

“The Prayer Closet”

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

- The Wiesners in Malaysia:** the move to Kuala Lumpur will go smoothly and the new school will be established quickly; the Lord will clear away political opposition and bureaucratic roadblocks; the Spirit will preserve the health and well-being of the family
- President Obama:** the Lord will impart to him a better understanding of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution; the Spirit will teach him to prize freedom and dignity for all people; the Father will sustain him in health and protect his family
- Purity Ball:** the Spirit will lead in the planning and decision making for all aspects of the event; word of the event will spread widely and the Spirit will draw those ready for the commitment; unity of purpose will bind all who serve together as a team
- Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Aaron Bowen** (son of Randy & Ruth): Aaron is halfway thru the police academy, has put fire fighting volunteering on hold until done. Please pray that he continue to do well in the academy and for job opportunities to become known to him.
- Young Adult of the Week: Katelyn Duenas** (daughter of Rudy and Tracy): Katelyn is now happily married and living in Lincoln. She works as a medical biller and is experiencing work related stress due to the changing of healthcare laws. Please pray for stress relief and that she and her husband can find a good church near home.

Our message today comes from the Gospel of John and I have entitled it “Will You Ask the Father?” The passage to which we have come confronts us with some of the most demanding, some of the most comforting, and yet simultaneously some of the most disturbing of Christian teachings. What we encounter in these verses, John 6:35-40, six verses, not long; what we encounter at this particular point is the intersection of the will of God with the wills of fallen men. What we are dealing with are the realities of sin and grace. This is what John records of Jesus’ words, beginning at verse 35 of chapter 6 through verse 40.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’” (A little later on today we shall be celebrating the Lord’s Supper. It is right for us to understand that there is an allusion, not a direct connection, but an allusion [here] to drinking the cup and eating the bread. That should be in our minds [as we read this passage]. *“But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

We hear in these words, if you are familiar with the Gospel of John or you have been tracking along with our series in John, we hear an echo here, and the echo is of something that we heard in John 3:16-21. We will quickly walk through that earlier passage. It begins, of course, with that great evangelical verse: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Then [John] gives a broader statement, and that is where I want us to go. He says, *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned. . . .”* Those are precious statements. Wonderful is the reality of which they speak. But we are not permitted to stop at that point. We are required to continue. So we continue with the verses 18-21. *“...but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”* It is obvious that John 3:16-21 and John 6:35-40 are saying the same thing. It is also obvious that what these verses have to say is both wonderful and terrible. They are wonderful because of the marvelous assurance that if I have faith in Jesus, I am saved; but terrible because if I don’t, I’m not. And if I don’t already [have faith in Jesus] what do I do?

I am going to step back and approach this through what I think is some of the fog of our contemporary culture and way of thinking. Here is a statement that should be obvious: God is not made in our image, we are made in His. Some weeks ago I stressed this, I stress it again today because though that statement should be crystal clear and obvious beyond any debate, as a matter of fact it is a major battlefield; it is a major battlefield in the spiritual war for the heart of the church and the soul of humanity in our day. We should be well enough acquainted with the reality that the tempter is continually striving to get us to remake God into the image of man. That is the continual effort on the part of the tempter.

We are not inclined in our day to actually set up false gods as such. We don't do that; we are more sophisticated. But there are other ways that we, we being a part of the culture that we swim in as fish in water, strive to reduce God to comfortable dimensions that fit inside our preferences. What I find, and perhaps you do as well, is the implicit insistence that God cannot do or say anything that is contrary to or beyond my understanding. I used the word “implicit”. Here is a definition of the word “implicit”:
“suggested or to be understood though not plainly expressed; implied, distinguished from explicit.” I don't know anybody who would just come right out and say, “God is no bigger than me.” That would be an unusual person. But by the same token, when you engage in a conversation with people, they become very incensed and resistant to the idea that God is in fact something beyond their comprehension. Applied to the topic at hand, one would say it this way: “Well it goes without saying that I am or I should be able to understand what God says and does, so that if I don't understand something it is either wrong or it is not true [of God].” What this amounts to is a determined resistance to allow God to be God. This attitude, by the way, is uniquely modern. It is the slowly maturing fruit of the notion which first resurfaced in Western culture during the Renaissance, and that is during the 1400 and 1500s. This is the statement: “Man is the measure of all things.” You need to know that that statement sums up the core philosophy that has dominated the progression of western civilization as it has moved progressively further and further away from its Christian roots. It reached its full force in the Enlightenment, which is the 1700's or the eighteenth century, and it is the theme of the modern era.

