

“Praying in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18-20 & Romans 8:26-27)

April 3, 2011

Pastor John Bronson

Order of Worship for April 3rd, Communion Sunday

Pre-service Song:

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment:

Call to Worship: Psalm 28 and Prayer

The Apostles’ Creed

Songs of Worship:

“I Worship You, Almighty God”

Song # 146

“Great Is the Lord”

Song # 140

“Holy Ground”

Song # 138

“Christ Alone”

Overhead

Offering and Offertory

Message: “Praying in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18-20 and Romans 8:26-27)
by Pastor Bronson

The Lord’s Supper:

Preparing our Hearts in Song: “How Deep the Father’s Love”

Overhead

Invitation, Prayer of Confession and Consecration

Dedication and Distribution of the Elements

Closing Song: “Jesus Saves”

Overhead

Parting word of Grace

Evening Studies in the Word

Hebrews 8

5:30 – 7:00 pm

The Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

April 3, 2011

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

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Missionaries and Christians in the Arab-Muslim world:** will draw strength and wisdom from the Lord to remain faithful under all circumstances; will find favor and have a convincing witness for Christ to their neighbors; will be protected from spiritual and physical harm
2. **President Obama:** will find the courage and wisdom to lead in Christ; will respect the limits and fear the dangers of power; will increasingly love moral goodness and cherish the right to life of every conceived child
3. **Deacons and Men’s Ministries:** will have a deepening life of prayer together; will be eager to pursue new ministries for the church and in the community; will come alongside of men for encouragement and to raise up new servant-leaders from the congregation
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: TSgt Pete Gibson** (husband of Marjorie Gibson):
5. **College Student of the Week: Joshua Bronson at University of London** (husband of Lina, son of John and Nini Bronson)

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The title of today’s sermon is “Praying in the Spirit.” This continues our series of reflections on what Paul had to say in Ephesians 6:18-20. Before I turn to that section, I want to make a few comments about the Lord’s Supper, which is of course the real focus at any time you include the Lord’s Supper in your time of worship. That should be the major focus of your heart and mind. I will be turning briefly to Romans 8:26-27. But at this point what I would like you to do is to open your scriptures and look at Luke 22:14-27. This is one of the places in the Gospels where we are given an account of Jesus eating with His men on the night of His betrayal. And instituting, launching or first establishing the Supper. This is what He said:

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”

As I mentioned, today we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Participation, or fellowshiping, or sharing in – those are three different ways of translating the word used here for participating; it is [Greek] “koinonia” – so participating, uniting with, joining together with Jesus in the taking of this supper is by invitation only. In a little while I will extend to you in the name of the Lord Jesus an opportunity to join all of us, who believe, in the [Lord’s] Supper. In order to participate in the Supper, following the things stated in the Apostles’ Creed, there are things you must believe. You must believe that Jesus died for you sins. You must believe that He rose again from the dead. If you don’t believe those two things then this Supper has absolutely no meaning whatsoever, and it is an insult to Jesus and to all who believe if you partake. You must believe that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead indicates that He has fully satisfied the justice of God in removing all of the guilt for you sin. It is all gone. If you do not believe that, then what you are saying is that you don’t actually believe that the death of Jesus was sufficient to cover you sins, and if you don’t believe that, you are going to spend the rest of your life trying to make up to God for what you have done. And that is to insult the sufficiency of the work of God’s Son in loving you, and caring for you and paying for your sin.

This is a ritual. This is a symbolic, not a “real” meal such as most of us will go home and enjoy later on today. We need to be very careful when we think about engaging in a ritual. Rituals can easily become empty, hollow, a denial of the very thing we want them to be. It is a symbolic meal. But we must be careful what we mean by “symbolic”. A distinction is often drawn between Christianity and “religion”. If we are careful, it is a good distinction to make. “Religion” when used in a negative frame of reference indicates that a person engages in various kinds of actions that are designed to win a favorable notice, or to make points with, or to somehow recommend yourself to what ever god it is you worship. All religions have rituals. When we see the Muslim bowing five times a day in prayer, he is carrying out a ritual, and he will tell you explicitly that he is doing that in order to win favor from Allah. That is anathema to us. Anathema means “condemning judgment to eternal hell.” What? That is right! For such people, what really matters is the action you take, because it is the action that is going to earn favorable recognition from “God”. So if anybody is here and you think you need to take the elements in order to win God’s favor, don’t! You will only earn God’s deepened judgment.

