

“Fragrance and Light”

Ephesians 5:3-14

July 18, 2010

Pastor John Bronson

Order of Worship for July 18th, 2010

Pre-service Songs

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship: Psalm 99:1-9 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“How Great is Our God”

Overhead

“Micah 6:8”

Overhead

“Sanctuary”

Song # 655

“Cleanse Me”

Song # 657

Offering and Offertory

Special Music

Message:

“Fragrance and Light”, (Ephesians 5:3-14)

By Pastor Bronson

Closing Song

“When I Look into Your Holiness”

Song # 649

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening Study: “Signs of the Times”

“Silencing Christians” DVD series

5:30 pm to 7:00 pm

Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

July 1, 2010

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

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Sheryl Jackson at William Carey Academy**, Chittagong, Bangladesh: that Miss. Jackson will be blessed and refreshed by family and friends while in the States; that the financial needs of the Academy will be fully met; that the Lord will protect the Academy and win the hearts of many for the gospel in Bangladesh
2. **President Obama**: that the Lord will ensure his and his family’s health; that the Lord will enable him to rise above his childhood and education to understand truth, goodness, justice and righteousness
3. **Trustees**: that the Spirit will move many in the congregation to support work efforts on Wednesday evenings; that they will be enabled to make practical, cost saving and effective improvements to the facilities; that they will sense the Lord’s pleasure and the congregation’s thanks
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: SPC Rebecca Wagenaar** (sister of Pam Cervantes, Daughter of Kent and Elaine Rankin):
5. **College Student of the Week: Caleb Bronson, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor** (son of John and Nini Bronson):

The title of today’s message is “Fragrance”. It might be “Fragrance and Light” in the bulletin, but I had so much to say about fragrance that I gave up on light and we will have to turn on the light next week! The passage is Ephesians 5:3-14. I am not going to read that at the moment. I suggest that you look at it. What I want to do is to begin by reading instead 2Corinthians 2:14-17. The topic for today, the focus, is holiness. Americans are not good at this. Holiness is not a prominent value or pursuit. In fact the issue, the question of holiness, a holy life, being a holy person, recognizing that I need to be set aside – I need to be set aside, and I in my life need to set other things aside – this is ambiguous, it is not clear to us. We struggle with figuring out what it means to be holy. So there are some issues I want to settle in our minds which are rooted in the Word of God, as we approach the issue of holiness as it begins to be spelled out by the apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter 5. I am beginning to read in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. This is what he wrote: *“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”*

It is said that aromas, fragrances, are amongst the most powerful stimulants of human memory. Nini and I experienced this at least in a small way when we first came to Oroville. We drove up into the foothills - we were supposed to go up and think – so we drove up into the foothills, we opened the doors on our car, we stepped out, we walked a little bit and virtually at the same moment we both said, “This smells like California!” For those of you who don’t know, both Nini and I had grown up in this state, but we had long been, over 20 years, away from this state and had not live here during that time. But, oh, when the combined smell of the oaks and the eucalyptus and the citrus trees and the chaparral came into our awareness we remembered all kinds of things about our years growing up. We thought, ah, this is the right place to be. You thought it was because we liked you, but no, it was because it smelled right!

The Word of God says that we are to have a special fragrance in our lives. Hear again what Paul said to the Corinthians: *“We are the aroma of Christ...”* “We,” that would be y’all and me too. We are the aroma; it is the fragrance of God himself amidst fallen humanity: that is what in fact we are called to be. That is the message Paul delivers to the Corinthians in the passage I just read. “Fragrance” of course is a metaphor, a kind of picture of a spiritual reality. The spiritual reality of “fragrance” is holiness. Holiness! We are called to have the aroma of Christ. So at this moment what anybody ought to be doing is conferring by letting the Spirit of God speak and say, “Do I smell like Jesus? Is that really true? Is that the atmosphere that I bring with me? Do I bring the atmosphere with me wherever I go? For that is the expectation of the Word of God.

Holiness now becomes the topic. The fragrance of Christ is holiness. Generally speaking there are two ways that Christians are holy. The first way is by faith in God’s call, to believe the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross: we are holy by belief. The second way is by faith to obey God’s commands based on what God has done in Christ. The line in the song that the Wilson sisters sang that so grabbed me was that the Lord has given us the power to not sin: the power to not sin. Sin is the negation of the aroma of Christ, but obedience is the flavor. Jesus was obedient to death out of love for His Father. You and I have received that same power, that same choice.

