

1“A CALL FOR INTERCESSION”

(Romans 15:30-33)

“Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints; That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed. Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

It has been well-said that there are three very important things that largely shape the life of a disciple-maker: (1) His relationship with God; and (2) The fellowship of believers of which he is a part; and (3) The individual disciple’s relationship with him. This may be an over-statement, and it may disregard other crucial factors in his life, but the point is still well taken. In the relationship of a disciple-maker and his disciple, nothing is more important than intercessory prayer, the discipler’s daily prayer for his disciple.

Rivet this principle on the wall of your mind; it is universally applicable (no matter what kind of ministry is involved): *A true ministry is a miracle of God, and though other vital factors are also involved in such a ministry, it comes only in answer to prayer.* The prayer that is necessary is personal prayer by the discipler, and intercessory prayer by as many other believers as possible. In this study, we will examine an example of intercessory prayer. Actually, the text comprises a request by the Apostle Paul addressed to the Christians in the city of Rome, inviting them to support his ministry by their intercession for him. It is a classic Christian call for intercessory prayer, and its lessons are timeless.

I. THE BASIS FOR AN INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY, 30A

First, we clearly see in this text the *basis* for intercession in the fellowship of believers. In fact, there are *two bases* stated in the text.

Paul uses two strong words to introduce his invitation. In the English Bible (KJV), they are “B” words, “brethren” and “beseech.” “Now I beseech you, brethren.” The word “brethren” is used for Christians; indeed, for *all* Christians. So this is a general summons to all the Christians in the church of Rome. It is used here to remind these Christians that they are all (and equally) members of the Christian family, the family of faith, and that as such they have full family privileges and full family responsibilities. The other “B” word is the word “beseech.” This is a very tender and appealing word. It is the same root form which Jesus used as His title for the Holy Spirit. The word is *parakaleo*, “I beseech you.” The word Jesus used as a title for the Holy Spirit is *paracletos*, which derives from the same root word.

You have heard many preachers and teachers preach about the need to be “Christ-like,” and even the need to be like God the Father, but how many times have you heard such leaders teach about the need to be like the Holy Spirit? Here, Paul demonstrates a likeness to the Holy Spirit, and he in effect invites all of his readers to seek to grow in that likeness. The words of Paul could be paraphrased, “I tenderly call you alongside of me to make a gentle appeal to you.” This is what the Holy Spirit does *for* every believer and *within* every believer. He stands alongside of each of us, to lend the full provision of His Personality to any situation we are in. Here, Paul puts his arm around His fellow-believers in Rome, and tenderly asks them to support Him like the Holy Spirit does. His *appeal* is based on the Spirit’s tenderness, and their *response* should be based on the Spirit’s tenderness. Actually, it is the Holy Spirit Who is appealing to us today to join Him in His ministry of intercession for believers, and we should respond to the appeal with the same gentle effort as we obey His appeal.

Then Paul states two foundational bases for our prayers of intercession. First, he asks them to pray for him “*for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake.*” Note the full title that is used for our Savior. The full title gives great strength to the appeal. He is called “Lord,” which is His title as Sovereign Master. He is called “Jesus,” which is His title as Sympathetic Man. And He is called “Christ,” which is His title as Scriptural Messiah. When all these titles are joined, the full majesty of the Person is intended. What an appeal this should make to every Christian! If this appeal has *no appeal* to you, it is doubtful that you are a Christian.

A business man in Denver, Colorado, was approached in his office one day by two other business men, who made a business proposition to him, seeking to enlist him in a business partnership. However, it quickly became evident that their proposition involved some “shady dealing,” some very questionable business practices. He respectfully declined the offer, stating “moral reasons” for his decision. One of the men leaned forward in his chair and indignantly said, “Well, for Christ’s sake!” The Christian business man smiled politely and answered, “My friend, I want to thank you for supplying me with the perfect statement of my reason for declining. It is precisely *for Christ’s sake* that I cannot engage in such a partnership!” Friends, every decision we make is to be *for Christ’s sake*; every action we take should be *for Christ’s sake*; every thought we think and every word we speak should be *for Christ’s sake*. Thus, Paul’s appeal only announces and employs the basic Christian motive; it does not invent it or impose it. Every Christian should respond in full alert and with eager participation when he is invited to do anything “for Christ’s sake.”