Keeping that in mind, now we will go back to the Gospel of John: According to John 3:19-21, there are two kinds of people in the world. If you are alert to, aware of, tuned in to the way modern life is, you know that I have just said something absolutely outrageous [to modern sensibilities]. “What do you mean [by saying] there are two kinds? We are into diversity! I mean there is just a multiplicity, in fact there are so many different kinds that you cannot possibly say anything coherent about all of them ever at once.” That is a very important thing to understand. What it is saying is that there is no truth that binds all things together. But according to John 3:19-21 there are two kinds of people in the world. [What comes next] will be even more outrageous than the fact that he limits it to two. There are those whose deeds are evil, and therefore they cling to and love the darkness, and there are those who come to the light because their deeds are true. What we find, what John says, is that those who come to the light because what they do is true, are those whose deeds are done “in God”. That poses a difficulty for us: what can it possibly mean to say that someone's deeds have been carried out or done “in God”? I do not know altogether or comprehensively what it means, and I am left with many wonderings and many questions when I try and understand this. But if I draw a line from John 3:19-21 to John 6:35-40 – this is what I want us to do; I want you to turn to John 6 – If I draw a line from John 3 to John 6, particularly to John 6:37, I think I gain a little understanding. This is what he says in verse 37: *“All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”* As part of His ongoing presentation of the truth of the Father to the Jews in general and Pharisees in particular, Jesus says that in spite of having more than sufficient evidence regarding His identity, only those who are enabled by the Father to believe in Him will actually come. Verses 35-36, *“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.’”* So who will come? Who will believe? Jesus tells us: all that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of my Father who sent me. This is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given but raise it up on the last day. The answer as to who it is who will come

to faith is that it is those whom the Father draws to Jesus. That is just as clear as a bell as it is written flat out across the pages of scripture.

For some what I have just said is very unsettling. For some, in fact it is demeaning. At the same time for others it is wonderfully encouraging and comforting. More broadly then I would conclude that someone's deeds are done in God if they are those by which the Father draws them to faith. Did you follow what I just said? What are those deeds that are done in God? They are those deeds by which the Father draws them to belief in Jesus. How many of you can remember the process through which you were saved? You see, very often a person does not recognize the active presence of God in their life before they are saved. It is not at all unusual for people who have been saved to look back and say, “O my goodness, God was at work there, and God was at work there; I met that person, that person started praying for me, I didn't even know who that person was but that person started praying for me before I knew anything about the Lord! I realize, in fact – to put it in very common cultural terms, I was set up!” Here we begin to grasp, hopefully you understand, “O my goodness, God was at work in me, reshaping me on the inside so that when the time comes and the gospel is presented and I have clarity and I say, “Well, of course!” Indeed, not only are people often not aware of the presence of God at work, they will even be resistant.

What we find is that [those who are being drawn by the Father to belief in Jesus] want to do what is true; they want to do what is true, what is right, what is good, what is just, what is kind. They do not necessarily understand that those things reach their perfection and have their foundation in Christ.

But let's step back again. Have we really understood what Jesus has said? After all, John's Gospel was written a long time ago and in a different language. Beyond that John's style, and possibly Jesus' style as well has a deceptive kind of simplicity. Often there is far more meaning packed inside of what either of them had to say than first meets the eye. So what I would like you to do at this point is turn to Romans 10:17-21. Here we find Paul stating precisely the same truth, although in somewhat different words. He begins with that glorious statement, v. 17 of Romans 10, “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*” Alleluia! But that is not, as is so often the case, people will put that wonderful statement out on the table and they will walk away as if that was the end of the argument, through and done! Got it finished! The trouble is, Paul went on writing, so you want to pay attention to what the man has to say: “*But I ask, have they not heard?*” You need to know that in chapter 10 of Romans, Paul is dealing with what was for him was an existentially agonizing reality. The existentially agonizing reality was that the vast majority of the Jews did not believe. That was his people and it broke his heart and he wept and he is trying to figure it out, and so he is talking about it. So he says, “These Jews, haven't they heard?” And he says, yes, they have. Then he makes a quote: “*Their voice has gone to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.*” (Psalm 19:4) Then Paul asks another question: “But I ask, did Israel not understand?” Then he first cites Moses who says, “*I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.*” Then [Paul] cites Isaiah 65:1, “*Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, 'I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.' But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'*”

