

**Series: IF YOU WANNA GO UP - You Gotta Go Down**

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

**STARS and MATCHES**

**Philippians 2:12-18**

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1. This spotlight, made from the landing light of an airplane, has 750,000 candle power, plugs into a cigarette lighter in a car or boat—and will light things up for half a kilometer! If someone were to shine it in your eyes, it would about knock you flat!

-This, on the other hand, is a match. You can **see** it for half a kilometer—maybe even out to 10 km on a clear night. But you don't want to try to light up the shoreline with it!

-Now, here's my point—and I **do** actually have one! Have you ever looked at the lives of others—their intelligence, their capacity, their courage, their accomplishments and thought to yourself, "**Oh, maaaaan...!** I feel like a **match** in comparison to a **spotlight!**"

- a. There are a **lot** of brilliant, talented people in our world—Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg—just to name a few. When I begin to feel intimidated I take **some** comfort in the fact that how God measures brilliance and the intensity of a life is **way** different than we do! And it's **way** more **accurate!**

-See, apparently God is not necessarily impressed with the **star players** in our world. Like, He doesn't evaluate people based on how brilliant or creative or successful or accomplished they are.

- b. Here's what is really cool about God's value system.

-You and I may never invent anything or do anything that's brilliant and spectacular, but the Bible says that our lives can shine with a **brilliance**—and make an **impact** that we could never dream was possible. Paul puts it like this:

**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, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of god without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me. (Philippians 2:12-18 NIV)**

- c. With everything going on in our world, we are—I believe—at a critical junction of human history. As followers of Jesus, we are God's **only** light in this world. God doesn't need more people lighting and throwing matches—He needs and wants people to shine like **stars**—and light up the darkness.

-And so, this morning, I want to talk to you about how to become a **star**--how to light up your corner of a very dark, confusing world—at a very difficult time and place in history.

2. See, at the core—our **mission** at The Olive Branch is to be a community of people who have been **transformed** by the Good News of Jesus—who when have a **transforming** impact on our world. That is to **be like Jesus**—to **shine like stars!** The **question** is—**how does that happen?** Who is responsible for making me holy—is it God, or me? Paul once said,

**...Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT)**

-When you ask, “So how **do I** become a new person?” you’ll hear a number of formulas. One is, **"Let go and let God."** The implication is that if we can just let ourselves go limp enough, God will zap the bad stuff out and zap the good stuff in.

The other solution is usually some version of, **"Well, try harder!"** The implication is that if you work hard enough--stuff Bible verses into your mind, fast, meditate and pray, restrain, resist, light candles, do religious things--that all this work will result in transformation.

- a. The tragic news is that **sometimes** Christ-followers never really change that much. We think Bible knowledge leads to maturity—and it can be fun to learn that stuff and impress others with it. But knowing the Bible is **not** spiritual maturity.

-What makes me sad is that from **my** perspective, I there are a lot of people who have a growing gap between what they **know** about Jesus and the Bible—and their lifestyle—which has flat-lined. Know what that gap between what we know and how we live is called? A **credibility gap**.

-The point of God **giving** us truth—was to change our lives, to create people who love and respect Him—and love and respect others.

- b. I have **great news**: Personal transformation **is** possible. We **can** grow into people who are fully devoted to God, give our lives away, and genuinely treat others with love, generosity, and compassion. What becomes clear in this passage is that personal transformation has two tracks--kind of like a railroad track. **Both** of them are critical.

-The **first track** is found in the words, **continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling**. Now, you need to know that this is **not** saying that we are saved by doing good things. Not at all. The word **salvation**, as used in the Bible is a broad word that refers to all that happens to us from the time we respond to God’s grace until we are safely home in God's arms.

-**Work out your salvation** simply says that personal transformation doesn't take place by just going limp. We have to make good choices, expose ourself to truth, discipline our spending, stay away from darkness, resist evil--**live out our faith in fruitful ways**.

-The imagery in the words, **work out** are that of a farmer's field. Does anyone here have a garden? How many of you just threw a bunch of seeds out the back window and, **POOF!**, early this month a bumper crop of tomatoes, pumpkins and green beans appeared in your kitchen sink? The soil, sun, and rain are amazing --but there's a lot of digging, weeding and fertilizing that goes on before the harvest.