If you turn back in your scriptures to the opening chapter of Ephesians you will see that Paul greets them with this statement: *“To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.”* There in that little statement you have a double greeting pointing us to both aspects of holiness. First the saints are called, [that is], the Ephesian Christians are called “saints”. Why are they called “saints”, because they have been called out of the world and into the people of God. They have been called. I could do that right now. I could say, “I’m going to create a holy group. I could say Jerry and Tom and Cindy and Jeff: I want you to come up here; I am going to call you out from down

there, I am going to call you up here. If they responded, then they would be becoming a separated group. They would still be who they were, the same miserable crumbs we have already known, no change in their character whatever. But just because they respond to the call, they believe that my voice had some kind of authority – they probably thought I was going to give them money, but I’m not going to do that – because they respond, then they would be of the select group, the separated ones. So that is the first way in which we are holy: we respond. Now of course when we respond to the call of God, there is a much richer body of knowledge and implication. I am going to give that to you. You might want to right this down. This is what the person who responds to the call of God in faith, just believing that if God has called I ought to go [believes]. First we recognize and acknowledge that we are made by God. He has the right to call us [for we are His creatures, He made us]. Secondly we believe that [we] live in His world, He is in charge, He is the God, and I need to respond in obedience. The third thing that we recognize is that it is in the nature of the call, and I have not given all of it, that I need to respond because I am in trouble. I am a sinner. I have violated the God Who is in charge, I have violated His rules, His laws. I need to repent of that. The fourth thing I recognize that as I stand out there, not yet responding to the call, I recognize that where I am out there, I am under judgment, and it is a judgment that I myself could never satisfy. That is why I respond to the call in Christ. Fifthly, when we respond to the call of God in Christ I am acknowledging the whole price has been paid on the cross: that is why I go. Sixthly I am acknowledging Jesus paid it all, so that by the time, you see, following the metaphor, by the time I get up these steps and stand here on the platform I am recognizing that I am entirely free of guilt. That is why it is called grace. The last thing is that now I am in a position where I can successfully not sin. Those seven statements summarize the implications of responding in faith, believing the call of God in Christ. I do not think every Ephesian believer had that whole list seven things clearly in mind, but these are the implications. What those seven things do is they tell you what it means to be a saint. That is what a saint is. A saint believes all seven of those things.

Notice that all seven of those things contain not one single word about a moral transformation. That is not what is going on here. It is not [the case] that because I am a saint suddenly I am very good, I am perfectly obedient, I am wholly conformed to the character of God, that I fully understand and I follow in obedience his will. That is not what is being said. I have responded to one thing: I have believed in the gospel; I have believed that God sent His son to die for me; I have believed that His death is sufficient to pay for my sins; I have believed that I have received the ability to not sin; and therefore I am now a saint, I am a holy one. My believing has separated me from the body of mankind that does not believe.

But notice that Paul [also] says to the Ephesians that they are faithful. This is the second way in which we are holy. The Reformers and the Puritans after them characteristically would say that we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. That is an awkward statement; it is also necessarily true. You’ll hear that statement as you listen to James 2:14-24. James is going to use a lot more words, but he is going to say the same thing. I am going to read that passage – too long by far to put on the screen; you might want to look it up in your scriptures.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Luther was so troubled by this passage of Scripture that he thought maybe James didn't belong in the Bible, but he was wrong. We need to reason through that passage very carefully because we are dealing here with the most basic realities of the Christian life. First, we are saved by faith alone. Paul puts it this way if you look at Romans 4:3-5, “*For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. . .*” The same thing Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” We are saved by grace alone. We become saints by grace. We simply believe what God has said. We lay hold of it.

When Paul spoke of Abraham being justified by faith in Romans 4, he stated specifically that this occurred before he was circumcised. Paul spoke of Abraham believing unto justification. If you recall the account of Abraham's life in Genesis, you know that Abraham was circumcised long before his son Isaac was born. So when James refers to Abraham being justified by works through his offering up of Isaac in obedient faith through God's testing call, he has already believed in God for years and years. James and Paul are talking about two different things. They are talking about two different stages in justification. The concept of justification has a range of meanings, just like the concepts of salvation and holiness and other such terms. Paul said to the Ephesians, we are saved or justified or reconciled to God by grace through faith. We are saved by believing, by having faith. The gospel is fundamentally a promise from God that if you put your faith in the death of Jesus on the cross for your sins and in the resurrection of Jesus from the grave for justification, that is as the proof that full payment was made, you are now free from condemnation: Romans 8:1. For your sins are gone. God will count or reckon you as saved, released from judgment; or as it is put elsewhere, you are covered by Christ's blood and draped with his righteousness. That is saving faith.

