

“The Prayer Closet”

June 2, 2013

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

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania: Sheryl Jackson and Lyn Silvernale will have the Lord’s protection and the Spirit’s empowerment as they present the gospel in the context of teaching English; the Spirit will open the hearts of many to the gospel and make clear and compelling the contrast between the way of life in Christ and the oppressiveness of Islam

President Obama, Governor Brown, and all elective executives: the Lord will overshadow their hearts and direct the paths of their understanding for truth and justice in governance; that they will be convicted to hold their office as a sacred trust before God and will honor the will and seek the true good of the people according to the revealed will of God

Children’s Ministries: the Lord will draw many children and their parents to this year’s VBS at the end of June; that the VBS will be fully staffed and Spirit filled with love for the Lord and children; that the Summer Staff of Discipleship Hour teachers will be excited at the opportunity to teach and bless children and families for the summer

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Jonathan Sweetman, Army Reserves (son of Catherine): that the Lord will strengthen and encourage him as he works this summer; that His faith remain strong in the Lord; that he will trust in the Lord’s provision

Young Adult of the Week: Julie Finn at CSU Chico (daughter of Sean and Penny): that she find a good summer job in Chico.

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)

I.

Open your scriptures if you would please to Philippians I:3-II. As many of you know, I preach through passages of scripture. I don't, except in very rare occasions do a topical sermon and therefore a sermon specifically designed for a particular day. That is extremely rare for me. However, for his passage to be the passage we look at on the day we take communion I probably could not have picked one more appropriate. Listen to what the Apostle Paul writes to the people in Philippi.

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

What a passage describing the relationship between Paul, who is the man who came and planted this little congregation in the town of Philippi. We looked at this last week [when studying] the beginning of the letter. Obviously Paul has a lively affection for these people.

There is a tendency amongst us sometime, understandable, to say that the love of God, the love that we are to have for one another, is not primarily an emotional love. That is true. When we read the word “agape” in the scriptures, which is the word most often associated with the love of God, it is actually describing a moral love. That is, it is a love which says, “I am committed to doing the very best thing I can for you.” It is not primarily emotional. It is an act of the will in determination to organize my life in order to bless you. I might find you overwhelmingly irritating... (right?) [but] even [regarding] irritating people I am to organize my life to bless them. However, there is something more: that more emerges from these verses. It is not sufficient, we do not in fact come close to or approximate the true character of God if we remain only at an act of the will. Part of the transformation that comes over us as we feed our understanding on the truth of God is that we experience Him beginning to reshape our hearts to redirect our affections and to teach us how to take joy in one another. That is what Paul is talking about.

Notice again what he says: *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me – here is the key – to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart...”* Wow! Don't you think that if we cultivated that kind of perception regarding one another that getting here on Sunday morning would be no labor, because we would be coming to greet, to meet, to be with people who evoke in us joy! Ah, that's right!

Paul tells us a great deal about the relationship between himself and the Philippian congregation in this opening paragraph. Take special note of the emotions or the affections which subsist or exist between Paul and this small community of faith. He says, “I am thankful when I remember you.” We should ask ourselves this question: “God, when I think of the people with whom I share the life of faith, does thanksgiving spring up within me, and if it doesn't, help me; help me to arrive at that point.” Paul is thankful when he remembers them.

Secondly Paul says he is joyful when he prays for them. He is joyful. Of course he spells out particularly why he is joyful; it is because they have partnered with him in the gospel. So you might think to yourself, “Who are the people in this body of believers who have partnered with me in the ministries that I carry out?” We should say thank-you and what a joy it is that so and so and so and so came along and [partnered with me]! I wonder if all the ladies who sang together this morning look upon each other and say, “Thank-you, what a joy it is to be together!”

Thirdly Paul says he is confident regarding their progress in the faith. He is confident. That indicates to me, and as we go through the letter we will see, that Paul has seen the evidences of grace in their lives. Well, if he has seen the evidences, normally it is because he is looking for the evidences. He wants to know and be reassured that they are growing in grace. Fourth he says – and now he is turning around [from viewing the Philippians to viewing himself] – “I hold them in my heart.” No statement of distance, no statement of indifference, certainly not even just a statement of the act of the will: “I hold them in my heart.” Fifthly he says, “I yearn for them.” That goes back again to the opportunities that we have to gather together: do we yearn, do we lean in that direction? Or do we say, “O man, [what a burden of obligation]?”

