

But First, Prayer

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4

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As we get started this morning, there are two envelopes making their way around the room this morning, there's one on the table in the back room as well, and I'd like to ask that we all take a white sticker and hang on to it for a bit. Don't stick it anywhere quite yet, but tuck it away somewhere, and we will get back to that at the end of today's lesson.

Several months ago, one of our young adults introduced me to a meme that has become quite popular over the past few years, and it apparently goes back to a 25-year old designer and illustrator in Chicago who saw a picture taken in L.A. that was posted on his friend's Tumblr account. The designer from Chicago added a caption, his friend then reblogged the picture with the caption, they updated the font again, put it back out there, somebody requested the caption on a mug, and gazillions of likes and shares and reblogs later, a phrase has now become incredibly popular. On that original image, the designer had made this comment, "Maybe it's a good day for rearranging the office/dining room. But first, coffee."

That phrase, "But first, coffee," has now become not only a popular hashtag, but it has now also made its way onto mugs, and sweatshirts, and welcome mats, and wall art, and has even spawned a number of coffee houses around the world - in Jakarta, Istanbul, in London, and a chain out in California. There have also been some variations on this theme, and that's what I would like for us to do this morning as we continue in our series of lessons from 1 Timothy with a passage on the importance of PRAYER.

As we have learned over the past few weeks, Paul writes 1 Timothy to a young preacher who is serving the church in Ephesus. And in Chapter 1, we've seen the importance of sound teaching, as Paul encourages Timothy to fight the good fight, and the message is: Hang in there, keep on doing what you are doing, and be aware of the danger of suffering spiritual shipwreck (as we studied last week). Today, we move into a section of the book where Paul gives Timothy some inspired advice concerning how the church itself needs to operate (in chapters 2-3). What do we need to be doing? What roles do we have? How is the church organized? And so on. But today, we start looking at prayer. When we come together as a church, we pray. And in this passage, we have some instruction from Paul to Timothy on prayer.

This morning, then, I hope that all of us will open our hearts to the word of God (in 1 Timothy 2) as we study some inspired comments from the apostle Paul on prayer. If you will, please look with me at 1 Timothy 2:1-4,

¹ First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. ³ This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

As we look very carefully at what Paul says here, I want us to notice the IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER, I want us to pay attention to the SPECIAL EMPHASIS he gives here, and then I want us to notice the GOAL or the AIM of our prayers.

I. But we start with the reminder that PRAYER IS A PRIORITY - WE ARE TO PRAY FOR ALL PEOPLE.

So he starts by putting prayer at the top of the list. Of all the things that we might be doing as Christians, prayer is at the top of the list - it's not taking care of a church building, or shoveling snow, or mowing the lawn, or even the various service projects we might do - these are all important in their own way, but prayer comes first. Prayer is not an option or something we happen to do when we happen to find time to do it or something we do after we've exhausted all other options, but prayer is a priority. Prayer comes first.

Prayer came first for Jesus. We think about the life of Christ, and we realize that Jesus prayed often and at every critical moment - at his baptism, when he was tempted, all night before choosing the apostles, early in the morning, in the garden, on the cross - Jesus prayed all the time. In the book of Acts, the early church prayed often also, and we should as well.

And these prayers, Paul says, come in the form of entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings. An ***"entreaty"*** is a request, asking God for what is needed. Some translations might refer to ***"supplications."*** ***"Prayers"*** in this passage emphasizes that we are humbly asking for something, that we are approaching God with a reverent attitude. ***"Petitions"*** refers to an ***"intercession"*** (as some translations put it); asking for something on behalf of someone else. It's the idea of using our influence with God to ask for something on behalf of another person who might not have the relationship with God that we have. And then ***"thanksgivings,"*** of course, is when we thank God for something. So, we ask, and then we thank God when those prayers are answered, and we do this on behalf of ***"all people."*** So, these prayers that we offer are to be for others. These prayers are offered to God, but they are not for us in this context. We are praying for others.

