

Pray The Word (1 Timothy 2:1-6)

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For the last few weeks, we've been in a series of sermons called, Sunday Matters. What makes the weekly gathering of the people of God so important? And what should we do when we gather on Sundays? You could summarize the biblical answer to those questions as follows: we gather for corporate worship to glorify God and edify one another by remembering and responding to the gospel.

There are a host of ways we do as much. God is glorified and people are edified when you greet someone you haven't met before and courageously engage them in conversation even when you think you'll run out of things to say in less than a minute. God is glorified and people are edified when you spend half the morning in the HVAC closet troubleshooting a computer issue so we can be comfortable inside when it's freezing outside. Among all those activities and more, however, the Lord has established clear priorities – public means of grace for all people in all places at all times.

That means what we do together on Sunday morning isn't about what "works," what draws the biggest crowd, what connects with millennials, or what gives us a perceived spiritual recharge for another week. What we do when we gather must start with what our God and Savior has said he wants us to do when we gather. He is not a god of our own making who we worship in whatever way we want to worship. He is our Savior King, who, as David Peterson says, "must be worshiped in the way he proposes and in the way he alone makes possible."

When we turn to his authoritative Word and ask, "Lord, what do you want us to do when we gather?" He gives us clear instructions, including: "I want you to preach the Word. I want you to sing the Word. And I want you to pray the Word." We pray the Word when we begin our meetings by extolling God's excellencies in prayers of praise. We pray the Word when we respond to the gift of conviction by repenting of our sins in prayers of confession. And we pray the Word when we respond to the assurance of God's mercy toward us in Christ with prayers of thanksgiving and intercession.

It's the latter sort I want us to focus on today – prayers of intercession and thanksgiving – because it's the focus of Paul's written instruction to a young church leader named Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:1-6. In 1 Timothy 1, the Apostle Paul charges Timothy to uphold and protect the truth of the gospel in the midst of rampant false

teaching. 1 Timothy 1:15, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..."

Then, in chapters 2-6, Paul transitions to explain the kind of individual and corporate life that is in keeping with the faith we profess. 1 Timothy 3:14-15, "I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church..." Qualifications for church officers? Check. How to steward financial resources? Check. Age and gender-specific exhortations? Check. Paul addresses all of those issues and many more.

But we do well to pay attention to where he starts, to the one issue, the one gospel practice, that is first up to bat. In light of what the "King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Timothy 1:17) has done through Christ, here's what we need to do.

1 Timothy 2:1, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people..." Let's get started, Timothy, by talking about prayer. Why? Because:

The pleasure of God in working salvation for all people compels us to pray for all people.

Praying for one another and other people isn't a transition device. Hmm...how can we get the band offstage without people noticing? Going from singing right into a sermon could be a little jolting emotionally, so let's smooth things over with a nice little prayer. No! Intercessory prayer is one of our highest priorities in corporate worship. We do well to understand the significance of Paul's instruction here by asking three simple questions: For whom should we pray? What should we pray? Why should we pray?

1) FOR WHOM SHOULD WE PRAY?

The answer in verse 1 isn't hard to find. "Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings" should "be made for all people..." The point of using four different words for talking to God isn't to make a sharp distinction between them. The impact is cumulative. It's a call, as Ray Van Neste says, "For all sorts of prayer for all sorts of people."

Now think about it. If "all people" literally means praying for every human being alive today by name, it would be an impossible command to obey. With nearly 8



billion people in the world, we would never be done praying and end up neglecting all sorts of other biblical commands. The emphasis is more qualitative than quantitative. Paul's talking about "all kinds" of people. We know that because the very next verse highlights a particular category of persons for special mention.

When we bring requests to God in prayer, it's easy for our petitions to extend no further than ourselves and our immediate family. Is it wrong to pray for yourself or your immediate family? Of course not! Both you and they are clearly included in the "all people" at the end of verse 1. But until Jesus returns and makes all things new, we must be alert to the various ways the remaining selfishness in our hearts corrupts even our prayers, causing us to limit our intercession to what feels important to us instead of starting with what God says is important to him.

We need to regularly ask ourselves: Are any significant categories of people missing in who we pray for over an extended period of time, both individually and corporately? Do we pray for non-Christian friends and neighbors who have heard about Jesus, but have yet to choose to trust and obey him? Do we intercede for non-Christians in other nations who have never even heard about Jesus, and the missionaries laboring among them? Do we make supplication for Christians in other churches in our city, asking God to grant them unity and fruitfulness in ministry, no less than ourselves? Do we express thanksgiving for evidences of grace and spiritual growth in the lives of fellow church members? How about leaders in our congregation and denomination at large?