Is this something just idiosyncratic to Paul? No. Jesus made this comment; He said that His disciples were His friends. Jesus is for us the friend that is closer than a brother. That is Proverbs 18:24. Our relationship with Jesus Christ, by His design, is to be that of closeness, the bond of friendship, the act of interaction, the readiness to stand alongside and to share whatever the concern might be. How different from a formal relationship. In the intimacy of a close and completely trusting friendship there is nothing that need be held back. There is no sense of hesitation as to whether or not what I say or what I present regarding myself will be acceptable. So many Christians organize their lives in order to make themselves acceptable to God, which is nonsense, since nothing can be hidden from Him Who loves us: Closer than a brother.

Paul thanks God as he remembers the Philippians because he knows that it is the gracious working of God, the freely given acts of God’s love, which has transformed them, changing them from the typical Roman pagan into the delightful group of people who spontaneously support him as he is engaged in ministry. So you come the sixth verse which many of us have memorized which is a magnificent statement about the gracious goodness of God: *“I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.”* There are three important truths that stand inside that statement, important for us as we seek to apply them to our own relationships with one another. The first is that we remember that God begins the work of salvation: God begins the work; that work of transforming our lives is at His initiative. It is not with us, so we pray constantly. This reflects a foundational truth about the relationship that we have with God. This is essential for us to understand. When Adam and Eve broke the covenant relationship with God, which we know as the fall of man, what was broken was the cooperation between men in dependency upon the Living God, and God. Having been broken, every effort that we make, especially the successful efforts that we make in order to change and improve ourselves, does not and cannot correct the basic loss, but actually deepens it. The fact of the matter is that self-sufficiency resists grace. So the more I work on making myself a splendid fellow, without having already accepted God’s grace for me and acknowledged that I cannot do this on my own; the longer I hold out and resist and falling on my face before God and confessing that I am in complete and total dependency on Him for forgiveness, the longer we do that and the “better” we make ourselves, the more distant we are from God. That is one of the deep

ironies that we face: self-sufficiency resists the grace of God. So I must abandon self-sufficiency and cry out to the Lord, “Please save me; don’t let me continue in the direction that I am falling.”

The second truth is that our confidence in the progress of other believers is not fixed on the believer; it is fixed on God. This is essential. It is not anything specific about the believer that encourages us. It is our knowledge of God and His love and His determination to bring about what will please Him and make of any person a child of His grace. In practical terms this means that for every word of encouragement that we share with fellow believers, for every opportunity we might extend to them for help, training, cooperation and the like as they move forward in the path of spiritual growth, there will be the uplifting of many prayers. If I did not pray for this congregation it would be a total waste of time for me to preach, because I am fully persuaded that nothing I say will make any difference at all unless it pleases God through His Spirit to take His truth and penetrate your hearts and minds. Amen! I have at various times in my pastoral ministry said that primarily I preach this message to God. That is what I do: I preach the message to God in the hopes that God will then take the message and push it into the understanding and believing of the body of believers.

Lastly take note of Paul’s time frame. He says that the process of change, improvement, will be completed at the day of Christ Jesus. When is that? That is at the end of the age. There are implications to that statement. There are implications when Paul says of these people who stir up great joy and are the occasion of thanksgiving for him and he says, “I know that God is going to complete the work of perfecting you in the day of Christ Jesus. In the meantime... (some of you already know where this is going to go) ...in the meantime, guess what: it is really irritating! Why? It is because all of us are unfinished. Did you notice? You noticed! This is part of the realistic understanding of the Christian faith. People who do not know Christ and do not know the church and stand off to the side and look in and they say to themselves, “What a bunch of horrible people! We thought they should be perfect.” No, that is not the way it is. As a matter of fact it is quite the contrary. We are unfinished works of grace. Consequently we fall short, all of us. Most of us, learn more about goodness from the Book than we have mastered in the will and heart. And having learned these many things about goodness in the Book we then look at others in the body and wonder why they have fallen short, forgetting that what God says is that the Word of God is a mirror and primarily is designed for self-reflection. We fall short and because we fall short, inevitably we disappoint. In the anticipation of taking communion today you might say to yourself, “How disappointed am I? Who am I disappointed in. What is going to be done about this?” That is why the special music today was so perfect: “Let’s get Together at the River of Forgiveness”. We should never let our irritations and disappointments in one another stand in the way of our joy and delight in one another and our thanksgiving to God. Just think how horrible that irritating person would be without the grace of God!

Not many of you know me well enough to know me well enough to know who I was before I was saved, and that is grace! I know enough about a number of you to know that is grace also!

