

Prayer more than just habit

Sunday School Lesson

The opening of the Christian gatherings with a word of prayer is more than a good habit; it is an expression of our basic faith and character. Our study today begins with a word on prayer from 1 Thessalonians 3.

The opening verses of 1 Thessalonians 3 record the apostle Paul's concern for his friends in Thessalonica, his sending of Timothy to encourage them (since he could not go himself), and his rejoicing at Timothy's return, with good news of steadfastness. "Now we live," he exults, "if (or since) ye stand fast in the Lord" (v.8). With verse 9 comes the mention of specific prayer. Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians and for the joy they have brought him, and he continues with a petition that he may revisit them and supply what is still lacking in their faith and life (verses 10, 11).

This shift from thanks to petition, and from rejoicing in his friends' accomplishments to concern for their maturity in Christ, reflects an attitude that is critically important in kingdom labors. Is God's messenger never satisfied and always asking for more? Yes, he is never satisfied! Pleased with good - certainly! Satisfied with an unchanging level in that goo - certainly not! One might as well expect a proud parent to be satisfied with 2-year old behavior in a 4-year-old child.

There is a difference, however, between our children on the one hand and God's children on the other. In this world we reach physical maturity and cease growing. Our minds slow down, and we quit learning. But in Christ we never reach the end opportunity for development, and we always have eternity to anticipate. Our text this week deals with carrying out our earthly responsibilities while looking past them to heaven.

Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians to allow God to make them "increase and abound in love one toward another" (3:12). The New International Version renders this, "Make your love increase and overflow for each other." The love that God has manifested to us in Jesus is to stimulate us not only to love Him in return, but to love all who are in Him.

But even this is not the whole story. Verse 12 adds that this love is to abound not just "to one another," but "toward all." Thus, our love is to overflow like the Nile to refresh and renew all the lives we touch in the process. Christian living should not be restricted and directed as if being forced through a concrete sluiceway. Rather, it must be allowed to expand and to enrich art, literature, civic concerns, commerce, medicine, political life - indeed, everything we touch as Christians.

The Christian's love for others will lead toward increasing holiness. Thus, the monastic life, in which one withdraws from social contacts, is not the way to godliness. While holiness must affect our hearts, a key to one's acceptance before Jesus will be the practical expression of love to the sick, the sorrowing, the hungry, and the homeless (Matthew 25:31-46).

The final judgment on holiness will take place at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in His glory. Accompanying Jesus at His appearing will be a vast retinue of saints - those holy people who have departed "to be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23) and who will participate in the glory of His triumphant return. Some believe that word 'saints' includes the angels.

Like a seed which grows into a tree

Friday is World Day of Prayer. Here is a list of local churches observing the event.

Ebenezer Baptist Church
202 West Sugar Creek Road
Noon

Hood Memorial AME Zion Church
305 Stacco Street
Belmont
7 p.m.

Saint Luke Baptist Church
1401 North Allen Street
11 a.m.

The Pines Retirement Home
400 Avinger Lane
Davidson
11 a.m.

The Pines Retirement Home
400 Avinger Lane
Davidson
11 a.m.

Plaza Presbyterian Church
2304 The Plaza
10 a.m.