- c. Now, I'd like to think that, on the day I give my life over to Jesus, that—kinda like a carwash - I could shift into neutral, scan the bar code, turn up the radio and move through the cycle and come out sparkling clean on the other side.

-Or when I needed a bad habit removed, that I could pray, or go to some church where I'd get zapped with a kind of spiritual anesthetic as God did surgery and removed all of the nasty stuff along with any temptation to ever do bad things again.

-But the truth is that you and I have to work the garden. Now, don't get nervous here --I'm going to talk about God's part in this in a few minutes, so hang on. We simply have to cooperate with God. That means believing that what He says about sin is true—which means that **we** have to say a firm **NO** to sin—and make plans to **avoid** temptation, and we have to say **yes** to some things--and get out of the **Lazy Boy**.

-And we need people to hold us accountable for the truth we know. This typically happens in ministry teams or in LIFE groups—especially at a time like this when our gatherings are limited. Transformation has **always** happened best in little communities—and I want to beg you to take time for one—or lead one!

-What this really boils down to is **choices**. We make them every day. We either choose to humble our pride and self-sufficiency—and aim for higher ground—or we float down-stream. We take the cheap, easy, convenient way.

- d. This passage says that we are to work out our salvation and live out our faith **fear and trembling!** What's this all about? Is this saying, "You'd better not screw up --God will turn you into a crispy critter!" I don't think God wants people to serve Him like He's an angry abusive Father.

-I think the **first** think it means is that we have a good, healthy respect for God and His counsel that it can destroy our lives. To respect your physician is to pay attention when he tells you that your health is in danger. In this case, sin is not a little amusement on the side—it's a cancer that will eat you alive—and destroy everything you've always wanted. There's a reason why it took Jesus death on a cross to set us free!

-Something else. Over the years I've learned that I can either listen to and **act on** what God is saying to me—or learn the hard, embarrassing way. There's a certain amount of trembling that goes on--knowing that life is for keeps and God is not playing games. **Listening** is a lot easier than God's other tool for learning; pain and regret!

-And finally, there is a deep respect for God and His honor. Compare it to marriage. If you have a good marriage and love your spouse, **you don't do stupid things**. Your goal is to please the one you've married; to make them feel loved, cherished,

and listened to. There's a little bit of fear and trembling as you work out your relationship. Why? Because, ***IF MAMA AIN'T HAPPY, AIN'T NOBODY HAPPY!?*** No, you ***love*** them--and it feels great to be in harmony.

-And out of the deepest respect and awe for who God is, we make ***good choices!*** We know that one day we will have to look Him in the eye and explain our lives. ***That's*** an awesome thought.

3. Now, so far, I've talked about effort, decisions, working, weeding, saying "no", fear and trembling. There are a ***lot*** of people in our culture who think this is what following Jesus is all about. Effort--work, work, work; do, do, do. And they think, rightly so, "***Who needs it?***"

-Let me say it again, ***we are NOT saved on the basis of performance!*** But, like anything worthwhile in life, living with integrity and with honor and making a difference ***will not just happen*** in life. It takes effort and prioritizing on our part. Saying ***NO*** when you need to say ***no***—and ***YES*** when you need to say ***yes***.

-But there's another piece to this that makes ***all*** the difference--a piece totally missing in every other religion--and sometimes missing in the way some live out their faith. It's the ***power of God***.

-Notice what it says here in this passage:

**continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is *God who works in you to will and to act* in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12a-13 NIV)**

-***That's the second track to the life you've always wanted***—and it's ***the most important track!*** It's actually quite ***amazing!*** Let me explain why. First, He's at work to help us with our ***will***—our ***initiative***. I remember hearing a comedian say, "When I feel the urge to get off my butt and exercise, I lie down until it goes away!"

