

“The Prayer Closet”

July 7, 2013

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Joel and Virginia Cook, AWANA Missionaries in Northern California and Northern Nevada: for decision making as we prepare for the upcoming year with the theme of “Stand Committed to the Gospel”, travel mercies for trip to headquarters in Chicago at the end of the month; prayerfully seeking financial partners to meet needs

President Obama and the Supreme Court: the Lord will protect each of these people from all evil; the Spirit will give each of them a clear sight of the truth; the Father will draw each of them to love His Son

Youth Ministry: the Spirit will give wisdom to the youth staff as they incorporate Erin Ballantyne and Caleb Bronson as staff interns; the Lord will awaken solid youth leaders from within the group and through them will draw many teens from the community; it will please the Lord to bring many to saving faith through the Word

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Aaron Bowen, Butte County Firefighter Volunteer (son of Randy and Ruth): that he gets more calls to be able to go on; that he get a full time position soon; for safety in his travels to and from calls; that he is able to share God’s love as he helps others

Young Adult of the Week: Maggie Conley (daughter of Dave and Barbara): that she is able to prepare for her move to San Luis Obispo for school and that the transition to her new home be smooth

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

(please call the office to request updates)

We are in the midst of a study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Today the title of the message is “Training for Greatness.” One reason why I picked out Jeremiah 1:4-10 [for the Invocation] is that he is one of the great figures in the Old Testament. He is a man who professed his own inadequacy, who felt himself to be too young to undertake the task, and yet when God put His hand on him he responded with obedience. If you have never read the prophecies given by Jeremiah I encourage that you do that this week. [He was] a man who achieved greatness in a time of national disaster, no, [it was] the death of the nation. As Israel died, Jeremiah stood strong and preached the Word of God. He is a tremendous example of training for greatness. We need to be thoughtful about that. The passage [for today] is Philippians 1:27-2:2.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you, or am absent I may hear of you that you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Let us reflect on what we have just heard, a powerful exhortation and a powerful appeal from a great man. That man was Paul. He has appealed for, and the exhortation is for unity: one spirit, one mind. That is his exhortation.

The unity of the church is a constant theme throughout all of Christian history. The unity of the church is [to be] found not only in the local assembly, but also amongst the generality of churches. It is a quality or standard for Christian living. [The call for] unity comes to us directly from Jesus, from His own teaching. Unity in the body of Christ is not primarily an organizational or an institutional reality, but it is a spiritual reality that reflects our submission and obedience to the Lord. You find this teaching given to us in John’s Gospel 17:20-21. This is Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” He is standing the presence of the Father and in the presence of the Father He is appealing that God will work a great miracle in the body of Christ, those who come to have faith in Him. The appeal that He has made is written out this way: *“I do not ask for these only, – meaning His immediate disciples meeting in that Upper Room on that night [of His betrayal and arrest] – but also for those who will believe in me through their word – [that would be you; that would be me that would be all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He says, I would be asking you, Father on behalf of all who come to believe in me] – that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”* That is the appeal that Jesus makes to the Father regarding the consequence of the gospel in the hearts and the minds of those who come to faith.

The unity of the church lies at the heart of our witness to Jesus as the divine Son of God sent by the Father to be the Savior of the world. But most of us know that in practical reality that unity does not exist. It has eluded the church from the very beginning. There are many factors that contribute to this lack of unity. Perhaps, if I were to try and zero in on something in particular, I would say it is unrealistic expectations. What do I mean by that? I think that oftentimes we have images of one big happy family in which [we imagine there are] no differences of opinion, and all conversations are affirmations of agreement, where there is complete trust in the leadership and where there is ready compliance and cooperation by each person with the purpose, programs and initiatives laid out by the leadership. That is how I run my family and all of my children treat me—right? You see what a foolish assumption that is! Above all, this happy state is envisioned as “just happening”. That leads I think with the second difficulty with unity: that little thought is expended to envision just how such across the board agreement is going to be achieved.

Paul addresses the goal of unity when writing to the Philippians. In Philippians 1:27 and again in 2:2, the section just read, [Paul is] talking about unity. Remember what Paul said: *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind. . . being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”* Associated with this goal we saw last week that Paul refers to the believers, this is how he describes [them], he refers to their “manner of life”, which needs to be worthy of the gospel. He [also] speaks about them—and you can see it right there—as “striving side by side”: their manner of life and striving side by side. We looked more carefully at the term “manner of life”. This is literally a reference to acting as good citizens, citizens of the city or the polis. In this reference, therefore, unity is not primarily or first of all an agreement on all particulars or even the substance of every topic or subject of discussion. Rather unity is mutual agreement or commitment to the rules or procedures by which matters are raised, discussion and resolved.