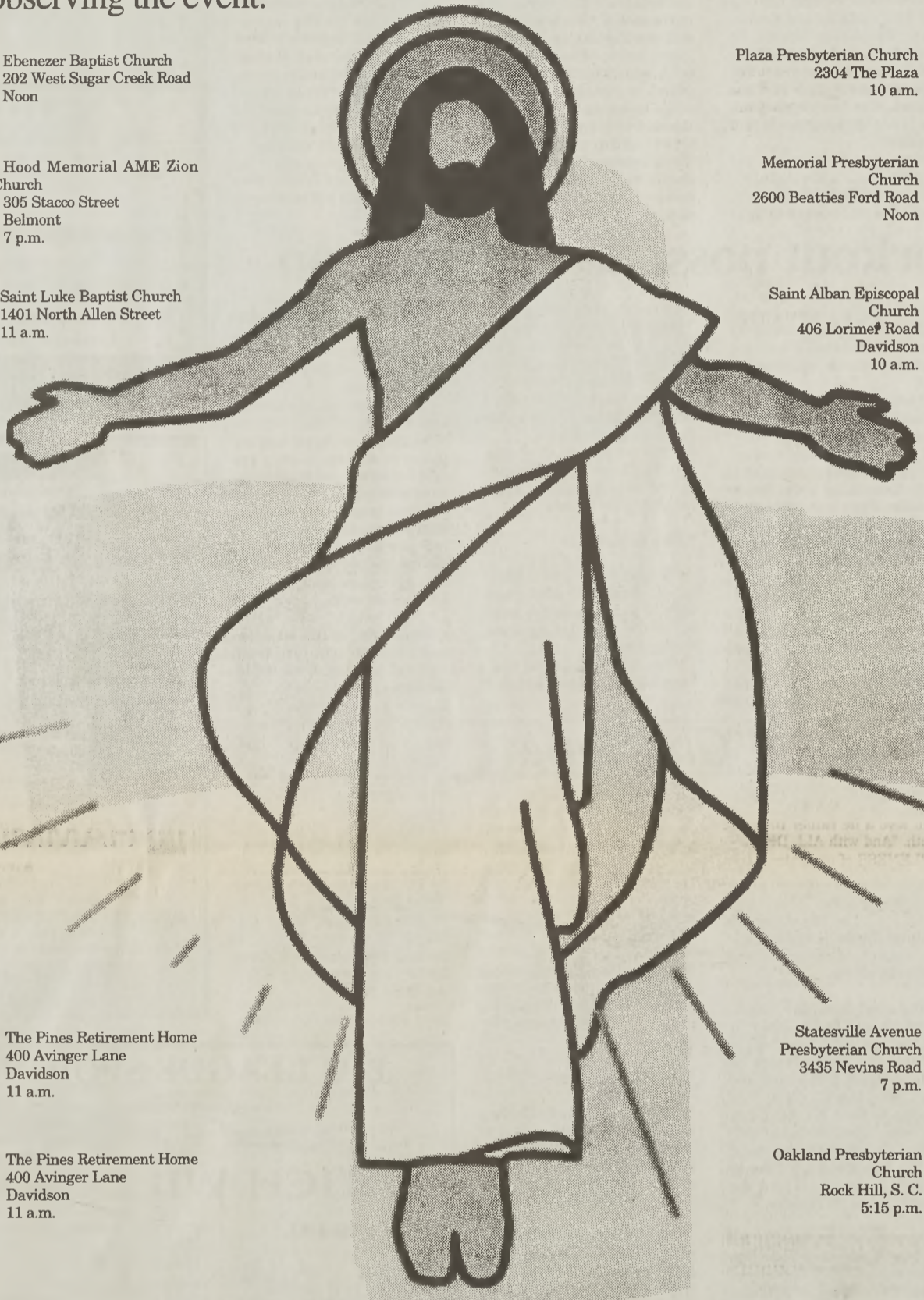
Memorial Presbyterian Church
2600 Beatties Ford Road
Noon

Saint Alban Episcopal Church
406 Lorime# Road
Davidson
10 a.m.

Statesville Avenue Presbyterian Church
3435 Nevins Road
7 p.m.

Oakland Presbyterian Church
Rock Hill, S. C.
5:15 p.m.

Sharon Towers
5100 Sharon Road
10 a.m.



God, you too can be a winner Sweepstakes notice sent to God at Florida church

By Tom Bayles
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TAMPA, Fla. - American Family Publishers found God in Sumter County. And He may be very, very rich.

A sweepstakes notice arrived at the Bushnell Assembly of God earlier this month announcing God, of Bushnell, Fla., was a finalist for the \$11 million top prize.

"I always thought he lived here but I didn't actually know," said Bill Brack, pastor of the church about 60 miles north of Tampa. "Now I do. He's got a P.O. box here."

"God, we've been searching for you," American Family wrote in the letter, as first reported by the local weekly newspaper, the Sumter County Times.

The message was centered between two round seals requesting God to "come forward."