Christianity is profoundly different in its understanding of the relationship between God and man. When the Christian comes to the table, the Christian is by faith obeying Jesus’ instructions in the eating of the bread and drinking of the cup. What the Christian does when he/she comes to the table is by faith he/she appeals to God that, despite the fact that we continue to be sinners, that God in His Spirit would graciously make Himself known to us; that our hearts and minds would be open to the reality of His presence with us, that the veil that tends to be drawn across our consciousness because of continued involvement in sin would be pulled away; and the bright light of His presence would fill us up and we would have joy in the knowledge of His redemption and His goodness to us; the marvelous affirmation that He loves us, and because He loves us, we obey. For the Christian, when it comes to something like the Supper what is important is faith, trusting the already given fact of God’s love for us, not something we earn.

This is why, if you look again at those words in Luke, Jesus did not say something like this – he could have said something, Greek is able to say something, like this, and he didn’t – He didn’t say, “Think of the bread as representing my body;” or “think of the cup as representing my blood.” He did not say that. What did he say? He said this is my body and this is my blood. We ignore that most of the time; we shouldn’t. It was to capture this sense of the actual, immediate presence of Jesus that the Roman Catholic Church established the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Catholics decided, they said, “You know in order for us to fully grasp the reality that Jesus is actually here, we believe that the bread and the cup are actually transformed into the flesh and blood of Jesus.” We don’t believe that; we think that was a mistake and it got the Catholic Church into a lot of trouble as they moved in that direction. (I am not going to go into that; that is not the purpose of my comments.) One of the first things that the Reformation did was to eliminate [this teaching], recognizing that the point of the Lord’s Supper is not to be found in some amazing transformation of the bread and the cup, but rather the transformation is in us. That is where the transformation occurs.

But that transformation needs to be not just the psychological one, but rather what you might call a theological or a spiritual one. Here we come to the point. Jesus is the bread, and He is the blood, and He is the host for the meal. I don’t mean that in the symbolic manner. In literal fact, when I stand and invite you to the meal, it is Jesus who invites you. This is one of the reasons why, by the way in all of the traditional Reformation churches the pastor never dressed in my kind of clothes. Do we all remember what he used to dress in? He was covered in a robe. The reason for that covering was to say, “I want you to understand something about who I am and who I am not. I am not John Bronson. Who I am is the servant and the spokesperson for Jesus Christ. When I am covered with this robe, I want you to forget about my specific personality and I want you to think about the Lord Jesus Christ in a very lively way.” Now, we don’t do that anymore, and understandably in light of the abuse in the past. But we should not forget the point. The point is, I John do not invite you to this supper. And the deacons in this church and the elders are not the ones who have made it available. It is Jesus. He is the One. And you in yourself don’t want to meet with me, you want to meet with the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ and know that that is the One that you remember and that you worship. This is the real presence of Jesus.

I have a pragmatic reason for wanting us to be alerted to this because we are now going to move to some comments about prayer. It is the same with prayer as it is with the Supper. Whether in the ritual of Communion or the discipline of prayer, that which is of greatest importance is our fellowship, our communion with Christ. If our prayers are basically like this, that I sit in a place and I talk, with no

anticipation of hearing anything from God, you just wasted your time. What you want is to meet with the Lord. That is what you need to seek, to wait upon. Remember that I drew the distinction between prayer on the run and deliberate prayers. It is in the deliberate praying that we need to focus upon this.

Prayer is often hard work, especially deliberate prayer. We don't expect that to be the case and so we falter. For men this is particularly difficult. Men like to pray on the run. They do not like to pray deliberately, because they feel like it is a waste of time. Men like to do! They do not like to wait. I made the comment last week; all people pray, even atheists, which is a wonderful thing to think about. Can't you just imagine some atheist at the end of the age and Jesus walks up and says, "Hey Mack, I heard you all eighteen times you prayed. I was right there!" And Mack says, he says, "Oh boy." All people pray. However, obviously, not all people pray correctly. They do not always pray to the true God, and sometimes even if we pray to the true God, we don't pray as we should.

