

“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:

Russell and Sharla Weisner: the Lord will continue to protect the family and the school from prejudice and hostility; the Spirit will draw many to the witness of the school and open their hearts to the gospel; the Spirit will build unity in the Christian community in Kuala Lumpur; the Lord will give joy to the Weisner children in the States

President Obama and the Cabinet: the Lord will instill a spirit of integrity, humility and respect for the institutions and practices of our nation dating from its founding; the Spirit will open their minds to the truth; the Lord will press home the need to answer for and correct the scandals and abuses of power

Board of Elders and the Nominating Committee: the Spirit will guide the elders regarding the Lord’s will for future ministry and staffing for the church; the Spirit will lead the members of the Nominating Committee to those men and women the Lord has called and prepared to serve in church leadership

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Al Billington, Paradise Police Department (husband of Debbie): that the Lord protect and guide all the members of the police force

Young Adult of the Week: Lukas Valadez (son of Robert and Tori); for God’s guidance and direction in his life; to persevere in God’s truth and His ways

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Carol Bernerd, Bob Boettcher, Carole Lindsey, Ellen McNabb, Randy Bowen, Volker Ladendorf, LaVerne Lee, Dick & Jane Miller, Phil Peterson, Sam Farris

(please call the office to request updates)

The title for today is “Standing Firm”, the text is Philippians 1:27-30. My intention is that we will understand that we need to know how to stand together. We need to know how to stand together as families. I am engaged right now in a couple of studies which, by the grace of God, will eventually bear fruit in my preaching ministry and in the life of this church. One is on the essential role of families in the continuity and progress of the gospel. We have lost sight of this. It is an essential thing for us to understand. Families need to know how to stand together. So do churches. Churches need to know how to stand together. That is increasingly important as time unfolds and we have the hostility of a culture that is less and less receptive to Christianity. The forces, therefore, blowing against the integrity – that is the “hanging-togetherness” – of family are more and more intense. There are some simple statistics about families. The greatest likelihood that you will not go to church is if you are single. Being single in our culture is almost a guarantee you will be pulled away from the body of Christ. That is a statistical observation.

We need to stand together as a nation. It is foolishness to assume that we can believe in, build our lives upon and operate according to a set of principles that are fundamentally contrary to the natural impulses of fallen humanity and not have to work hard at it.

We see this in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In writing to the Philippians Paul had indicated that he is between two things. I think we experience this ourselves. This is verses 22-24 in chapter 1. He says, “I am not certain which way I am going to go in my life. Which shall I choose? I am hard pressed between these two things: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” Notice what the options are as far as Paul is concerned. The options are, I would like to escape into the presence of God and be free of the mess, or I will stay, committed to service. Those are the options.

It is interesting that it is not only Paul that we see weighing these two options. We may not have noticed this, but Jesus also weighs these two options. You might recall that on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, when He is about to be arrested. When Peter pulls out his sword, defending his Lord, Jesus says (Matt. 26:52-53), “*Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*” Then Jesus makes this comment and we need to think about this. Here He is, His men are about to scatter, He is about to be commandeered by those whom He knows are going to destroy Him, and He says, my option is to call on twelve legions of angels. That is what I can do. I have an instant overwhelmingly powerful source of security that I can make certain that it is all well with me. I will suffer no loss; I will suffer no harm. I will move out of this situation in triumph! What will I do?” We all know what He did; He bowed to the Father and He died most horribly.

Both Paul and Jesus set in front of us this choice. Americans love choice, but we don’t like this one. All the time we are asked, “Will I do as Jesus and Paul did and willingly choose the way of suffering, or not?” Fundamentally that question is presented at every single worship service in which we engage.

Facing and making hard decisions, especially decisions in which you sacrifice your own well-being in order to care for others is the stuff of heroes. Our culture is in love with heroes, but there is a very distinct difference between heroes in the New Testament and heroes in American culture. Don’t you get kind of a thrill when Paul says, “I could go and escape and be with the Lord, or I could remain because it is better for you...” That is an heroic statement. What is the difference between a New Testament hero and a cultural hero? Our heroes, the heroes that we [get excited about]—how many have seen [the recently released film] “Man of Steel”? Superman! He is the

classic American hero. That is my kind of guy; that is what I want to be! I want to be the guy who has overwhelming power and I can overwhelm the enemy and smash him to the ground! But Christian heroes point to Jesus and then they offer themselves as servants.

This is a sharp issue: serving others rather than oneself is at the heart of sanctification. Why? It is because that is what Jesus did. You and I are expected by God to follow Jesus as our model, and therefore we are expected by God – what it means to become fully Christ-like, is to become a servant of others. We will address this more to be sure. How many were involved in VBS this last week? It was outstanding. How many people were involved: 75 helpers! There were close to 150 small children here every day. But that is not the only way [we can serve others]: Wednesday night AWANA, Saturday when the Trustees schedule a workday, using a free afternoon to give rides to the sick and elderly, bringing Christ’s compassion to the needy, taking time to witness to a neighbor or to disciple some young believer: all of these are ways in which we offer ourselves as servants.

