

The Heart of Worship

4/4 in Series

Act 4: Supplication

James 4:2-3; Philippians 4:4-7

Psalm 20 (Responsive Reading)

02 27 2011

Scripture Lesson:

Things We Ought To Do

Last week I began a list of things that people **OUGHT to do** but often neglect. Examples include: daily flossing, annual check-ups, and regular exercise. We ought to cut back on salt, limit saturated fat, and sleep eight hours nightly. We should change smoke detector batteries semi-annually, replace heat/air filters quarterly, and balance checkbooks monthly. We really ought to change the car's oil every 3,000 miles, rotate the tires periodically, and check the fluids after every fill-up.

We could make a similar list about our spiritual lives—devotional practices that we ought to do but often ignore. They include Bible study, prayer, worship, fellowship, fasting, meditation, service, witness, and evangelism. John Wesley called these spiritual disciplines "*means of grace*" through which the Holy Spirit blesses God's people.

We serve the Creator of the heavens and the earth, but we often live as spiritual paupers. Our Heavenly Father waits to richly bless his children. It turns out that all we have to do is **ASK!**

The Heart of Worship: ACTS

Today we are continuing our worship series entitled *The Heart of Worship*. We are both examining and experiencing how to worship God in spirit and truth. During the series, we are using the acronym of **ACTS** as an outline for the sermons. **ACTS** stands for: **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication. ACTS is a helpful model for both personal prayer and public worship.

- 1) Act 1 of worship is **Adoration**. Adoration is praising God for who God is. "*The chief purpose of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever*". (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*) We glorify God in worship through song, silence, prayer, fellowship, word, and sacrament.
- 2) Act 2 of worship is **Confession**. When we come into the presence of God's holiness, our own sinfulness is all too evident. The Holy Spirit convinces and convicts us of sin, calling us to confession and repentance. "*If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9)
- 3) Act 3 of worship is **Thanksgiving**. An attitude of gratitude encompasses three movements of faith: recognize the gift, acknowledge the Giver, and give thanks. Colossians 2:7 calls us to be "*overflowing with thanksgiving.*" The heart of worship is a joyful place where God's people are overwhelmed with grace upon grace.

4) Act 4 of worship is **Supplication**. This isn't a common word that we use in regular conversation. Frankly, I tried to find a more recognizable word to use; however, the "S" for "*Supplication*" makes the ACTS' acronym work! I mean, you could use a more familiar word like "plea" or "petition" but then the acronym would be ACTP—and that just doesn't sound right!

Synonyms for supplication include plea, petition, prayer, request, and entreaty.

The act of supplication brings the needs of us and others before God in prayer and worship. We ask our Heavenly Father to intercede on his children's behalf.

Philippians 4:6 instructs us: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*"

We intuitively understand that supplication is a vital part of our personal prayer life. Much of our private devotion involves praying for ourselves and others.

We also worship with this same attitude of supplication. Although we do not always express it in this way, we have all come to church seeking and asking for something in our lives and world. We hope and pray that something significant will occur during this hour together.

Prayer . . . worship . . . ultimately supplication is reflective of the entire Christian faith. The act of supplication—asking and petitioning God—recognizes that there is a basic "given-ness" to life in general and the Christian life in particular. The theological word for this is **grace**. The very act of asking acknowledges that GOD is the author of "*every good and perfect gift.*" (James 1:17) And it is our heavenly Father's good pleasure to bless his children richly.

Supplication

The Bible repeatedly portrays God as our Heavenly Father who wants to bless his children. Earthly parents and grandparents understand this desire. They want the very best for their children and grandchildren. So why do we so often live in spiritual want?

The answer is painfully simple: we don't receive because we do not ask. James 4:2 states this basic truth: "*You do not have because you do not ask God.*"

Professional fundraisers talk about the importance of "**The Ask.**" If you are raising money for a good cause, then you have to look folk in the eye and ask. Consultants preach this fundamental principle: if you don't ask, you won't get. And oftentimes you will get less than the person's potential to give if you don't ask boldly. The goal is to leave no money left lying on the table.

Jesus told a parable about a man who had unexpected guests arrive late at night. He had no bread to feed them, so he woke up his neighbor to ask for help. The sleepy neighbor was less than thrilled at the request. Then Jesus said, "*I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his **importunity** he will rise and give him whatever he needs.*" (see Luke 11:5-13)

"**Importunity**" is not a word we use in everyday conversation. It has traditionally been translated as "*persistence,*" "*boldness,*" or "*shamelessness.*" We are called to bring our requests before God with importunity and confidence. If even a grumpy and rude

neighbor asleep for the night will answer his neighbor's cry, how much more will our heavenly Father respond to his people's prayers!

You've probably seen those news stories about all the money the **IRS** holds in unclaimed refunds. In a recent year (2005), the IRS held \$1.3 BILLION in refunds that people never claimed.

It makes you wonder how many unclaimed blessings there are in heaven's storehouse waiting to be claimed by their rightful owners. We don't need to guard God's wallet—we need to boldly make our supplications known to God.

Jesus once asked the crowds: *"What father among you, if his son asks for a **fish**, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an **egg**, will give him a scorpion? If you then who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Luke 11: 11-13) Matthew's Gospel added, *"Or what man of you, if his son asks him for **bread**, will give him a stone?"* (Matthew 7: 9)

The items Jesus mentioned bear a superficial similarity to one another. A **serpent** found in a fishing net might resemble a fish. A balled up **scorpion** could be mistaken for an egg. A flat, round **rock** has the same shape as a loaf of bread.

