

Praying for...
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Sunday, September 18, 2022

Let us pray: Living God, by your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds, that as your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and taught your will, for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I once drove by a liquor store that had a sign out front with the moveable letters, and the owner of the store had put on the sign, “Pray for our President – Psalm 109:8.” And I thought, “Wow, it’s not every day that you see a liquor store encouraging people to pray, and to pray for our president in such divisive times!” Admittedly, I did not know Psalm 109:8 off the top of my head, but I carry a Bible in my car, so I pulled it out, looked it up, and saw that it says, “May his days be few; may another seize his position.” It goes on to say,

“May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow.
May his children wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord,
and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
Let them be before the Lord continually,
and may his memory be cut off from the earth.”

Now, here’s the funny thing if the owner of that store had actually read the entire psalm and not just the verse they were using to make a point. Psalm 109 is being spoken by a righteous person who is being wrongly accused and lied about by his enemies. It starts off saying, “Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate and attack me without cause.

In return for my love, they accuse me, even while I pray for them. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love. They say...” and then it goes on to say what I read earlier, “May his days be few; may another seize his position, etc.”

So the words that were quoted on that liquor store sign were the words being spoken by the *bad guys* in this psalm. And after *they* finish talking, the righteous psalmist says, “May *that* (the words they have spoken) be what happens to *them!*” So this liquor store owner was inadvertently calling down the curse of God upon *himself* and saying that the president he hates is *righteous* and being *wrongly accused!* (We have to be *really careful* with scripture...)

Now, I intentionally didn’t tell you *when* I saw this, how long ago it was, so that you wouldn’t know which president it was talking about, because it doesn’t matter. That is a *weaponizing* of scripture and prayer and faith, and it is wrong no matter *who* we are talking about. Even if you think that this other person is your *enemy*, what does Jesus call us to *do* with our enemies? “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven.”

Paul writes to Timothy and says, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions.” He *doesn’t* say, “I urge that prayers be made for everyone in high positions, as long as you *like* them and they’re on your side.” Paul says *everyone, all* who are in high positions. “Even *them?*” Yeah, even them. Even the political leader who you think is the most evil person to ever walk the face of the earth. Paul calls us to pray for *them*. That doesn’t mean we have to *agree* with them or *endorse* them. Believe me, Paul was no friend of the emperor. But it does mean we have to *love* them. And sometimes that’s even harder than *agreeing* with them. We can’t control how *they*

are. But we can control how *we* are *toward* them, and *that's* what we're called to do as followers of Jesus Christ.

In such a highly polarized, politically divisive time, it is critically important that we pray for our leaders, even the ones we don't like or agree with. Why? Paul says the purpose of this is "so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." When our *leaders* do well, it tends to go well for *us*. When our leaders do *not* do well, it tends to go badly for us. Don't you want things to go well? Don't you want to live a quiet and peaceable life, compared to the times we're currently living in? Don't you want to live in all godliness and dignity? Because when you pray for people that you don't necessarily like or agree with, that doesn't say anything about *their* godliness and dignity, it says something about *yours*.

We are called to pray for *everyone*, for *all* who are in high positions, that it might go well for us *all*. So what does that look like? How should we be praying for them? We're going to get to that, to exactly what a prayer like that can look like, but Paul says some other things that we need to unpack in order to get there.

This letter to Timothy was written *by* and *to* people living in the Roman Empire, under the rule and reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar. We don't know *which* Caesar, because we don't know exactly when the letter was written. It could have been Caesar Nero or Caesar Domitian or any number of other Caesars. But that doesn't really matter because the point is the same with *all* of them.

We know the name *Julius* Caesar. He was the emperor about 100 years before Paul's time. Julius Caesar was the first Roman Emperor to be thought of as *divine*. After his death he was

given the title *Divus Julius*, or the Divine Julius. And every Caesar after him was given the title *Divi Filius*, Son of the Divine or Son of God. (That sounds familiar.) Caesar was referred to as the “King of Kings,” “Savior of the World,” “Prince of Peace, and “Lord of All.” There were temples and altars in the marketplace where people would make offerings to Caesar. There was even a common saying used to praise the emperor, “Caesar is Lord.”

All this to say that the Roman Emperor was viewed as a god, and his authority to rule was divine. So then Jesus shows up, and people are saying, “No, no. *Caesar* isn’t the Son of God, *Jesus* is the Son of God. (It’s one of the things that got him killed.) And they are saying, “No, no. *Caesar* isn’t Lord. *Jesus* is Lord.” (That’s one of the things that got *Paul* killed.)