There is something essential, if you have been tracking with the messages [in Philippians] for us to realize: serving others is also the essence of slavery. A slave is at the bidding of the master, and we do not like slavery. We do not like slavery at all, even though we are told in the Word that we are the slaves of God, we do not like that at all. That is a very ugly and unattractive image to us, and understandably.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why in scripture we are given some very compelling pictures of the end. What is at the end? [It is] not what you are thinking. I have a men’s study on Wednesday nights and it is a battle to get those guys to concentrate on reasonable things and not trying to figure out when the antichrist is going to arrive! The end as far as you and I are concerned is really addressed in I Corinthians 3:10-15. It is essential that we read and take with full measure the opening words of these verses. Paul says, *“According to the grace of God...-- according to the unmerited favor of God: according to the freely [given] good pleasure of God—which has been given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day—which day? The last day as far as you and I are concerned—will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”*

Picture this: there you are, you are standing next to Jesus. Everything that you have done and said in life is progressively brought in front of you, one by one they are in some way passed through the fire. What kind of fire is that? Though Paul does not address it there in I Corinthians we can reasonably understand what the fire is. First of all it is the fire of God’s moral purity: “Is what I have done, what I have said morally pure after the attributes of God?” Second reasonably in addition to God’s moral purity there is God’s exclusivity. That is the essence of the meaning of the word “holy”. God says in Isaiah, “I share my glory with no one.” So the question arises, “Is what I do, what I have done, is it for the glory of God or for my own glory? Is it all about Jesus or is it all about ...?” God does not share His glory. Another aspect of that fire would be God’s truth. That then raises the question as we think about who we are, what we do and what we say: what is my testimony? Have I carefully and rightfully represented the purposes, the character, the mercy and the goodness of God in all that I have done and all that I

have said?” You and I both know what the answer is: the answer is, no. That is why we rely on the shed blood of Jesus Christ. None of us should ever assume or presume that we stand in front of others extending our hands – representatively to be servants – we should never assume “I have my act together, I have perfected things, I am together now, guilt free, sin free and more than capable of meeting your needs.”

That is not true; it is not true of anyone. Everyone of us needs on a constant basis to apply to God for mercy, ask that His righteousness would cover over our unrighteousness, that His blood would wash us clean again and again and again so that the sin in me does not contaminate the people whom I serve. This is essential!

We can be sure that Jesus will see each thing we have said, thought and done in the best light possible. But we should remember what we are told in James, that God is impartial. There are no favorites. You might wonder in that moment how it will go, how each thing will prove: gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw. This is what Paul said to the Philippians. We need to recall this and to keep things straight in our minds. Paul said, *“I am sure that I will be delivered, that is, I will not be ashamed. For I am sure that I will have honored Christ in my body.”* That is what Paul says. And how will the one who goes naked away from the judgment seat of Christ feel, even as the comforting arms of God wrap round and breathe the unfailing love of God into their singed hearts? That is a choice, beloved; that is the choice. What am I building; will it survive?

We should notice that it is not only before God that Paul was confident he will have no shame. By being obedient to live his life as a servant of others for the Lords’ sake Paul says he will have good reason to anticipate that there will be those who glory in Christ because of what Paul has done. Paul has good reason to anticipate. Hear it again, Philippians 1:24-26, *“...to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”* In the middle of the week I know that the VBS director’s son Allan was running a high fever. How many think she wanted to stay home and take care of her boy? Absolutely! But she said in her heart it is more necessary for those one hundred and some odd children who are coming that I trust whoever is going to take care of my child and I will fulfill the responsibility that I laid out. The reason I say that is not to be nice to her but to tell us how practical this is. We are not talking about stuff that happens in Hollywood. We are talking about stuff that does or doesn’t happen here, with us in this room. That is what we are talking about as God deals with us. So Paul goes on and says, *“I know I will remain and stay with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.”* Here is the portion that I want you to look at with understanding eyes: *“...so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus.”* Do we understand what he has just said? It is an amazing statement. There is no false modesty in Paul. We are so funny about this. It is almost impossible for us to accept genuine, true compliments and observations about what God has accomplished in our lives. Ask yourself this, if you are engaged in self-effacing denial when somebody is saying to you, “I sure see Jesus in your life,” what an odd “unspoken” statement that is. “I don’t want you to see Jesus in my life.” No, that is not right. I don’t want you to see me! No, we don’t understand what the process is about. The process is about the fact that when Jesus comes in and goes to work in your life, you change. It is not that suddenly there is a big “Jesus picture” that drops down so that nobody knows who you are anymore. He is not interested in that; if that is all Jesus wanted to do He could just erase us. He is not about the business of erasing us; He is about the business of transforming us, changing us, so that we have the characteristics of Christ. So that when our lives touch other people’s lives, they are actually touched by the grace of God.

