

“First of All, Pray”
1 Timothy 2:1-8
September 13, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

If your house is a complete mess, it's sometimes hard to know where to get started in straightening it out. Most of us have had that experience when the movers have just left you in your new house, and all of your possessions are piled helter-skelter throughout the house. It's so overwhelming that it's hard to know where to start. Timothy was facing something of that situation with the church in Ephesus. After Paul's imprisonment and subsequent acquittal in Rome, he and his young protégé, Timothy, travelled back to Ephesus, where they found the church there in a sad state. Some false teaching had taken root, leading to a number of other problems. Paul was unable to stay to deal with these problems, so he left Timothy to do so. But he did not leave him without guidance, and this letter that we call 1 Timothy is that guidance.

In the section before us this morning, Paul indicates the area Timothy is to address first as he seeks to straighten out this messy church. He is to start with prayer, and I would like for us to look at the topic of prayer this morning, noting its priority, power and purpose.

I. The Priority of Prayer

Paul says that **“first of all”** the church is to pray. There are a couple of ways this phrase could be taken. Does he simply mean that prayer is the first topic he wants to address? Is this phrase just an outlining cue in which Paul is helping Timothy keep up with the topics he is covering in his manual for restoring church health? Or is the phrase meant to express a sense of priority and importance? Is he saying, “The first topic on my list is prayer” or is he saying, “The most important topic on my list is prayer”? I agree with John Stott's conclusion that *first of all* refers “not to primacy of time but primacy of importance.” As Timothy faced this chaotic situation, with so many areas in the life of this church begging for attention, he must have been wondering how to get started. Paul says to start with prayer.

We find the same thing in our lives and in our communities. When life falls into chaos and disarray, the temptation is to do something just because it feels better to do something than to do nothing. Paul didn't seem to view prayer the way I often view it. I often find myself rushing through prayer in order to get to what I think is really necessary for me, which is to get to work. But Paul gives priority to prayer. He wants Timothy to give attention to the work of prayer

because he believes that this is the most important step to be taken in restoring proper order in the church.

Paul uses four different words to describe our prayers for all people: **“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings.”** The second word, “prayers,” is just a generic word referring to all kinds of prayers. The first one, “supplications,” refers to profound personal need. In his classic work on prayer, Ole Hallesby says that Mary’s request of Jesus at the wedding is the pattern for our prayers. After the host ran out of wine at the wedding feast, Mary comes to her son and says simply, **“They have no wine”** (John 2:3). That’s the idea behind this word “supplications.” We present God with our needs, leaving to him the solution. There are times when we don’t know the proper solution to our need. We are keenly aware of our need, but not at all sure of the needed solution. I find that this is often the case with relational struggles, such as sometimes exist between a husband and wife, parents and children, or any two people. Sometimes we don’t know what to ask for in these struggles, and that’s okay. We can just present God with the need and let him take care of the solution.

But sometimes we know the solution we want. A child has wandered from the Lord and they need to be brought to repentance, a job has been lost and there is a need for income. The word “intercessions” came to mean entering into a king’s presence in order to submit to him a petition. In prayer we come to the king of the universe with our petitions. What he orders will be accomplished because he is the King.

The last word in the list, “thanksgivings,” doesn’t seem to fit. All three other words indicate presenting God with some kind of request, but this last one anticipates the answer as the request is being made. We typically think of thanksgiving as coming only after God answers the prayer. We pray for a job, God answers by providing a job, and we give thanks to him. That is certainly a biblically proper sequence to follow, but it doesn’t seem to be what is in view here. Paul seems to be saying that thanksgiving is to accompany our requests, even before we receive an answer. The only way I can think of that we can give thanks even before receiving an answer is that we have learned to trust God to do what is good and right. To give thanks in the request assumes that we have come to see God as trustworthy and good. He no longer has to prove himself to us, because we have learned of his commitment to us through his giving of Jesus to us and forgiving us.

So prayer is to be given priority in our lives. Does it have priority in your life? Leanne Payne says it like this. “There is nothing surer on this earth than the truth that God hears and answers prayers. It has been said that it is a rule of the Father’s house that we *ask* for what we get.” I think that if we believed that, we would make prayer a priority.

II. The Power of Prayer

Notice the three step sequence Paul urges upon Timothy as he directs the church in Ephesus. The first step is for the church to pray for **“kings and all who are in high positions.”** The result of these prayers is **“that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way,”** which is the second step. And then a third thing results: people get saved. There are several significant truths about this sequence.

I notice first Paul’s view of the place of the church and state in society. It is the duty of the church to pray for the state, asking God to bring upon the state the blessing of peace. And it is the duty of the state to protect the church, allowing it to pursue its purposes without hindrance from the state. The church doesn’t ask for special treatment from the state, nor for financial subsidies from the state. We want the same thing for ourselves that we would want for other religions, that the state provide a level playing field for all religions, protecting all to pursue their purposes and not showing favoritism to any single religion.

The second thing I notice in this sequence is the content of our prayers. Paul commands the church to go beyond the concerns of its own members and pray for our community, city and nation. It is appropriate that we pray for the needs of our members. When our members get sick or injured and need healing, when they run into financial or relational problems, we would be in sin not to pray for these needs. But we are also in sin if we pray *only* for the concerns of our members. We are to expand our concerns to our community and even to the world. What are the needs of our world for which we can be praying? Many of these needs are identified regularly in the news headlines. There has been a great deal of discussion about health care reform. No matter where you stand on that issue politically, we can at least agree that when more than 20 percent of adults between 18 and 64 lack health insurance, that’s a problem. And when our region, the south, has a higher rate than the rest of the country, we can all agree that this is a need. We are to pray for such things. Or when we read of the problems of our local government, Jefferson County, instead of responding with the cynicism that is so prevalent around us, we are to pray as those filled with hope. But how can we have hope when things look so hopeless? That brings us to the third significant truth about this sequence.