But that is not the end of the story, which is what we see in James' reference to Abraham. You have to have a right understanding of the term “justify”. What does it mean to be justified? Justification means to be brought into alignment, into agreement or into harmony. When an accountant – and this is fundamentally an accounting term – when an accountant justifies your accounts, he or she makes sure that everything, every aspect of your finances matches up so that every penny of income and expenditure is accounted for. The other day I realized I had made a thousand dollar error. Ouch! I am not a good accountant! Fortunately I keep a large balance for know my weaknesses and therefore I did not get hurt by this, other than by profound humiliation. When we say, as we do say, “I am justified by the blood of Jesus,” what we are saying is that He has paid everything I owe. There is no balance left over. Every sin, all guilt, past present and future is entirely satisfied through the blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when I step before my Holy Father and He looks upon me, what He sees is the fully justified – forgive me for mixing my metaphors – the fully justified garments of Christ's own holiness. No flaw is visible. Hallelujah, hallelujah!

But that is not the end of the story. Is what we encounter in James contrary to what Paul says? No. James says that Abraham's faith was perfected and he was justified through his works joined with faith in offering up his son Isaac. Justification is being brought into alignment or agreement or harmony. Paul says that the blood of Jesus perfectly balances moral and spiritual accounts with God. What James is saying is that by grace through faith we progressively bring our lives into perfect alignment with God. Hear what Paul says in Romans 5:1-2 (this is a rare instance when I prefer the New American Standard Version over the English Standard Version). *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand. . .* (emphasis added). How many of you know what an introduction is? How many of you can recall the first time you were introduced to the person to whom you are now married? I do! Well, you see, I met Nini when I was a graduate student and she was senior in

High School. I mean, really, just young! Now, how many of us would say that our relationship with the person who is our spouse is at the same level as when we were first introduced? That’s just dumb! That is plain dumb! Anybody whose relationship with their spouse is the same today as when they first met isn’t married! And that is exactly what James is saying. He is saying, if you think your relationship with God is the same today as the first day you met His grace, you never met. James is a little more rude. What he actually says is, you’re dead, hopeless, without Christ. Can I say it in more ways?

In Philippians 2:12-13 Paul says this, *“Therefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...”* Moving on from the first introduction when we were first gathered here as a separated group of people, now we recognize that we have been called into a separated place in order to receive a set of instructions and we are now to work out those instructions. And how are we to work them out: with fear and trembling. Oh, oh!

Paul had just written to the Philippians that they were to have the same mind among themselves as had been lived by Jesus, a life of sacrificial obedience to God. Jesus conformed perfectly to the will of His Father and in that sense Jesus was fully reconciled and justified before His Father. In that same sense we are called to obedience. Paul says in Romans 1:5 that we are called to the obedience of faith. In Galatians 5:6 he phrases it this way; it is faith working through love. The point being made, and made emphatically, is that faith either works or it isn’t faith.

At this point we’re still not back to Ephesians 5. I think it is needful to clarify the difference between the necessary pursuit of holiness on the one side and legalism on the other. This is a constant struggle and it is no wonder. We live in one of the most antinomian periods of church or spiritual life. What is the meaning of “antinomian”? It means “against the law or without law”. We believe that we should be able to live upon the face of the earth with no rules. I thought about that. How many have eaten at Out Back Steak House? “No Rules”: it is the most antinomian steak house on earth. You just go in there and there are no rules, you can get your steaks any way you want. Probably they won’t give it to you raw, but I don’t know. That is the idea: no rules; everything is just up to your taste, your impulse, your subjective desire: it is all about you and what you want. Antinomianism: no rules, no law. Many people think that that is what grace means, that grace is antinomianism: no rules, no law. They mistakenly think that every reference to standards or expectations for behavior is legalism. Recently I talked to somebody who was talking about their life and how they felt that it was important that they pray every day and they read the scriptures every day, and then they just dropped in this line: “Well, I guess that’s rather legalistic.” And I thought, what do you mean it’s legalistic? Having order, having structure, knowing what you are doing, following a path, having a plan, executing the plan: that’s legalism? Give me a break; that is just being organized!

What is legalism? I wish I could get you all to memorize this so I wouldn’t hear any more dumb comments! Legalism is the conviction that you earn your standing with God by what you do, that you are saved because you are such a magnificent performance! Let me tell you something: if that is the basis, you’re all damned. There is no performance that can satisfy the demands of God. It is impossible. Anybody that thinks they can satisfy the demands of God does not comprehend His holiness. It is arrogant! It is arrogant! “I’m good enough to meet the Almighty.” I hate to see that moment of meeting.

What is holiness? Holiness is living as God’s friend. In John 15:14 Jesus says to His disciples, *“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”* That is a pretty straightforward statement I would say. It agrees with James’ comment about Abraham in James chapter 2:22-23, *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”* How was it fulfilled? Abraham became God’s friend. So every single person who was introduced to this grace in which we stand, who has heard the call of God to separate out of the world and come into the group who identify with the Lord Jesus Christ, each one of them is invited by God to become His friend.

