

# **A Holy Calling**

## **Thanksgiving Sunday**

11/22/20

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle reading where we hear these words once more: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.. (1 Timothy 2:1-2) This is the Word of the Lord.

There is Thanksgiving - as it relates to the holiday and how we give thanks - and then there is a Christian Thanksgiving. A Christian thanksgiving is a priest's thanksgiving, for we don't merely give thanks for ourselves... but for "all people", as we heard in our Epistle lesson... for those who do not know God... and even those who are enemies of God... who cannot and do not give thanks to Him for the blessings they have received. In Christian thanksgiving... we serve others who cannot enter the presence of God... by entering His presence on their behalf. This Christian Thanksgiving... is a holy calling.

Thanksgiving entered American tradition and became a holiday because people saw in it God's providence. They recognized that it would have been very easy for the Pilgrims not to have survived in the new world. But... they did survive... because God showed them mercy and had a plan for them and their descendants. And so it became a holiday because for a long time many Americans believed God had chosen this country... and it was necessary to recognize His hand in creating and preserving it by giving Him thanks.

But in our lifetime, beloved... the place of Christians in this country has been very... complicated. We're in a similar situation to the one the Puritans and Pilgrims experienced in England;... we feel ourselves to be a minority... with limited political and cultural power... facing a rising intolerance from the broader culture.

St. Paul also experienced something similar;... but the weakness of the Church politically... and the hostility of the surrounding culture in his day were far greater. And Paul's words remind us of the most powerful way that we can respond to our nation and our neighbors when they appear to us to be hostile to Christ, the Church, or to simple morality.

He urges that our first work - after having received the grace of God - is to act as priests on behalf of "all people,"... to serve our neighbors by bringing them before God in supplication, prayer, intercession and thanksgiving.

Having heard this lesson many times, one may assume that supplication, prayer, and intercession were all basically the same thing... and that in this passage Paul was simply urging us to pray.

In reality, however....each of these four words used by Paul indicate a specific type of prayer that he urges the church in Ephesus offer on behalf of "all people" and particularly "kings and all in high positions."

First... supplication. Supplications are prayers asking God to help in a certain need, a certain trouble. St. Paul urges as of first importance that the Christian churches carry the needs of their neighbors - and rulers - to God. This is why we always include prayers for our leaders... whether we like them, or not.

It should be noted that rulers in Paul's day were quite likely to be more hostile and dismissive toward Christians than judges and authorities in our time - even though it is evident that many are very unfriendly today. Also... many of the neighbors of the Christians in Paul's time would have been unfriendly. Many Gentiles hated Jews because they denounced all their idols and separated themselves from Gentile society... and most Gentiles in Paul's day would have seen the Christians as a sect of the Jews. On the other hand, Jews saw Christians as heretics and apostates.

But Paul says that it is of first importance... that supplications be offered by the church on behalf of their neighbors... and particularly rulers... authorities. So whatever trouble or calamity the churches saw their neighbors in - even when those neighbors were hostile - they were to carry that trouble or need to God as if it were their own.

This is important because Christians - then and now - have access to God through their faith in Jesus. And just as Jesus used His access to God the Father on our behalf - by praying for us, by teaching us, and by dying for us - so the Church carries out His work with Him in this world... by interceding on behalf of all people.

Next, is prayers. The word prayer can mean many things, but in this setting it likely refers to prayers for the general welfare and prosperity of our neighbors and rulers. Even when you don't know what need your neighbor might have... you can still pray for God's blessing on his work, his family, his children and grandchildren. You can pray that God would prosper him financially and in every other way.

We often pray this way for ourselves. But here... Paul is teaching that we identify with our neighbors and pray for their blessing in this world... that we use our access to God to seek their blessing.

Then Paul urges that intercessions be made. Intercession refers specifically to prayers for forgiveness of sin. Oftentimes in the church and in society we become aware of someone's sin. Our inclination is to get angry... to indulge in self-righteous anger. And this here... is particularly the case when we are dealing with politics. This or that ruler is doing something wrong... saying something wrong.. acting in an inappropriate manner...proposing legislation that would take away our rights or harm us. We get indignant... outright mean and nasty.

