

“Safety”
Pastor John Bronson

Philippians 3:1-11

August 11, 2013

Order of Worship, August 11, 2013, title, “Safety”, text, Philippians 3:1-11
Opening Song:

Welcome and Invocation: Psalm 113

Message Theme: To remain faithful to the Lord we must guard against shifting our hope for fulfillment and happiness away from Christ to any other thing

Worship Theme: Salvation is ours in Christ alone through faith alone by grace alone as revealed through the Word alone for the glory of God alone

Sunday Evening in the Word
The Christian and Worldly Authorities: 1 Peter 4:1-6
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Church Library

“The Prayer Closet”
August 11, 2013
“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

“The Prayer Closet”

“And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matthew 21:22)

This week let us be united in praying for:

Vance and Carol Johnson: Evangelical Theological college of the Philippines: the Lord will add many to the new church plant in the Johnson home; the Spirit will enable the Philippine leadership of the Free Churches will to be effective in planting many new churches; the Lord will bless the Johnson family children as the transition to adulthood in many different countries of the world

President Obama and the Houses of Congress: the Lord opens their minds to the truth and away from ideological partisanship; the Lord protects them from all evil, even that arising from their own midst; the Lord will grant them wisdom to restrain evil as well as promote the good

The Youth Director Search Committee: the Lord will lead them to consensus on a job description; the Lord will lead them to unity of heart and mind in completing their search; the Lord will lead them to the person He has prepared for this position in our congregation

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Caleb Hammonds, National Guard (son of Tom and Cindy): for a full time/permanent job opportunity

Young Adult of the Week: Molly Finn, Simpson College, Redding (daughter of Sean and Penny): starting at Simpson this Fall, please pray for her as she enters a new environment, that she stay close to the Lord, make good friends and for a good roommate relationship

Please pray for our homebound family members: Fred & Jean Pauly, Gary & Ruth Lentz, Hilda Chapman

(please call the office to request updates)

What do you think about your family? Don't tell me! Family is a different element, particularly in American life. American life has become very much focused on individuals pursuing their personal interests. If you look at advertising and such things you realize that the emphasis in our culture definitely falls on the freedom and independence of the individual being able to go and do what they want to do. Very often the family is presented as a potential problem standing in the way of the pursuit of that self-fulfillment. That is an attitude of mind and a cultural disposition which the church experiences also. Of course the church is supposed to be a family.

Family is a problem because you don't have any choice. How many of us have wondered about that many times? One, two, three and then, wow, where did that one come from? Then four, five and six follow. Oh man, obviously they made a mistake in the nursery! So we need to think about our relationships [as families]. I have said that about us [as a congregation]. How many of you have stood where I am standing right now and looked out at the congregation. Haven't you ever said to yourself, “Really; what an unlikely lot!” That is just the way it is. [But] God calls us together. This is one of the reasons why churches are strange things in American society. Not all churches, but I would say that any of the churches that are a genuine an expression of the purposes of God through the Holy Spirit are strange, because God calls together a remarkable group of people in order to display His glory through them. And part of that glory is the fact that God can draw together a group of people who would otherwise not be together, and yet together they display the harmonies and the purposes of God. And that is to the glory of the praise of His great and most gracious will.

Turn with me now to Philippians 2:19-30. I am going to read the passage and then make some comments thereafter. This is Paul. At this point in the letter he moves from a sort of general address talking to the group [as a whole] and now he zeroes down and begins to talk about some individuals. All families and churches are comprised of individuals who have names and particular characteristics that go with them. Beginning at verse 19,

(v. 19) “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. (v. 20) For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. (v. 21) For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. (v. 22) But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. (v. 23) I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, (v. 24) and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

v. 25) “I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, (v. 26) for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. (v. 27) Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. (v. 28) I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. (v. 29) So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men (v. 30) for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”

If you look at the passage and reflect upon it for a while you begin to sense something of the strength of the bonds of affection amongst these people. Paul is tied closely to them. There is a strong emotional connection which comes out in these verses. What you and I need to answer to ourselves is, is that true of me; is that what is happening to me as I am a part of the body of believers into which the Lord has called me and as a part of which I serve the Lord.