Paul’s other foundational base for inviting intercessory prayer for himself and his ministry is stated in this phrase, “and for the love of the Spirit.” One translation says, “For the love we bear one another in the Spirit.” Now, this is not an ideal to aspire for, this is a spiritual fact. Every born-again person bears love for other Christians in the Spirit. That love may have been violated by carnal selfishness, but it is still present in each believer. Earlier in this same letter (Romans 5:5), Paul said, “The love of God is shed abroad (broadcast, like a sower flinging seeds wholesale in a field) in our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who has been given unto us.” *Every believer has been flooded* at the time of his conversion *with the love of God through the incoming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit*. So Paul is simply appealing to the common experience of all Christians as a base for engaging in intercessory prayer.

So Paul makes a powerful appeal to the Christians in Rome to support him through their prayers of intercession for him and his ministry. The grounds of his appeal should be sufficient to enlist every Christian in such a vital ministry.

II. THE BATTLE OF AN INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY, 30B

Second, Paul exposes to his fellow-Christians in Rome the *battle* of intercession. He says, “I beseech you . . . that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.” The *ministry* of intercession is captured in the words, “your prayers to God for me.” The *battle* of such a ministry is revealed in the word translated, “strive together.” This is a very militant word. In the Greek text, it is a fifteen-letter word (sunagonisasthai; it’s a good thing you don’t have to pronounce that to get to heaven!). It is a compound word, made of a combination of a root verb and a prepositional prefix. The prefix is the little word “sun” (pronounced like our English word “soon”), and it means “together with.” It is the preposition for mutual action or joint effort. The root form of the verb is the word from which we get our word, “agony.”

Now we can see the intense battle that is involved in a ministry of intercessory prayer. Paul literally said, “I tenderly entreat you . . . to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.” What an enlightening sentence! What lessons it reveals about intercessory prayer! Note the phrase,

“Strive together *with me*.” Here we learn that intercession is not merely a praying of words; *it is the taking of a position. It is the experiencing of full identification with another person. It is the fullest and most vital expression of the “inside-out,” other-centered, ethic of the Christian life.* Every Christian should feature himself as always “striving together with” some other Christian (or a fellowship of Christians) — *for them* (or “for me,” as Paul said it). Nothing that a Christian does should be done merely in his own name or for his own advantage. Everything should be done “for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake,” and “for *them*.”

The root word, “agony,” highlights the battle, the struggle, of intercessory prayer. And the words, “together with me,” highlight the mutual responsibility of joint effort. No Christian should ever stand alone in the Christian battle. He should always have the support of other Christians by means of intercessory prayer.

Any large city which features a zoo probably has an animal in its zoo called the *gnu*. I heard of a father gnu who came home from work one day only to have his wife cozy up to him and slyly say, “Honey, I’ve got *gnus* for you!” One day I visited the zoo in my city and saw the pen which housed the gnus. In the informational plaque on the front fence, this item was posted. “When the gnu is under attack, it falls to its knees and fights from its knees.” “The gnu *fights from its knees!*” How I wish the church were as wise as the gnu! The church will never launch any farther than it can launch from its knees. It will never win any more battles than it can win from its knees. The disciple-maker will never have any more authority than he gains from his knees. We need more “knee-ology” than “theology” in the fellowship of believers today. This certainly does not depreciate theology; it only maximizes prayer.

