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Prayer's Priority

I Timothy 2:1-6

Introduction

What would you say is the most important thing we do as a church—preaching the gospel, teaching the Bible, making disciples, helping the poor? Or maybe it's missions! That's been one of our greatest strengths as a church over the years! The answer to that question, of course, is: None of these things! John Piper makes that point in his book on missions. In fact, on one level it's a strange way to begin a book on missions because he says this. See what you think. He says, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church." "You're right!" you say. "That is strange way to begin a book on missions." But then he goes on to say this and it makes a lot more sense. He says, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man." Then he adds: "When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. But worship abides forever. Worship, there-fore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It is the goal of missions because in missions we aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory."

But you say, "Is there anything in the Bible to back that up?" There is! In fact, you can see it for yourself if you'll open your Bible to 1 Timothy 2, starting with verse 1. On your way to it, you might want to stop at 1 Timothy chapter 3 where Paul tells us why he wrote this letter. It was an instructional letter written to the church in Ephesus, in case he couldn't visit them right away, and he says this in verse 14: "I am writing you these instructions, so that if I'm delayed, you'll know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth," which means everything in this letter was written to help us do just that, to understand our priorities as a church and how to carry them out. So turn back a chapter and notice with me: What tops his list of instructions in chapter 2, verse 1? That's our passage for today, if you'd look at it with me now. He says: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, for there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time."

Worship, Paul says—worship specifically in the form of prayer—is our great priority as a church because everything else flows out of it: preaching the gospel, making disciples, establishing peace and justice in this land we love—everything good we long for flows out of and is the result of fervent, heartfelt prayer and praise. In fact, what I've found to be the most helpful thing in this passage is the fact that Paul tells us exactly how to do it, so we enjoy the greatest return on our investment. And I want you to notice with me where he tells us to begin. He says the place to begin is by praying for people—

1. Pray for people.

This is from the English Standard Version. Paul says, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.” People are to be the focus of our prayers, and why? Because they’re the only thing that lasts for-ever! C.S. Lewis was very strong on this point: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses and remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now, you’d be strongly tempted to worship or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet if at all only in a night-mare. All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it’s immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit, immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.” We pray for people because they live forever, either in the presence of Christ enjoying all those things He’s prepared for those who love Him or suffering a lonely eternity separated from every vestige of His love and goodness.

So we offer up supplications, intercessions, and thanksgiving for all people. Supplication comes from the word for “need,” reminding us of the weakness and frailty of those we pray for. Intercession, on the other hand, refers to our ministry as priests, praying for the needs of those who don’t yet know Him—so that they too come to believe in His goodness. And we pray with thanks-giving, grateful that we can reach out to them and that the gospel is powerful enough to save anyone who comes to Him in faith. And notice, we also pray “for kings and all those in authority that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” which leads me to ask you this question as the fall elections approach: Are you a supporter of Barak Obama, Patty Murray, Christine Gregoire, or one of our other elected officials? I ask that because according to Paul, it doesn’t matter who you vote for. As Christians we’re to pray for everyone serving in a position of authority, whether we like them or not! If you doubt that, all you have to do is remember who was emperor at the time this was written. Nero Caesar who fed Christians to the lions in the Coliseum and covered others in wax and lit them as torches for his garden parties! And yet, what did Paul tell them to do for him? Pray for him! And you might think, based on what he was like, that what they were to pray for was a change in his policies and more tolerance for religious dissenters. But that isn’t what he says. Instead, he says we’re pray for the salvation of all people, including kings and anyone else who serves in a position of authority.

2. Pray for people’s salvation.

Verse 3 says: “This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” We’re to pray for the salvation of all people, no matter how great or small. Why is that a priority? Let me give you 2 reasons for it. The first is man’s need and the second is God’s grace. The Bible teaches that the most pressing need of every person born into this world is salvation because whether we like to think about it or not, each one of us was born with a terminal illness called sin which is slowly killing us, and the end isn’t merely death. Jesus said that apart from Him, our default setting is the second death. The first death, according to the Bible, is when our souls are separated from our bodies. But the second death is far more serious because what it involves in the separation of our souls from God forever.

Jesus talked about this more than anyone else, and He described it in several ways. He called it a place of eternal torment and darkness where the worm does not die, the fire never goes out, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth lasts forever. And I know it isn’t politically correct to talk about these things, but not to talk about them is to live in denial and miss salvation! So we pray for the salvation of all people, even those we may not like very much, which is why I mentioned Barak Obama a moment ago,

because I know there are some who do not like him very much. But let me ask you. Given the horrors of hell described by Jesus, I wouldn't wish these things on my worst enemy, would you? So I pray for Barak Obama because, even though he attended church for years and says that Jesus is his Savior, the Christ he met in that church was not the Jesus of the Bible. It was the Christ of liberation theology which denies the need for personal salvation and says what we really need to pursue is a collective salvation that can only be attained by pursuing social justice for everyone in the world. And while that may sound like a noble goal, that's very different from what the Bible teaches. The salvation Jesus offers is not of this world and is made possible by His good works, not ours. And if you believe that—that there's a hell to shun and a heaven to gain, it ought to make all the difference in the way you pray. It should make you want to pray for the salvation of all people, even those you do not know or like very much.

