

Pray for your rulers

Littlebourne - 23rd February 2025 - 1 Timothy 2:1-7

We have heard already that 1 Timothy is a pastoral epistle - a letter to from Paul to Timothy with instructions about how to lead the church. The immediate audience for the letter is Timothy, but the expectation, as we see in the text, is that this will be read by a wider audience and is of benefit to the whole church in instructing them how to operate.

In chapter 2 now, we get to the practical matters. Paul has just mentioned at the end of chapter 1 that the charge to Timothy is to hold to the faith. He's also mentioned some who have 'made shipwreck their faith'. Now, Paul says 'I urge then', or some translations, 'I urge therefore'. This leads on - he's explaining how to avoid the fate of Alexander and Hymaneus and hold to the faith, and the first thing is prayer.

v1-2

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Paul's first charge to Timothy, and to us, is that prayer is said for all people.

Four things are mentioned that we should do - petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving.

- Supplications or petitions - from the Greek word δέησις (deēsis) - meaning a request, an entreaty. The indication is prayer for our wants and needs, typically for ourselves.
- Prayers - προσευχή (proseuchē) - a more generic word for prayer.

- Intercessions - ἔντευξις (enteuxis) - this is a word only found twice in scripture, here and later in this letter in chapter 4 verse 5 (though there translated as prayer). In secular Greek, this word was used for formal petitions or requests, audiences with authority figures, and legal advocacy. It's advocacy, petition on behalf of others.
- Thanksgivings - εὐχαριστία (eucharistia) - gratitude to God for all things, and for others.

Now there's plenty of overlap between those words - Paul is being emphatic, rather than specific.

These prayers are to be done 'for all people'. Now we know we can't literally pray for every single person. We have neither the knowledge nor the time to do that. We struggle to even pray for all those we know personally. The indication in the next verse, of a particular group we shouldn't forget, shows this is telling us that we should pray for all sorts of people - we shouldn't limit our prayers to just those that are very close, nor those that are very far, nor just those that are fellow Christians. We should pray for the lowest and the highest, the smallest and the greatest. Those we like and those we don't. There's nobody we can't pray for.

We are to pray specifically for 'kings, and all who are in high positions'. We should pray for our rulers. In Timothy's day, this would have been the Emperor and the Proconsul of Asia who ruled from Ephesus and the Apostles of the church, etc. For us, it's our King, our Prime Minister, our MPs, our church leaders, our employers, etc.

We don't have to like our leaders, or agree with whatever politics rules the day. We can take positions on whether whoever is in charge is doing right or wrong, or whether they deserve their position. But before all that, let's be sure to pray.

The goal or consequence of this is to have peaceful and quiet lives, filled with godliness. When Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon, he writes (Jeremiah 29:7):

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.

We pray for the good of those around us, and that is for our good too.

v3-4

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

We see that prayer is good and pleasing to God. He wants to hear our petitions and is pleased when we come to Him first.

Verse 4 influences what we are to pray - we should pray for salvation for those that are lost, that our rulers would themselves be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We can pray in conformity to God's will in this way. If God desires this to be the case, we can pray for it boldly.

We do have to be careful here - we see here that God wishes all men to be saved, just as we are to pray for all men. It's the same term in both places. In verse 1, this would naturally be interpreted as all sorts of people, that we should not pick and choose who we pray for. Here too, it means not every individual, but all sorts of people. This isn't a proof text for universalism.

What this means is that salvation is not for a certain rank of person or a type of man. The invite to salvation is given to all kinds of people, from all nations and groups.

v5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Continuing the thought, Paul tells us that there is one God. A throwaway phrase like this is easy to skip over, but everything in scripture is there for a reason.

The fact there is truly one God is the central affirmation of Old Testament faith - it's the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Observant Jews would say this twice a day, remind themselves of it constantly.

I think that Paul is contrasting the many groups of people, with the fact that there is only one God. There are many sorts that receive salvation, but only one God that gives it. The rulers we pray for might be completely different to us, but we are both under the same God. Timothy would have looked at the Roman rulers in his day and they would have been very different from the Jewish leaders of the church - but both are beneath the one God of all. The many groups of men that come to faith are all united by virtue of the one God they worship. This is a recurring theme in Paul's writing - that there is one way of salvation for all, both for Jew and Greek, for high and low, for everyone.

Similarly, there is only one mediator between the one God and men. This same mediator is given to all. It's the man Jesus Christ.

The term used here is one for a go-between, an arbitrator, an envoy. Christ brings both God and man together into agreement. He represents both sides - He is both God, and man. Paul emphasises His humanity - He can mediate because He fully shares in our humanity with us - He can really represent us.

Paul tells us elsewhere, Romans 5:18-19, about how we were represented by Adam, but now are represented by Christ:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Adam really represented us - he was both the head of humanity in the sense of being the first man, from who all others descend, and the root of the sinful nature that overtook us. But also in that what we do in sin, is exactly what he archetyped. Faced with the same temptation we would do the same thing - Adam is a representative of sinful humanity because we're all like him.

