

Grace and Supplication

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If we all pray...it will be like plugging in on a current whose source is in Heaven. I believe that prayer completes that circuit. It is power.” Gen. George Patton, Dec. 8, 1944

Sup·pli·ca·tion. noun: 1. the action of asking or begging for something earnestly or humbly.

Ask a typical American where supplication falls in their daily practice and it’s doubtful that it would be very high on the list. We are by nature a self-reliant people. That spirit also flows freely through the Christian community. We are the doers, the goers, the senders. We have the answers to life’s daunting questions, solutions to society’s ills, and plenty of money. We build big churches, hold large crusades, and fund great campaigns. So why is our impact on society slipping away? One reason may be the way we pray. Our prayers are supplications of sorts but on the end of the spectrum that doesn’t work up too much of a sweat or require a great deal of sacrifice. But supplication as presented in Scripture is hard work and often lonely and desperate. In our brief time this morning, I would like to focus on three essential qualities of the one who practices true Biblical supplication: compliance, courage, and compassion. There are more, of course, but these three certainly must be present.

The first is compliance. One reason supplication is difficult is because of pride. If we see ourselves as in control, as the solution to the problem, we will find it difficult to approach God in an attitude of true humility and contrition. A proud person is stiff-necked. That’s the word God used numerous times to describe the Israelites, and it wasn’t meant as a compliment. (Ex. 32.9) It aroused His anger. Noncompliant people—stiff-necked people—can’t practice true supplication. The very word *supplication* derives from the Latin word *supplex*, from which we get other words such as “supple.” The supplicant is literally bent at the feet of the one to whom supplication is being made. Taking this picture further, we see the Christian supplicant as bending and conforming to the person and will of God. After suffering loss of his family and possessions, Job said, **“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” (Job. 1:20)** Job was not happy about his situation but he bent himself in compliance to the will of God.

Turning pride, or stiffness, into compliance with the Almighty God is tedious work. Surrendering to the God of the Universe cuts against the grain of our extremely stubborn sin nature. Like a piece of lumber that needs to be bent, our stubborn wills need to be softened, and then slowly, steadily, forcibly molded into the will of God. This idea of surrender is seen in the Greek word translated as supplication, *hiketeria*. The word means “an olive branch.” In ancient times a needy individual approached the one whose aid they implored holding an olive-branch entwined with white wool. This signified that they came as a supplicant, a petitioner—a beggar.

When we come to God in supplication, we wave the white flag of surrender. In our fallenness we are at war with the sovereign God of the Universe. Although through the cross believers have procured a permanent judicial peace with God, what is called justification, we disrupt that peace in the relational setting by our daily sins. Because we are justified we can freely make supplication to God, but it has to be done in the proper attitude. 1 Peter 5:6 tells us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God that He might exalt us at the proper time. Pride inhibits true supplication because, as Peter says, **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”** (1 Peter 5:5)

Moses provides an excellent example of the slow process of compliance. Numbers 12:3 tells us that **“the man Moses was very humble, more than any person who was on the face of the earth.”** Even so, it took 40 years of relative isolation to transform him into the emancipator of Israel. Forty years to change from doing things in his own power to doing them in God’s. Even after those forty years in the

Midian wilderness there was more of Moses to be bent to God's will. But eventually he became the man who regularly prostrated himself before the Lord in supplication for his nation, because of all the sin that his people had committed before the Lord. And because he was that man, God listened to him.

Solomon was also that man, at least at first. Demonstrating the heart and attitude of true supplication, we read in 2 Chronicles 6 that **"he knelt on his knees in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven..."** He then entreated the Lord to fill the temple, dwell among his people, and listen to their pleas. And the Lord listened and did just that. As we stay surrendered to the will of the God and bent in humility before Him, our supplications invite His presence and move His mighty hand.

In addition to compliance, supplication requires courage. The one in power over us might reject our petition and destroy us. Ecclesiastes 5:2 warns, **Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.** Although we are God's adopted children we should still maintain an appropriate reverence of His holiness and majesty. Consider the example of Abraham. Genesis 18 recounts the story as Abraham negotiated with God over the fate of the righteous in Sodom who would be swept away by God's coming wrath. At each plea Abraham begged the Lord to not be angry at him for being so presumptuous. Abraham had a healthy fear of the Lord.