We aren't just talking to ourselves, these are not just thoughts that we think about other people, but these are prayers offered to God for others. And I would add here: These prayers are not limited to health concerns! As we've noted before: We look at our bulletin, and it can sometimes look like a long list of health issues. Our physical health is important to us - we care and God cares about broken bones, and cancer, and accidents, but let us also be praying for spiritual concerns. If you need help with that, I would encourage you to pray Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3 (a letter that was written to the church where Timothy was preaching).

The NASB (and most of the older translations) say that we are to be praying for ***"all men"*** (at the end of verse 1). Thankfully, most modern translations have updated that to be more gender accurate, that we are to be praying for ***"all people."*** We don't want our translations to be gender neutral, we want them to be gender accurate. And in this passage, the word Paul uses here refers not to ***"men"*** in particular, but literally, to ***"all people."*** The word he uses is the basis for our English word "anthropology." Anthropology is not just the study of "males," but it is the study of the human race. And I point this out now, because Paul will use some more specific language, distinguishing between men and women, later in this chapter. We hope to get to that in two

weeks. But for now, we are to pray for all people - our friends, families, ex-family members, enemies, strangers, other Christians, students, those in the military, neighbors, everybody. No person on this earth is outside the scope or range of our prayers - and these prayers we offer are important. Prayer is a priority. We are to pray for all people.

II. **But notice, please, that Paul continues in verse 2, with a very specific request, that we are to pray FOR KINGS AND FOR ALL WHO ARE IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY.**

So, we pray for all people, but there is an emphasis here on kings and authorities. And that is why Hans read those two passages a little bit ago. We don't have the time to look at this in depth, but God expects us as his people to submit to the government that he has provided for us. Generally speaking, kings and governors have been sent by God 1.) to punish evil, and 2.) to praise those who do good. And our role as Christians is to submit. We submit, because those in positions of authority have been put there by God himself. We think back to the conversation between Jesus and Pilate in John 19. Pilate is interviewing Jesus. He's frustrated that Jesus isn't responding, so Pilate says to the Lord, ***"Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"*** And Jesus answered and said, ***"You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above."*** That's what Paul says in Romans 13. This is why we pay taxes, Paul says. Of course, that's hard for us to hear, especially as Americans! We are the land of the free and the home of the brave. We submit to no one. This nation began primarily as a protest over unfair taxation. Isn't that basically it? King George kept demanding more and more, and we said, "No!" There will be no taxation without representation, and we fought a war over that issue. My ancestors fought in that war. We have records tracing our family back to the Revolutionary War. And here we are today! Are taxes fair? Like some of you, we did our taxes this week, and I now have five envelopes in my living room, ready to go out to be postmarked by tax day, which is tomorrow - two to the Wisconsin Department of Revenue, two to the IRS, and one to the Social Security Administration. So here I am keeping one eye on our bank account and another eye on the grand total of all of those checks. I need to mail those checks tomorrow, but I need them to arrive sometime in May! Last year when I approached the counter, the woman asked me, "First Class, Priority, or Express?" And I responded, "How about donkey?" Generally speaking, we do not like paying taxes.

So we have taxes on one hand, but on the other hand, we are also faced with immoral and ungodly politicians. Politics itself is just ugly. We've had some heat, haven't we? Especially here in Wisconsin. We've had a recall. We've had a state Supreme Court recount. We've had some close races for some very important positions. Wisconsin played a key role in the 2016 presidential election and probably will again in 2020. And no matter what we believe, all of us will have some serious and passionate disagreements with some (if not all) of the authorities who rule over us. It can be hard to pray for someone we really disagree with. As Americans, we often want to "resist." Maybe you've seen posts and comments and hashtags online promoting the idea that we need to "resist" the government in some way. But did we catch what Paul said in Romans 13:2? ***"Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God."*** We need to think long and hard before doing something that God has expressly told us not to do. So what do we do when we are ruled by men and women we would consider morally reprehensible?