I can see in your eyes and you are thinking, “Is this a worship service?” I had an interesting conversation right before this service with someone who was talking about this topic and he asked, “Where do you think you have the best example of what Jesus talks about when He talks about getting together, what happens at a typical morning worship service or what happens at a congregational business meeting?” Which do you think is the right one? [It is] the business meeting. Beloved, it is a piece of cake, it is easy for us to be “of one mind” and agreement sitting here in this room right now because nobody knows what you are thinking about. But when you go to the parking lot and you get in the car, assuming you are awake when you get in the car, and you drive out [you begin to talk]. But at the business meeting. . . “I never go to business meetings. Never! People say outrageous things at business meetings. You cannot imagine how many stupid ideas are in that body of believers! So I don’t go there!” You see how it works; you see what I mean by “unrealistic expectations.”

When it comes to the second term, “striving”, “striving side by side,” two important insights are gained if we take this term with full seriousness. The first is to simply realize that unity is hard work. This, by the way, is one of the reasons in many churches all decisions are made in a very small group at the top and directions are simply given and you have a “yes” or “no”, for that is all they want. For it is a hundred, a thousand, a million times easier to make a decision amongst a couple of people than it is to involve all those “other” people, who are nothing but a big pain in the next, unless, of course, they agree. So the first insight is that we strive for unity; we recognize it is hard work. The second [insight] is that it is team work, explicitly team work. We strive together to be a team. Beloved we have talked of this before. Let me make a values clarification. This is a building (gesturing to the whole room). It has many parts and pieces. It takes a fair amount of work and agreement to make sure that all the parts and pieces are put together in such a manner that you actually end up with a building, rather than merely a pile! It takes a degree of talent to put together a building. (Gesturing to the congregation): what is this? This is the temple of the Lord. What do you think it takes to make this into a coherent, functioning “building”? More than it takes to build this structure, infinitely more. Which one do you think God is most interested in? We all know that God does not care about buildings at all, not compared to what He thinks about us.

So the question arises, doesn’t it, are we striving to be a team? I can guarantee you that is the intention of God through the Holy Spirit, because Jesus just said so [according to John 17:20-21]. Striving, working hard to be a team so we function together, bearing a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ, demonstrating to the world through the miracle of a bunch of people like us getting along with each other on a consistent basis. That is exactly what Paul is talking about.

Three questions come to mind, three very important questions. The first one is: I said in speaking of “manner of life”, which is a political term, a description of acting as good citizens, that is the meaning of that term: good citizens operate according to the laws of the polity they are a member of. That is the nature of the term and that is the kind of behavior that is described. That is why it is following rules and procedures and agreed upon ways of

making decisions and all of that kind of stuff. So the question we have to answer is what kingdom or polity are we a part of? We are a part of the kingdom of God and therefore we need to be operating according to the rules and procedures of the King and the kingdom. So the first question is, “Do I know [those rules and procedures, those laws?] Knowing those laws is why we read, teach, and preach the Bible. So the first question is, do I know the laws of the kingdom? The second is, do we work together so that our behavior as citizens is worthy in the sight of the King. The third is, do we in fact strive together. Knowing the laws of the kingdom, again, is why we gather together to worship. By the way, it is the core obligation or task of the church whenever it gathers together. So it is part of the work of small groups as well as of the other ministries of the church. Those ministries, let me give you a little list. It is not only VBS, a tremendously powerful example, but also youth ministries, AWANA ministries on Wednesday night, the deacons ministry – I appreciated the report today; that is an exciting development in the life of the church – the trustees—did you see the note in the bulletin saying thank-you to Dick Miller and Wayne Bell for the work that they did for designing and the trustees for putting together the new entry way to the church office. It is so beautiful that you don’t even want to go into the office. You just want to sit on those benches and say, Wow, this is really nice! It is beautiful and we are thankful—things like the Angel Tree ministry [at Christmas time]; all of these are opportunities for us to figure out how we can work side by side: Mexico Mission and all that we do to support the Christian School and so on. This is not abstract; it is a practical question. Right now the Holy Spirit is zipping around the room and he is pointing to people and He is saying, “What are you doing to strive together with others in this local body as a part of the team which will bring glory to My name?” That is the practical application.