But in salvation, we are plucked out of Adam's fated line and made sons of God, co-heirs with Christ, adopted into a new family, with a new head. And this head is perfect and represents us before the Father in a perfect way. We are clothed in His righteousness and we're treated like we live the perfect life that He did.

Jesus can do what nobody else can - He can represent humanity completely, being fully human, yet He can represent them as righteous, since He alone amongst humanity can meet God's standards of righteousness. He also can represent God to us, as He is God, He is the second person of the trinity incarnated.

Part of the way that He mediates is like that of how a priest mediates - by offering sacrifice. Here it says that He gave Himself as a 'ransom' for all.

The word used here (ἀντίλυτρον antilytron) means a 'substitute ransom', a payment on behalf of others. We see Jesus say a similar thing in Mark 10:45 (also Matthew 20:28):

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Remember when Jesus is in Nazareth, in the synogogue, He reads from the scroll of Isaiah and applies the words to Himself (Isaiah 61:1):

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;*

He does this by paying a ransom. He's a redeemer.

The question then is what is this ransom and who is it paid to? Sometimes we talk in terms of Christ 'paying the price' for sin.

Now there are two conflicting ways this gets thought about. One theory, that crops up early in Christian history, is that Jesus paid a ransom to Satan, because Satan was the kidnapper so to speak. The Bible tells us we are slaves to sin, that we're captured and held captive by evil.

2 Timothy 2:25-26 tells us that people are in the snare of the devil, captured:

God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

This idea of a ransom that is paid to Satan in order to set people free has a long history in Christianity.

Now there's another separate theory of atonement called Christus Victor - the idea is that in the atonement Christ decisively conquers the demonic forces that threaten us, that in His death and resurrection, Satan is bound rather than us. You can see that these theories are not really compatible.

The other way of understanding the idea of ransom, the correct one, is that the ransom is paid not to Satan, but to God. He is the one who must be satisfied, He is the one to whom the debt is owed, and He is the one to whom this debt is paid. Jesus doesn't negotiate with Satan.

This doesn't mean that sinful man is not in some sense under Satan's thumb, that Satan has no influence over the world - he does. God doesn't negotiate with the hostage taker. On the cross Jesus rather defeats Satan and death and sin.

The price paid for sin, was Jesus taking the just punishment for sin on the cross. God demands the price paid for sin - and the wages of sin are death.

Now there's a lot more to the atonement than just this idea of ransom - the whole central event of history is multifaceted. But this is a part of what happens - the offended party, God, is owed a redemption price, and Jesus offers Himself as that price. What Christ has done is satisfied God's wrath against sin for us.

Paul makes no mistake when he joins together Christ's redemptive work and His mediatorial work - they are inseparable. He has, like those priests of old, made the sacrifice and gone through the curtain direct to where God is enthroned.

Paul tells us that this is 'the testimony given at the proper time' - this is revealed to us in Christ, that we might see that all men may seek salvation, not just a small portion of the world - Jews, but all.

v7

For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Paul lastly underscores that he is not making this up, he's not unknowledgeable about these things, but that he has been divinely appointed to be a preacher and apostle, a sent one, sent to the Gentiles. We might think this an odd statement to write to his close friend Timothy, but this shows us the intention that the letter isn't just for Timothy, but for the whole church of Ephesus, and indeed ourselves today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first charge that Paul makes to Timothy, and by extension ourselves, is to pray for all kinds of people, including those above us, those in the government and leadership of all sorts.

We can have opinions on how our leaders act and what they stand for. We might not like what they do, and we might even be right about that. But before we wade into politics, are we praying? We're so often quicker to complain than to pray.

Paul tells us here to pray for our leaders. We see in scripture lots of ways to do this. One way is to pray those imprecatory prayers that we see in the Psalms sometimes. Prayers that call upon God to enact justice. This can make us uncomfortable today, and it's certainly not the only way to pray, but I do believe it is valid to pray like David did, for justice against our enemies.

Now we don't pray this sort of thing lightly, but we certainly can pray that God frustrate the plans of the wicked. If we know our rulers to be doing things that are directly contrary to God's law and purposes, we ought to pray about it strongly, not out of vindictiveness or vengeance, but that God would justly deal with people.

Another way we might pray is by taking seriously what Jesus has told us in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:44):

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

Are we praying that God would bless our leaders, when they feel like enemies too? Are we praying like Jeremiah for the prosperity of the society we live in, even if there's much to disagree with about society at large?

But I think Paul is telling us to pray something specifically - something that combines both the imprecatory aspect of changing our leaders direction and the blessing aspect - he encourages us to pray for Kings and those in high places to be saved. To repent and believe. That justice would be done, by the mediatorial sacrifice of Christ. We should pray for our leaders to follow Christ.