

High Impact Life: Shining Like Stars

Dr. Tom Pace

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Philippians 2:12-15

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. Philippians 2:12-15 (NRSV)

I don't know if you notice it when it's happening, but I think when you look back on your life what you see is how God is at work in it. Like in the midst of it as you go through every day, you're not always aware of all that God is doing in your life. But as you look back you can see how God is at work in you.

That's what the scripture says in verse 13: "... for it is God who is at work in you..."

God gives you spiritual gifts, which are things you're good at and they are awakened by the Holy Spirit when you use them for God's purposes. Some are teachers, some are preachers, some are great helpers, and some are evangelists; in fact there's a whole host of spiritual gifts. Everyone has one. God has given you those. God has given you passions – awakened things that you care so much about. Things that you want to keep making sure that you don't forget those things about which you are passionate.

God has given you experiences: Things you've gone through, challenges you've faced. Some good experiences and some not so good experiences. Whether God provides the bad experiences or not, we do know that God works in the midst of those. God has given you relationships with people who have made an impact on your life and shaped and formed you. God has given you resources. Time, talent, money, influence. All of those form this cocktail of how God has worked within you. And that's true of every one of us.

And here's the picture that we get. God works *in*, we work *out*. It says, "God is at work in you..." but just before that it says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." "For God is at work in you enabling you to both will and to work enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

God works in and we work out.

It's doesn't mean that we earn our salvation. Sometimes I hear people saying that this is what is meant, that you have to work out your own salvation. No, you don't work out your own salvation in the sense of earning it. You do something with it. God has saved you. God has given you life and given you eternal life. And the question is how will you work it out, how will you use your muscles, your spiritual muscles to do something with it?

One of my favorite movies is "Schlinder's List" and it's a sad movie. But there's such a powerful scene at the end. The story is of Oskar Schindler who has moved into Nazi-occupied Poland during World War II. He went there to make money and wanted to take advantage of the war effort as the war was going on. So, he moved into occupied Poland and he hired an all-Jewish work force because it was cheaper. He wanted to make money.

Then once the Nazis began to exterminate the Jews something inside Oskar Schlinder clicked. He began to use all his resources and his money to buy these Jews and save their lives. He saved around 1100 Jews and at the end there's a scene where they're presenting him with this little ring which is a token of their gratitude for saving their lives. He takes it and begins to weep. Then he says, "I could have saved more. You don't know how much money I just wasted. I just gave it away." He points at an old car and says, "If I sold this car, I could have saved three or four more people."

It's just such a stunning realization. Maybe you and I don't have the opportunity to save the lives of a Jewish prisoner, but we have been given all of these gifts. This amazing life that God has given us. And what are we going to do with it? How can we work it out?

Now it also says, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." It's interesting that sometimes we think of God as an angry vindictive God and if we don't perform well as Christians we're going to be in trouble. That's not the picture at all. We work out our salvation and we exercise it, we do something with it, with fear and trembling because it is an amazing force we're working with – this God stuff.

I want you to imagine walking into a nuclear power control room of a nuclear power plant. The people there take that seriously. That's big powerful stuff they're dealing with. You're not over there playing cards in the corner. This is important stuff.

That's what he's saying here. This is God at work in you. Don't be cavalier with it. This is an incredible power.

We're going to hear today about how some people have chosen to work out their salvation, to do something with their salvation to make an impact on the world around us. The first one we're going to hear from is Alex Williams about prayer.

Alex Williams: Prayer Ministry Team: Good morning! When Pastor Thomas Harper suggested I join the prayer team I was terrified. Prayer has been one of the weakest parts of my spiritual practice. I had no idea what I was doing when I walked into that first meeting. But of course, everyone was very kind and explained the ins and the outs of the group.

The primary goal of the prayer team is to help and be there for people, largely through prayer. I joined right before the Lenten season when every week we alternate between a special service and our prayer and healing services. As a collective the volunteers and the attendees of the various services learn new methods to pray and how to connect with God.

