

“Lights that Flicker, Lights that Shine!”
Pastor John Bronson

Philippians 2:12-18

July 28, 2013

Order of Worship, July 28th, 2013, title, “Lights that Flicker, Lights that Shine!”, text, Philippians 2:12-18 “

Opening Song

Welcome and Invocation: Isaiah 42:5-9 and Matthew 5:14-16

Message Theme: all things work together to perfect us in the image of Christ, a goal so wondrous that we tremble and are full of fear that we should rise so high!

Worship Theme: Our wonder and joy that God would be our close friend and seek our good

Sunday Evening in the Word
The Christian and Worldly Authorities: 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 4:1-6
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Church Library

“The Prayer Closet”
July 28, 2013
“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania:** the new teaching methods for training the local pastors prove effective both for English and for Scripture comprehension; the Lord continues to provide open doors for new teacher placement and witness; the Lord ensure continued favor from the state and local officials
2. **President Obama and his cabinet and administrative appointees:** the Spirit will instill in them a new respect for the practical wisdom of the United States Constitution and the rule of law; the Lord will expose falsehood and deceit to their eyes such that they fear and reject it
3. **Board of Elders:** the Lord will give them unity of heart and mind in establishing a search committee for a Director of Youth Ministries and sorting through the issues and challenges for a Family Life Ministry and maximizing the administrative effectiveness for church business and ministry
4. **Military and Public Service Personnel of the Week:**
5. **Young Adult of the Week:**

We continue [today] in our study of Philippians. We have arrived at Philippians 2:1-11. This is the third Sunday in a row that we have had the same title for the message, “Training for Greatness”. The passage we arrive at now is the heart of the matter. I will read this section. Let the Holy Spirit talk with you as you hear this portion of His word. Ask yourself, for this is the whole point – I appreciated the earlier comments about the light [shining] into the darkness – When the word of God comes to us, the intent is that God is shining the light of His truth into our lives so that we see who we are with greater clarity. That is [God’s] intention; not just that we will see Christ, obviously you want to see Christ, but you also want to see yourself as He sees you. So let the Spirit talk to you as you put your eyes on [the passage]. Paul the apostle writes:

(v. 1) “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, (v. 2) complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (v. 3) Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (v. 4) Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (v. 5) Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, (v. 6) who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (v. 7) but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (v. 8) And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (v. 9) Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, (v. 10) so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, (v. 11) and every tongue confess that Jesus is Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Last week as we came to the end of the message I made the comment that Jesus was the greatest man that ever lived. Paul’s words here tell us the nature or the quality of that greatness. We have a culture that is enraptured in a certain sense with greatness. People are constantly trying to create their legacy and leave as large a foot print of their lives in ours as they can. So what is the substance of greatness? What is it that make a person a great person. That is the question we ask, and I would say that each of us should desire to be great like Jesus. We should desire to excel, we should desire beyond the ordinary and become extraordinary by His grace. But of course it is essential that we understand what it is we are reaching for if we are not going to become confused.

It is significant, is it not, that this is Paul’s training for greatness. What is? It is reading the word. If you turn in your scriptures to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, a passage that any AWANA person knows by memory, what we find here is this statement about the nature or the working of the word of God. This is what it says: *“All scripture is breathed out [inspired] by God and profitable—this is how the word of God is profitable, how it benefits us—for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* The comment that we receive here from Paul as he was speaking to Timothy is that the careful, consistent, meditation upon, study of and familiarity with the word of God not only gives me a bunch of information, that is true, but interacting with this word begins to shape and direct my will and my desires as I am interacting. This is why we call the Word living and interactive, because it penetrates and pierces and challenges us and it causes us to step back and reflect and say, “Oh ho, is that true of me or not? Is that the direction in which I am going or not?” The word addresses us in that dynamic way. It trains the will. The faithful and careful reading of God’s word for study and meditation will renew our mind, and it trains our will. There is a wonderful passage that we looked at when we studied the letter of Paul to the Ephesians. I am going to read these verses, Ephesians 4:17-24. This has to do specifically with the mind. Listen to what he says.