But what loving, responsible parent would do such a thing? Even humanity in its sinful and evil ways knows how to give good gifts to our children. How much more will our Heavenly Father bless us? We serve a good and loving God who delights in meeting his children's needs.

When we bring our needs before God, we do not come to a God who is indifferent to our plight, who cares nothing for our needs, or who measures out grace by the ounce. Instead, we come confidently in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray with importunity, persistence, shamelessness, and boldness!

In Romans 8:32, Paul writes: *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

In human terms, I would not hesitate to ask family and friends to borrow something I needed. I feel free to go to them for assistance because of who they are. Jesus taught us to pray to God, *"Our Father, who art in heaven."* Know and trust God's nature. Wants best for his children when we come to him in prayer.

Supplication is ultimately based in God's nature and character. Because we understand God loves us and wants the best for us, we can come in confidence before him with our requests. God's response is not based upon the quality or quantity of our faith, the way we word our prayers, the number of times we repeat them. Instead, it is based upon who God is and the depths of divine love.

Having said all of this, supplication is also a **human activity and responsibility**. Jesus spoke both words of command and promise when he said:

Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks, it will be opened." (Luke 11: 9-10)

The verbs Jesus used to define prayer are both intense and intentional. The Lord does not describe a casual dalliance in devotion but a committed dedication to discipleship. **Intensity:**

- Ask:** cry out, petition, implore, request
- Seek** search, look, hunt, hunger
- Knock:** pound, rap, shake the door

Jesus' instruction on prayer describes not only intensity but also **intentionality**. Call to be regular, constant, and persistent in prayer. Although many prayers are spontaneous, spiritual growth results from a discipline of regular daily prayer.

When Jesus told his disciples to ask, seek, and knock, each verb was in the present perfect tense. They can be translated: *"Keep on asking . . . keep on seeking . . . keep on knocking."* A surprising thing occurs. Those who keep on asking keep on receiving. Those who keep on seeking keep on finding. Those who keep on knocking find door after door opening.

Expectation

Supplication should always be accompanied by expectation. If you pray for rain, take an umbrella. If you pray for sunshine, put on some sun block.

There's a rather obscure story in 2 Kings 4:1-7 which illustrates this point. One day the prophet **Elisha** encountered the widow of another prophet. She told him that her family was broke and the creditors were coming to take her two sons as slaves. All she had in the house was one small bottle of oil.

Elisha gave her some very odd business advice. He said, *"Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside . . . pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."*

The widow followed his advice. She began pouring the small amount of oil she had into the first jar and then the second and the third The oil did not quit flowing until the final jar was filled to the brim. Elisha told her to sell the oil and pay off her debts.

There's an important spiritual principle at work here. There are times when God can only bless us to the **extent of our preparation**. Suppose the widow ignored Elijah's instructions and only got a few jars? This would have limited her blessing. Suppose she had taken full advantage of the situation and gathered hundreds of jars. You have to believe that the oil would have continued to flow.

How we enter church often determines how we leave. Our preparation, expectation, and anticipation can dramatically shape our worship experience. If you come half-heartedly and reluctantly, expecting little or nothing, then this is often what you will receive. If you come enthusiastically and eagerly, expecting a blessing, then this is often what you will receive. Of course, God is God, and the Lord is not defined by human limitations. However, we certainly play our part in supplication.

God's Response

Our supplication is matched by **God's response**. Remember that it is God's good pleasure to meet our needs. Like a parent at Christmas taking delight in their children's joy, it is our Heavenly Father's delight to answer our requests. Granted, the answers don't always come in ways that we expect—or even want at the time.

Our supplications and prayers are always accompanied by that pesky little qualifier: *"Thy will be done."* Of course, we often pray, *"Your will be done, and if you have a few moments, I'll tell you what it should be!"*

A question often asked of pastors is, *"Why doesn't God answer my prayers?"* My typical response is that God DOES always answer prayer; however, it's not always in ways that we envision or desire. The Lord answers in one of three ways:

- Yes
- No
- Wait

Another consideration is that we don't always RECOGNIZE the answer to prayer when it occurs. We forge ahead to the next request, forgetting how God answered this one. Or we dismiss it to circumstance and happenstance. Or the response occurs in such an unexpected way that we don't even recognize God's hand in the events.

One day a man was working on top of a tall barn, repairing the tin roof. Suddenly he slipped and began sliding towards the edge. He called out in desperation, "God, SAVE ME!" Just as he slipped over the side, a nail caught his overalls and saved him. The man called out to heaven, "Never mind, God, this nail saved me!"

Here's another thought to consider. Sometimes the very act of asking is efficacious for our souls. It reminds us that we are not alone, and our Lord is able to provide exceedingly more than we could ever imagine asking.

Conclusion

Over the years, I have become more and more sensitive to the needs that people bring to worship. For a variety of reasons, folk often disguise or conceal their burdens and concerns. People ask, "How are you doing" and others respond, "Fine. How are you?" Underneath the polite smiles, hearts are breaking. People come staggering into the sanctuary under burdens that are unbearable.

A vital part of worship is **supplication**. This is the place of all places to bring the sorrows, heartaches, anxieties, and concerns of our lives. We don't always even know what to ask or how to pray wisely; but our souls intuitively understand to make our needs known before God.

Hear again the words of Philippians 4:6-7:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which

transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen.

Special thanks to Dr. Phil Schroeder, Associate Director of Connectional Ministries of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, and Dr. Jane Brooks and staff at First United Methodist Church in Rome, Georgia, for sharing concepts and content included in this series.