

Title: Supplication
Text: Ephesians 6:18
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We are in our fourth and final week of our series exploring four different modes of prayer: Adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication, which together form the helpful acronym ACTS. We began by discovering that:

Adoration is bowing before the beauty of God.

Following in we faced the reality that:

Confession is bowing before the holiness of God.

Finally, last week we celebrated the fact that:

Thanksgiving is bowing before the grace of God.

This week we turn to supplication.

Supplication is not a word we use much in the 21st century. The Webster dictionary defines supplication as:

(The action of) asking humbly or earnestly.

Supplication is the most common prayer we most likely offer. It is the prayer of asking.

In the Sermon on Mount Jesus taught this:

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!
(Matthew 7:9-11)

Jesus is telling us we pray to a good Father who loves to give his children good gifts. And so:

Supplication is bowing before the goodness of God.

There is a story told of a journalist who is assigned to the Jerusalem. She takes an apartment living in the old city overlooking the Wailing Wall – the remnant of the Western Wall of the temple where hundreds of orthodox Jews pray every day. Every day when she looks out her apartment window, she sees one particular old Jewish man praying vigorously. He is there every day from early in the morning until late in the afternoon. Late one afternoon the journalist goes down and introduces herself to the old man just as he is leaving the wall.

She asks, "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?"

The old man replies, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for world peace. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication disease from the earth."

The journalist is amazed. "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?" she asks.

The old man looks at her sadly. "Like I'm talking to a wall."

Let me offer you a confession this morning. There are times when I feel like I'm praying to a wall. Have you ever felt like that? There have been times when I offered up my prayers to God, when I have humbly and earnestly asked a good God for good gifts and it has seemed like my prayers have bounced back off the walls of heaven, returning unanswered. Let me put it in a 21st century way. There are times when my prayers to God bounce back at me like an email sent with the mistyped address.

Let me go a step further. Some of my greatest testimonies as a follower of Jesus have been as a result of prayers wonderfully answered by God. But also, some of my biggest disappointments as a Christian have been in prayer. For example, I have asked for friends to be healed, and that haven't. That's a good gift isn't it? Why won't a good God give it then?

As the disappointments stack up in prayer, one after another, we can come to the point where we give up asking altogether. Why risk one more crushing disappointment? Too many of us live in a place of faith-less fatalism – where we effectively say 'que sera sera' – whatever will be, will be. It will come as no surprise to you that the bible does not allow for faith-less fatalism. Rather, it encourages faith-filled optimism when approaching God with our requests. We have seen it in Jesus' own words. Let's now turn to a man whose life was drenched in prayer, the Apostle Paul. For the rest of this message I want to focus on this one verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he speaks specifically of the prayer of supplication:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (supplication). With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.
(Ephesians 6:18 NIV)

The word the NIV translates as 'requests' is the Greek word 'densis', which in other versions is supplication. This verse is all about supplication prayer. I want us to unpack the verse word by word and as we do, I hope you will come to the same conclusion I did:

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything, asking for our needs and the needs of others with stubborn perseverance.

And

Ephesians 6:18 begins with 'And', which immediately tells us we must look at what precedes it to make full sense of what Paul is saying. And what immediately precedes this verse is Paul's plea for the Ephesians to put on the full armour of God as they do spiritual battle. The section begins this way:

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.
(Ephesians 6:10-11)

Paul makes sure we know that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but principalities and powers and dark forces of evil in the spiritual realm. So we have to be battle-ready – wearing the full spiritual armour of God, which he then details, finishing with the only weapon that Paul lists:

Take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit...
(Ephesians 6:17-18)

Paul is saying that the two offensive weapons we have as we do spiritual battle are the Word of God and prayer - nothing less and nothing more.

Folks, this is why you will get sick of pleading with you to develop the spiritual disciplines of bible reading and prayer. If you want to overcome in your life, if you really want to live as more than a conqueror, if you really want to experience

the fresh with of the Spirit in your life then place yourself in the place where God can empower you by immersing your life in the bible and soaking your days in prayer.

Make no mistake - we are in a spiritual battle. We all have a spiritual enemy who is constantly trying to drag us down and take us out. Jesus earthly ministry began with prayer and fasting as he endured forty days of temptation in the desert. And his earthly ministry ended with a night of agonizing, heartfelt prayer as he wrestled in the Garden of Gethsemane with the enormity of the day that was to come. For the three years in between, when Jesus wasn't teaching or healing the sick, he was alone in prayer. Jesus saturated his life in spirit-fueled prayer. We must, must, must do the same.

