

Intro: The Christian life lived *upward* is a life of **worship**, of bowing before God in humble recognition that He is God and we aren't; that we live and move and have our being in Him, and that salvation is found nowhere else than in following Jesus Christ as Lord by presenting ourselves as living sacrifices in a way that is holy and acceptable to God.

The Christian life lived *inward* is a life of **community**, fellowship, service, and love, as we are made members of one body, and thus members of one another. Our worship binds us to one another, and so we care for one another as family, brothers and sisters in Christ. We give one another food and drink, welcome, clothing, shelter, and companionship. We rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, bearing one another's burdens, and so fulfilling the law of Christ.

The Christian life lived *outward* is a life of **mission**, of discipling the nations through baptism and teaching, of bearing witness to the truth that Jesus is Lord, of making a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in us, of serving the world by proclaiming the gospel through word and deed, of praying for all people and for kings, that they may come to the knowledge of the truth, of evangelizing everyone so that we may bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and of showing mercy and doing good to all men in the name of Christ.

These are all essential aspects of life as God's people, and a church that is not pursuing faithfulness in all three areas is not a healthy church. Just like a car is not doing well if it has a great engine, and a pristine body, but no wheels, a church that doesn't function in all three directions isn't healthy. Or, to use another analogy, it doesn't matter how polished or strong two out of three legs on a stool are: if one is broken, don't sit on it!

And so over the years, you've heard me use this triplet of ideas to explain the life of the church, and for the past several years, we've been setting out congregational prayers in each area, as points of emphasis to help us keep sight of the whole while at the same time exploring the parts. We can't say everything all at once, but we also can't allow essential aspects of church life to disappear into the background while we focus on one particular angle. This is challenging to do, but since we serve a God who is ever three and always one, we shouldn't be surprised, and we can't give up trying. God Himself is the perfect balance of unity and plurality, the one and the many, and ultimately everything we do is shaped by that truth, that reality.

And so today, my goal is to introduce our three prayer requests for 2018, which are largely drawn from the texts of Scripture that we read, but informed by others as well, and fill out of the background of why these prayers are so important, and ways in which we can plant and water our fields, so that when God answers our prayers with His heavenly rain, good fruit will grow in our congregation.

Worship: Sweet Incense – This year, we are asking the Lord that our worship would rise up as sweet incense before Him. Psalm 141 gives us this image, originally found in Genesis 8, when God receives Noah’s burnt offerings as a pleasing aroma after cleansing the world through the flood, which then became a major feature of the sacrificial system under Moses. We see this same idea in Rev. 5:8, where the living creatures and the elders hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

The big idea is this: sin stinks to high heaven, but sacrifices smell sweet to God. In our worship, we bring the sacrifice of praise, and we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, and when we do it in a way that pleases God, our worship rises up as sweet incense.

The reason why we are praying that our worship will be received as sweet incense is because *there is such a thing* as worship that stinks. Some *worship* is unacceptable to God. For example, God hates man-made worship: In Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu cook up their own incense, inventing their own way to worship God, which he had not commanded them, and fire fell from heaven and consumed them.

Our goal in 2018 is to worship in such a way that we are not consumed by a fireball from heaven, and this prayer will be answered if we worship in the way that God has commanded, rather than adding our own special touches. When we add things into worship that God hasn’t commanded, God isn’t *impressed by our creativity*, He is *displeased by the stench of our disobedience*.

The way we worship here at this Church is the way it is because we want everything we do in worship to be founded on God’s Word. Under the Word of God, there is room for freedom and creativity in *applying* God’s commands, but we do not have the freedom to *add* to God’s commands.

For example, sometimes I preach following the lectionary, sometimes I preach passage by passage through a book, and sometimes I preach on a biblical topic, from multiple passages. That’s freedom in *application*. But I am not free to *add* to worship by preaching from some other book besides the Bible – I can’t base my sermon on the newspaper, or Narnia, or even one of my heroes like Martin Luther or Charles Spurgeon. We’re not free to open up the pulpit for a political speech, or a poetic reflection on life, even if it’s a politician or poet who loves Jesus. We can’t replace teaching God’s Word with Q&A time, sharing time, or drawing our feelings with chalk. God said that *when the Church gathers for worship*, we are to preach the Word, and so while different preachers do it differently, as long as the Word is preached, that’s sweet incense to God.

That’s just one example, making the point that our worship must be according to God’s Word if it is to be sweet incense. We could also make the point that God hates *hypocritical* worship, from Isaiah 1, where God tells Israel that the incense that they offer and the animals that

they are sacrificing are an *abomination* to Him, because while they are *worshiping* according to the Word, they aren't *living* according to the Word. They obey the law in Church, but then they go home and sin up a storm. God says that stinks! He hates that kind of worship! And so when we pray that our worship would be sweet incense, we are praying for God to convict us of sin, so that we will cease to do evil and learn to do good, so that God will accept our worship.