-The ***problem*** with us is almost ***never*** a ***knowledge*** thing—a ***knowing what to do*** issue; it's ***actually wanting to do the right thing!*** Think about it; do you ever ***feel*** like humbling your pride and asking for forgiveness? Do you ever ***feel*** like budgeting your money and making room to give generously? Do you ever ***feel*** like editing the stuff you watch to keep your mind and attitudes pure? ***NO!***

- a. If there's going to be any change in our lives, what needs to happen ***first*** is that we have to ***want*** to change! And ***that's*** what this passage is saying. The Living Bible puts it like this:

**For God is at work within you, helping you *want* to obey him, and then helping you *do what he wants*. (Philippians 2:13 LB)**

-Because God has access to our hearts, He alone is able to do that. Sometimes He just shows us how dumb and stubborn we're being—and the damage we're causing to ourselves and others. Sometimes the Holy Spirit deeply convicts us of our sin--where we are overwhelmed with guilt and shame and remorse until we come to God--helpless and small--and say, "I ***desperately*** need You!" Sometimes the ***pain*** outweighs the ***ego and pride***.

-God's Word plays a role in that. Some of you have mentioned that, at times, you've been a part of Olive Branch gathering (when we could **do** that) and it seemed like I was talking right to you. You need to know, that's **not me**. I don't have that kind of power. It's the Spirit of God **speaking, urging** you to change.

- b. Now, is that enough? Not for me it isn't. A **lot** of people in our world want to change--and can't. Years ago Lori used worked in Radiation Therapy at the University of Kentucky Medical Center. Every day she met people who because of radical surgery on their throats breathed through **traches**--holes in their throat.

-What blew her mind was watching these people **still** smoke cigarettes through that hole! Did they feel the **need** to change? They breathed through that **need-to-change** every day. Did they have the **power** to change? No. I'm going to read a very raw, honest admission from Paul—see if you can relate.

**-I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what hate I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (Romans 7:15, 18b)**

-And unless you're way better than Paul, me and others—**this is your truth too!** We can't do it on our own. Know this: God does **not** ask us to **do** something, to **quit** something, to **make something right**--and then leave us stranded, all on our own to pull it off. Please understand the power of these words: **It is GOD who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**

-And that's **exactly** why God can hold us accountable for the credibility gap between what we **know** to do and actually **do**. We have the power to change. Here's why, Paul goes on to say in the next chapter, Romans 8, that the Holy Spirit, the One who **raised Jesus from the dead** lives in us, and waits, **WAITS** for us to ask Him for help. Humility. Down is **up!**

- c. There are two things that you and I need to **understand** about the Spirit's power. First of all, that power is to help us act **according to HIS good purpose**. God will give us power to do what **He** wants; God will **not** give us power to do what **we** want—which usually has something to do with being rich, popular and famous.

-The imagery for the Spirit is **wind**. Imagine your life as a sailboat; God will **fill your sails with wind to go in His direction!** Period!

-To be clear, God needs access to **all** the areas of our lives--not just the parts that embarrass us. If you want **all of God's power**, then you have to bring **all** of yourself to Him--not just pieces parts.

-Years ago, my brother, for Christmas, gave me a key to his 150 Suzuki motorcycle. Thinking that was really cool, I told my friends in high school! One friend said, "What's he going to give you next year—**handlebars?**" True, right? If someone tells you they're going to give you their car, it doesn't work if they drag it to your house, one piece at a time!

- d. The second is that God gives us...**power along the way**. Again, the sailboat imagery; when you aim your life in the right direction and pull up anchor, God sends the **wind**, and breathes His amazing power into our lives.

-Does anyone remember the story of the people of Israel crossing the Jordan River into the promised land? It didn't part until they **waded into the water!** David didn't get the power to take down Goliath until he took off Saul's armor and picked up a handful of stones. It's called **faith!** If you just sit in your **La-Z-Boy** and wait for the urge to hit you--you'll never find the power God promises you. Power comes along the way.