This is one of the reasons why Paul writes in Romans 8:26-27 and he makes this statement: *"...the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."* Paul tells us at this point that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. And in this little passage he indicates that there are two ways that He helps us. He helps us with the content of our prayers: what to pray for. He also helps us with how to pray: what to pray for, and with how to pray.

Let me make a few comments about how to pray. Perhaps at this point you are thinking, "Well, should pray sitting or standing? Should we raise our hands or should we bow our heads?" Those are matters of very small importance. But these are matters of great importance. In Matthew chapter 6 before He introduces the Lord's prayer, Jesus has some very important comments to make about how to pray. His first comment is, you pray with your mind fixed only on God. Remember that that is where He talks about the Pharisees who loved to stand on the corners and they would actually have someone blow a horn in order that all would know that "I am going to pray to God now; may we have a holy hush while I lift my voice up and give proper praise and glory to God! Have you been noticing my virtues?!" But Jesus says, hide. Go in your closet where no one knows what you are doing, and pray. Sole attention on God: turn off your cell phone, I-pod, cut yourself off from all human interference and focus on God!! In one of the books I am reading from the conference has to do with what does it mean to live in a digital age. The younger we are, the more difficult it is. So, sole focus on God, that is how we pray. Furthermore, we are not to be using vain and empty repetition. God is not interested in flattery. Those are the negatives.

But what about this in Luke 18:1-8, Jesus said we are to pray with perseverance. There is an immense difference between perseverance and mindless repetition. Perseverance basically says, how much do want it and what are you willing to do in order to have it happen? Will you persevere until the answer comes? We are to continue in prayer until the matter we have raised with God is settled. In Hebrews 4:16 we are told to approach God boldly or with confidence. In the Old Testament we have a beautiful example in the story of Elijah in his dramatic confrontation with the idolatrous priests who served Queen Jezebel. We are told in that tale that not only did Elijah successfully prevail upon God send fire from heaven to consume this offering he put on the altar, we are also told that after Elijah prayed for the fire, he went to the top of the mountain at the end of three years of drought and he knelt down on the ground, and he put his head between his hands and he said, "Bring rain." He had to send his servant seven times to look out at the sea and see whether or not there was any evidence of rain. On the seventh time we are told a little fist shaped

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cloud appeared over the waters, and Elijah said, “Run!” And the storm came. James picks up on that and compliments Elijah’s fervency. If we pray, we must pray with faith and hope. Hebrews 11:6 makes this comment: “. . . *without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.*”

How is your prayer life? Perhaps it would make an immense difference if we took with greater seriousness what the Word of God tells us about how we are to pray. So often, is it not true, that our prayers are light and passing, that the prayers we offer are actually wishes: “I wish this would be true but . . . who knows?” Our prayers do not spring from conviction; they do not arise out of a deep personal meeting with God, saturated in His Word so that I have every confidence that the desire of my heart is in agreement with the will of God.

“The Spirit himself intercedes with us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8:26-27) How does the Spirit pray? What did we just learn? He prays with groanings. What you and I need to ask ourselves is, when is the last time that we in prayer were so gripped by what we wanted and longed for that we groaned within our spirit, crying out to God, “Let this be!” We will speak more about this next Sunday. What does the Spirit pray for? He prays for the will of God. So should we.

Pray with me now: gracious Father in heaven, we are about to partake off the Supper. Jesus said that He desired with great desire to eat that meal. He knew what it was. It was the last, the prelude, indeed, it was the picture of what was about to be done. He was to have His body rent, His blood spilt; and that would only be in the midst of the most awful degradation of His person by men who hated Him, by men who betrayed Him, by men who deserted Him. And You, Father, would withdraw from Him and let the whole of your wrath pour out upon Him, that You in Your perfect holiness and justice that You would be justified before all men and angels and principalities, having bought for the full price all of Your mercies and Your grace so freely given to us. We give You thanks, Father. We pray in the name of the risen Savior. Amen.

(No questions this week.)