The goal isn't to create some kind of exhaustive list where every conceivable category receives at least one mention over the course of a calendar year. The goal is to practice a radical unselfishness in our prayers that humbly considers others more significant than ourselves. It's not about checking all the category boxes. It's about taking care that our prayers reflect a breadth of all kinds of prayer for all kinds of people.

And by the way, if I can get really practical for a moment, that usually requires having some sort of plan. Most of us need some sort of structure to consistently make supplication, intercession, and thanksgiving for categories and kinds of people that matter to God but could easily avoid recollection amidst the craziness of everyday life. I use an approach similar to the one Paul Miller outlines in his helpful book, *A Praying Life*. It serves me to have a short list of people I pray for every day, and a longer list of different kinds of people I pray for on a rotating basis.



Regardless of the strategy you choose, remember the goal. We want to avoid major gaps in the “all people” of verse 1 – case in point (verse 2) “kings and all who are in high positions.” In the middle of the 1st century, who did that group include? It wasn’t filled with democratically elected governing officials. It included Roman emperors like Nero, corrupt political puppets like King Herod and King Agrippa who persecuted and killed Christians like Paul. You want us to pray for them? Why in the world would I do that? Besides, what would “thanksgiving” for Nero even sound like?

Romans 13:1-2 help us understand why prayer for governing authorities matters so much. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed...” A few verses later Paul adds, “[F]or he is God’s servant for your good.”

Whether a governing official recognizes as much or not, they are God’s servant. They are charged by God to use the power he has entrusted to them for the good of others, not to advance their own selfish ambitions. So why should the people of God pray for a Roman emperor persecuting Christians or (switching to our own context) a president or senator you did not vote for, but won the election anyway? The answer is simple: because God, in the mystery of his sovereign will, saw fit to establish them.

That doesn’t mean we agree with them or support their actions. It does mean (according to verse 2) we should pray, “Lord, thank you for our president. Thank you for making him in your image. Thank you for giving him specific gifts and abilities that reflect you, whether he knows it or not. We don’t know all the reasons you established him in office at this point in our nation’s history. We don’t need to know in order to trust you with all he will do and not do. We pray you would grant him humility and wisdom to rule in a manner that pleases you, protects the weak and vulnerable, and brings tangible expressions of your blessing to every corner of our society.”

We ought to pray like that no matter who the president is, what party he represents, or whether we voted for him or not. And we’re going to take some time at the end of the meeting today to do as much together. Allow me to seize this opportunity, however, to exhort you as we head into an election year. Give careful attention, especially as November approaches, to the way you speak about and relate to our governing authorities – whether elected or appointed. As Christians,

our participation in the public square should be characterized by humble submission and faithful prayer.

That does not mean those are the only ways we engage politically or entail some sort of passive citizenship. To the contrary, the gospel compels us to work and pray against moral evils like racism or abortion that fail to treat men and women as image-bearers of the living God for whom the Savior shed his precious blood. We do well to courageously heed and obey the word of the Lord to Israel in Jeremiah 29:7, especially where principles of biblical justice are in play. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Something is terribly wrong, however, when Christians are known more for attacking or decrying our political opponents than we are for praying for them. So I urge you, brothers and sisters, force yourself to stop and pray for the candidate or public official you’re about to critique on social media before you start typing. And if you find you’re unable to pray for them or can’t think of what to pray for them, take that as a cue from the Holy Spirit that whatever you were about to say or write is probably not a good representation of King Jesus. Pray first. Post second.

For whom should we pray? We should pray for all kinds of people without exception, especially for “all who are in high positions,” for as George Knight observes, “The lives of all people, including Christians in their concern to proclaim the gospel and live a godly life, are affected by civil authorities.”

2) WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY?

Look at back at the middle of verse 2. What is the end goal of praying all kinds of prayers for all kinds of people, including civil authorities? “That we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” The first part – a peaceful and quiet life – describes the kind of freedom from turmoil, persecution, and physical hardship that result from civil authorities ruling in a wise and just manner that enables human flourishing.

Neither Paul, coworkers like Timothy, nor the churches they established, took as much for granted and nor should we. How many times was Paul forced to leave a city under the threat of death for sharing his faith? How often do our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world gather for worship wondering if the secret police will suddenly burst through the door? The freedom of worship we enjoy in

this country is not commonplace in world history. We need to pray, brothers and sisters, that our civil authorities would continue to protect our right to follow Jesus and lead others in doing the same.