I had never experienced such an impact for Lent. I've been hooked on the prayer team ever since. Every first Wednesday of the month, Lent or not, we prepare the chapel for the prayer and healing services. I am so excited to get to the chapel and get it ready for this powerful service. Then I always feel revitalized and closer to God.

There can be such chaos and stress in our lives. After the sermon and the service, we just focus on having a quiet moment with God. This can be very powerful to just exist and breathe and pray. This isn't just something I do at church for fun anymore. This is really close to my heart.

Despite my fear in the beginning I'm very thankful that I joined the Prayer Team. I learned that prayer is about connection – it doesn't have to be scary or intimidating. I work with a fantastic group of people and enrich my own spiritual life. All with the goal of helping and being there for others. Thank you.

Wyatt Biggs, Youth Ministry: Good Morning! When I think of how God has impacted my life, so many things pop into my head. All the friends I've made through the church. All the things I've learned during Small Groups and all the fun I've had on the church retreats.

But one thing stands out in particular. That's how I broke my arm at church. Let me set the scene – it was in sixth grade in our Small Group and I was at the church because no one volunteered to host the Small Group that week. So, it was a couple of years ago before all the remodeling had started, and it was actually a night meeting about that remodeling.

My parents were downstairs and came down just after dropping me off at the Small Group. One thing led to another and I was chasing a friend around some couches. I thought, “Why don't I just cut across the couches and take a short cut?” So that's what I did. That's what I tried to do.

A crack in my arm later looked like a tentacle. I thank God almost every day that it was me who broke my arm because a few years before that I'd broken my other arm. I also thank God that my parents were just downstairs.

I also thank God for all the staff that was there that night even though they seemed more frantic and seemed more scared and afraid than I was. I thank God for my Small Group because I knew they were praying for me that night. Thank you.

Eve Kroencke - Student Ministry: Good morning! I've been at this church since I can remember. If these walls could talk, they'd tell you about my parents' eyes meeting down this aisle during their wedding, my awestruck expression as Dr. Moore introduced me to the congregation for the first time, and the amount of chocolate that splattered onto my dress in the aftermath of my confirmation. In Sunday School I learned that Jesus loved me this..... much and let me tell you that to a five-year-old that was a whole lot. I went through my lower school years knowing that God loves me but never truly getting to know him in a personal way. During middle school I encountered difficulties with self image and friendships which pushed me to lean into the church. And in turn, lean into God. Realizing as Joseph Patty so loved to tell me that Jesus wanted to be involved in my life. He died for me, not everyone as a whole, it was never a numbers game, but for each of us individually. Middle School taught me that Jesus wanted a relationship with me and that when I was in absolute distress he was there.

Student ministries gave me confidence in my faith and the ability to learn who I was with Jesus – saved, whole and beautifully made. Who we all are with Jesus.

At the end of Middle School and into High School I was able to share with others how I got to the place I was. St. Luke's encouraged me to share both my story and my heart with those around me. And instead of slapping Jesus into the face of others, to act like Jesus in my everyday life.

Looking back, Student Ministries has pushed me to lean into my faith instead of the world, it has allowed a place where I can feel safe and secure and confident, and to go out into the world and act like Jesus to everyone I encounter. Whenever I step into these buildings, I feel a sense of calm and hope, holding on to the knowledge that in this place I am safe. If these walls could talk, they would tell you that St. Luke's has given me everything I need, and more, to walk out into the world knowing that Jesus is by my side and his love is flowing through my veins. Thank you.

Zach Kroencke, Student Ministry: So how many of you all have kids that don't want to be dropped off in a daycare but would rather come with you instead? Well, that kid was me. My parents used to always drop me off in daycare when they went to church. I would not have it. I cried and screamed until they would come pick me up.