In closing the message last week I took special note of the family character of the body of Christ. We are all brothers and sisters of Jesus, our Elder brother. That is an actual description of the body of Christ in the Word. Paul described the Philippians as the children of God. He tells us he regards Timothy as a son. He refers to Epaphroditus as “my brother.” After the long years of Christian history and the usage of these terms, they tend at times to become almost without any content. We have all heard this: somebody walks up and says, “Hello there

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sister Mary; Hello brother George!” You know that they are not saying anything other than “Hi,” and we understand that. But we should not assume that that is the way Paul uses those terms, for there was no history behind his usage of the word. This was something that emerged in the life of the church. So we should expect that what we see being demonstrated in the usage of these terms by Paul is something about the depth with which Paul senses they are bound together with what we heard earlier as “the affections of Christ”. This affection is animated in us by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who prompted Jesus to give His life for us. We should be mindful of that. Paul loves these men as a father loves a son and a brother loves a brother. He loves them, he says, with the affections of Christ.

I think most of us would agree that most often— not always, but most often – contemporary friendships, just out in the world, rarely rise to the level of genuine family ties. This is demonstrated in how easily friendships are broken and how easily they are left behind. This is a widely observed characteristic in our culture. There have been numerous books written about this increasing reality. Recently I read that in Sweden over half the households are occupied by one person. That same phenomenon is rapidly developing in our own culture. So there is demographically—studying the behavior of large groups of people—there is the disappearance of the family [as a social] reality in people’s lives. It is hard for us [to see or sense this] in a congregation like this for we are a family dominated group of people. That is to be prized. We should say to ourselves, that is very good thing.

I am not making any negative comment about any single people in our group. Heaven forbid that you would think so. In fact that is one of the reasons the body of Christ is a family; it is so in the sense that integration, not just in a formal sense that we get together and do stuff now and then, but rather that we are knit together with ties that cannot be broken. They have that depth and strength, and that is the intent of the family ties.

We often hear, and I think we understand, the phrase, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.” We have touched on that a little already, and sometimes we wonder about it! But what we don’t notice, at least in our age we have ceased I think to value, is that family ties are unearned. They are given. It was an absolutely stunning moment for my wife when we had our first son. You don’t know all the peculiarities of my wife and you never will, but this one I will tell you. We were in seminary and we were pregnant. She got up one morning and was going to go to work. Then she had a contraction. Then she did so again! I am standing there, innocent guy, “What is the matter with you now?” The short and long of it was that within four hours we had a son. She said to me later, “It was almost surreal. [I] got up to go to work and went to the hospital to be a mom.” When she was there she said, “Oh my goodness, 24 hours, seven days a week!” And I said, “Yours!”

Given! We instantly fell in love with Ian. He didn’t deserve any of the love we gave him. He didn’t! What do you think a kid does at that age? Don’t ask. Oh my goodness, they are nothing but a continual demand. Family ties are given.

There is a connection [with spiritual realities] that we don’t always appreciate: so is grace; grace is a given, it is not earned. Within the ties of the family one would hope, and I think it is by God’s design, that regardless of what happens, regardless of what goes on, the tie is given. Therefore no matter where the journey goes, we go together, for it is given, and it is given by God.

I don’t want to be cruel, but this is one of the reasons why divorce is so disastrous. It is the shattering of one of the grace gives [from God]. It is a shattering. You cannot avoid recognizing the way the pain shoots out and deeply affects all the lives of those involved. I am not saying there is never a time when divorce is necessary. I can’t say that. But I can say this; there is never divorce that is not a catastrophe. It is just a disaster. One of the intentions that we should have always in our hearts and minds is to so live our lives in the grace of God that there is never need for a divorce; that we never need to see those ties broken, that we know how to draw close to one another and to nurture

one another and to care for one another, and to pray for one another and to stand beside one another so that no one is standing alone under an intolerable burden, so that we live our lives so that the grace of God flows. That is no easy task, as most of us are well aware.

Naturally in a fallen world relationships are damaged to one degree or another, in families no less than elsewhere. Often when family ties go awry the damage is great and the wounds are deep. Believe me I know, I have been there. I know what kind of piercing, cutting, destructive consequences there can be. Family ties ought to be, they are supposed to be open. They are enduring. Family bonds, family ties remain despite the pain. I spoke not long ago with someone who is divorced. As that person spoke with me I looked at them and said, “You still love your partner don’t you.” And that person burst into tears and said, “Yes, I do.” So there they are, torn apart from one another, cannot be reconciled, a frustrated unfulfilled love that now is laced with bitterness.

The love that binds families together is different than that which binds friends together. It is said that love covers a multitude of sins, and normally we say hallelujah, and indeed we should. But that statement is problematic, in other words it is not clear in the nature of its consequences. If love is joined with compassion and forgiveness, then more than any place else this dynamic should take place in Christian families and the church. The love of Christ is a love that forgives. It is a love that seeks reconciliation. It is a love that embraces the most difficult other in order that the relationship will be sustained through to the end. But if love remains without compassion or forgiveness, then bitterness will in time poison those seeking to live together, whether it is a family or a church. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us”: that is probably one of the most profound, practical pieces of wisdom you will ever hear; [and it is] a part of that prayer Jesus gave to us, and this is why He gave it. To walk with Christ is to be a forgiver. It is to be one who seeks reconciliation, desires peace.