Consequently one of the things that we have to do is to be careful not to cast out hasty judgments, condemning people and casting them aside as if they were hopeless. Get the mirror in front of your face if you want hopelessness. But in the midst of this deepening compassion and patience in dealing with one another, there is something we must never do, not if we will be true to the Word of God. We must never cease to say that what is evil is evil. The grace of God is no whitewash. It is not designed to let us pretend to be good. Indeed it is designed

to give us the inner strength and courage to own up to the fact that we are not good, and that we are in need of grace. Likewise it is designed to give us the strength to put up with one another in spite of our imperfections, knowing that God is about this work. What work? God will complete His work of perfection in the day of Christ.

Like Paul do we yearn, we lean forward, to that time when finally all of the excellent qualities and the beauties, the excellences of character, all of that delight that exists in every human soul – for we are creatures made by God – all of that will finally radiate out with no flaw and no distortion because all sin has been removed and the incredible beauty of every human being that God has made will finally be seen with distortion or distraction: will that be a day? Rightly we think of the anticipation of eternal life and glory as looking upon the Lord Jesus Christ: absolutely! We will probably stand there amazed for four or five million years just saying like the angels in Isaiah chapter 6, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” But now and then we might just take a moment and glance at this incredible creature next to us, perfected by grace, transformed by truth and fully reflecting the image of God. Wow! In the day of Christ Jesus.

We have already dealt with the third of Paul’s affections, that he is confident regarding the Philippians progress in the faith. Paul’s confidence, again, is not in the believer; it is in God. If you think that Paul fails to notice what is amiss in those around him, read Galatians I:6-7. No one in ministry is unaware of the difference between those who willingly cooperate and seek to conform themselves to the purposes of God and those who take a sort of nonchalant and lackadaisical attitude toward God and figure that if God wants them to improve, He will get it done. That is not the path of grace.

The fourth affection we have listed is that Paul holds the Philippians in his heart. There is a lovely verse in I Thessalonians 2:19-20. This is how it reads: *“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you, for you are our glory and joy.”* Those words, I anticipate and believe, are readily taken up as a statement describing the relationship between parent and child. “This child, given to me by God, raised up in my home, nurtured and now the object of my joy, the song of my thanksgiving, the delight of my soul” O what a pleasure, what a triumph of God’s grace in the parent that they can take the child and say, “Beloved Father, Lord Jesus, here!” I do not hesitate to say that in the midst of a congregation where children, where parents and children are, for children should understand that the heart of a parent who is in Christ longs for just that day!

But Paul is not speaking of parents and children. Paul is speaking rather of the body of Christ, fellow believers who walk side by side. There was a man in the congregation I served who said a very peculiar thing to me. It always troubled me and still does. He said, “You know pastor, I love sharing the gospel with people, but the minute they have accepted Christ I just move on; I don’t have any continued interest.” My thought was “What?” Something is wrong, something is missing in that. Here is a rumor, some gossip! I heard by rumor, not confirmed – who cares about confirming gossip? – that our missionary ladies to Tanzania who have just returned home felt no particular desire to stay in Tanzania! But I would guarantee you that within those ladies there was a certain tumult and conflict of emotion for you do not touch other people with the grace of God and then say, “See ya!” Why? What is of greater interest and wonder than to see the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of another soul, and to watch the qualities of Christ begin to emerge in that otherwise hardened, secular, pagan – I don’t care what you call it – [soul]? And it must be incredible when you watch it happen in a child because of their innocence and their

readiness to change. What sorrow that in the United States of America for a whole variety of reasons by the time a child is nine or ten they are no longer allowed to be children. It is a work of grace.

When we say that a person is held in our heart, what we are saying is that they have now become a part of the core concern of our life. That is not a statement of indifference. Paul is telling the Philippians that they now live within him as the object of his heart's love. I will simply put it to all of us, can we, do we say this regarding one another? Whenever someone comes into this congregation from another, whether it be from in this town or from elsewhere, I always ask this question, why are you leaving? Without good reason for changing from one body of believers to another you have to consider extremely carefully what the dynamics are, why would you shut down those relationships, why would you rip them out of your heart? It cannot be a light thing. If it is, there are problems that need to be attended to.

Paul says of the Philippians that he holds them in his heart. This statement, this recognition should then trigger an awareness of something of significance, of deeper significance perhaps than the points already made. Paul has a deep love for these Philippians; he delights in them, he yearns for them, he is thankful for them. Therefore how easily could Paul move on to the next assignment? That is what our missionary ladies have had to do. How do you pull that off? My wife and I have done that a number of times. You uproot from a body of believers that you have served and loved and in whom you delight, and now what? Where do you find that inner strength?

