

1Timothy 2:1-7

1Tim. 2:1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For

there is one God;

there is also one mediator between God and humankind,

Christ Jesus, himself human,

6 who gave himself a ransom for all

—this was attested at the right time. 7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

HE NEEDS PRAYER

During the Revolutionary War Boston was captured by the British. But, the minister of the Congregational Church, Charles Chauncy remained in the city to tend to the needs of his people ... despite the fact that he was an outspoken proponent of the Revolution.

The English troops forced him to pray for the king so Chauncy opened the worship service with this prayer, “O, Lord, we pray for thy servant King George. Grant unto him wisdom, for Thou knowest O Lord, he needs it.”

PRAY FOR ALL PEOPLE

In our lesson for today from Paul’s letter to Timothy the Apostle tells us that we should pray for all people. Now that sounds like a tall order. I can pray for many people family and friends. I can pray for members of my church. I can pray for my country. I can pray for people in other countries when a crisis arises.

But, can we truly pray for all people? For example, can we pray for a political leader that we think is disreputable and wrong on all the issues?

I suppose we could take Chauncy’s approach and pray that God would grant them wisdom because Lord knows they need it! I too have prayed that prayer on more than one occasion for politicians in both political parties.

And yet I think Paul is encouraging us to do more. Paul is encouraging us to do more than use prayer as a backhanded insult. Paul wants Timothy and the church to truly pray for all people, the good and the bad. Paul wants us to have the best interests of everyone at heart and to wish all people well. Paul, like Jesus before him wants us to love and pray for our enemies as well as our friends.

THE CONTEXT OF THE LETTER

We need to once again remember the context of this letter. Paul was in prison. He would soon be executed, martyred for his faith. And yet he encourages Timothy and the early church to pray for everyone, and the first group he mentions is the kings and those who are in high positions.

The kings and those in high positions were the very ones were responsible for Paul imprisonment. You would think that he would have a harsh word of judgment for these people.

But, as we noted last week, Paul's outlook was shaped by his past.

At one time Paul was one of those people in high positions. Paul was the chief persecutor of the church, a man of violence. And yet by the grace of God this chief persecutor became the chief evangelist for the Christian faith. Paul said in effect,

“If God can save me, God can save anyone.”

HOPE FOR ALL PEOPLE

That experience profoundly shaped the theology and ministry of Paul. Salvation was not by works but by grace through faith. And no one and no thing were beyond the touch of that Divine grace. Paul believed that the whole creation was groaning for that great day when this universal salvation of God would be completely revealed in his Son, Jesus. (Romans 8:22-25)

Christians have hope for all people. This hope is not based upon the fact that we are so smart and will convince others that our way is the right way.

This hope is based upon the fact that our God is a great God, and this God has revealed in His Word His desire for the whole world to be saved. In 1 Timothy 2:4 Paul spelled it out. He wrote that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

You could almost think of this passage as Paul's Great Commission. If you want to know the heart of God, it is the heart of one who wants to seek and save the lost.

A GOD WHO SEEKS THE LOST

There are many, many passages in Scripture that express this aspect of God's nature. Last week we read the story of the Shepherd who left the 99 sheep in order to seek the one who was lost. Right after that story comes one of the most famous stories in the Bible, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

These and many other passages all point to a theme that runs throughout the Bible, the universality of God's love. The passage we were taught in Sunday school long ago, John 3:16 spells it out, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..."

John Knox, the great leader of the Reformation wrote in the First Swiss Confession, "The end and intent of Scripture is to declare that God is benevolent and friendly minded to mankind; and that he hath declared that kindness in and through Jesus Christ, his only Son ..."

THE CHURCH NEEDS A BIGGER HEART

And yet quite often in the history of the church we have not prayed for our enemies. We have limited our prayers to those who are just like us. This has been a struggle from the very beginning of the church.

In this same letter to Timothy in the first chapter we read about those who taught "false doctrines" and devoted themselves to "myths and endless genealogies." We're not really sure what these false doctrines were but we do know the results of this theological nit picking. Controversies were promoted instead of God's work.