Paul makes a contrast between Timothy and “the rest”. The contrast he makes is [that] he says, Timothy is a man of proven worth. You can imagine that if you are in a church which is utterly committed to the continuity of its ties regardless of the circumstances through which that body has gone that your leadership is going to have to be comprised of people who are deeply grounded in the gospel, have a sound knowledge of the Word of God, and are skilled, that is, they are practiced with knowing how to forgive others in order to sustain and to nurture the life of the body in an ongoing way. This is one of the reasons why – and people don’t always understand this – there are qualifications for ministry. It emerges right here, when Paul is talking about Timothy as being an exceptional young man. Listen again to the qualifications that are in place for leadership within the body of Christ: I Timothy 3:2-7, *“...an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”*

When you reflect upon those qualifications you recognize that the man has to have remarkable balance as he deals with the issues of life, applying the principles of God’s words to the conduct of his family life in order that then he could step forward and take on the broader range of responsibilities which are the body of Christ.

Timothy, Paul says, has served as a son with a father. That is a telling phrase. How many of us served with our father? Let me tell you point blank that I never did. Why not? My father was like many of yours: my father was gone in the morning, he got up before I was up; he came home almost always after I had finished my supper and I was doing my homework. I rarely saw my dad. What happens? You understand what happens. That relationship becomes thin and is very tenuous in terms of how much influence and force it is able to exercise in shaping the life of the son. Now we have a compromised situation. Timothy, Paul says, served as a son with a father.

Something that most people know who study these sorts of things is that every civilization has been built on the foundation of effective family life. If you trace them you will find that at the root of these civilizations there are strong families that are able to continue through generation to generation and generation, and they elaborate various forms of social life shared together which endure. I am not saying that they are good; I am saying that they are strong and that they endure. There is an essential reason why this is so; it is this: it is in families where children, people – I haven’t figured out yet at what age a child becomes a full person. I figure it must be when they are about thirty. In Jesus’ day you weren’t a man until you were thirty. That was when you reached full adulthood. It is in families that people learn to live without self-focus, to live for more than selfish purposes. If you have raised children you know that one of the things you have to do, and you have to do fairly often, per hour, “Share your toys; share your toys! You can have the car tonight; your brother can have the car tomorrow night. Share the toys.” I mean the ones you drive.

One of the unique things that God allowed us to do – I am probably going to be living alone soon! – is that we had the unique privilege of raising a two year old – who is present in the room – with an eighteen year old at the same time. It was hard to distinguish at all times which was which! No doubt your families are different, but we found a remarkable strain of self-focus at eighteen. That is an amazing thing. Learning how to suppress your personal desires in order to serve someone else is the fruit of an effective family life. We should strive for that and pray for that and long for that to be the case. Don’t misunderstand when I make reference to these kinds of families. I am not necessarily speaking of Christian families at this point. Sometimes the willingness, the ability to suppress your personal desire was simply to support the family’s glory. I am not talking about that as far as the church is concerned. But historically in every case where the family as such has been attacked – which is what is happening in our own culture now – and the effort is made to supplant the family with primary loyalty either to the state, to the company, the fighting unit or whatever, those efforts have failed in the long run. The reason they fail is that those civilizations collapse. Sometimes people say they collapse because the dominant forces could ever break the power of the family over their children. That is simply not true. What happens is that those experiments or efforts fail by way of internal disintegration. They are devoured, hollowed out from within. Why is this? [It is] because unprincipled selfishness soon supplants the idealism of those who have not been taught to love others more than themselves. What I have just given you is the history of Soviet Russia. It attempted to destroy the family, knowing that the family is the great vehicle by which traditional values pour down through generation to generation. They wanted to break that tie. They did everything they could to destroy families. They succeeded and collapsed. We are on the same path. We are doing gently what they did harshly. You and I need to be alert to this.