What is essential here is for us to understand that what stirs the Philippians is not Paul’s magnificent gifts, it is specifically his transformed character. That is what has struck them. It is the humility and the goodness of Paul, his readiness to sacrifice in order to help others, it is his moral character animated by his affections.

We run into an issue here in Philippians 1:27-30 that sometimes causes a bit of stumbling. Paul presents himself as a worthy example of one who lives out the gospel of Christ. In the next verse, verse 27, Paul recommends that the Philippians are to aspire to the same high standing. See again verses 27-30, *“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 are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side of the faith for 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.”* The paradox that Paul sets in front of the Philippians in these few verses is that as they are worthy of the high calling of being Christ’s servants they will be led to suffering. That is the dynamic that is set in front of the Philippians.

If we are familiar with the broad scope of religious and ideological extremism, we know that a virtually blind assurance that you are on the right side and the winning side is one of the hallmarks of the fanatic. Furthermore it is characteristic of fanatics that they are willing to die for the cause and to die for the leader. How many remember Jim Jones? Tragic, unbelievably tragic: a whole congregation of people were willing to drink cyanide laced Kool Aide and die because he said that was the right way to go. So if you read verses 27-30 of Philippians I doesn’t that sound like fanaticism: ready to die for the cause?

This is a case where the chapter divisions [in the Bible] are no help. Recognize that what Paul says in chapter 2:1-II follows immediately on his call to total commitment. The question is, what are we committed to? Now listen:

(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.”*

This is far removed from the fanatic’s blind devotion. The aspiration of our souls is that you and I will live lives that are worthy of the gospel of Christ. What is the heart of that worthiness? The heart of that worthiness, if you go through that paragraph, is humility. Humility is the opposite of the fanatic. The fanatic are arrogantly self-righteous, fully persuaded that they are perfect in their passion. But you and I are called to humility, the humility that willingly and readily bends itself before the other person’s needs. It will not do for us to say, “O, I’m only a human; I can’t be expected to be perfect.” Nobody is expected to be perfect. All we are expected to do is to strive to be worthy of the gospel. Paul says to the Ephesians (4:1-3), *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to*

walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It is the expectation of God which is put on us by God’s word that we will strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, that we will do this with humility that continually looks out for the interests of others. We are indeed those whom God forgives as we forgive. I hope we recognize the line from the Lord’s Prayer.

What do your neighbors think of you? What do the people of this city think of us as a church? Do they say, “You know, that church on the hill, it is full of forgiveness and compassion”? Or do they say other things?

When we speak of expectations there is an inner resistance, is there not, a protest which sometimes rises up within us. “Don’t burden my life with your expectations. I need to be free.” This is a line in American culture. “Surely to act, to do something because I am expected to in order to satisfy someone else’s ideas and under the constraint of their or anyone else’s authority is to fall short of the sincerity of heart and mind which God looks for in His children. After all, isn’t it up to me alone to work out my salvation before God? Don’t lay your expectations on me.” If you haven’t heard that it is because your ears are deaf! Paul himself says it, doesn’t he; if you look in chapter 2:12 what does he say: “...*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*” Yes [that is what Paul writes]. Obedience is a personal choice. But there is still an expectation. That expectation comes to us from God. The problem is most of the time God tells us what His expectations are through other people. All of you who are married men, did it ever cross your mind that God was talking to you through your wife? “Oh! No, no, no: the Bible says the man is the head of the house, and therefore God speaketh through me!!!!” Right, how’s that working out? The ear attuned to listening for the voice of God through the one who needs help.

In Philippians 1:27 Paul is clear that God expects the Philippians to stand firm: “...*that I may hear that you are standing firm.*...” Not only that, but the expectation is that they will stand firm in one spirit and with one mind. How does that happen? By the way, one of the things that one of the books that I am reading said is this: one of the most powerful influences for dis-integrating American families, so that families are no longer woven together, they no longer stick together, they no longer function together, but they are scattered and broken and incapable ultimately of passing on the faith from generation to generation is the television. I told my precious children that if you are going on a date and you are wanting to get to know either the friend or the young lady, don’t go to a movie. Why not? [Because sitting side by side mindlessly watching what somebody else has dreamed up doesn’t promote the interchange of knowledge!] The same is true at home with the TV. The family no longer talks together except to complain about the ads. Furthermore with the advent of the television civic responsibilities were dropped by the American public and you then have the emergence of a ruling elite, not the common person who no longer has time, for the average person watches seven and a half hours of TV a day, and that’s before the internet, Facebook... What do we think when you no longer have any time to think, but you are always responding to the trivia that flows across the social media or through the programs?