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and

to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

That statement that Paul has just made is that you and I should aspire, it is a reasonable aspiration and desire for us to become like God in righteousness and holiness. That is what he sets in front of us. So it is not for us to say that we are only human and therefore we stumble and fall in this way, or we are only human and therefore we should not aspire to be more than kind of ho hum, so so. That is simply not an acceptable way of understanding the word of God. The word of God says that He has granted to us the power through the word to reach for true righteousness and holiness. So you and I ought not to stand in front of God and say, “Well that may be what you want but it is not what I think I can do,” because God’s response is, “But I have made every provision for you to be able to do it!” We need to be listening to God as He speaks to us.

There are many wrongs ways of reading God’s Word. But all of them are better than not reading the word at all. So I am commending that you read the word of God, and you do it on a constant basis and let the word talk with you.

Now looking again to chapter two of Philippians, notice that Paul opens with an appeal. He appeals to the Philippians, and in this appeal what we find is a remarkable lesson in practical faith. This is the appeal, what he actually says: *“...if there is any encouragement in Christ...compete my joy...”* There is an exhortation here, a comment for our wise consideration. Are there times, do we find in the course of our walk of faith that there are seasons of sadness, of uncertainty? Are there times when we feel that the level of joy within us is kind of draining out and we are beginning to drag and we are finding it difficult to maintain the course? Why might that be so? In terms of Paul the need for encouragement has already been given. You might recall in looking back at Philippians 1:29-30 has just said this, *“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him – Yes! Believing in Jesus, that is what we want! – but also suffer for him.”* Paul has just said that: you are given the privilege of believing in Jesus, and you are given the privilege of suffering for his sake, engaged, Paul says, engaged in the same conflict that you heard that I had and now hear that I still have.

It is interesting that at the end of this letter Paul will write what is one of the best known Bible verses, and this is it: *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”* What is interesting is how often we misuse that verse. We misuse the verse as if Paul was say, “Fundamentally, I’ve got it! If it’s me and Jesus, that is all that is necessary. After all, I can do all things through Him who strengthens me; it is just Jesus and me and conquest!” But consider: it is Paul, the man who writes that verse who writes chapter 2 verses 1 and following, where he says, “I appeal to you...complete my joy.” Paul does not for a moment hesitate to admit that he wants what he needs, and that is the input from other believers. He needs to be sustained. Paul, you see, gains courage and strength from the love, faith and prayers of those he has served. This is at the very heart of what it means to be part of the body of Christ, to be part of the church. We are not called to have a solo flight to personal greatness, but rather we are called to engage in a team effort that accomplishes great things. There is a world of difference between those two statements.

We need to listen to Paul’s words according to the effect that he looks for. He wants to be comforted by the testimony of their lives. He wants to be encouraged by their participation in the life of the Spirit. He wants to be blessed by their affections for him and their sympathy for what he is enduring. In all of these things his joy, he says, will be brought to fullness by know that they have the same mind as he has, and the same live that he has, whether that love is for Paul, for one another or for God. He says, “I just want to know that I am standing arm in arm with a group of others who share with me my same perceptions, my same passions, my same commitments, and also are willing to share with me the burdens that come with all of those things in response to God’s grace and working within me.

It is surely significant, is it not, that what Paul wants from the Philippians is what Jesus’ own disciples did not give Him. What we are looking at here is the remarkable effect of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Let me remind you

of something. In Luke 22:24 we are told that a dispute rose up amongst Jesus’ disciples as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. This had already happened [as recorded in] Luke chapter 10. The subject came up now and then and probably came up more often [than was recorded]. A group of guys wandering around with Jesus and they are talking with one another: “Well, who do you think is going to be first in the kingdom, you or me?” What is peculiar, the ironic and perhaps bitterly sad is that the second time this is referred to is the night of Jesus’ betrayal; they are in the Upper Room. They sense the heaviness of the hour. And in the midst of that dramatic time when Jesus is actually giving His last comments, His last teaching to His men that he has loved and nurtured for three years, they turn to each other and start talking about, “Well who is going to be first in the kingdom and who is going to be second?” Does this ring a bell?