We should not read verse 21 where Paul makes the comment, “...*they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ*”, - he is contrasting Timothy with others, the “rest” – Paul is not there advocating the idea that mature Christians neglect their own interests. You might recall his words in verse 4 where he said, “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” The difficulty that Paul addresses here is that he is dealing with those whose horizon of interest has abandoned Jesus Christ. Now we turn the light of this passage to look at us as Christian families. The question that you have to ask yourself is, within the context of my family, not when I am here at church, but when I am at home, is Jesus Christ dominant on the horizon of our interests and concerns, or does he fade away? That is the thing that is troubling Paul as he refers to “all the rest.” Notice that when Paul contrasts Timothy with “all the rest,” all the rest are part of the church. He is saying that these people in the church are not all that interested in Jesus Christ, but Timothy is! That is what is significant. The proven worth of Timothy is not simply that of a dutiful and loving son in cooperation with his father, but the man is devoted to Jesus Christ so that Timothy’s devotion to Paul is first of all a devotion to Jesus Christ. Every parent in this room who wants to follow after our God should desire for that to be the case for every one of their children. “I want you to love God more than me. That is what I want. I am raising you to have a life rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ, not me.” Figuring out how you are going to accomplish that is exceedingly important. Timothy and Epaphroditus

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are both fellow workers with Paul, but they don't work for Paul. For whom do they work? They work for Jesus Christ. That is for whom they work.

Paul said of himself that he yearned for the Philippians. You go back to chapter 1:8 and there Paul says, *“For God is my witness how I yearned for you all with the affections of Jesus Christ.”* So there is a deep emotional content to Paul's relationship with these Philippians. In verse 26 of chapter 2 Paul says of Epaphroditus that he longs for the Philippians just like Paul did. They are the same. This is evidence that they are animated by the same Spirit within. These affections are the affections of Christ which the Spirit implants and brings to life in those who are born again. The counsel here is that we should spend time in prayer and ask, “Lord, to whom are you calling me? Who should I love in this congregation?” The fact of the matter is that no one of you can love all the rest of you, not in any lively, personal sense. So you realize that you are to anticipate that God is, in the course of time, going to draw me and connect me to this, that and the other person, not every other person in this body, so that will then become part of an encompassing network of relationships that define the whole of the body of Christ. So, we like everybody; we love with this lively affection a fewer number because we are limited human beings. But do we love anyone? That is where the question comes to; do I love anyone? I like most of them, but love, this kind of love?

These affections are a manifestation of the love of God, or, these affections are empowered by God's love in us. That is the description. If you think about it, what do you know about God? Is He a God of half measures? Is He a God of light and passing affections? Is He a God of unstable purpose? No! If our affections are a reflection, a repeat of the real thing, they will not be shallow. God does not deal with us shallowly. He knows us absolutely, so when He says, “You are mine,” all of what you are is now His and He is fully acquainted. This is one of the reasons why we can in good faith repeat that remarkable statement, “. . .all things work together for good to those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose.” In us are no surprises to God, none. We are surprised, dismayed, want to run away. Those are normal responses as progressively the love of God brings us into a lively self-knowledge. So it is good that we sense the hand of God placed upon us, holding us even against our will so that we will remain, for He won't go away.

But, do we tend to go away from one another. Now we get down to the other part, the application. Christians should not be tepid. When the resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ dictated His seven letters to John the Elder with which the Book of Revelations begins, He said of the Laodicean church (Revelations 3:16), *“Because you are tepid (lukewarm), because you are neither hot or cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth.”* God is not real excited about tepid people; they are not high on the list of His favorites to visit. He visits all of us, but those are not high on the list. Christians are not to be emotionally bland people regarding their affections for one another.

You have to put this alongside of what was said earlier. What happens if you have emotionally lively relationships that go wrong? [You can have] pain, anger, bitterness. It is to avoid those unhappy consequences; that is one of the reasons we avoid anything more than tepid relationships: get too close, might get burned. Did you ever think about that? Of course you have, and so have I: get too close, going to get burned. The other, the more dominant [reasoning] is that in our selfishness [we think], “Get too close you don't have enough room to move.” The great thing about being all by yourself is that you can go in any direction you want to at any time. The miserable thing about being in a crowd is that you have to get the whole crowd to go along with you if you are going to move in some direction, either that or you abandon the crowd. So being alone is kind of cool; of course it is lonely, but that is the price you pay, and more than just that price I suspect.

If we are going to function effectively within the context of genuinely Christian relationships, then who we are, our passions, are going to have to be under the control of the Holy Spirit through the gift of self-control. We should anticipate this, in fact we should desire this. It is exemplified in Epaphroditus. Listen again to what Paul said in v. 30. *“...for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to*

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me.” How passionate, how determined was Epaphroditus to carry through on the task? Well, he kept on and kept on with the task even at the hazard of his life, he was so determined to accomplish the goal that had been set before him. Epaphroditus would not have considered himself as a hero. We might relate the story of wind and hail and storm and fire and dragons and Oh he makes it through and hail the hero! But Paul does not talk about Epaphroditus that way. Instead the Philippians and Paul and Epaphroditus himself would have simply thought that he was a mature Christian. Picking it up, taking on the task, following it through to the end regardless of the cost was simply a manifestation of maturity. I could give some examples from this congregation. They would understand that this is what it means to be devoted to the interests of Christ. We don’t pick up an interest and then, when it becomes inconvenient, or untimely, or unpleasant, or not quite what we expected, we don’t just say, “O, no, no, no, that wasn’t what I signed up for. No; I want to stay here on my couch, and I will wait for the next opportunity, or the next. I don’t want to be involved in that messy business over there. No, that is not my calling. My calling is something else.”