However, experiencing a “peaceful and quiet life” isn’t our ultimate goal in praying for all people. It is especially relevant to how we pray for “kings and all who are in high positions.” But the call to pray in verse 1 isn’t limited to the government. Governing officials have a widespread influence and merit focused prayer, however, they are simply one category among many. So the second part of the goal in verse 2 includes them, but isn’t limited to them.

The ultimate goal of all kinds of prayer for all people is that they, along with us, might live a life that is “godly and dignified in every way.” Not a convenient life. Not an easy life. A godly life. A dignified life. Or as the NIV translates, living “in all godliness and holiness.” Does that mean it’s wrong to pray for physical health? No. Does that mean it’s wrong to pray for a new job, a passing grade, or financial provision? No. It does mean we need to carefully examine the content of our prayers to see if what we are interceding for the most is what God cares about the most. Be honest, Friend. When was the last time you prayed for someone that they would become more like Jesus? After all, that’s what godliness is, likeness to Jesus.

That ought to be what we pray for “all people” more than anything else. More than physical health. More than material prosperity. More than freedom from suffering. Why? 1 Timothy 4:8, “For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” Godliness is the path of life. Enjoying a growing relationship with God through faith in Jesus where the Spirit transforms us more and more into his image is the path of joy. It’s also the only path of deliverance on the final day of judgment.

Your 401k will not matter. Your reputation in the eyes of men will not matter. Your athletic achievements, sexual experiences, or other earthly pleasures will not matter. Godliness alone will matter. Godliness alone will be rewarded. Likeness to Jesus and the intimacy with God that comes with it is what you were made for, Friend. Does that mean we earn God’s love and favor through living a godly life? No. It does mean without holiness, without turning from sin to follow Jesus, no one will see the Lord!

We need to pay attention not just to who we pray for, but what we pray because it’s easy for our prayers to fall woefully short of what really matters. In 2020, brothers

and sisters, I urge you to pray for godliness, not only for yourself, but for all people. It's what your husband needs the most. It's what your children need the most. It's what your friends, your elected officials, other churches, and anyone else you can think of need the most. As Paul says at the beginning of verse 3, "This is good."

"Whatever else you do, Lord, above all, please make them more like you. Cause them to reflect your glory the way you created them to reflect your glory."

And if you want to know how to persevere in praying for godliness and not just say, "Lord, please make ___ more like you," over and over again. Take a few months this year to study the prayers of the Apostle Paul. Pick up a copy of D.A. Carson's book, *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Carson does a fine job taking the reader by the hand and explaining all the various ways Paul prayed that different kinds of people would become more like Jesus.

For example, we just finished a preaching through 1 and 2 Thessalonians at KingsWay. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, Paul says, "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Instead of praying the same old thing in the same old way, follow Paul's lead. Pray for your spouse, pray for the men and women in your Community Group, pray for our elected officials, that God would make them "worthy of his calling" and "fulfill every resolve for good...by his power." That's a prayer for godliness, but it's not generic. It's specific. Faith to pray rises when we allow God's Word to lead us in praying specific prayers for specific expressions of godliness in specific kinds of people.

Notice, however, that the assessment in 1 Timothy 1:3 - "This is good" - isn't limited to godliness or the ultimate goal of our prayers. It includes the activity of our prayers. Godliness is good, and praying for godliness is good. Why? Look at verse 3. Because "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."

3) WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

We should pray because God is eager to answer our requests! Prayer isn't about cajoling a disgruntled deity to get out of the heavenly rocking chair and lend a hand. Biblical prayer is asking God to do what he has already said he desires to do, what he wants to do, and what he will be faithful to do. So what does God desire? What does God want? He desires "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (verse 4).

But that immediately raises a difficult question, doesn't it? If verse 4 is in fact what God desires, then why does both the collective witness of Scripture (including passages like 1 Timothy 4:1), the history of the church, and our own life experiences reveal his desire does not always come to pass? Plenty of people refuse to repent of their sins, follow Jesus, and be saved from the divine judgment we deserve.

So is God lying? He doesn't really desire all people to be saved. Or is God impotent? He would like all people to be saved, but honoring the freedom of the human will prevents him from making it happen. It's not an abstract issue. It's a deeply personal issue, especially for those of you who have children who aren't following the Lord. So allow me to make a few orienting comments.