Do we strive? Here is a note to clarify something. We are always fussing about laws, rules and regulations. We know that we are free from the [Old Testament] laws. We don’t function according to all the rules and regulations and procedural demands of the Old Testament—that is only partially the case but we will take it for true right now. What we like to say and we do say and it is correct to say is that we operate according to the Royal Law, the law of love. And we think, that is a relief! We are to love God; we are to love one another; and we are to love our neighbors. If I was really being a pain in the neck I would have you turn to the person next to you and say, “I love you!” I don’t [actually] want you to do that because it would be confusing and mess up all your relationships. But we should be advised: living by the law of love is much, much more difficult than living by legalism, that is, a careful observance of a limited number of laws. What do I mean? The legalist sets out prescribed obligations. Here is the prescription: true Christians tithe ten percent. When I have given my ten percent, I am free; the rest is mine! But what happens when you love people?

I Corinthians 13, the whole chapter is about love. Picking out verses 7-8: Love bears all things; love believes all things; love hopes all things; love endures all things. Love never ends. How much will love pay for the well-being of the beloved? Ten percent, fifteen percent, twenty percent: how much? It is an altogether different standard, it is an altogether different way of looking at the challenge. Finally we recognize that love strives. How many of you have raised children? “Sorry, kiddo; I just give \$25/week. If you eat too much, if you buy too many clothes, if you use too much electricity in your room, it’s over, you are on your own! I am sorry, you are at college. You ran out of the budget. You’re stuck and that is where you stay: walk home!” Love is the measure; so how much do we love one another? Is our love for one another a reflection of our love for Jesus Christ, and thereby is it a reflection of His love for us?

What Paul speaks of here is the path of blessing insofar as this can be experienced in the context of a fallen world. I made a couple of comparisons. For the Buddhist the way of blessedness is withdrawal from the world. In fact what the Buddhist does is to eliminate all desire. In the absence of all desire the truly accomplished Buddhist is at peace because nothing bothers them. For the Hindu the way of blessedness is through highly disciplined meditation into what is called nirvana. So exalted in his thoughts that he walk right by those who are lying in the gutter of the street, dying of starvation and he is untroubled because he is exalted in his thoughts. Both of those groups and

Confucianism and Islam does the same, the believer pursues blessedness by an intense concentration on their own, personal holiness seeking a direct access to God. If you want to understand India, study Buddhism and Hinduism. But what about us? Paul has already described it. For those who are in Christ, blessing comes to the one who gives from the one who receives. I could not have created a better illustration than what was shared, that when the deacons were able to give this fifty some odd year old man what was a rare instance of someone extending an act of kindness to him and he crumbled under the weight of that goodness, and Blake said that he wept in the face of that blessing. That is the essence of Christian love and service. That, beloved, is why Christianity is so unique and so different if in fact we strive together to be a team observing the laws of God.

Pray with me: our heavenly Father, we are about to partake of the supper, in which we remember our Lord Jesus, what He did for us, what He does for us. We do not measure up. We know that. Every day we need fresh mercy, renewed compassion, restored by Your forgiveness, rebuilt through the indwelling presence of Your Spirit reminding us of the glorious promises by which we live. As we prepare, our Father, to take the bread and the cup, we ask that You would receive us as both repentant and filled with thanksgiving, and expectant of the blessings You have promised. Help us, our Father, help us to be worthy in our manner of life, help us to strive together in love. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. How does the issue of unity in the Body of Christ most often come to mind for you? What do you see as the most significant causes for the lack of unity?
2. Paul speaks of the Christians' "manner of life" in political terms. How might this help us understand and effectively pursue the unity?
3. What are some examples or instances of people "striving hard" or working as a team to achieve unity?
4. Why is legalism actually easier than living by the royal law or the law of Christian love?
5. What keeps most people away from church or congregational business meetings? Do you think these are legitimate reasons? If there are objections, how can they be met?
6. Each of the "great" religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, and the varied forms of Christianity – instructs its members to engage in good works, works which aid the poor, sick, vulnerable. That being the case, is there anything to distinguish between them on this matter?
7. When did you first realize that there are more than a few people who oppose Christianity? How did this realization come to you? Was it a surprise?
8. Based on the statement, "...few things speak as eloquently of the worth of something as our readiness to pay whatever the cost for obtaining, retaining or enjoying it may be," how would you rank the various things in your life that you own?
9. If, as is often said, adversity is good for the strength and growth of the church, why do you think Paul says we should pray for peace and quiet: see I Timothy 1 & 2?
10. Do you often (ever) wonder what we will do after Jesus returns? What is your response to I Corinthians 6:1-5?
11. Are you a joyful Christian?