All who truly encounter the holiness of God experience a fear of His judgment. Job said, **"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."** (Job. 42:5-6) Isaiah said, **"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"** (Is. 6:5) As the Righteous Judge, God punishes sin and that should provoke a fear that undoes us. But as the God of love, who sent His only Son to save us, the fear that undoes us is transformed into a confidence that remakes us. In the assurance of faith we stand before a holy God.

Weak humans that we are, we often want for courage before men more than before God. We think of Esther. She was a queen, true, but she was principally a trophy of the king, an adornment for his harem. As the story goes, her cousin Mordecai had uncovered the plot of Haman to destroy the Jews. He needed Esther to rise to the occasion, go to the king and plead their case. But Esther feared the king. She couldn't just waltz in and make her request. She risked not only losing her people, but her head, too! After a pep talk from Mordecai, however, Esther summoned the courage to go to the king. But she was carried on a huge wave of supplication. For three days Esther, Mordecai, and all of the Jews in the land fasted and prayed for a favorable response from the king. God was with Esther. The scepter was extended and she poured out the plight of her people, entreating the king to spare them a genocidal fate. God honored Esther's supplication and opened the king's ears and heart. Justice was served and the conspirator Haman saw the end of a rope rather than the end of the Jews. As James says, **"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."** (James 5:16b NIV)

Likewise, we think of Elijah. The prophet had incurred the wrath of king Ahab, and his conniving queen, Jezebel, patron saints of evil power couples for all ages. They hated the prophets of God, especially that "troubler of Israel," Elijah. But Elijah had the courage to call on the name of the Lord and challenge the prophets of Baal. He had the courage to inundate his altar with water, making it physically impossible to conjure up fire. He had the courage to endure the taunts and incantations of his opposition. God heeded Elijah's supplications and sent fire from heaven that consumed both Elijah's offering and the entire altar itself. **"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."**

And no discussion of courage would be complete without the example of Daniel, who under penalty of death dared defy an edict of his king. Daniel was a prime minister to the pagan King Darius, but he was fully bent in humility toward God. The king had signed off on an law against making petition to anyone other than himself for thirty days. Daniel, as was his custom three times a day, went to his room, whose windows faced Jerusalem, and made supplication to the Lord in full view of those who sought his death.

For his “crime,” Daniel was thrown into a den of ravenously hungry lions. God rewarded the courage of His faithful servant, shut the mouths of the lions and preserved Daniel’s life. The king was overjoyed and satisfied the lion’s hunger with some tasty conspirators. Again, **“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”**

Biblical supplication challenges our faith. Consider the widow of Zerephath. Elijah had decreed to Ahab that there would be neither “dew nor rain in Israel for three years,” (I Kings 17:1) and God had made good on that prophecy. The streams had dried up and food was scarce. Elijah encountered the widow as she gathered sticks for a small cooking fire—her last. Elijah asked for a drink of water. As she left to get it, he called out for her to give him some bread, too. The widow informed him that she only had enough flour and oil for one final meal that she was going to share with her son before they starved to death. Doubtless, the widow was a bit conflicted as she used the last of her stores to make bread for Elijah. But she possessed a courageous faith so she did as directed, seemingly unconcerned about where her next meal might come from. In response, God miraculously provided for her and her son. Her flour and oil did not run out until the land was able to recover from the drought.

George Muller, the famed British evangelist observed, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.” Throughout his long ministry, Muller remained resolved never to ask for funds from people or to borrow money. He went to God alone for every need, trusting wholly in the Lord’s faithfulness and provision. And God met every need. Muller’s faith was patterned on that of the widow of Zerephath.

A third quality of effective, godly supplication is that of compassion. You can’t pray for those you hate. And it’s hard to hate those for whom you are praying. Let’s go back to Moses. Many times the Israelites pushed him to the limit with their complaining and stubbornness. But Moses had extraordinary compassion on his people. More than once God announced His intention to destroy the nation and build a new one out of Moses himself. Moses would, in a sense, supplant Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as the supreme patriarch. It would be Moses’ obedience that would be rewarded and long remembered.