First, we need to understand the "all people" in verse 4 in the same way we understand "all people" in verse 1. Remember in verse 1, it didn't mean every single human being without exception. It meant all kinds of people. Second, notice verse 4 does not say all people being saved is the only thing God desires or is what God desires more than anything else. Passages like Romans 9 and Ephesians 1 remind us God's greatest desire, his ultimate ambition, is for the exaltation of his glory. That's good for us, because no one is more glorious or satisfying than him! And Scripture tells us he is glorified in his righteous acts of judgment no less than in his righteous acts of mercy.

Finally, verse 4 assures us no one will fail to be saved from the wrath of God because they wanted to trust and obey Jesus, but God said no. Scripture repeatedly identifies the great obstacle to our salvation not as an unwillingness in the heart of God, but rather an unwillingness in the heart of man.

If verses 4-5 teach us anything, they shout loud and clear of the universal invitation of the gospel and the complete sufficiency of Christ's work to redeem any man or woman who will bow their knee to King Jesus. God desires "all" people to be saved (verse 4). So what did he do? Christ Jesus, God the Son incarnate, laid down his life

on the cross (verse 5) as “a ransom for all,” paying the penalty of sin for all who choose to trust him as their Savior.

Verses 4-5 are not designed to leave us in a theological quagmire or get us stuck in a debate on the extent of the atonement. They’re designed to motivate us to pray! So why should we pray? We should pray for godliness because God himself desires to save all kinds of people by opening their spiritually blind eyes and leading them in the knowledge of the truth! He wants people to be saved. He wants people to become godly. And He’s done all that is necessary to make it possible. The logic of the entire passage is that we should pray the requests in verses 2-3 for the people in verses 1-2 because of who God is (verse 4) and what he has done (verse 5).

In contrast, consider how often the impetus for our prayers is nothing more than our own felt needs or our own perception of what other people need. Are those bad things, Friend? Not necessarily. Needs we feel and needs we perceive are not inherently bad reason to pray. But they’re not reliable, pure, or consistently true and right like the character and ways of God. A church that finds life and joy in prayer is a church that prays in accordance with the revealed will of God, a church that prays in keeping with who God says he is and what he has already done.

Who has God said he is in verse 4? A God who desires all people to be saved. So what has God already done in verse 5 to prove as much? He’s given himself up as a ransom for all. It’s the Word of God, and the saving work of God made known through the Word of God, that ultimately compels us to pray. Again, George Knight says it well. “It is only when we remember that God is the Savior of all that we will be adequately urged to pray for all, sinners as they are.” The great engine behind biblical prayer is not our felt needs. It’s the revealed will of God.

One of the great strengths of Tim Keller’s book on prayer (*Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*) is the way he explains how meditation on the Word of God enables us to pray in accordance with the will of God so we can pray with the kind of perseverance that comes from knowing God is categorically eager to do what we’re asking him to do. If that idea is new to you, stop by the book shop this morning to grab a copy in English or Spanish.

Every year we dedicate one of our corporate prayer meetings on Sunday night to praying for friends and family members who have yet to come to the knowledge of the truth about Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:5 tells us why we should do that and why next Sunday evening, January 12, we do well to specifically pray for salvation for men



and women in our midst who are wrestling with Christianity and growth in godliness for those who have recently decided to follow Christ.

We pray for salvation and growth in godliness because there is only one God. There are not multiple gods. No one else offers abundant joy and life. We pray because there is only one mediator between God and man – Christ Jesus. There are not multiple paths to God. Either we come through repentance and faith in Christ or we do not come at all. We pray because Jesus’ death on the cross is wholly sufficient to redeem us from the guilt of our sin and set us free to serve the Lord. He paid it all. We fight for godliness not to earn our salvation but because Jesus has already purchased our salvation.

And we pray because all I have just said – the whole truth of the whole gospel – is not the invention of man. It is the authoritative testimony of God, “given at the proper time” (verse 6). Who God is and what he has done for us through the gospel of Jesus Christ is the reason we pray.

CONCLUSION

For whom do we pray? We pray for all people, especially our governing authorities. What do we pray? We pray for the ability to lead a peaceful and quiet life where all people, including ourselves, grow in godliness. And we pray not ultimately because of the needs we feel or perceive, but because of what God has said and done. The pleasure of God in working salvation for all people compels us to pray for all people.

KingsWay, let’s make 2020 a year where we devote ourselves to corporate prayer. It’s not flashy or original. It doesn’t tend to draw big crowds, but nor do most things that really matter over the long haul in church life. A faithful congregation doesn’t flit from one new initiative to another. A faithful congregation remains devoted to a handful of simple things for decades, chief among them being the practice of corporate prayer. Let’s pray and ask for God’s help to do that together.