Here he is dealing with the problem of people who have heard and know all that they need to know. They have heard; they have understood; but they have refused. Psalm 19:4, “*The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above His handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through*

all the earth and their words to the end of the world.” Everybody knows! Isaiah 65:1, *“I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I’, to a nation that was not called by my name.”* The Gentile peoples and nations of the world would come to faith, and the Jews knew this. These statements which you have now been exposed to, were not controversial truths for the Jews in Paul’s day, nor in the days before. But though they were anticipated, [the Jews] anticipated that the peoples and nations of the world would come to faith, the Jews themselves refused the obedience of faith. We know that if you have followed through in the confrontation that they had with Jesus. In spite of all the testimony that Jesus gave, in spite of the miracles that He performed, in spite of the fulfillment of prophecy which was laid out in front of them as clear as a bell, they said, “No”. It is obvious, therefore, that their failure is not rooted in a lack of evidence. Their failure is rooted in stubborn hearts. Paul in the beginning of chapter 10 of Romans wrote this: *“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”*

That is a critical statement. What is God’s righteousness? It is simply this: Jesus Christ is the righteousness of God. What does that mean? Jesus Christ gave His life in order to validate the Law of God; to validate the holiness of God; to fully satisfy the demands of God for the sins of men so that you and I can come into God’s presence and say, “Yes, I am a sinner. But Jesus Christ has fulfilled the demands of the law on my behalf. Therefore not only is my righteousness received as a gift from God, but I can look at God and say, You are perfect in Your holiness, You are perfect in Your justice, You perfect in Your righteousness, there is no flaw in You whatsoever, and therefore You are totally trustworthy. You do not bend and reshape the rules. You fulfill them!” Jesus Christ is the righteousness of God, and therefore Paul goes on to say in those verses, that Christ is the end of the law. There are two ways in which the word “end” can be taken here, and both of them apply. On the one hand [as indicating that which completes or fulfills the entire negative or sacrificial payment demand of the Law so that that obligation is removed from our backs. But He has also modeled the law in perfection and so sets it before us and He meets the fullness of its positive demands.] At different places Jesus or the work He accomplished on the **cross** is referred to in both ways. He is the final sacrifice for sin which makes all further sacrifice unnecessary. Did you ever wonder why we don’t sacrifice animals? This is why. Ever wonder why we don’t worry about the laws of defilement? This is why. But also Jesus has lived a life of perfect obedience to the law, and has lived that life for us.

Now beloved, we would be in serious error if we were to think this is a problem only for the Jews in their resistance to the ministry of Jesus and the preaching of the Gospel. The same problem appears almost at once in the life of the church. Turn with me if you would to Galatians 1:6-10. You would think that anybody who understood the gospel of our salvation in Christ would just be overjoyed with the liberty that is ours in Christ. But that is not true. In Galatians 1:6-10 Paul addresses a church that he planted through the preaching of the gospel and this is what he has to say: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”* What was the

error of these Galatians? It was simply this: they brought works of Law back as the way to gain and secure God's grace. They moved from trusting the work of Jesus for them to trusting in the works of righteousness that they did for God. I would challenge all of us in this room to pause and ask not whether or not, but how often we fall into exactly that frame of mind. The truth is that the believer only does anything because they know that God loves them and has already forgiven them. All action on our part as believers in Christ flows out of the certainty that we have been forgiven and are accepted in the Beloved. We would never say, “I must do this or that, or God will not love me and forgive my sins.” We never say that – or we shouldn't. The one who believes salvation comes from law-keeping becomes anxious to do the right thing, driven by anxiety, driven by underlying fear, driven by uncertainty. But that is not gospel living. Living by faith is a life of thanksgiving and joy.