Eventually my parents tried taking me to church. I immediately stopped crying and was quiet. Just by being in church as a toddler, even without having the comprehension can be impactful. My parents continue to bring me to church and at one-point Dr. Moore said something along the lines of "Do you believe in Jesus?" to the congregation. And if you were in the audience that day you could hear a high-pitched young boy's voice in the back screaming, "I do!"

That little boy was me. This was the beginning of my life changing journey at St. Luke's. The next step was at sixth grade confirmation where I was able to meet new peers and make new friends that are now my brothers and sisters in Christ. Then there were mission trips to the Dominican Republic where my eyes were opened to how people live and how fortunate I am to live the way that I do. And next came youth retreats where at first, I only went because of my friends. But then I realized how valuable they are for my journey in Christ. These retreats have built the structure to my foundation of faith. Whether that be crying during worship because the Holy Spirit is moving me, or leading and supporting Middle Schoolers by giving advice and helping them with their problems.

I've gone on an incredible journey with the help of St. Luke's and I know that journey is nowhere near its end. No matter where I will end up with life, I will always be grateful for the values and lessons God has instilled in me through St. Luke's. The people, the speakers and the events at this incredible place have reshaped my life and I hope they can do the same for yours. Thank you.

Richard Domercq, Caring Ministry: Good morning! I've been a member of the hospital visitation ministry for over fifteen years. That experience has been a wonderful blessing for me. The ministry team consists of clergy and of lay people like me. We visit hospitalized people who may be members of St. Luke's or relatives of members, or even non-members who have friends at St. Luke's. I personally visit patients at the Medical Center twice a month, or once or twice a month.

The Team means to see that each patient on the list is visited every single day by someone from our church. I don't know of any other church, large or small that makes this kind of dedicated effort. Patients and their family members or other caregivers often express surprise and gratitude at the faithful consistency of our effort. I'm only one small player on the team but I feel that I have an impact. In a sense we are a microcosm of the body of Christ and I am proud to be a member of this team.

But I get much more than team spirit from this ministry. For one thing it is gratifying to bring a little diversion into the lives of others who are in unhappy or tedious situations. We may talk about their hospital experience or the weather outside or sports or what's going on at the church - you name it. Just because people are in an unpleasant situation doesn't mean that they have forgotten how to smile or even to laugh. It feels good to brighten someone's day if only briefly, just by showing up. Every visit involves praying with the patient and sometimes the family members too. I ask the patients to tell me specifically what they want me to pray for. You can bet we don't pray for world peace or an end to hunger. We pray for a negative blood test or a clean scan or for an organ transplant to become available. We pray for an effective surgery, a reduction in pain, or just a little sleep. Or we may joyfully thank God for a successful procedure just completed or a good medical report just received. And almost every prayer ends with a fervent plea to get out of the hospital as soon as possible.

These focused prayers can be powerful and intimate. On occasion, while a patient and I were praying we have felt the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit. It was like a warm electricity flowing between our joined hands. This type of mountain-top experience sustains my faith long after. Through this ministry I've had the privilege of conversing with people showing enormous faith and courage in the midst of dire circumstances. I'm inspired by how many of the people have positive attitudes based on their faith in God's healing power and his promises for life eternal.

By comparison, my faith feels shallow. But engaging with these saints in crucial times does deepen my faith. They are my role models, my faith mentors, and that's the greatest blessing of hospital visitation for me. Thank you.

Dr. Pace: So, God works in and we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But the passage goes on with another image. It says, "...so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world."

To shine like stars. You know that I came to St. Luke's as the Youth Pastor in 1982 and even then, they were using a phrase that I've heard ever since. When they'd refer to St. Luke's as a "beacon church," that we want to shine to the whole city and want to make an impact on everyone that the light of the church would shine throughout the city.

Now if that's going to happen, what that means is that each one of us must make our light shine. It's not just this institution of the church that makes the light shine, it's every one of us as God has worked into our lives with this cocktail of experiences, spiritual gifts and passions and relationships and resources. All of those and each one of us is to let our light shine. And sometimes we think, "I can't do much."