Jesus’ response is a lesson in humility. This is what Jesus said to them (Luke 22:25-27), *“And he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.’”* Any discussion of who we are within the context of the body of Christ should be a discussion of how do I serve, who am I serving. Instead of coming up to one another and asking, who do you think is the most prominent and important person in this congregation, we should say, “Well, how do you serve in this congregation. By the way, this is how I find ways of service.” That is what we are being told by Jesus that we need to do. Paul, of course was not there in the Upper Room on that night when the conversation went on among the disciples and then the instruction was given by Jesus. But I just cannot imagine that none of those men told Paul what Jesus had said on the matter, mainly because what Jesus said there in Luke 22:25-27 simply resonates so directly and immediately with what we read in Philippians 2:1-11.

Indeed as we come down to the third verse in that chapter, we come to the heart of Paul’s instruction as to how we are to walk in the path of greatness after our Lord Jesus Christ. Foremost, you will notice, in those verses is Paul’s concern for the quality or the manner of life that they are living. Hear those verses once again, Philippians 2:3-4. *“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* Fundamentally that is what the AWANA commander was asking us to do earlier today when he talked about AWANA. What he was saying was that we have a ministry opportunity, we need servants on Wednesday nights to serve in AWANA, and I am asking you to let God talk to you and say to you, “Is this an opportunity to put somebody else’s interests ahead of my own?” That is what that information was about in terms of fitting into the context of these verses from Philippians.

If we are honest I think we give ourselves a pretty easy pass on the first two issues Paul raises. We are in fact well-guarded in congregations such as our won against issues of rivalry and conceit. Those are not allowed in our kind of congregation. We have a sub-culture that does not permit them, and I am glad that we do! I am not saying this is a bad thing; it is a good thing. Rivalry within the fellowship of the body and conceit are not acceptable amongst us. That is what we say! I should note that Paul’s interdict against rivalry, however, is not to be confused with good-hearted competition. What is good hearted competition? How many of us know the Nazarenes are always irritatingly ahead of us in raising money for Walk for Life? The only reason they do it is to embarrass us; I know that is true. The Baptists are way behind us: yes! That kind of rivalry is not what Paul is talking about. That is good hearted and mutual fun, prodding one another on to push forward and accomplish as much as you can—particularly in reference to the Nazarenes. That is an important matter. We all know that rivalry can degenerate into something not pleasant, and the way I which it becomes not pleasant is when rivalry begins to feed the illusion of superiority, that somehow our performance indicates there is something inherently superior about us as opposed to someone else. This goes further when rivalry begins to feed this kind of inner perception or self-evaluation it moves on to pride, and pride in oneself becoming contempt for others. If you have arrived at this point, if you find within yourself an impulse of dismissal – “Oh well, they are just...” – you should know that such contempt is

actually worse than condemnation. We know that rivalry amongst brothers can spur each other on to greater efforts, and that is a good thing; but contempt withers the soul and embitters the heart. So when we find that our relationship with others in the body of Christ, perhaps amongst ourselves, perhaps between churches, if we find that there is a withering away of affection, if there is a deconstruction or degeneration of respect, if we begin to feel that we are sort of offish and hold ourselves aloof, at that point we need to come to the cross of Christ and we need to say, “Lord God of heaven, I think I am in trouble, and I need to find grace and mercy and forgiveness from you and I need to find a renewal of my heart and my mind so that I hold my brothers and sisters in the Lord with a lively affection that I might encourage them in their walk and not discourage them.”