I think we would be honest in understanding that this is difficult ground to stay on. The habits of the heart by which we continually seek to earn and create and improve our own righteousness so God will be impressed with us: that is so overwhelming, it is also dead wrong! So what you need to be doing constantly is asking yourself: “Father, am I at peace with you? Am I reconciled with you? Am I still trying to earn my own righteousness? Give me understanding, so that I don't fall into these patterns.”

So often these teachings from Jesus and Paul regarding the Father's sovereign grace, that the Father alone decides who will have the ability to trust in Jesus alone are lifted up as a counsel of despair. But is God's sovereign grace a counsel of despair? This is what we say: “Well, it is all up to God, therefore there is nothing I can do.” But that is not at all the case. From one end of the Bible to the other, the constant stress is on the wonderful truth. What is that truth? God delights to save sinners. That is the truth. There is a parallel truth: God takes no pleasure, God has no pleasure in the death of sinners or the death of the wicked. Earlier I said of these things, to some that is unsettling, to some it is even demeaning, to some it is wonderfully encouraging and comforting. It is unsettling for us to think that we cannot take charge and control in something that is so important to us. Some see it as demeaning in that we must rely on another. But for others this is the breath of hope. Why is this hopeful? [It is] because we place all of our hope in God, not ourselves. It is essential for us to be clear that we are not saved by our love; we are saved by His love. It is essential for us to be clear that we are not saved by our faithfulness, but by His faithfulness. It is essential for us to be clear that the purposes of God are made known to us in the sending of His Son, because why did God send His Son? [It was] to save sinners! That is why He sent Him.

Someone may say, “Pastor you just said, you just quoted both Jesus and Paul as saying that no one can come to faith in Christ unless the Father draws them.” That is right, I did say that. I said that because that is what the Bible says. So what is the counsel? My counsel is this: that whether you presently have faith in what Christ has done or not, you pray to God and ask that the Father would give you faith to believe in Jesus. There is nothing in the entirety of Scripture from one end to the other that says any person at all on the face of the earth cannot ask of God for the gift of faith in His Son Jesus Christ. There is no point in pretending to believe in Jesus if you don't. But there is every reason in the world to appeal to God the Father that He would make known to you His love for you through Jesus Christ. That is a perfectly rational thing to do. All you have to do is say, “I am a sinner.” And then, “I am asking you Father, to bring me to faith in Jesus.” Do you think He will? Isn't that a stupid question in light of all that God has revealed, of all that we now know about God? It is just an overwhelmingly stupid question! Pray with me.

Father, I don't know every person in this room, but You do. I know how You work in our lives long before we are aware of it, often times. I know You did in mine. I know from the Word, Father, that you are far readier to love us than we are to believe in Your love. I know from Your Word that You sent Jesus specifically to save sinners. The Word says specifically You take no pleasure, there is no delight on Your part, in the death of the wicked. So Father I am praying and asking that of all who are here today, if they are believers in Jesus or not, they would turn their hearts and their thoughts to You, Father, and ask, please clear away the fog, subdue the rebellious spirit of resistance within me, and grant to me out of Your loving heart, faith in Jesus. He is indeed is the Savior who died for me and through whom I now, Father, live to You. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What do you see as the most significant way in which God is not like us?
2. Why are people tempted to remake God in their own image?
3. How would you answer the question as to what it means to say someone's deeds have been carried out "in God"?
4. In your experience do people generally have a kind of intuitive recognition that the world has a Creator and that the Creator is worthy of worship? Do people sense that the Creator has any sort of direct knowledge or interest in them personally? (See Psalm 19)
5. Have you known people who profess and demonstrate a "zeal for God" and yet are ignorant of the gospel and even of the Bible? What do you notice about their "faith"?
6. Why does a person saved by grace through faith strive to do the right things? How does this differ from a person who believes they are only saved by doing the right things?
7. What is God's attitude or "default position" toward sinners? What encouragement should this give us?
8. If you are struggling with an inability to believe the gospel of our salvation in Christ, have you, or will you, pray to the Father and ask Him to give you the needed help to believe? Do you understand that is why He sent Jesus, so that together they can save the lost?