Furthermore, when Paul used the words, “with me,” he let the Roman Christians know that he was not expecting anything from them in his behalf that he was not already doing for them — *and for himself*. Christian, hear this instruction: *pray yourself*, and *pray for yourself*. But do not let self-attention absorb your total prayers. You will never be gratified or fulfilled in your Christian life if you turn prayer into a means of carnal indulgence or self-seeking. In fact, it would be safe to say that your prayer life will soon be a shambles if you only pray for yourself and your selfish concerns. And if your prayer life is *already* a shambles, this is a probable contributing cause. You are reproducing the Adamic (Satanic!) fallacy of prostituting God’s resources for your own selfish purposes.

Here is Paul’s appeal concerning the battle of intercessory prayer: “I urge you to *become fellow-warriors with me* in your prayers to God for me.”

III. THE BLESSINGS SOUGHT IN AN INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY, 31-32

Third, Paul specifies the *blessings* he hopes to receive because of their intercessory prayers for him. Indeed, these are the specific blessings they are to pray for in his behalf. Verses 31 and 32 supply an incredible education in the Christian life and provide incalculably valuable lessons for the ministry of Christians. The concerns Paul identifies in these verses remain universal needs today for every Christian disciple. Five special spiritual concerns may be detected in Paul’s appeal.

First, Paul urges the Roman Christians to pray “that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea” (verse 31a). So we are to invite other Christians to regularly pray for us, that we would be delivered from the attacks of unbelievers. The Christian needs protection at every moment from the spirit of unbelief that shrouds the world. However, he must realize that *not all unbelief is outside the church. Not all unbelief is practiced and expressed outside the fellowship of “believers”!*

Some years ago, while waiting for several hours in the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, I had the happy surprise of getting to visit with five of the Dallas Cowboy football players. They were on their way to Nashville to participate in an off-season basketball competition as the Cowboys’ *basketball* team. I had

the opportunity to witness to three of them about Christ. When I asked the best-known one of the five, a star Cowboy running back, “Do you know Jesus Christ personally? Have you been saved?” he answered, “Well, I’m a believer, but I am not living it right now.” Ponder his words carefully. They contain a subtle but devastating contradiction. The word “believer” comprises a present-tense definition. You may call a one-time killer a “murderer,” but it is not proper to call a one-time believer a “believer.” A Christian should only be called a believer if the first exercise of faith changed his life into one of continual belief. The star running back would have been more accurate to say, “I believed in Christ . . .” No “believer” could accurately say, “I am not living it right now.” Believers always behave accordingly! In fact, *you believe only what you behave*. To call yourself a “believer” (a present-tense confession) and not be living it (a present-tense violation) is a total contradiction. The practice cancels the profession.

However we may interpret that story, the spirit of unbelief is a constant threat to a Christian’s life, and this is doubly true for the Christian who is fully engaged in active Christian ministry. We must keep ourselves alert to the attacks of unbelief which originate from *outside* the Christian community, to the attacks of unbelief which arise from *within* the fellowship of believers, and to the attacks of unbelief which assault us *inwardly* through our own flesh.

The word that is translated “delivered” in Paul’s request (“that I may be delivered from unbelievers in Judea”) is a strong and radical word. It might better be translated, “rescued.” What a powerful picture is conjured by that word. The word “rescue” presupposes a serious and threatening danger. A person not in danger does not need rescue, but a person under threat is in immediate need of rescue. No wonder the New Testament presents such graphic pictures of the Christian life in terms of warfare, battle and combat!

As a pastor, I had the privilege of winning a man to Christ and baptizing him. The man was totally blind, the victim of an enemy sniper while he was serving in the United States armed services in the South Pacific. A lull had occurred in a fierce battle, and he stood to his feet to stretch his body, when an enemy sniper’s bullet smashed through the front of his face, rendering him totally blind. It was an incredible blessing to be used of God to bring him from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight. Friends, unbelief is like that sniper, and its attacks are like that sniper’s bullet, ready always to handicap and incapacitate you as a Christian. The interceding discipler should pray daily that God will deliver his disciple and all other believers from the attacks of unbelievers.