But Moses did not give in to such temptation. In fact, there is no indication that the idea of personal greatness even crossed his mind. His immediate response was to supplicate for his stiff-necked people. Moses reminded God of all that he had done to rescue the nation from their captivity to Pharaoh. Moses stood in the gap for his obstinate fellow countrymen, acknowledging their sin, pleading for grace, and above all seeking the glory of Jehovah. Moses told his people, “That is why I threw myself down before the Lord for forty days and nights—for the Lord said he would destroy you. I prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, do not destroy them. They are your own people. They are your special possession, whom you redeemed from Egypt by your mighty power and your strong hand.’” (Deut. 9:25-26 NLT)

Because of the compassionate supplications of one godly man, God relented from destroying Israel. I doubt Moses knew or liked all of his kinsmen. And humanly speaking, he probably didn’t like some of those he knew. But Moses’ compassion looked beyond the surface to the God who created us in His image. It looked to our desperate need for a restored relationship with our Creator. The people of Israel would never fully know what their leader had accomplished for them, how close to destruction they were. Had they known, they would have been far more grateful for their deliverance rather than romanticize their servitude back in Egypt. In the same way, the people we pray for—whether dear to us or far removed—will never know what our supplications brought them in the way of God’s blessings or the staying of His hand in judgment.

All of these examples point to the one whose perfect supplications on our behalf opened the way to eternal life. On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. But before he mounted that hill Jesus knelt in a garden. Although his companions were nearby, he was alone—pouring out his heart to the only one who could carry him through the terrible journey on which he was about to embark.

Hebrews 5:7 says, **“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”** Those days of prayers and supplications culminated in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. The air was silent, but the heavens were being rocked by the supplications of the Son of God. A load greater than the mass of the entire universe was about to be heaped upon him: the burden of every sin committed throughout history by every man, woman, and child who ever drew breath.

He prayed for his own, for that slumbering group of Apostles the Father had given him. They had received his words of eternal life and would soon be charged with taking the message of the gospel to all the world. But now he was going away. Compassion fueled Jesus’ very reasonable fear that their physical slumber reflected a deeper slumber of the spirit, which would make them ripe for the picking of that prowling lion, the serpent of old and Jesus’ archenemy, Satan. God heard his supplications. None were lost.

Jesus also made supplication for **“those who will believe in me through their word.”** (John 17:20) That’s all of us who have received Jesus in faith. You, me, all who have been adopted as children of God by faith in the name of Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, we were the subject of his supplications on that night long ago! And we live secure in the knowledge that we are inseparably his because, as Hebrews tells us, as our **high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens, he always lives to make intercession for us.** (Heb. 7:24-26)

Finally, Jesus made fervent supplication for himself. In his humanity, he truly did not want to drink the cup of his Father’s wrath. He didn’t want to be separated from his Father even for a nanosecond. So he made one final plea for a way out, but only if it was his Father’s will. It was this plea that drew blood—before the blows to his face and body, before the thorns on his head, before the lashes to his back, before the nails in his hands and feet.

God heard this supplication, too. He revered it, for it was given by a perfectly obedient son. But the cup had to be drunk, drained to the last drop. The curse had to be lifted. Death had to be destroyed. The way of life had to be opened. Disobedient children had to be forgiven. God revered his son’s supplication but He rejected it out of love for us. God gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. The rejection of Jesus’ supplication on his own behalf unlocked the door to heaven. There was and is no other way.

The lessons of the Old Testament saints and the example of our Lord teach us that we are to make our supplications with compassion, with courage, and above all, with compliance to the will of the Father. We make supplication with compassion because we all like sheep have gone astray. We are fallen humans who need a Savior who ever lives to make intercession for us. Those we do not especially like need our compassionate supplication on their behalf.

We make supplication with courage because that’s what moves the hand of God. Hebrews 4:16 exhorts us to **“come boldly unto the throne of grace.”** It is courageous supplication, audacious supplication, that shapes us into bold, assured, and triumphant Christ-followers and keeps our spiritual flour and oil flowing through the worst of times. Staying passive under the pious mask of God’s sovereignty is nothing more than fatalism. The Christian faith is a living faith. Dead ritual has no place in it.

Finally, and most important, we make supplication bent in compliance to God’s will because that is the only posture that works. Try it any other way and you will fail in frustration. But that is to look at it negatively. To conform to the will of God, to align our heart with His, is to press into His being just as an infant settles peacefully into the folds of its parent’s arms.

As we come before the Almighty God, may our supplications be infused with compassion, fueled by courage, and governed by compliance with His good and perfect will. By His grace, Amen.