If God were to win, the letter stated, "What an incredible fortune there would be for God! Could you imagine the looks you'd get from your neighbors? But don't just sit there, God."

Sweepstakes officials did not return several telephone calls for comment Thursday.

Brack said a youth pastor collected the mail that day and pointed out the addressee. "I read it in church a couple of weeks ago and everyone got a kick out of it," he said. "It is funny and everybody seemed to enjoy it. It lifted everybody's heart."

Brack said his 140-person congregation is considering whether to mail in the entry. The church could use the money.

If they win, Brack said he'd settle with American Family for 10 percent on the dollar and call it even.

"I'm willing for them to show up here at the church with cameras and me in my bathrobe as long as they write a check," he quipped.

And if American Family chooses a different winner?

"God would be disappointed," Brack joked.

Minister says churches should battle AIDS

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOSTON - African American churches have an obligation to lead a campaign against AIDS, say many black ministers nationally.

Several black clergymen said that while some black churches in the area have addressed the epidemic, too many African American congregations resist dealing with the issue.

"Folks have to start realizing that it is criminal, sinful to be out of the fray," said the Rev. Jeffrey L. Brown, pastor of the Union Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass.

He also is chairman of the Ten Point Coalition, an organization led by ministers that cosponsored Sunday's gathering, called a healing service, at the Columbus Avenue AME Zion Church in the Roxbury section.

More than 20 black ministers attended and apologized for what they saw as a lack of leadership by the black church in the fight against AIDS.

They offered prayers for those

with AIDS or infected with the virus that causes it.

"We confess that a vision has been needed, and we have failed to make it plain," said the Rev. Barbara Perriman of Morningstar Baptist Church in the Mattapan section.

"To the extent to which the black church is supposed to serve as custodians of moral order and spiritual leadership, to that extent, the church has to be out front," said the Rev. Eugene Rivers of the Azusa Christian Community Center in Dorchester.

AIDS is the leading cause of death for blacks aged 25 to 44.

Most African American churches are conservative, especially on issues involving sex, which may explain the reluctance of some of them to talk about AIDS openly.

In general, they promote abstinence as the correct sexual conduct outside of marriage, and many of them consider homosex-

uality a sin.

However, as ministers of an increasing number of black churches have to deal with members with AIDS or HIV, the virus that causes it, it is recognized that African American

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churches cannot afford to avoid the issue.

Locally, several Gastonia ministers have heeded the call. This week marks the first Week of Prayer/Revival for the Healing of AIDS, a program sponsored by local congregations and the community HIV/AIDS Task force, an affiliate of the AIDS Council of Gaston County.

Five Gastonia churches have volunteered to open their sanctuaries to AIDS/HIV workshops. The workshops will be followed by church services.

The two groups hope that by combining resources, more people will find out how to prevent

the spread of the virus, which affects 527 Gaston County residents. Blacks make up 70 percent of confirmed HIV cases in the county.

"Our understanding of the Bible, the message of the gospels, calls for us to respond," said the Rev. Michael Robinson, pastor of Love's Chapel Presbyterian Church. "The AIDS crisis inspires us to put our faith into action."

The local effort joins with national observances motivated by a program called Balm in Gilead, a national effort to get churches more involved in the fight against AIDS.

"The AIDS epidemic shows every sign of increasing its deadly impact in our communities through ignorance and lack of resources," BIG founder and CEO Pernessa Seele said.

"Actually, the reason we're taking it to the churches is that African Americans tend to take their problems and needs to pas-

tors," Arvelle Isbell of the Gaston County Health Department said. "We think taking it to the pastors will help get the information out."

Organizers hope to see 50 to 100 attendees at the sessions which run through Friday.

"Now is the time to affirm the legacy of the African American church as a beacon of light in the midst of this Gilead of hopelessness and fear," Seele said. "We invite all black churches to become the balm of faith, knowledge and strength that will the difference in the lives of people who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS."

• Thursday - 6 p.m. Community Resources, Tabernacle Baptist Church, 519 19th St.

Friday - 6 p.m. Faith Perspective HIV and Women, Friendship Baptist Church, 221 W. Bradley Ave.

For more information, call 853-5138.