According to Paul the goal of God's work is not controversy but love, love that comes from a good conscience and a sincere faith. (See 1 Timothy 1:3-7)

Unfortunately, I see the same problem in the church today. The church today is filled with those who specialize in theological nit picking while having no concern for the lost. What the church needs to do today is talk less and love others more.

I'm reminded of that children's story, The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. It was said that the Grinch's heart had grown "two sizes too small."

Sometimes I think that describes the church. Our heads are big enough, thank you very much. But, our hearts have grown two sizes too small. We need to have our hearts enlarged. We need to learn how to pray for all people and not just the people who are just like us.

That's easy to say. It's really hard to do.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER?

When I was in seminary there was a church growth movement that promoted a certain technique. They said that people prefer the comfort of worshipping with people who have a similar racial ethnic background. Therefore in order to make churches grow more effectively we need to design them to appeal to a specific group.

In other words, birds of a feather flock together therefore we should use that fact to plan our churches. Much to the chagrin of many of us, the principle worked really well. Birds of a feather do like to flock together. Churches grew that promoted this principle. When everyone agrees with you on social and religious issues it is very easy to pray for one another.

But, unfortunately that phrase, birds of a feather flock together is not in the Bible. We are called to unity but not to a dull uniformity. We are called to love and pray for all people not just those people who are like us.

We are called to reach out to everyone in the name of Christ because you never know when an enemy of Christ might become the next great evangelist. You never know what God may choose to do as a sign of His grace and love. Our God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4)

ONE GOD AND ONE SAVIOR

What is this great truth that can save even the worst person in the world? Paul spells it out in verses 5 and 6. There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and humanity. Jesus is that mediator. Jesus is the Messiah who died for the sins of the world once and for all on the cross of Calvary.

In the Old Testament ancient Israel also proclaimed this basic fact about God. Their basic statement of faith was: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God.” God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. God is the great Creator of all that is.

But, despite the power and grandeur of this one God, God was also a God who remembered his people by name. He was a personal God. God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God knew his people by name, and God still remembers our name as well.

This one Creator is also the great lover of His people. The Creator cares for His Creation. I like the way Walter Lock put it, “God’s will to save is as wide as His will to create.”

THE STRUGGLE WITH PRAYER

Whenever I have a sermon on prayer, I find that many people struggle with the idea of prayer.

They know that prayer is important because the Bible tells us that it is important. They know that prayer is communication with God. They believe that in some cases our prayers are answered positively. As the church down the street puts it, “God answers knee mail.”

But, the hard realities of life often run counter to these simple statements about prayer. Sometimes we communicate with God, and it seems like no one is there. Sometimes we pray fervently for something and our knee mail is not answered.

The Bible tells us to pray for all people, but let's be honest. There are some that I don't pray for, that I don't want to pray for.

How could Paul pray for all people? How could he overcome the frustration of enemies who seemed to get away with murder and friends who wasted their time on unimportant theological details?

A CONNECTION WITH GODLINESS

We've already said that his conversion experience played a large role in his hope for all people. But, there was another deeper reason that Paul encourages prayer for all people. In verse two he tells us that we are to pray for everyone so that we "may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

In order to be at peace both personally and with each other it is necessary for us to change the way we look at the world.

The implications of the Greek word for "godliness" are instructive. According to William Barclay it means "reverence both towards God and [humanity]." In other words when we pray for all people we recognize that human beings were made in the image of God and thus all human beings are important to God.

And when human beings deny this image it makes us sad. We pray for their salvation.

A PRAYER OF PASSION AND COMPASSION

When I think about the attitude of God toward sinful human beings I think about Jesus' lament over Jerusalem before he was crucified. Do you remember what he said?

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37) This should be our attitude toward others as we pray for them.

And when we pray for those who need God's salvation we pray for ourselves as well. When we have a heart for the lost we come to appreciate the grace of God in our own lives a new and deeper way.

Prayer is having passion and compassion for the world. It is longing for the salvation of those in the far country. It is a prayer that the lost might be found. It is a prayer that

those who are far from their heavenly Father like the prodigal son might come to their senses and make their way back home.