Paul says something here that is very subtle but very significant. He says, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, *for* kings and all who are in high positions.” He doesn’t say prayers should be made *to* kings, pray *to* them. He says to pray *for* them. Because, he says, there is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, and it’s not the king. It’s Christ Jesus. We live under the rule and reign, the power and authority, not of *Caesar*, but of Jesus Christ, the *true* King of kings, Savior of the World, Prince of Peace, and Lord of All.

Paul says that we should be praying for kings and those who are in high positions so that they might come to know *that*. Because, he says, God desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. The Roman leaders were pagans, they worshipped the Roman gods (Apollo, the god of the sun; Mars, the god of war; Neptune, the god of the sea). Paul is saying to pray for them so that they might come to know the one true God. He didn’t *agree* with them. He did not *endorse* them. He was running all around the empire saying, “Jesus is Lord and you

are *not*.” But he wanted them to *know God* so that they might *live* and *lead* in truth, and so the people could live in peace.

What would it look like to pray for Vladimir Putin, that he might come to *truly know God* and live and lead from that place of truth? You might say that’s impossible, that’s not going to happen. They thought it was impossible that the Roman Emperor would become a Christian, but he *did*. We talked about this last week, as Christians we believe that it is possible for *everyone* to change. *No one* is beyond the redemptive, healing, transforming power of Jesus Christ. We have *hope* for *everyone*.

That doesn’t mean, though, that we should pray for people to change. I think that a lot of times, when we hear this call to pray for our enemies, people we don’t agree with or like, people on the “other side,” our prayer is something to the effect of, “God, change them. Make them more like I think they should be.” It reminds me of the man who was praying, when suddenly Christ appeared before him and said to him, “I will grant you one prayer. Whatever you ask for, I will give you.” The man thought, “Wow! Millions of dollars, a huge piece of land, political power. What should I ask for?” And Jesus said, “Know one thing. Whatever you ask for, your neighbor will get double.” Well, the man *hated* his neighbor. He didn’t want his neighbor to have twice as much money or land or power as him. So he thought about it and said, “Make me blind in one eye.”

So often our prayers are focused on what *we* want for *ourselves* or what *we* want for *others*. Not necessarily what *God* wants or what *they* need. I can’t pray for other people to change because I don’t know how they *need* to change. I don’t even know how *I* need to change. Only God knows that. It’s not *our* job to change people, it’s *God’s*.

Pastor and author Magrey deVega says that prayer should push our perspectives beyond ourselves to include others, even those with whom we are in conflict...such prayer must be directed toward *the needs of others* rather than solely for our own.¹ What does it look like to pray like *that* for our leaders, especially the ones we don't agree with? Again, I *don't* think it's saying, "Lord, change them to be more like I think they should be." And it's *certainly* not praying, "May their days be few; may another seize their position." That kind of prayer is not *loving*, and remember Jesus calls us to *love* our enemies and *bless* those who curse us.

I think that a truly loving prayer for our leaders or our enemies or anyone we're at odds with might look like this. "Lord, bless them. Give them everything that they need to lead well. Give them wisdom and patience to do what is right. Help them to *know you*, truly and deeply; to know your presence with them and your love for them, and to lead from that place of love and truth, providing for the needs of the people, that we might all live in peace." That kind of prayer isn't asking for God to *change* them, but to *bless* them and give them what they need to be the people God created them to be. That kind of prayer makes *you* a more loving, humble person, too. And if God does indeed bless them with that, wouldn't *all* our lives be better for it?

Or we can pray for God to grow the fruit of the Spirit in them. "Lord, may they know love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Grow that fruit in them and help them to live and lead from that place." Isn't what we want for *ourselves*? Shouldn't it be what we want for *everyone*, especially our leaders?

¹ *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship (Year C, Volume 3)*, pg. 330

Or we can pray the prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr that's on the front of the bulletin: "O God, the sovereign of nations, teach us how we may build a common life in which the nations of the world may find peace and justice. Show us what we ought to do. Show us also what are the limits of our power and what we cannot do. Recall us to our dignity as co-workers with You now and evermore. For the rulers of the nations, that they may act wisely and without pride, may seek to promote peace among the peoples and establish justice in our common life: we pray thy grace and pledge our concern, O God."

So it's not, "Lord, *change* them," but, "Lord, *bless* them." It doesn't mean that if they are doing bad things, we want God to bless them so that they can *keep* doing bad things. Because the blessing of God brings about transformation. You cannot receive the blessing of God and be the same as you were before it.

Can we pray for Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden and Donald Trump like that? If we can't, that might say more about *us* than it says about *them*. I'm not saying it's *easy*, I know it's *not*. But it's what Christ calls us to. *Jesus* is Lord, and we live our lives in Christ's kingdom, under the rule and reign and power and authority of Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.