Stand firm in one spirit with one mind: That is only going to happen if they pray together, if they talk together, if they work together. There is an interesting word that Paul uses here. The Greek term that he uses for “striving together” is “sunathleo”. If you were to translate this word literally, it would translated in this manner: “fight together or side by side.” It comes from the root word “athleo” which means “to compete”. The idea is that what is accomplished is accomplished with great effort. It is also that it will be accomplished by working together as a

team. That is what happened at VBS. That is what is supposed to be happening at AWANA: a team meeting together, praying together, strategizing together, together accomplishing a goal. That is what Kari Walden does with the choir. You probably all thought we just got up on a Sunday morning, whipped out a piece of music and sang with exquisite beauty. Well Kari has no such supposition! She knows full well that if we did that it would be a cacophony, a horrific mess, a babble of voices and sounds. Did you ever wonder if that is what the church is like in our country because we don't work hard at being a team? We might ask ourselves, is Christianity losing ground for the heart and soul of America because we are not striving together as a team?

If you go to verse 27 again, Paul there makes this comment: *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you...you are standing firm...”* It is interesting if you know what the Greek word is for “manner of life”. It is not the normal word to describe that, which is “walking along together”. In the Greek it is “politeusthe”. If you are familiar with your languages it is a verb form of the word “polis”. Polis was the word for the city-state. It is the origin for our word “political”. If you were to translate this word literally, it would say, “only let your behavior as citizens be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The point is that the exhortation is not just that the Philippians will strive together to be of one heart and one mind, but that their aspirations will specifically be to meet the standards and expectations of good citizenship. Beloved, regardless of what liberal, secular historians say, the fact of the matter is that the reason for the progress to democracy in the Western nations is rooted squarely in the Bible because the Bible gives a powerful political example of what it means to be saved. And we have forgotten it. At some point along the way we decided, we evangelical, fundamentalist Christians, that politics was dirty and we washed our hands as if we weren't dirty!

The city or the political entity that we are to serve is not Rome, it is not even Philippi for the Philippians; it is the heavenly kingdom of which Jesus is the king. The call is not simply to be good guys or even to be a great team. The call is to be good according to the laws of the kingdom. This country was founded by men whose minds and souls were shaped by Biblical truth. Whether or not they personally believed it each one is not, in fact, at issue. The institutions that have guided this nation since its inception through beginning of last century were shaped with a Biblical understanding of the nature of man. Those institutions are being dismantled, and as they go, our freedoms go with them.

I am going to ask that you would come forward and pray. I do this because I think standing together in a physical manner helps to reinforce that sense of our being a team agreed that in this case a great spiritual contest is underway. Members of our Supreme Court have stated in times past that the Constitution of the United States is no longer adequate to govern this nation. The United States is governed by a president, and this state is governed by a governor, who consider it to be their right and power to ignore laws lawfully and constitutionally cast, and the Supreme Court and the judiciary will not put them under discipline. What I am telling you is that this nation is not a nation under law, but we are again the way we were before the War for Independence: we are governed by the opinions of men. The church bears a high responsibility for the disintegration of our culture, specifically including our political culture.

Citing materials from the Family Research Council flyer Call 2 Fall: “The first Continental Congress called for a day of public humiliation, fasting and prayer throughout the colonies on July 20, 1775.” Can we imagine what would happen if somebody [a government official or body] tried to call for a national day of humiliation and

prayer today? You would be thrown in prison. “Three millions of people on their knees at once supplicating the aid of heaven is a striking circumstance and a very singular one in America, and the blessings of heaven follow in answer to our prayers.” They did, and they will also follow ours if we will pray. I am asking you to come forward and spend a little time in prayer.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Jesus and Paul both dealt with conflicting desires. What sort of conflicting desires have you dealt with?

2. What is most difficult for you in committing to serve others?

3. Are there people in your life greatly changed by grace? What most impresses you regarding them?

4. Have you ever thought (worried) that a really sold out Christian might actually be a fanatic? How does Philippians 2:1-11 speak and guard against that for Christians?

5. Is forgiving others easy or hard for you? What are some of the issues in life which you find especially difficult to receive or to extend forgiveness?

6. How do you respond to other people’s expectations of you? How do you respond to God’s expectations?

7. Do you see your personal faith journey as a team effort? Do you see Christian obedience and service as aspects of good citizenship in the kingdom of Jesus? How might thinking this way be helpful?

8. Have you ever thought that being a legalist might actually be easier than loving others? Where does Paul’s teaching on Christian love most convict and most encourage you?

9. How do the pursuits of blessing by Hindus and Buddhists differ from that of Christians?

10. What are you willing to pay for the full use and enjoyment of God’s gifts of grace?