4. Now. Think about **our** culture for a minute. Do we have **stars?** We do. Movie stars, star athletes, rock stars, reality TV stars...the list goes on and on! So, **how do you become a star?** Usually by **going up! By being better than others!**

-To become a rising star in the business world, you have to be smarter, more clever, more creative, harder-working--more **something** than someone else. You have to **go up!** Many times even talent isn't enough--you have to have some gimmick. The key is to **stand out** from the rest. You get it, right? **You're only a star in comparison to someone else.**

-But according to what Paul says here, the **real** stars, 1) created by God and, 2) seen best—not in **comparison** to the other stars, but in **contrast** to the darkness of the night sky. And he **talks** about this darkness; a **crooked and depraved generation**. **The Message** says:

**Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. (Philippians 2:15 MSG)**

-Sounds harsh, doesn't it? So, think about our world for a few minutes. Imagine a typical night of Primetime TV? Surf the internet—and Netflix for a few hours? Watch the news. Surf the magazine rack at a convenience store—or in the checkout line at Loblaws. What do you see that's good and wholesome? How much love for God and kindness to others do you see? I see greed, lust, pride, hate, ego, and lots of other stuff—but not much that **I'd** want to build into my life—or have announced at my funeral.

- a. Let me ask you another question. How many of you pretty much trust everyone you meet? That they're going to be honest with you—not greedy; that they won't harm you or take advantage of you—or give you COVID-19? Anyone? **We're wearing masks!** When you live in a **broken, crooked, polluted** world, it leads to both **fear** and **cynicism**.

-What God calls us to is **way** different—things like telling the truth, doing an honest day's work, staying sexually pure, keeping your promises, not coveting someone else's spouse, stuff, or status, staying humble, keeping peace, not talking about others faults and problems, loving and honoring others—and loving and respecting God.

-In comparison to the way **we** want things to be—and the way **God** made things to be—we live in a **twisted, polluted world**. And it's **not** getting better.

- b. So—**how do you live in a world like this?** Well, this passage says, "Do **everything**--in other words, live your life everyday--**without** complaining or arguing." The word translated **complaining** here is **gongusmon**. The word actually **sounds** like you're arguing or grumbling! Same with the word, **whine**.

-The logical question **I'd** ask is, "Stop complaining and arguing? Why, **that's what God's people do best!**" I've led churches for over—well, a **long** time—and **that** is the sad truth. Here's what's true; the longer a person has been following Jesus—**without actually being transformed**--the more they complain, grumble, and whine and argue.

-The **Spirit** is the One who brings joy. To ignore his promptings to love God and love others is to **frustrate** Him. We **lose our joy**—because God, the source of joy, **hates** it when his kids whine, argue, grumble and complain—just like us! If you doubt me, read the story of the Israelites and how God dropped them in the desert because they **just wouldn't stop!**

-When we do the same thing--criticize, whine, grumble, murmur, complain about church, about leaders, about other Christians—we **lose the battle with darkness and become part of it.**

- c. When we sabotage the unity and love and humility God calls us to—and attack other Christians instead—cause **we love and need to be right**—God leaves the room. And we **hinder** what God calls us to do here and everywhere else in the Bible; to pursue unity, live in unity and work **together** to present the Good News of Jesus **as people who ARE Good News!** No one who wants to win a game or win a war turns on their team-mates!

-And I'll tell you **exactly** why Paul singled this out. **This is the area where people who say they love Jesus get stuck—and justify their awful attitudes and behavior!** I mean, let's just be honest. This isn't about **truth**—it's about pride and the need to be right! Paul says: "If the light is **ever** going to shine out of you—**ya gotta clean the windows!!**

Don't act like a **child**—act like a **child of God! Do EVERYTHING without complaining and arguing.** How many of you feel strangely drawn to people who whine, complain, argue and criticize others? Well, people who are far from God aren't drawn to them either. Even God doesn't like hanging out with them!

- d. Something else. Know what Followers of Jesus are getting well-known for these days? Cursing the darkness. Complaining, whining, murmuring about how difficult it is to live in a world filled with darkness. How **bad** things are "out there." "Nobody knows, the sorrow I've seen. Nobody knows, but Jesus..." And you know what Paul would say, "**So SHINE! Light it up! Don't just curse the darkness—make a difference in it!**

5. Listen to the standard Paul sets: **Without fault.** You've seen this already—a 750,000 candlepower spotlight! More light than anyone needs! How much light do you think you'd get if I spray-painted the lens black. Now, the light's still there--it's just that there's black spray-paint over the front.