What would also be a description of Epaphroditus who was willing to continue to the point that he almost died, is that he was compelled by God’s love. This is what Paul says of himself in First Corinthians: compelled by the love of God. We have to ask ourselves about ourselves: am I compelled by the love of God? In this moving around, in my picking things up and dropping them, agreeing to something and then disagreeing with it, and kind of establishing my independence within the larger context of the whole body of Christ, my constant insistence that I will not be overwhelmed or crowded in upon, that I want to remain open and have lots of options: am I manifesting that I am in fact compelled by the love of God, or am I manifesting and demonstrating that I am compelled by the love of me in the midst of all these choices? We need to be thoughtful about this.

In this situation what we recognize, at least in the case of Epaphroditus is that he felt bound because of the affections of Christ working through his heart and life. He was going to make it to Paul and he was going to deliver what the Philippians what him to deliver to Paul, even if he became deathly ill. That is a startling example of what it means to be a servant of God. Paul again explains in v. 27 that he was ill near to death. That was the quality of his affections.

I said a while back that there are hazards, there are temptations if we are committed to serving others. Running the hazards of temptation and sin is part of the price for being able to serve others. There are lots of them, but in the context of the comments I am sharing this morning, there is danger for us having such powerful affection animating our souls. Wounded love can be moved to anger and even to hate. Most of us know that. Paul responded to the prospect of losing Epaphroditus. Do you see what he says? He says he is so glad that God did not have Epaphroditus die or, “I would have had sorrow upon sorrow.” Often it puzzles me though I understand it though I don’t agree with it: [Christians will say] I know that Epaphroditus is going to heaven, so why would I be all upset if he dies? [My response is] what? [It is because] he died, he is gone, you can’t talk to him anymore; you can’t look into his eyes; you can’t feel the sense of his presence, you cannot know the liveliness of his personality: he is gone! So you weep! But maybe it would be better not to care that much, so that if somebody dies you can just turn the channel.

What Paul describes in these verses is profoundly counter-cultural to the way we live as limited liability Christians. We live safely. For Paul the church was not a bland association of the nominally committed. How many of us have been in that kind of church? I have. For Paul, for Timothy, for Epaphroditus and for the Philippians the life of faith was not a peripheral formality sitting on the edge of things. Rather faith in Jesus, the bonds of affection by which He forms the church, was for them amongst the defining realities of life. That does not mean all of our lives will look the same, but it does mean they should be animated by the same inner reality of God’s love.

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Pray with me: Our Father in heaven, thank You for Your Word, Thank You for Your love for us. All of us in this room realize how far short we fall even of an example of a man like Epaphroditus. Oh Father, this is a tough age. We don't struggle with starvation, a thousand ills. We struggle with the conveniences and comforts that draw us away from the high price of true affection. Forgive us. Work a right mind in us. Renew in us the joy of Your salvation. Father, weave us together with the unbreakable bonds of the family of God. For we would know You and serve You and glorify You with one another and in the community to which You have brought us to live. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you see or experience relationships in the church as if they were family bonds? How do family and church relationships differ?
2. How many friends do you have that are as strong as your family ties? Why do you think it is difficult to cultivate close and enduring friendships?
3. Wounds from friends often end the friendship, but wounds in the family more often leads to bitterness. Do you agree? Has this been your experience? How can we save friends and sweeten a bitter heart?
4. Would you say that your experience of family, either the one you grew up in or the one you now have, has taught you how to love others and live for more than selfish ends?
5. How central or prominent were or are the interests of Christ in the life of your family life? What were or are some of those interests and how were or are they pursued?
6. Is cultivating “the affections of Christ” an important aspect of your family life and Christian spirituality? What makes this difficult?
7. Do you experience relationships and activities in the church to be emotionally bland? Should they be intense? If so, how might that be achieved?
8. In what ways are you or others that you know “compelled by the love of God”? (On this see 2 Cor. 5:14, NASV)
9. Emotionally charged or intense relationships can lead to various kinds of trouble. What can we do to guard against this as well as find recovery when troubles come?
10. Should the bonds of affection amongst people of the church be amongst the defining realities of our lives?