Instead of resisting, Paul tells us here to pray, to pray for kings and for all in authority. And yes, that's hard to do, especially when we disagree, but have we thought about the actual emperor Paul was telling Timothy to pray for? Nero, one of the most evil men to ever walk the face of this earth. He is the emperor who will go on to order Paul's execution. He is the emperor who burned Rome to the ground and blamed it on the Christians.

Pray for this man, Paul says. Of course, if any human authority tells us to disobey God, we go with God, ***“We must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29). But short of that, we submit. And in all things, we pray.

What good does prayer do? Well, Solomon said something interesting in Proverbs 21:1. As a king himself, Solomon says, ***“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.”*** God has a way of directing world events by directing the hearts of kings. So, how do we change government? Paul tells us to pray. Ultimately, the answer isn’t in revolution, or protest, or complaining, or even in voting. Most of you know how I feel about the importance of voting. I’ve been an election official for more than 25 years now. Voting is important. But the most important and most effective tool we have is to pray. We might not agree with laws or policies, we don’t need to like our leaders personally, but we pray. We pray for wisdom. We ask God to protect them and their families. The last time I preached on this passage was on October 4, 2009, and my suggestion then was to pray for the president by name and to pray for his family, to pray for Sasha and Malia, to pray for Michelle, to pray for their family as they deal with the stress of public life. Have we seen the before and after pictures of our presidents? Serving in that capacity takes a huge toll on a man physically. We pray for the president as he copes with the burden of leadership. Back then I suggested that we pray for our senators, Kohl and Feingold, that we pray for Tammy Baldwin as our local representative in congress at that time, that we pray for Governor Doyle. Things have changed a bit since then, haven’t they! Authorities come and go. I’ve included a handout in the cubbyholes this morning (and also sent it out by email last night), a prayer guide that’s put out by Intercessors for America, a non-partisan group promoting prayer for those in positions of authority. We used to get these cards from time to time, but they change so quickly. Thankfully, these guides are now available online. This one was updated this past Wednesday and lists all of those in positions of authority at the national level, starting with President Trump, and then the Vice President, and the president’s cabinet, and Congress, and the committee positions, and the Supreme Court, and so on. I don’t know why, but I prayed more often for the last president than I’ve prayed for this one (both publicly and privately). But I need to change that. We need to be praying for kings and authorities.

Sometimes we don’t know what to pray for. I don’t know what all of you are praying for concerning our current president. My prayer has been that God would surround him with wise advisors and that the president himself would have the wisdom to listen to good advice. I’ve heard some of you ask God to protect the president from those who would intend to do him harm physically. We don’t need to agree with somebody to pray a prayer like that. And that applies not just to the president, but to our governor, and judges, and to our new mayor as well. The next time we are tempted to complain about some government official, Paul would suggest that we start with prayer, instead. Prayer is our priority. Prayer comes first. And the emphasis here is that we pray for kings and for those in positions of authority.

- III. **As we come to the end of this passage, we find that Paul gives us a REASON for these prayers - we have a GOAL, a PURPOSE, for the prayers that we offer, and if I could summarize verses 2-4, WE ARE PRAYING THAT OUR LEADERS ALLOW US TO LIVE PEACEFULLY, SO THAT THE GOSPEL CAN SPREAD.**

We pray for those in authority, ***“...so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** So we pray, not necessarily for a strong economy, or to win a war, or for our side to win in some way, but in this passage at least, we pray that the authorities would rule in such a way that we can live in peace, so that we can do what we need to do as God’s people, without interference. The first two terms address our relationships with others: We want to live ***“tranquil and quiet lives.”*** We aren’t living in

chaos. Outsiders need to look at us and notice that our lives are at least somewhat calm and orderly. The next two qualities refer to our relationship with God: We want to live our lives ***“in all godliness and dignity.”*** We are to live reverently, with dignity, with a sense of seriousness. Our lives are to be genuine, godly on both the inside and the outside. And the idea here is: We pray for the authorities ruling over us, because the world around us impacts how we live. Our prayer, then, is for law and order to prevail.