Well, this is the whole point. Look to verses seven and eight of Philippians I. Paul says, “It is right for me to feel this way about you all because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace...” Then he goes on and says, “...for God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” What Paul is saying there is that he recognizes that he is sensing within himself Christ's love working through him and loving those Philippians, that the source of his love, the strength of his love, the dynamic of his love is in fact the inward presence of the Holy Spirit loving others through him. That is critical. Paul's interest and desire, as he says, is to follow after Christ as he loves those whom Jesus loves. I made this comment before but sometimes you people are a bit slow! Look around and tell me, how many of these people would you know and love if you hadn't met them in the body of Christ? I can ask a more rude question: how many of them would you want to know? In all honesty God gathers together in truly healthy churches remarkably diverse groups of people, and we should be praising the Lord. One of the things that is troublesome to me is when you go to a congregation and everybody is 25 to 27. What am I talking about? [There is] no diversity. We need to have that full spectrum of humanity in order to deal with all of the issues that come through the passage of time. Learning how to talk cross-generationally is something that this age in America desperately needs. The church of Jesus Christ is a place where that happens, or it ought to happen. So grandparents and grandchildren are more than welcome. They should be gathered together and put in situation where they hear the Word of God and they interact over that Word of God. I would love it if we were more ethnically diverse.

Because the love is not primarily ours; it is God's. Jesus has turned Paul away from self-love to the love of God. Paul's great desire and purpose is to turn the Philippians away from self-love to love what? To love God! Not [to love] Paul. He would be delighted to have them love him. He would be delighted to have the experience of their affection. He is delighted to be supported by them. But the bottom line is not that they would love him, but that they would love God. Because if they love God, guess what is going to happen, they will love him too. But what will

happen if they only love him and not God. No good thing. Probably the most horrific example of that in history, at least that I am aware of is – how many here remember Jim Jones down near San Francisco. When you examine that ministry initially by every outward appearance it was sound in the gospel, clear as a bell. But someplace along the line a drift began to occur, and amongst the things that happened is those people loved Jim Jones. Maybe they confused him with Jesus Christ. I said last week and stand by the statement. I am an elder. That is all that I am. No one in this congregation should ascribe or attribute anything more to me than any other elder in this church. I love Jesus Christ, so do those men. By the way, so do almost all of you – say that only because I am not sure of every single person!

You understand what I am saying. It is easy: you get somebody like me who stands up in front of you all the time, I am terribly good-looking, I am charming and you know... You're just going to fall in love with this guy, right? Not a chance. It would be – can I say it? – evil. It would be evil for it would be idolatrous. It would be taking glory from God and giving it to a man. Don't ever do that! The love that we have for one another, the love we have received from God. We give that love to one another because we give that love to God, always. We keep this very clearly in mind.

Paul says to them, that they are to love with knowledge and discernment. Ours is to be a love that is knowledgeable and discerning. Some of what we have already looked at and I will continue the message next week, is learning how to see accurately who we are in Christ. Part of that is learning how to love the way God loves.

Please pray with me: our gracious heavenly Father we thank you that we can gather together in this place freely on this morning. I think that most the people whom Nini and I know love many here. We are good friends. The web, the network that binds us together in Christ is a precious thing. We give you thanks. May Your Spirit speak with us. If there are wounded places that need to be attended to, if there are relationships that need to be addressed, grant to us the grace courage needed to so. Now Father as we prepare to take the Supper together may we enjoy the fellowship of Your Spirit and be reminded of Your great love for us, that love which caused Your Son to give His life for our sins. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What do you see as the purpose of the church, that is, if the church is to glorify God, how is it to go about doing so?
2. What do you understand is the Bible’s teaching regarding elders and do you think our congregation follows the Bible’s teaching?
3. In your opinion or experience, are the people in our congregation affectionate with one another? What sort of affections (interpersonal bonding emotions) hold us together?
4. Have you often been disappointed or frustrated by other believers? Do you think Philippians I:6 is helpful in handling these issues?
5. Tolerance is not the approval of evil but patient endurance of evil in the hope of eventual change. Do you agree with this statement? How does this differ from the “politically correct” tolerance in America today?
6. Are there fellow believers whom you “hold in your heart”, that is, who have become part of the core concern in your life? How do you respond to these people?
7. Why is it important that our “first love” is for Jesus/God rather than for other believers?
8. Are you learning to love others the way Jesus loves you?
9. What does it mean to say that ours is to be a “knowledgeable and discerning” love? What are we to know and what are we to discern? How does this differ from a sentimental love?
10. What does scripture indicate is the relationship between moral discernment and understanding the revealed truth of God’s word?