Community: Serving in Love – Moving on to community: this year, we want to highlight loving service as one of the key elements of living together as God's people. Simply attending the same church doesn't make a community - it takes more. What turns a *congregation* into a *community* is serving, suffering, and celebrating. When we rejoice together, when we weep together, and when we sweat together, we are *bound* to each other in a deep way, and this year, as part of that, we want to emphasize serving together.

Galatians 5:13 is a remarkable verse that summarizes Paul's radical teaching on Christian freedom from the Jewish laws and ceremonies, as well as from pagan customs and cultural habits. You are free from all of that, because your Lord Jesus has set you free. But then Paul takes that freedom in an unexpected direction: you are free to be a servant. And in fact, that's not just an option you might choose if you want to; that's what your freedom was *designed* for. You weren't set free to live according to your own desires for comfort and ease. You were set free to serve your brothers and sisters with the gifts and graces that God gave you in Christ.

And so as we pray this prayer, we're asking God to rebuke the natural selfishness that exists within us that leads us to spend every waking moment serving ourselves, as if we were God. No, God is God, and so we serve Him. But as Martin Luther pointed out, God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does! We serve God *by serving each other*.

And the primary way we serve each other is through our vocations, our callings. Americans are really good at volunteering, and adding extra service on top of our callings, which is fine, but really, the main way we serve our neighbors is through the main task that God has given us, whether we also volunteer for any special projects or not. Did you put in a good day's work at the office, at the job site, at school, or at home raising your family? Then you are serving your neighbor, even if you weren't able to help out with Winter Relief or at the Pregnancy Clinic.

But, if the reason you weren't at Winter Relief or the Pregnancy Clinic was because your friend Netflix or the NFL was getting lonely without you, then this prayer from Galatians 5:13 is going to be dangerous for you to pray this year. Praying this prayer might cause God to attack your laziness or your selfishness, and that's gonna hurt! It'll hurt, but it will be good, and it will be an answer to prayer. We are asking God to send His Spirit to make us loving servants to one another, and that's a prayer that He is eager to answer. As we'll soon see in Mark's gospel, He answered that prayer for Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve. *Make us like Jesus, O Lord!*

Mission: Open Doors – Finally, mission: This is the weakest area for our church. Of our three-legged stool, this is the leg that wobbles, to keep us from getting too comfortable. Now, by God's grace, we are supporting both a local evangelist and evangelism efforts overseas, but it's all too easy to think of our outreach efforts as consisting only in writing checks and hoping that someone might accidentally stumble into worship here one Sunday.

And so this year, we're going to pray and prepare and participate in outreach here in our congregation, in our local community. And as God said to us last week, the light spreads through the Word, through preaching, and through the Church. And so as an application, I asked you to think of someone that you can read the Bible with, someone you can invite to hear the preaching of the gospel, someone that you can connect to our Church. I hope you thought about it. I hope you didn't just look in the mirror and then go and forget your face.

So maybe someone came to mind – now pray for an open door. Or maybe you don't have someone specific in mind, but you've been thinking about where to look – at work, at school, at the gym, at the playground. Or maybe you just don't really have any non-Christian friends, and you aren't even sure where to start.

Start here. Start by praying that God would give you an open door to share the gospel this year; to invite someone to church before 2018 ends. Don't use the excuse that all the doors are closed; *pray them open!* And pray that for your brothers and sisters, too. For some of you, it seems you hardly need to pray: your natural gifts, your personality, your social circles just cause doors to pop open all around you. That is a gift from God, so thank Him for those open doors!

But remember to pray for your brothers and sisters who find it much more difficult, and who might not have the same opportunities you do. Pray not just as individuals, but as a Church, realizing that God might answer not by opening one door for each of us, but maybe by opening ten doors for a few of us. If we've been praying together, then we can rejoice together when God answers our prayers in the lives of those around us.

At the same time, I want you to have a holy jealousy – I want you to want to be the one who walks through that open door and leads someone to Christ this year. Not as a point of personal pride, but out of a holy desire to be used by God to share the good news of salvation with someone who desperately need to hear it.

Brothers and sisters, let us worship God, serve one another, and seek open doors for the gospel this year. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray: Lord, may our worship rise up as sweet incense before you. Help us to serve one another in love. And O Lord God, we ask that you would open doors for us to share the gospel, so that you might be glorified in your Church, through our worship, by our community, and in our mission. We thank you for hearing and answering our prayers, for we ask these things in Jesus' name, and Amen.