Second, Paul urges the Roman Christians to pray *that his ministry will be accepted by the people* (verse 31b). He asks them to pray that there will be a high confidence level between him and all other believers. Here are Paul’s words: “Pray that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints.” Paul was probably talking about an offering collected for the poor saints in Jerusalem, but the same prayer must be prayed for all of our service in the fellowship of believers. A disciple must pray that the ministry of his disciple-maker must be fully accepted by him and others, and that as he himself begins to minister to others, his ministry will be accepted by them. The word translated “accepted” in this verse literally means “well-received with favor.” Every Christian should regularly pray this prayer for his own ministry and for the ministries of all other Christians he knows. In the Christian community, *one brother’s success is everybody’s victory*. We must get beyond the selfishness of thinking only of our own ministry, and of being jealous only for our own success.

A ministry rendered by one believer must be accepted by other believers. How many times have committed believers tried to minister, only to have their ministry rejected or rebuffed by invulnerable or self-righteous saints. Christian, let this acceptance begin with you. Don’t say, “But I don’t *like* him,” or “I don’t like some things about him.” Your dislikes of a brother or sister may be an exposure of your character flaws, not a testimony of his capability. You see, you tend to “read” a leader through your own

self-image. If your self-image is low, you tend to lower others in your thinking. You tend to attribute your weakness or your sin to others around you.

Whatever may be the cause of rejection of a brother's ministry, pray that it will be overcome and the individual ministries of brothers and sisters will be accepted in the Body of Christ.

Third, in a discipler-disciple relationship, each should pray for the other that he will have *a joyful life and ministry* (verse 32a). Paul appealed to the Roman Christians to "pray that I may come unto you with joy." What a difference is made when a Christian is joyful in life and ministry! May God help the joyless discipler or the joyless disciple! An old Puritan wisely said, "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God." Samuel Shoemaker, who mentored me through several of his books, wrote, "The greatest symptom of true spiritual life is *not faith, or love, but joy.*" C. S. Lewis demonstrated his awareness of this great truth when he entitled his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*.

However, we find to our dismay and disappointment that many Christians seem to live every day as if they are wound up as tight as a rigid guitar string. They don't seem to be able to bend, so they break themselves and often try to break others as well. Let me ask you a serious question: Is your faith a *pressure* or a *pleasure* to you? Is your faith a *load* or a *lift* to you? Is it a *burden* or a *blessing*? Psalm 16:11 says, "Thou will show me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." If I do not experience this fulness of joy and these durable pleasures, I am living away from God's presence, removed from the blessing that comes from His right hand. I need to learn to *relax* and *celebrate* in every situation. Relaxation is a crucial aspect of the faith that rests fully in Jesus Christ, and celebration should be a continual exercise in the life of every Christian. So every disciple should pray daily that those who minister to him and those to whom he ministers may have a joyful life and ministry.

As far as I am aware, one of the greatest lessons the Holy Spirit has taught me in my "field-training" as a Christian is the lesson of unconditional praise. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, I experienced a time of deep depression which was induced by circumstances in my life at that time. In fact, I thought my life was under threat because of the depth of the depression. It was just as that time ("in the nick of time," as Hebrews says) that God broke into my experience with the lesson of praising Him all the time about everything. At first, the practice was very awkward, but when I obeyed Him with my praise, the depression disappeared like mist in the bright morning sun. So I know how important joy is in a believer's life. Every disciple should pray daily that those who minister to him and those to whom he ministers may have a joyful life and ministry.

Fourth, in a discipler-disciple relationship, each should pray for the other that *he will live in the will of God* (verse 32b). Paul asks his readers to pray "that I may come unto you with joy *by the will of God.*" Paul's frame of reference for everything in life was the will of God. To the Apostle, mistakes in tactics, the carrying out of details, may be forgiven, but a mistake in strategy, the large-scale blueprint for living, can't be forgiven. That large blueprint is called "the will of God." A wise Christian said, "To not do the will of God is *like cheating at a game of solitaire.*" The individual cheats only himself.