Pray in the Spirit

Paul says 'And pray in the spirit'. Supplication is speaking with God.

In prayer God always has the first word. Eugene Peterson has said:

Prayer is answering speech. The first word is God's word.
(Eugene Peterson)

God's first word is through my son Jesus I have saved you and with my Holy Spirit I gift you. Every person who has trusted their life to Christ as Lord has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God has taken up residence in their life and infuses it with resurrection power. With that power is the opportunity to listen and speak to God. In the power of the Holy Spirit is the opportunity to have conversations with our Father just as Jesus did. Wow!

We are completely dependent on God to pray in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift God gives us at our conversion. He is also a gift we easily let slip from our life. That's why earlier in his letter to the Ephesians he implore them to be filled with the Spirit over and over and over and over again. We need to keep gulping down the Spirit of God because in our frailty we are like leaky buckets. Henri Nouwen says:

The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either.
(Henri Nouwen)

Supplication is speaking with God.

on all Occasions

Supplication is speaking with God all the time.

Paul is saying pray regularly and constantly. He is saying make the time to pray and with the goal to build a life of prayer. Like bible reading, prayer is a spiritual discipline that is built one act of obedience at a time, one decision to turn from the TV or the internet or whatever it might be, and instead turn to God.

It is no secret I like to drink a certain cola beverage. Like many addicts, I am in denial. I also am prone to Kidney stones. I have had two kidney stone attacks in my life – one since I have been on the Gold Coast. After my first one, my specialist gave me some advice that was hard to hear. He told me that one of the best ways to avoid a future attack was to drink lots of water – not coke – but water. In fact, the US Department of Health offers this official advice:

Water is an inexpensive and calorie-free protection against kidney stones... dark colas have been found to increase the risk of stone formation and should be avoided.
(US Department of Health)

Water flushes the kidneys and works against the build-up of calcium that forms stones. I didn't listen to his advice and I paid with a second attack even more painful than the first. The world-renowned Mayo clinic says that the optimum intake of water for healthy adult is 8-12 glasses drunk over the span of a day.

Here is my point. Just as our body needs a regular intake of water to maintain health, so we need to drink in the presence and power of Jesus to maintain spiritual health. Much as it pains me to say, we need to drink water all the time. And much as it pains some of you to hear, we need to pray all the time. Both require us to establish healthy, daily disciplines.

It seems to me that when it comes to prayer, there are three types of Christians. First there are prayer dieters. These are the people who pray just enough to get through. We stumble through life with a quick prayer here and a distracted prayer there. Along the way we lose spiritual muscle and wonder how often than not we feel spiritually of color.

Then there are the prayer bingers. We are the people who can go for days, weeks – months even –without any real prayer. Then something happens, it doesn't really matter what. We hit a crisis or we feel spiritually empty and for a season we pour out our heart to God in prayer. We storm heaven with our requests. And for a season God seems close. But the effort never becomes a habit, and we fall back into forgetful patterns.

Then there are the prayer warriors. These are the people building a life of prayer in the spirit as they embed regular habits of prayer into every part of life. Like an elite soldier they are always alert, always ready, always looking for an opportunity to speak with God.

The ancient Celts – the Irish in particular - got this. They had prayers for every occasion – washing the dishes, lighting a fire or milking a cow. The Celtic way was to seek and see God's blessing for everything in life, no matter how 'ordinary'. They were prayer warriors.

I don't want to be a prayer dieter, or a prayer binger. I want to be a prayer warrior – learning to pray in the spirit all the time.

Prayer warriors pray in the spirit regularly and constantly.

Supplication is speaking with God all the time.

with all kinds of Prayer and Requests

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything.

As I said earlier, 'requests' is translated from the Greek word 'densis', which means urgent asking of God, imploring of God or child-like asking of God.

The first time that 'densis' occurs in the Bible is in the first chapter of Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that Zechariah was a priest who served God in the temple. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth lived with a deep sadness; they had no children. But one day Zechariah was inside the temple about to burn incense when an angel of God appears before him. The angels said:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer (densis) has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.
(Luke 1:13)

For decades Zechariah and Elizabeth had poured out their hearts to God in desperate, heart-broken, urgent prayer. Their eyes were tear-stained with their prayers. They had waited and prayed. They had prayed and waited. Zechariah and Elizabeth may well have thought they were praying to a stone wall. They may have even given asking, their prayer now simply a terrible ache in their heart.