A number of years ago I heard a man speak at a session of the Texas Annual Conference. The theme of the conference that year was focused on restorative justice, prison ministry primarily, and working in the juvenile justice system, and this man was a chaplain in one of our prisons. I don't remember which one, though he was a United Methodist pastor. He was encouraging people to get involved in the wide menu of different prison ministries.

He said, "It can be really scary and intimidating to come into the prison to talk to convicts. You hear the gates close behind you and it's scary. You think that you really can't make an impact on their lives." Then he said something I've always remembered. "Even a very small candle burns brightly in a really dark place. Our prisons are really dark places and when you bring just your little light in it, makes a big difference."

I think that's what Paul's saying here. He's saying that in this world we live in where there's so much pain and so much hurt and so much darkness, each one of us can use our little light to push back the darkness just a bit. Just a bit.

Now it's not just that each one of us does that. But it's that the impact is because we do it collectively.

This image of shining like stars – I grew up in Southern Illinois in sort of a rural area. I lived in a college town but when I got in high school we moved out of town. We moved out into the country. Had a big lake behind our house – maybe a few acres of lake. But you were away from the ambient light of the city and you could walk outside my back door and just look up at the sky. On a clear night it was breathtaking.

You've probably been out in the country somewhere and looked up at the sky on a starry night. It's this overwhelming picture against a dark background all those millions of stars. That's the picture that's Paul's giving us – shining like stars. It's that the church is like those stars in the dark world around us. And together it's like each individual congregation is like a constellation doing its thing up in the sky. But the impact is when all of us take hold of this incredible power, the Holy Spirit at work and use that for God's glory. When we do that together the city is transformed by the love of Jesus, and that's what we're all about.

You're going to hear another couple of testimonies about people who have chosen to let their light shine. Let's pray together.

Gracious God speak into each one of our hearts. Help us to see how you have been at work in us. Then, God, give us insight and grace to work out our salvation, not to earn it but to use it. And to let our light shine so that the world might see our work and give glory, not to us, but to you. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Sam Hansen – Gethsemane Testimony: Good morning! I'm honored to speak to you about our Gethsemane campus and the impact it has had on the Sharpstown-Gulfton area and on our family. This community is densely populated by immigrants from around the world and Gethsemane warmly welcomes those refugees, most of who are from Latin America and Africa who have fled oppression and tyranny.

Gethsemane has appropriately been described as the United Nations due to the diversity of countries and languages represented in the congregation. Since the merger of the two campuses in 2009 St. Luke's has maintained a commitment to the inside/out principle "Transforming Houston Through the Love of Jesus."

As a result, the district has been impacted by a plethora of programs, such as JFON – Justice for Our Neighbors which offers free and subsidized legal counsel for immigrants, or the CCSC food pantry and community garden; reVision, a program that connects at risk youth with mentors. Their soccer program has enabled these youth to attend college on soccer scholarships

and they even won the state championship. Also, there are daily ESL classes, spaces to play, such as the world class soccer field that we built at Gethsemane. Places to gather, such as the new Canterbury Hall where the African worship service takes place. And also, even how you can learn to break-dance with the Break-Dance Ministry on Thursday evenings.

Kid's Hope at nearby Sutton Elementary mentors children who simply often crave a dependable adult to dress out and show up. Through the 2018 Christmas offering a new early childhood education initiative will be built at Gethsemane allowing children to have access to high quality pre-school education. And finally, the Connect Community which has interwoven many of the resources in the district to create a vibrant foundation to bolster the community. Partner organizations include KIPP school, the YMCA, Legacy Health, Houston Literacy program and St. Luke's.

As for our family, we first attended Gethsemane in 2013. Originally, we went to see what it was all about and ended up staying because the Holy Spirit was palpable in that strong community of worshippers. We wanted to bless those whose circumstances were fraught with turmoil and strife; however, we quickly learned that we were the ones who needed blessing, and we are grateful for the impact that these deep rich lessons have had on our children.