LIFTING HOLY HANDS TOWARD GOD

The source of this passion and compassion is of course the Passion of the Christ. It is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our salvation. Paul tells us that just as there is one God there is also one “mediator between God and the world.”

When we lift our hands toward the heavens in prayer, we are reminded of the Savior whose outstretched hands on the cross are a graphic sign of God’s love and forgiveness. (See 1 Timothy 2:8)

The forgiveness of God in Christ changes our attitude toward the world. When our debts are forgiven we learn to forgive the debts of others. Human and divine forgiveness go together.

And that’s why Paul also tells us that anger is incompatible with prayer. (1 Timothy 2:8) I’m sure many of you know that this is true. When we are angry with someone it is not possible to pray until we have resolved that situation.

LEAVING ANGER BEHIND

Jesus talked about this quite a bit.

He said that if you are offering a sacrifice in the temple and remember that you have a problem with someone that needs to be resolved. Go and make that right before you make the offering. (See Matthew 5:23-24) Jesus also said that our forgiveness depends upon our willingness to forgive others. (Matthew 18:35)

This is why the first prayer in worship service is a prayer of confession. Confession and forgiveness lie at the heart of the Christian faith. It is confession and forgiveness that make worship and prayer possible.

William Barclay had a wonderful illustration of this in his commentary. He told of a man who lived a careless and even godless life. But then his son died in a war in service to his country.

Barclay said this loss brought this man face to face with God, as he had never been before in all his life. He became a changed, God-fearing man.

One day he was standing before the local war memorial that had the name of his son inscribed on it. Gently he said, “I guess he had to go down to lift me up.”

That is what Jesus did on the cross. In the life and death of Jesus we see the love of God. He went down to raise us up.

PRAYER CHANGES THINGS

Eugene Peterson's dynamic translation of our passage for today begins with these words, "The first thing I want you to do is pray." (*The Message*) If the truth were told sometimes this is the last thing we do, and we wonder why our life is so devoid of spiritual strength.

We read on bumper stickers that "Prayer Changes Things." And it does. But, it changes things in a way that is different from how we often expect.

Prayer is not a way of getting what we want. Prayer is a way of connecting with the One who will give us what we really need, a changed heart, a heart that is large enough to hold the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I have found this to be profoundly true time and time again. When I pray for someone, especially someone with whom I am having trouble, that prayer changes things. First and foremost it changes me. God graciously allows me to understand that other person in a deeper way. God graciously allows me to understand my own life in a deeper way.

And most importantly God allows me to understand His grace and forgiveness in a deeper way. In this way "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven" becomes more than just a phrase we say each week. It becomes a reality that we experience.

Do you really believe that prayer changes things? If you do I invite you to let go of the anger that holds you down and lift up your hands to receive the grace of God that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Heavenly Father, with our hands raised high we pray for all people this day. We know that you desire all people to be saved and we ask to have that same kind of passion and compassion to seek and save the lost.

We pray for our leaders. Especially we pray for our president, Barak Obama. Give him wisdom and courage as he leads our country. Help us understand the challenges he faces and make us fair in our criticisms when we disagree with him.

We pray for our enemies. We pray for extremists who use terror to achieve their political ends. We pray for communists who seek to impose their political views on others. The challenge of loving our enemy seems too great for us, but it is not too great for you, Great God. As you changed the heart of an enemy named Saul into a friend named Paul long ago, change the hearts of our enemies this day. By the miracle of your grace make peace in our world a reality.

We also pray for ourselves this day. As we think about the power of your grace and forgiveness we realize that we have not been a very gracious or forgiving people. Change our hearts O God. Make us fitting servants of your truth. Help us proclaim that you are the Holy One who has loved the world enough to send your Son into the world to die for our sins.

We pray this day for the many who struggle with illness and sorrow. We pray for those who have the challenge of trying to keep the peace in war ravaged and hostile parts of the world. We pray for the many who struggle with grinding poverty. We pray for those who suffer under the regime of unjust and evil rulers.

We pray for these and more O God. We pray for all people, and we pray as your Son, Jesus taught us saying [The Lord's Prayer].