That is what He wants. So as we consider the relationship that we have with our God, we ask ourselves the question, “Am I conducting my relationship with God as if He was my friend? How do I do that?” Jesus says we do it by obeying the things that He commanded.

Obedience in one thing is, of course, not the same thing as obedience in all things. We necessarily live by grace to the end of our days. The freely given blood of Christ is payment for our sins to the end of our days. If we are counted as justified along the journey it is solely because of grace through faith just as when we first believed. Why; because we sin. But if in fact we are alive to God, becoming His friend, then we grow in our love for Him. And as we grow in our love for God we more and more desire to be His friend. In that desire we become reconciled – here is the second meaning of justification – we reconcile: to what are we reconciled? To His ways. I am in conversation with somebody right now who is just so angry at God! They are angry at God because they are not reconciled to His ways; reconciled to His character; and reconciled to His will. In this manner, as we go along, we develop the aroma of Christ.

Let me presume on you just for a minute more. I want to go back to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. I want to deal with one specific issue that is often thrown out as an argument against holiness. Reading the passage again: *“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere, for we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ”* I want to close with this. There are five essential realities set before us in that brief passage: there may be more but that is all I have pulled out. First, as believers in Christ we are to live in the daily triumph of God’s grace on the cross. There is a hymn and I cannot remember the title, but it has a line in it that says, “I’m free, I’m free, I’m free.” Every morning we ought to wake up and begin the day by greeting our heavenly Father, thanking Him for the day and saying, “I am free, I am free, I am free. Yesterday’s sins have no hold on me now! Amen and Hallelujah! Enough of us are sinners to understand what I just said. So we live in the triumph of His grace, the triumph of our Father on the cross. So there should be this tremendous quality of joy. Then we recognize that our part in the triumph is to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere. I want people to know that I am joyfully, gloriously redeemed. I want them to know that I am not what I was. I want them to know of the freedom that I have in Christ. I want them to know that I love Him and love Him openly and freely and gladly because all of the obstruction between me and God has been removed. I want them to know that I walk with my God. I want them to know those things. That is the second thing. That’s my part in the triumph. By the way, how many know what he is referring to when he talks about this triumph? When the Roman generals fought a battle someplace and they won, which they almost always did, then they would round up all the prisoners and they would go back to Rome and have a march through the city. In that march, the general walked along and declared, “Ah ha! Look at that, I won, I conquered, I prevailed, all those are the loser, I am the winner. That was the attitude. So do we live that way? Or do we usually say, “I hope I am ok. I hope I’m alright. I don’t want to bring a lot of attention to myself. What if I mess up? People will notice if I mess up! I’ll sneak.” He doesn’t say that our part is sneaking by quietly: it is a triumph. This is the fragrance of Christ. The third is that we recognize that as we cruise through the world, some people will like it, some people will not. Some people will say, “Ah, what a sweet, lovely fragrance. How compelling! Can I walk next to you?” Other people will say, “Phew, stinking! Where have been? What have you done? Let me give you some advice: other side of the street.”

The fourth thing is that we have no power over the way people respond. You see, how they respond is between them and God. In fact, we have no authority to change the message. You all know what a peddler is: a seller of goods. We are not selling anybody a bunch of goods. The gospel is not a product. The gospel is an invitation to

accept the grace of God as a sinner and become His friend, walking by faith. You and I are called to live out that friendship whether our neighbors like it or not. Let us pray.

Our gracious Father in heaven, we thank You for Your call. Knowing our Father that that call comes with an incredible price, the price of the cross upon which our Savior died, and the fruit is our salvation. We are now fully justified, every sin covered, and we are empowered by Your Spirit to be Your friend, to be faithful, to not sin, but to have the fragrance of our Lord, come what may, to the glory of Your grace. Our heavenly Father, how great You are! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What associations does the word “holy” bring up in your mind? Would you like to be known as “saintly”?

2. Do you think Paul and James contradict each other in their understanding of justification?

3. What is the meaning of “justification”?

4. In what way are we justified by grace through faith in Jesus' blood? In what way are we justified by grace through faith in our obedience? If our obedience is a “work” what part does grace play?

5. How does legalism differ from pursuing holiness?

6. What is the aroma of Christ which we “spread” throughout the world?

7. How is the Christian to respond to those who are offended by the “stench” of the gospel?

8. What objections are most often voiced against holiness in life-style choices?

9. Which seems more prevalent to you, sexual sins or coveting? Which is loved most by most Americans you know, God or mammon? What makes sexual sins especially damaging—not “more sinful”, just more harmful?