-Know what the Spirit of God whispers to us, if we'll listen? **Work out your salvation! Get the black paint off your light--and all the power of Heaven will back you up!** Know why? Well, obviously for **your** sake--but **especially** for those who need light.

-Paul says, **Without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like the stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.** Whether or not light shines from your life makes a huge difference in this world. But hear this; it's **not** about knowing it; it's **not** about preaching it to your neighbors. If you don't actually **live** it—you **lose** your influence.

- a. We just recently moved out of a neighborhood where we'd lived for 28 years. **28 years!** There are some moments I'm not proud of. There was the time I pruned a branch off a tree and carried it down to a wooded area close to the house.

-Then a guy I'd known since we moved there called my name and pointed to a sign that said I could get a \$1000 fine for doing that! So, I swallowed my pride, walked back into the woods, and got my branch--properly chastened.

-Then there was the Thanksgiving Matt got distracted while riding his bike and ran into a parked car. So I went out to find the other half of his tooth and survey the damage. It was a **brand new Nissan Pathfinder!** There was Matt's tooth—and a dent and a scratch—and my honesty cost me \$340! I told Matt to look for cheaper cars to run into. He didn't. The next time it was a brand new Toyota Highlander—and it was **\$2800!** Humbling yourself **costs!**

- b. The challenge for you and me is, through the power of God, **make sure we shine!** To clean the black off the spotlight. See, if we **don't**—then the Good News doesn't make sense. Jesus said that **salt that loses it's saltiness is worthless.** Jesus said:

**Don't hide your light! Let it shine for all; let your good deeds glow for all to see, so that they will praise your Heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:16 LB)**

-Sometimes people who follow Jesus try to be clever about this—and cover the light all week long; and then when they're with other people who believe as they do, they uncover it, hold hands, sing, **Cum-by Yah** and sing the carpet with their light. Then they cover it back up for another week.

-If you listen carefully, the Spirit of God is saying, "Don't be little birthday candle! Don't be a cool little solar light in the garden! Don't be a Bic lighter! Be a **STAR** in the night sky!!

- c. This passage closes with two thoughts. The first is all about accountability on the **day of Christ.** Paul speaks about himself here—but I think he's talking to us too. He says, "I don't want to stand before Christ some day and realize that I've **missed the point of why God made me!** Frittered away my whole live, never made a difference with my light!" I don't either, do you?

-And then, to close, he talks about joy. Living this way is exhilarating. The prospect of **changing someone's life for eternity** is better than any aware you'll get here. And it comes, **not by going up**, but by **humbling yourself**; just letting **God turn on the lights** so the goodness and love and purity of Jesus shines through you. Know this—**you can't do it!** God can and **will!**

6. This morning I need to ask you something very important. What is it specifically that needs some work in your life? Where do you need God's amazing power to change you—so that your talk about Jesus power to change makes sense?

-Does God need to change the unloving, judgmental way you treat other people—how you talk about them, treat their reputations? Is it the way you nibble around the edges of honesty when there's money involved?

-Is it your word? To be honest, you have a problem telling the truth--without stretching or exaggerating it? Or you make promises that you never really intend to keep?

-Is it in something that's going on right now between you and someone you're not married to? You **know** the relationship is wrong--or it's headed in the wrong direction. You just haven't been willing to choose what's **right!**

-Is it maybe in the specific area Paul mentions here? You really **are** a whining, critical, complaining person.

a. Folks, we live in a world that **desperately** needs the light. **We** need the light. **We** need to see the darkness for what it is. **We** need to see the obstacles in our path so we aren't stumbling all over the place. There are people in my world and yours who, if **we** don't shine our light--like stars in the universe--will be lost to God forever—and **never** experience the Life He wants to give them.

b. There's a part we play--where we own the darkness in us, and out of awe and respect for God, we take the steps to bring our junk **into** the light and have the humility to **own** it. **We do** not and **can** not generate our own light, but, see, there's this amazing God who helps us **want** to obey Him—and then helps us to do what **He** wants! **SHINE!**

7. So, what kind of light are you going to be? A match? A candle? A 20 watt bulb? A kid's night light? Or will you clean the windows and be a **star that lights up your world!** Cuz, see, the **world needs you!** But, it's your choice. Really.