and perhaps he held off his conversion for better reasons but deathbed conversions are not unheard of. And, frankly, sometimes it can sound like a pretty good idea: get in with Christ right at the end, no accountability for my life, no daily workout. Even if we aren't this blunt about it, many live out a more subtle version. If God is always there, eager to welcome me then working out my own salvation can move down the priority list. I'll focus on my work, or family, or education or finances right now and deal with salvation some other day. Jesus himself teaches us that the last will be first and the first last so showing up a little late to the party has some appeal.

The honest to goodness question is: why should we be Christian right now? In this life and for the long haul? For it is a workout. Being "in Christ" expects a great deal of us. A list as long as our arms could be made but, even just drawing from our Philippians text today, we already have a full agenda: be blameless and innocent, live in harmony with one another, have humility, care more about others' interests than your own, work toward having the same values and mindset as Jesus. And do all of this without murmuring and arguing! This demands great changes in our lives today; how we behave today. It shakes the foundations of who we are and how we interact in the world. AND:

There are some things living "in Christ" does not get us out of. There are things our salvation does not get us out of. It does not get us out of suffering or sorrow or pain. Our faith does not get us out of those things. Similarly, we know that tremendous blessings can fall upon those with seemingly little to no faith. Being "in Christ", being saved, does not get us into a special club; the club where we are the ones who will go to heaven and the rest will go to hell. For, if we believe God's grace can encompass and forgive even the worst of us and even if it is at the last minute, then fire insurance against a life in hell is no reason to get a workout in. Working out our salvation today, tomorrow and next day and the next cannot just be about saving us from hell. Our salvation is about much more. It is about changing our lives now; about saving our lives now.

Today, in my own household, we have made efforts to change the workout from a dirty word to a desired habit. The results have not been perfect nor have they been complete. The other day I introduced my 3-year old to "the workout video." We had no special equipment and so the kids' soccer ball transformed into our medicine ball and cans of food got pulled out of the cabinet to become hand

weights. Taking in Alena's 30-pound frame and tiny hands I rummaged through the cabinet again. Yes, tiny cans of tomato paste would do. Then the workout began. "Raise those arms!" the woman coached. "Just two more," she cajoled, "Feel the burn." With cans in hand, Alena and I followed, working out our bodies one muscle at a time. It wasn't perfect. It certainly wasn't complete. But it was a beginning.

Paul wants us all to start working out our own salvation just like we would our bodies. And, like our bodies, the changes in our faith life will not be quickly seen. It will involve some pain so it is best to start with small things—the tomato paste cans of faith if you will. Start small but steady, dedicated to this workout each and every day for it will build to something greater. Over time, this workout will reshape you into a new creation. Living "in Christ" will form you into the person you were created to be. That is what our salvation is about. It is about living out our lives to their fullest and receiving the gifts of our faith, the gifts of our relationship with Jesus, here and now. It is not about knowing all of the answers but about feeling peace even when no answers can be found. It is about deep joy even when happiness is impossible. It is about abiding hope even when doubts creep in. This is why we need to work out our salvation now. This is why we must be "in Christ" now and not someday soon. For we need the benefits of that exercise now and not just in the world to come.

So what does this workout look like? No special equipment is needed, no special skill. Paul gives us a starting place right here. Begin by practicing humility. And it does take practice! Do a few reps of looking out for someone else more than you do yourself. Once you've grown a bit stronger, try seeing others' opinions as just as good or better than your own...and hold it for a count of ten! Read God's word, even 10 verses a day is a start. Pray often, even if just to pray that God show you how to pray. Do not worry if you are starting with a faith the size of a tomato paste can for God can take that tomato can faith and change the world with it.

Because that is, of course, the goal of this workout. The goal is not just to reshape our lives, although it certainly will; the goal is not just to save our lives, although we can be sure of that; the goal is to change the world. Paul puts it like this: "so that you may be...children of God...in the midst of a crooked...generation, in which you shine like stars in the world." Our salvation is not a route out of suffering or questions. It is the route to becoming more and more like Jesus so that we can shine in a world that is tremendous need of some light.

It is a full faith effort that will push us beyond our own strength, this training in salvation. But, to not begin working on it today, and every day, is to deny the work that has already been done. Do not forget that it is God who is at work in you. And it is God who will give you the strength to continue when you do not see any immediate results. You did not start this, but you do need to decide if you are going to help it work toward its fulfillment.

Because Constantine really did miss out, didn't he? He may have been "in Christ" but he never got the joy of knowing Jesus in his life. He may have been saved but he did not get to experience what that salvation really feels like. And it really is the gift of a lifetime—our whole lifetime. For, if Christ has offered you anything in your life: any encouragement, any love, any community, any compassion, then it's time to pick up your cans and begin. Amen.