What this brings us to in practical terms—remember this is practical Christianity—we come back again to verse 3. What Paul says in verse 3 is “...do nothing from rivalry or conceit...” and then he goes on to say, “...but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” To say the least, this is disconcerting. It is not disconcerting for me to stand up here and say it or for you to sit out there and listen to it—I can say all manner of things and it wouldn’t bother you for a minute!—what is disconcerting is to do it! That is where it becomes disconcerting. If notions of our superior significance is the measure of our unexpressed thoughts, the hidden dreaming of our hearts, the out-breathing of our silent judgments on those who cross our paths or perhaps interrupt the trajectory of our interests and forward momentum of our desires—if that kind of stuff is going on inside of us we can anticipate that we will be stretched thin on the rack of God’s perfect goodness and relentless purity. What did Jesus say, after all? What Jesus said was that I am to love my enemy. So if I am to love my enemy, the one who spurns and hates me and treats me with contempt, how should I treat my fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord? How much more lively should be my affections? How much more ready should be my respect and admiration? How much more ready should I be to draw alongside to celebrate them and to say, “May I encourage you and help you along the way” rather than drawing away and secretly saying in your heart, “I hope you fail”?

So when it come to the application for running hard to see who is going to win the race for who is going to raise the most money in the Annual Walk for Life, what we pray is like this: “I hope the Nazarenes double what they give next year and we triple! That we all will find we have run the race and done gloriously to the glory of God, so we will stand together around the throne or whatever you want to imagine for this celebration and we will say, “Wasn’t it a great race, particularly because we won!” This is practical Christianity. We remember who we really are and how we operate.

We must remember that we are in fact broken people. We are all of us wounded in our souls. Being wounded, fear and pain are in the inner depths of our being. This is reality. We keep it hidden, layer upon layer of protection against that inner pace of pain and fear: wellness, sufficiency, wide spaces of distinction and cultivated indifference towards others: “Say what you want, it won’t bother me.” But it should. We prefer the company of those who are the same as we are so that we are not bothered by unsettling differences. If there are differences we easily conclude that they are deficiencies in others. “It is well with me and I am not in the least concerned about you in any case.” So we walk away unaffected. In this way we preserve peace within by keeping contrary perceptions at a distance. Tacitly what we are doing when we act that way is we are telling people that who we are and what we are doing is more important than who they are and what they do. (Let me mention that what I have just shared with you is fairly complicated. I know that. If you would like, these messages are always available on line on our website. You can get the text as well. I [hope] that I am not an egomaniac, but if that passage strikes you, you may want to go and get that passage and let be something to meditate upon, for it lies at the heart of much trouble in the body of Christ.)

If we can move past our shock and discomfort we might ask how one is to count others more significant than ourselves. That is the practical question: how do I do this? In other words, how does one practice being humble? [Speaker walked about with a mournful and hang-dog expression and slumping of his body:] that’s fun, but it has