We attended regularly for five years and only recently returned to Westheimer so our oldest could participate in the confirmation program and Pure Sound. At Gethsemane our family eagerly jumped in and taught children and youth Sunday school, joined the choir, and tutored kids on Wednesday evenings. All of us enjoyed the energy and passion that permeated the air. The African worship service is a marvelous service of fun, lively music, swaying and jubilant dancing and bright beautiful clothing.

Oasis, the new service for Spanish speakers is led by a passionate pastor from Cuba who was once a member of the world-famous musical group the Buena Vista Social Club. The band's exuberant music sizzles with passionate and fun rhythms. Alex, our nine-year-old, wanted me to make sure to tell you how nice the kids are and, in his words, "We were the only kids from Houston."

Gethsemane reminded us of how exquisitely interconnected a community can be. Many of the refugees lived in camps for five, ten or even fifteen years before they came to this country. They had witnessed atrocities that we only read about yet they have flourished here. They have

welcomed our family and allowed us to participate whole-heartedly in the beauty of such a unique church.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the long-time members of the church, some of whom have been attending since the inception of Gethsemane in the 1950s. They flung open the doors of the church to the newer members and exemplified Jesus' radical hospitality and servant mindset. Gethsemane is a beautiful representation of a generous compassionate and loving nature of Jesus Christ. And my family and I have been blessed immensely with our involvement there. We remain deeply grateful for the opportunity to play a small part in such a special, special place. Thank You.

Jane Long, Fine Arts Ministry: Much of what defines me is in music. Recently in worship we sang these words: "I'll weep when you are weeping, when you laugh, I'll laugh with you. I'll hear your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through." Sounds like just being there for someone to me. Yet we frequently think that generosity is about monetary gifts. I'm speaking to you today from my heart because of the manifestations of the generous hearts and giving spirits of our faith community.

My family's been involved at St. Luke's for thirteen years - Children's Ministry, Student Ministry, Fine Arts Ministry, and Adult Ministry. We've all formed close relationships in each of these areas. And on Impact Sunday those relationships are what counts for me.

My husband Henry was an architect. When he became unemployed in 2011 and for the second time in 2012 St. Luke's friends were there. Payment plans for youth trips. Donations of hours from an auction to repair our broken shower. Suggestions of resources. Quiet things.

Over a year later he was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's and he was 58. Our sons Evan and Patrick were teenagers. Again, St. Luke's was there, mentors for the boys, sliding scale for counseling fees, friendly shoulders for me to cry on.

Then there was Harvey. Our flood story isn't unique except for how we experienced the generosity of St. Luke's. Our house flooded, people showed up. St. Luke's friends sat with Henry so I could go through things in the house. St. Luke's friends mucked out the house and did laundry and stored boxes in their garages. Our clothes were all over Houston.

A generous St. Luke's family hosted us including our huge dog – I'm talking 110 pounds – as well as a small cat for 9 months while we sold our house and bought a new one. St. Luke's helped us find vehicles both to borrow and to keep. Furniture was donated, sitters for my

husband appeared thanks to friends who set up a schedule so I could attend choir rehearsals and worship. Monetary assistance was offered. It was generosity personified. Not just a check, though that was important, but showing up.

St. Luke's has shown up for my family. We would not be where we are today without you. In closing, another hymn text: "Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all, healing pain and sickness, blessing children small. Washing tired feet and saving those who fall. Jesus' hands were kind hands doing good to all."

St. Luke's continues to be the hands and feet of Jesus for my family and for others. Your generosity never ends. We are grateful.

Dr. Pace: That was great. All these things happen because of our generosity. The generosity of all of you, and many, many others. These are just a snippet of all that God is doing in your lives and through your lives. When we respond and have an offering what we're doing is saying "thank you" for what God is doing in our lives and through our lives.