The will of God may be divided into two sub-categories: the *known* (revealed) will of God, and the *unknown* (unrevealed) will of God. Over and over again, the Bible says, "This is the will of God." However, there still seems to be a great deal of fuzzy thinking among Christians about the will of God. Christians seem to be preoccupied with aspects of the will of God that God has not revealed. Whom do I marry? Where shall I live? Which job shall I take? There is no clearly revealed statement in Scripture by which you may always make these choices. However, this rule will stand: If you want to *know* the will of God for your *total life*, then *do* the will of God in the areas where you *know* the will of God. Jesus said, "If any man will *do* His will, he shall *know*..." (John 7:17). If you will give great care to fulfilling the "known" will of God, He will clearly disclose to you His "unknown" will. Furthermore, the will of God is not so much the fulfilling of an action or series of actions, but rather it is a carefully

designed relationship between Christ and the individual believer. *You, dear Christian, are the will of God! You are God's project! He wants to change your character in order to control your conduct!*

Imagine a wheel constantly going round and round. If you were on the edge of that wheel, you will go around with it. But if you get on the hub, the middle of the wheel, what happens? Everything revolves around you because of your position on the wheel. Prayer is a primary means by which we discover and occupy our center, our axis, the God in Whom we are to abide.

In the classic One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, the story of life in a Russian prison camp, fellow inmates saw a prisoner praying. They loudly ridiculed him, saying, "Your prayers won't get you out of prison." The prisoner answered, "I'm not praying to get out of prison, but to do the will of God." This should be the priority of every Christian's life — to do the will of God. In this great passage about intercessory prayer, Paul indicates that every believer should daily pray for others — especially disciples praying for their disciplers and disciplers praying for their disciples — that they will live moment by moment in the will of God.

Finally, in a discipler-disciple relationship, each should pray for the other that *he will be refreshed himself, and that he will have a refreshing ministry* (verse 32). Paul asked the Roman Christians to "pray that I may with you be refreshed." Note the terms "that I may" and "with you." Paul desires refreshment for himself *and* for them. Is this important? You see, everybody who touches your life either refreshes you or drains you. This is also true of everyone whom *you* touch. You will either refresh them or drain them. Every Christian should aspire to be a *blessing* to others, not a *burden* or a *blot*, nor even a mere *blank*. One of the most elevating sentences in Paul's letters is this one: "Onesiphorus has often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain" (II Timothy 1:16). Paul was in prison, and needed whatever encouragement he could receive. It seems that one of his fellow believers often came to see him, and his presence was like a tonic to Paul's spirit.

It should be the passionate desire of every Christian to encourage other Christians every time he contacts them. He should pray that he will be an encourager and that other Christians will commit themselves to the same ministry.

We have seen in this text the *basis* for an intercessory prayer ministry, the *battle* of such a ministry, and the *blessings* that should be sought through such a ministry.

IV. THE BENEDICTION SECURED BY AN INTERCESSORY PRAYER MINISTRY, 33

Finally, we see in this text the *benediction* secured by an intercessory prayer ministry. Paul concluded this passage with this benediction: "Now the God of peace be with you all" (verse 33). Sinful human beings sometimes ask God, "Where are you?" But this was the question God asked Adam. The question is not, Where is God, but rather, where is man in reference to God? Though God is omnipresent (everywhere), He may be far from the heart of a human being. God said, "You shall seek Me, and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart."

The greatest subjective blessing received through a ministry of intercession is a visitation from God Himself. The greatest blessing is the presence of God with the intercessor. Prayer is not a means to get *our* will done in Heaven, but it is a means by which God gets *His* will done on earth. Prayer is not primarily an adjustment of God to ourselves, but an adjustment of ourselves to God. Prayer is primarily intended, not to *change* God's mind, but to *find* it, and enable us to *do* it. A Christian should not pray, "Lord, please do for *me* what *I* want," but "please do *with* me what *You* want." True prayer is made up more of self-surrender than self-assertion.