nothing to do with being humble! So what does? What Paul says is simply this: look at verse 4. *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others.”* We hear in these words a slight adaptation of Jesus’ words to the disciples in the Upper Room, though it probably comes across as a bit less dramatic and less demanding than Jesus’ words. But this should help us to understand what is meant by humility. We have here the utter practicality of the Bible in its teaching. The fact of the matter is that most people simply cannot ignore their own interests. You have to take care of your own interests: of course you do. Not only would this be irresponsibly, to not take care of things, but it would also set you up for censure, that is for a negative judgment from God. This is brought home to us in a passage that I go back to all [the time]. I tell you all and I am dead serious about it, I am a Pharisee, that is my tendency, so I will set out a series of laws and rules and then I will judge you as to how well you fit those laws and rules. So the law of self-destruction, the law of self-abnegation, the law of making myself nothing so that others are more: that is easily put in place by me; but it is a false standard. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 this is what Paul says, *“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work...”* We all know how it finishes: give him food stamps. I have just articulated one of the fundamental contradictions between the Christian way of life and the United States government. Christians should never allow anyone to go hungry as an act of charity. What is charity? Charity is the practical manifestation of the love of Jesus Christ. The issue here is not whether or not the poor should be cared for; the issue is who should care for them and the basis upon which that care is given. Paul knew what we know, that the self-discipline demanded if one is to make their own way in the world is an excellent and needed corrective for those full of good advice and ready interest in other people’s affairs, for that is what he [goes on to] talk about. The principle which helps a man to lead the life of a local congregation is found in first Timothy 3:5. Listen to these words: *“...if someone does not know how to manage his own household well, how will he care for God’s church?”* This applies to all areas of life. Self-discipline in caring for one’s own interests is what spurs a person on to maturity, which is why parents should never go on funding their children indefinitely. At a certain point you turn to them and say, you are a man or a woman. You need to learn how to meet your own needs. If you don’t do that, what does Paul tell you? [He tells you] they will never grow up, and who wants to have a 40 year old infant? It is no kindness to make people permanently dependent on others whether it be the state or confused parents.

However, if someone is going to grow beyond the minimum in dealing with issues and people and sharing in the life of the church, then they will need to accept the promptings of the Spirit first to develop efficiency and wisdom in tending their own affairs, and then moving on and letting the Spirit of God prompt you to have the time and energy to take up the burdens of others. Here is the critical turning point. Let me ask you a question, but don’t answer! How much more money do you need in order to have all your needs met? I guarantee you nobody in this room knows. Why do I know that? [It is because our “needs” grow faster than our incomes. This is a universal. The faster our incomes grow the more things we “realize” we need. “I really need to have that, I really need to have that; oh my goodness, I really need to have that too. I never knew that existed, but boy do I need it!” We have an entire system of advertisement that tells us every single day, “You need this or you are a deficient human being!” And who wants to be deficient as a human being?

The ability to live contentedly involves more than simply saying, “I don’t need any more stuff; I’ve got four storage units already. I don’t need another storage unit. I have decided to myself I will have no more storage units; I am just going to walk by and look through the little window and say, “I am satisfied.” You’re not satisfied; you’re an idiot! What you need to do is you need to start looking into the window of other people’s lives who need things. Or let me say it nicely like Paul did: you need to become interested in the needs of others and not just your own.

The heart of man is made to love. The Spirit of God within us makes us want to serve. We have to give ourselves the opportunity to love those who need our service and so we find them and we find way to serve others. We say to God, “God give me enough so I don’t have to worry about getting any more so that I can start giving myself to

others.” Once you start giving yourself to others, you will find that you don’t have time to worry about more; indeed the more just becomes a problem.

All this is perfectly fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. This is why He is the greatest man who ever lived. Jesus made this comment: *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* Every parent should know this. What delight there is when finally you are able to give to your child gifts. That is part of the temptation in going on giving the gifts long after they should have begun to earn their own way. We know that it was said of Jesus by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:9 that He made Himself poor in order that He might make us rich. By His grace, beloved, we are rich. It is our great privilege to serve others, that is, having attended to our own needs we now let the Spirit of God direct our attention to the needs of others, and we put those first in the things we desire to do.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we want to be great like Jesus. We thank You that You in Your grace not only called us out of the darkness of utterly self-focused lives, but You have called us into the light of the fellowship of the body of Christ so that from one another we can receive that comfort and encouragement that comes from like-mindedness in the things of God and find that by Your grace we are capable of bringing Your love and Your truth into the lives of needy people around us. May we not neglect this great opportunity, that we, Father, might have the righteousness and holiness of Jesus Himself. That is Your desire, that is Your intention, and for us we will discover that is our blessedness beyond all other things. Father it is in the name of that great man, even the Son of Man, even Your Son Jesus that we pray. Amen.