Paul says to present all our requests – everything to God. Paul says ask for the smallest and seemingly insignificant thing as well as the most substantial. Paul is imploring us not to censor our prayer, but pour out our hearts to God in prayer, trusting that he is a good God who loves giving good gifts to his children.

Our prayer life will reflect the image of God we hold. If we believe God is a reluctant giver, jealously rationing out answers to prayer, we will be reluctant to ask, not wanting to risk disappointment. But if we believe God is good and gracious God who loves giving gifts to his children, we will present everything to God in prayer.

Before we can experience a revolution in our prayer life we need to experience a revolution in our understanding and experience of God.

Folks, we worship a big and generous and gracious God!

One person put it this way:

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance ... it is laying hold of his highest willingness.
(Archbishop Richard Trench)

Present every request to God. Don't hold anything back. Don't censor any prayer. If your request is wrong, trust that God will change your longing. Paul also wrote to the Philippians with a similar encouragement:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition (dennis), with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
(Philippians 4:6)

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything.

The verse finishes:

With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything, asking for our needs and the needs of others with stubborn perseverance.

The phrase 'keep on praying' is translated from the Greek word 'Proskarteresis'. It is an unusual word that Paul has chosen very deliberately to make a very important point. This is the only place in the bible where it occurs. Literally translated, Proskarteresis means persistence despite opposition or impediments. It means persisting obstinately in something or adhering to a task fiercely. Paul is saying pray with stubborn, obstinate, fierce persistence. In prayer, keep on going, keep on asking, keep on expecting, keep on pushing through, keep on crying out, keep on – keep on – keep on. Keep on asking until your voice is hoarse. Keep on seeking until every stone is turned over in prayer. Keep on knocking on the door of heaven until your knuckles bleed.

At home I have a record collection. If you are under the age of 30 you probably don't know what this means. Before mp3 files and even before CD's there were things called vinyl records. You would put them on a turntable, delicately place a needle on surface and magical sounds would come out. All would go well until you got a scratch in the record. When that happened badly, a new and awful groove would form and the needle would get stuck. Every time the turntable made a revolution the same, terrible sound would be made.

Sometimes my prayers sound like a broken record. Day after day I ask for the same thing – sometimes passionately, sometimes just out of habit. And I wait and I wait and I wait for the needle to move out of the groove. Ever feel your prayers are like that? Perhaps Paul is saying that that is broken record prayers – stubborn and fierce prayers – are exactly the sort of prayer God likes to hear. Brian Lowry puts it this way:

I often reflect on the spirited persistence of my prayers; there is a fine line between bold and bullheaded. But in my pondering, I think back on the great texts on prayer and the great prayers themselves. Alongside honesty and deep worship, you will most often find the quality of persistence. It seems the hiccupped, repetitious sounds from another room are music to the ears of God. He listens along with us. At times, he even sets the needle right.

Paul says church in Ephesus and in Philippi to persevere in prayer, to pray like a cracked and broken record. He says the same to the church in Rome:

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful (persistent) in prayer.
(Romans 12:12)

Paul says it the churches in Ephesus, Philippi and Rome, and he says it to the church in Colossae – pray like a broken record:

Devote yourself to prayer, being watchful and thankful.
(Colossians 4:2)

He says it to Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and he says to us – pour out your hearts in passionate, stubborn, obstinate, fierce persistent prayer to God.

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything, asking for our needs and the needs of others with stubborn perseverance.

Why does God ask this of us? Is this some sort of Divine joke? Is God toying with us? Is he being a cruel tyrant? Why do we have to persist – why can't heaven operate like a vending machine – insert the right prayer, press the right buttons and out comes your answer just as you wanted? We live in a world of quick fixes and instant answers. Why can't prayer be like that? These are big questions with even more complex answers. But let me suggest one reason now.

Perhaps persistence in prayer is not about changing God's mind, but about changing us.

In Romans Paul famously says:

Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character hope.
And hope does not disappoint us.
(Romans 5:3-5)

Perseverance produces character – Christ like character that endures.

As we offer our supplications to God, as we persevere in prayer, God by his Holy Spirit forms Christ-like character in us. Such character infuses us with hope that comes by faith – hope that will never, ever disappoint.

Supplication is speaking with God all the time about everything, asking for our needs and the needs of others with stubborn perseverance.

Supplication is bowing before the goodness of God.