Paul assumes that prayer will make a difference as the church prays for kings and those in authority. This is even more striking when we remember that in Paul’s day, probably none of these kings or authorities were Christians. So God says to us what Jesus said to his disciples when they looked over the hungry crowd of 5000 men. “You give them something to eat.” But the disciples responded that they had nothing to give. They were forgetting that they had

Jesus in their midst. Like them, we often forget that we have a prayer-answering God in our midst. Prayer can do anything God can do.

There was a father who was watching out the kitchen window as his 7-year-old son played in the backyard sand box. He watched him move several large rocks out of the sandbox. Then the little boy came to one very big rock that gave him a great deal of trouble. He moved it to the edge of the sandbox and then attempted repeatedly to lift it over the side and let it drop on the outside of the box. But he failed each time, because he wasn't strong enough to get it over the edge. The last time it fell back into the box, it pinched one of his little fingers. The father then walked out to his tearful son and asked him what was the matter. His son told him all about the heavy rock in the sandbox. The father asked, "Why didn't you use all the strength you had?" The little boy replied, "I did dad, I did." The father responded, "No son, you didn't ask your dad." And with that the father reached down and together he and his son removed the rock from the sandbox. We only use all the strength we have as a church when we pray, because in prayer we bring God's strength.

III. The Purpose of Prayer

Paul wants Timothy to remind this church that they are to pray for kings and authorities, not just so their lives will be more comfortable, but so that the gospel might advance. God is pleased when we seek the common good in prayer for our community and nation. Verse 4 then lists the reason that God is pleased with this kind of prayer. It is because he **"desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."** This statement corrects two different errors that the church has repeatedly fallen into.

First, it corrects the elitism that wants to monopolize God and thinks of Christians as somehow better or more deserving than others. The church in Ephesus had undoubtedly fallen into such an elitism, and Christians have always been prone to this. Though few of us would admit it, it is easy to start thinking, "I've got my salvation, and too bad for you if you don't." So Paul takes them back to the heart of God, reminding them that God desires the salvation of all people. Someone in our Bible study on Wednesday reported how it was such a realization to her several years ago when she realized that God loved others just as much as he loved her. She had been learning of God's love and delighted in it. And then the light bulbs went on when it dawned on her that he had just that same amount of love for other sinners who have been saved by Jesus. But does this statement teach the opposite of elitism? Does it teach universalism, the idea that all people will be saved and no one will ultimately go to hell? No, it doesn't. Paul was not a universalist, as indicated by his teachings throughout the New Testament, and even in this letter. He speaks of those who may **"fall into the condemnation of the devil"** (3:6) and the destruction that comes upon the greedy (6:9). He clearly believes in a judgment

to come (5:24). What then does this statement mean that speaks of God desiring that all people be saved? Does it mean his desire is thwarted when they are not saved? Does this then contradict the doctrine of election, so clearly taught elsewhere in the Bible? One possible solution to this is to understand the word “all” not as describing every single individual, but all types of people. It is the same use of “all” that we encounter in verse 1, where the church is told to pray for “all people.” We don’t understand that to mean every single one of the nearly 7 billion individuals on the planet, but all types of people. We are not to limit our prayers to praying for people like us.

The second phrase of this verse protects against a second error, the error of pluralism. Pluralism says that God can save people through whatever means they choose. If they choose to follow the path of Buddhism, then God will save them through that. If they choose Islam, Hinduism, or any path at all, God will consider that good enough and save someone through that path. But Paul clearly rejects this notion when he adds that God saves as people **“come to the knowledge of the truth”** (v. 4). He then proceeds to speak of the truth that is found uniquely in Jesus. Paul lists three aspects of his uniqueness here: his incarnation, his death and resurrection, and his exaltation. Paul speaks of Jesus becoming a man when he says that the mediator between God and man is *the* man Christ Jesus. Jesus is both fully God and fully man, and there is no one else of which that is true. Jesus is also unique in his death and resurrection, through which he has paid the ransom price for our sin. This idea of ransom pictures sinners as trapped in bondage, completely unable to free themselves. There is only one price adequate to pay for our release, and that is the death of a sacrifice. Jesus has become that sacrifice—not unwillingly, because he *gave* himself as our ransom. Further, Jesus is now exalted to the right hand of God where he serves a mediatory role. He is uniquely equipped for this precisely because he is both God and man. Our natural state is to be an enemy of God, completely cut off from him by our sinful rebellion. It’s not a matter of not being persuasive enough when we try to talk our way back into God’s good graces. Because of our sin and his holiness we can’t even get an audience with him. But Jesus is a man like us, and he is also without sin. He is loved by the Father and always has an audience with him. He uses this influence to mediate on our behalf, claiming the sufficiency of his own sacrifice as payment for our sin. The Father will always hear and grant this mediation.

CONCLUSION:

God says to us, “First of all, pray.” As we undertake to bring about the reign of God’s peace, only two weapons are available to us: prayer and the word of God. But they are enough. One of the ways you can join us in this church in the ministry of prayer is through our Prayer Partner ministry. We have an opportunity to do that now.