However, true prayer always attracts the presence of God to the one praying. Just as a person's lungs become filled with oxygen through breathing, so a Christian's spirit is filled with "the God of peace" through praying. Prayer may not be a time in which we seek to change God's attitude toward us, but rather a time when we seek to change our attitude toward Him. However, God draws remarkably near to us, and seems to show us great favor, in response to our prayers. What a "coincidence": the more I pray, the more spiritual power I have! The more I commune with Him in person, the more He comes upon me with power! *He smiles most easily upon the person who is nearest at hand.* So every Christian should master the ministry of intercession because of the benediction it brings to his own life.

A famous painting hangs on the wall of an art gallery in Madrid, Spain. It shows a peasant farm worker who has been ploughing a field with a plough and a yoke of oxen. The peasant is caught at mid-morning kneeling in a fresh furrow for a time of prayer. A church and steeple in the background of the picture suggest that the church bell has pealed out the hour of prayer. The farm hand has laid his plough across a fresh furrow and has gotten on his knees to commune with God. But we, the observers, know something he does not know. While he is kneeling in prayer, an angel has come down out of the skies and has picked up the plough, and is completing the ploughing of a row at the far end of the field. The angel is turning the oxen to plough another row, and the peasant doesn't even know it. Underneath the painting is this caption: "**NO TIME LOST**". You see, when a Christian prays, he doesn't really lose time; *he gains eternity.* And this is especially true when He joins God in His interest for *others.* May we say with Samuel, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (I Samuel 12:23).

Additional Thoughts, Quotes and Illustrations on Prayer

When the door of a steam room is left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise, a man, in his willingness to speak about everything in his conversations with other men, dissipates his experience of the presence of God through the door of speech, even though everything he says may be good. (An early mystic)

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of three hermits who lived on an island. Their prayer was simple like they were simple: "We are three; You are three; have mercy on us. Amen." Miracles sometimes happened when they prayed that way. The bishop heard about the hermits and decided that they needed guidance in proper prayer, and so he went to their small island. After instructing the monks, the bishop set sail for the mainland, pleased to have enlightened the souls of such simple men. Suddenly, off the stern of the ship he saw something skimming over the surface of the water. It came closer and closer until he could see that it was the three hermits running on top of the water. Once on board the ship they said to the bishop, "We are so sorry, but we have forgotten some of your teaching about prayer. Would you please come back and instruct us again?" The bishop shook his head and replied meekly, "Forget everything I have taught you and continue to pray in your old way." (Richard Foster)

Prayer takes place in the middle voice. In grammar the active voice is when we take action, and the passive voice is when we receive the action of another, but in the middle voice we both act and are acted upon. We participate in the formation of the action and reap the benefits of it. We neither manipulate God (active voice) or are manipulated by God (passive voice). We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it (middle voice). (Eugene Peterson)

Prayer should be nestling before it becomes wrestling. God's hands are our cradle. (Unknown source)

Prayer begins with the Lord, not with us. It is *He* who talks with me first. In the beginning, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, prayer was His idea, not an idea created by either our casual or crisis needs. Because it is His idea, prayer means more to Him than it does to us. Like parents accepting long distance collect calls from their children, even though it cost them money, the conversation will mean more to the parent than the child. (Dan Crawford)

The Christian who becomes *personal with* God will become *powerful for* God. (Source unknown)

When a Christian continues in prayer, the appropriate notice is not so much, “Quiet. Man At Prayer,” but “Look Out! God Is At Work!” (Melvin Banks)

Picture Heaven as like a catalogue order center, full of angels reading requests. “This one says, ‘I want to be happy in the future.’ One angel says, “What exactly does that mean?” “I don’t know,” another answers. “What shall I do with it?” “Put it in the ‘hold’ file with all the rest. Someday these humans will learn to be specific,” as he marks another request “Incomplete.” (Laura Beth Jones)

Prayer opens the sluice-gates between us and the Infinite. It brings the frail wire into contact with the battery. It links together man and God. (John Henry Jowett)

The practical outcome of Communion ends with Commission. (E. Stanley Jones)

“To believe is to pray, and to cease to pray is to cease to believe.” (C. S. Lewis)