And remember: Paul writes this under Emperor Nero, one of the most evil men to ever live! This man will have Paul executed in just a few years. But you know what is ironic? This evil man somehow manages to keep the peace throughout the Roman Empire. He maintains law and order. He builds and maintains roads that Paul and the others would use to take the gospel to far off places. He maintains safe passage on the Mediterranean Sea, that Paul had also used. He was “morally reprehensible,” and yet he got it done. As evil as he might have been, Nero helped create and maintain the conditions that allowed the gospel to be preached all over the world at that time.

And this is God’s will, that all people would be saved. By the way, we have another issue with the gender accuracy of some of the major translations here. Some of the older ones refer to ***“all men”*** being saved, but to be more accurate, some have this translated as ***“all people”*** or ***“everyone.”*** And I only point this out, because it will be important a little bit later in this chapter. But God wants everyone to be saved. God doesn’t want anyone to be lost. He wants all people to be saved; but it’s not all up to God, is it? We also have a choice in the matter. God makes salvation possible, but we have to respond. At the end of verse 4, we are reminded that Christianity is a truth-based religion. We are saved by coming to a knowledge of the truth. And in this passage, we pray for kings and for those in positions of authority, because they have the power to maintain an environment where this truth can spread, unhindered. And we are thankful for that.

Here in Madison, we have a secular government that keeps this road plowed so we can all get here safely, and that is awesome. If someone were to create an unlawful disturbance, we have cops who will get here in an average of 2 minutes, 30 seconds. That also, is an awesome blessing. God, then, in a sense, is using local authorities to help with the spread of his word. We think about a passage from Jeremiah we studied in our Wednesday evening class a year or so ago. When the people were taken away into Babylonian Captivity for those 70 years, God said (in Jeremiah 29:7), ***“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 have welfare.”*** So here they are, 900 miles from home, in captivity, and God is telling them: Pray for Babylon! Pray that the city prospers! In the same way, we also want good things to happen here in Madison. We want the City of Madison to be at peace, we want the city to prosper, we want a well-managed city, because when Madison does well, we as a church also do well. Some polices encourage the spread of truth. Other polices hinder the spread of truth. And so we pray for kings and for all in positions of authority, that they would lead with wisdom.

Conclusion:

This morning, we’ve studied the importance of prayer. Prayer comes first. And yes, we can pray for the sick, we can pray for job situations, we can pray for those who are traveling, but the emphasis here in this passage is on praying for those who serve in government. And there is a reason for this: We pray so that we might live tranquil and quiet lives in godliness and dignity, so that those who are lost might come to a knowledge of the truth, leading to salvation.

A moment ago, all of us got a small white sticker. I would invite you to use this as a reminder to pray for those in positions of authority. I never bring my phone to the pulpit, but I did today to show you where I put mine for now - right on the phone case - somewhere where I'll see it. I almost put it somewhere in the car - maybe on the dash somewhere. We might put it on a mirror or a shelf or on a desk at work. Or just stick it on the back of the person in front of you if you never want to see it again. But if it doesn't work, or if you find some other way to remember to do this, go for it. And let me know what you're doing, because what works for you might also work for me. But I hope we can remember to pray for kings this week. We don't necessarily need to kneel in some dark closet for hours and hours, but as we live our daily lives - as we're driving, as we're shopping, as we are waiting in line somewhere (as I'm waiting in line at the Post Office tomorrow waiting for the privilege of mailing our taxes) - let us remember what Paul wrote here. And if we do, we have 80 people praying throughout the day, and that has to have an impact.

As we close, our prayer is that all of us in this room would come to this knowledge of the truth Paul refers to here, that we would understand what God has done and what we need to do. We respond to God's love with obedient faith. We turn away from all sin, and we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism (with water provided by the Madison Water Utility), for the forgiveness of sins, as we are born into God's family. If you'd like to talk about it, we hope you will get in touch. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we hope you'll let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com