And it happens here - in the Church - just as often. Leaders – or presumptive powerful people in the church - push false teaching... push their agenda... or they abuse their authority. Disciples of the congregation engage in behavior that harms others. What do we do?.... Often... we vent our prideful anger to those who will listen. We divide into parties... picking sides.

But when God makes us aware of someone else's sin, friends... He doesn't do it so that we can defeat them... or that we can exalt ourselves over them. He makes us aware of it... so that we can do as Jesus has done with our sin. He took it upon Himself... and made it His own.

But of course we cannot carry our neighbor's sin and make atonement for it, because Christ has done that already. But we can take it upon our heart... our mind... our conscience... and intercede with God for their forgiveness. And God will hear us, because He has given us access to His throne by clothing us with the righteousness of His Son.

Finally, then... Paul urges that thanksgivings be made for all men. You know sometimes, brothers and sisters... we become envious when God blesses other people - especially when those people seem as though they do not deserve it... at least not from our perspective. But Paul urges that we not only pray for the needs of our neighbors... but to also give thanks for their blessings as though they were our own.

If you practice praying in this way - as a Christian - you will find just how powerful it is. This, friends... is our most powerful work... prayer. Because God has given us access to Him through faith in Christ... we have access to His power.. to work not only on our behalf... but on behalf of those around us.

We often wonder and worry about why the Church and its preaching no longer seems to touch our neighbors. The proper response to this is not to wring our hands, nor first brainstorm ways we can make Christianity more appealing to the world... but instead... to carry out the holy calling God has given us as priests... and carry our nation - and its leaders.. our neighbors in the community... our families and loved ones... to Christ and to His Father in prayer... just as when Jesus walked on earth and people brought their sick relatives to Him so He would heal them.

Paul says in our lesson... “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life... godly and dignified in every way. This is good... and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved... and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2:2-4)

We should not be troublemakers. The Word of God does not bring peace, Jesus tells us... but a sword. There will be uproar when His Word comes. But there should not be uproar... because we live in a way that causes people offense - because we're rude and quarrelsome.. or because we are insubordinate and unwilling to submit to the authority that God has instituted.

But... if we are carrying our neighbors and our rulers to God... asking Him to bless them... to help them out of trouble... to prosper them, to forgive their sins... and giving thanks when they receive benefits... how, then... can we be seeking to harm them? This is what we are commanded to do in the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

Prayer for our neighbors leads to a godly and dignified life which is pleasing to God. It pleases Him particularly because He wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth... even those we dislike... or hate.

It is not hard for you - if you're honest - to recognize that it is in God's pure mercy that you can say, “I am saved.” It is not because you have done well and earned it. It is only because God did not look on your sin, your trouble and need, and say, “They are getting what they deserve. I wash My hands of them.” Instead, brothers and sisters... God got dirty;... He became a man born of the dust. He went beneath the dirty waters of the Jordan River and identified Himself with all the sin of all men. And then... He shed His crimson-red blood... for your sin and mine.

It was because Jesus did not turn away from us and our debt of sin that the Father declared Him His beloved Son. Paul says it was because Jesus humbled Himself to death - even death on a cross - that the Father exalted Him to the highest place.

But now... He has saved you... and given you a holy calling... to be a priest in His priesthood. He has called you to join in His ongoing work as a priest, praying for the salvation of the world... and the blessing of the world. That is what we are here in this world to do... even as we carry out our holy callings as father, mother, pastor, grandpa, grandma, hearer, citizen... ruler.

We have works to do with our hands... but before we do those... He calls us to come to Him in prayer - and to do so not only for help for ourselves... but for our nation and its rulers and its people, our church, our families - especially those most in need, the fallen... the enemies of God.

Paul probably had a special reason for wanting this done. He himself was a persecutor of the church, and it is likely that the Church prayed for him... for this persecutor... which led to his salvation in Christ.

God wants all people to be saved. What wonderful news that is! No matter how far our country has fallen... no matter how far our church body has fallen, or someone in our family... God desires their salvation.

So let us carry out our holy calling as priests... and carry our nation, church, neighbors, and families to God through Christ. Let us pray for their salvation and their blessings in earthly things... and give thanks when they receive them. Let that be our first work in our holy calling, beloved... making supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings... in and through... Christ Jesus, our Lord. Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.