Paul adds, the reason we can be confident when we pray is because our God is by His very nature a Savior. "This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all—the testimony given in its proper time." God has such a gracious heart that He gave His very own Son as the ransom for our sins, which underscores all the more how desperate our situation is. After all, nobody in his right mind would send his boy to die if it wasn't absolutely necessary? But it was necessary, so God gave His Son as the ransom for our sins, because our God is above all things a Savior who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but pleads with us again and again throughout the Bible to accept His gift of salvation. Consider Ezekiel 33:11—"As surely as I live," says the Lord God, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. I only want them to turn from their ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! For why will you die, O house of Israel?" That's raw emotion coming from the very heart of God who pleads with us, "Why will you die when I want you to live? Turn from your sin! Turn from your sins and live!" And then He proved it forever by sending His Son to die for our sins. So how should we respond to these things? Paul says the first thing we're to do is to pray for those who don't yet believe because that's how the heart of man is softened and drawn to the Savior.

For me, it was the prayers of my barber, Mel Vedvick. Several friends had talked to me about Jesus over the years, but it was Mel who made the difference and he did it without saying even one word for me. Mel was a shy man who was scared to death to say anything about Jesus to others. So what he did was leave a few gospel tracts lying on the table of his barbershop, praying for God to work in the hearts of those who sat in his chair. And that's all it took for me to believe. I picked up one of those tracts as a teenager, and it pierced my heart with the truth, but I wasn't ready to make a decision for Christ. So Mel kept on praying for me all through high school until I finally accepted Him as my Savior my second year of college. Prayer is what opened my heart and drew me to Christ. And when I went on to become a youth pastor a few years later, who was sitting in church continuing to pray for me? Mel Vedvick, the man who led me to Christ without a word.

So let me ask you. Whose salvation are you praying for today? You'll notice I left a blank in this morning's outline where you can write the name of a friend, a politician, or maybe an unreached people group on the other side of the world that you're going to start praying for, believing that prayer can do what you could never do by your words alone. Do that with me before we go on. Write down the name of someone you're going to pray for beginning today. We pray for the salvation of all people, and to what end? That's the final point I want you to notice with me—

3. Pray for people's salvation for God's glory and the church's peace.

Let's start with the church's peace. Listen again to what Paul says in verse 1. He says, "I urge, first of all, then, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." Paul says there's a direct correlation between how much we pray for the salvation of our rulers and the kind of lives we live in this world. Because as physical as this world appears to be, it's far more spiritual than we realize. Most of the truly great forces in this world are immaterial—like love, fear, hate, greed, peace, kindness. These are the great intangibles empowered by forces that we cannot see with our eyes. Do you remember the words of Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"? It wasn't hyperbole when he wrote: "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us." He knew both from Scripture and his own personal experience that this world is far more spiritual than it appears.

For example, did you know that according to Revelation 5:11, there are hundreds of millions of angels at work in the world today? Unfortunately, one-third of them joined Lucifer in his rebellion against God and have been fighting His will ever since. So when we get bitter with one another, mock our public leaders, and go into fight or flight the moment things go wrong, who feeds off those things? They do. Those are things that energize the unseen forces around us! If you doubt that, all you have to do is pick up a copy of The Screwtape Letters this afternoon and you can hear it from the master demon himself. But the good news is there are twice as many holy angels with us than those who stand against us. So when we humbly bow before our Heavenly Father and pray for our president, our governor, and our representatives and when we lift up our neighbors, our co-workers, and fellow church members in prayer, and extend those prayers to our military, our missionaries, and the unreached people of the world, things change—not only in the lives of those we pray for, but in spiritual climate of the land in which we live. That was God's promise to His people in 2 Chronicles 7, and it still holds true today: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land."

Of course, the reason He heals our land and lets us live "quiet and peaceful lives in all godliness and holiness," isn't to make us more comfortable. He has a higher and holier purpose for us than that. The reason for the peace He gives is because that's the optimal optimal conditions for spreading the fame of His name! And that's also the reason He tells us to pray for others. It isn't because this world of sinners is so valuable in and of itself. We sinners are apt to think that about ourselves. It's about the glory of God. The reason He created us was to enjoy and proclaim the glory of God. And that's also why He tells us to pray for the salvation of others. We want more and more people to come to know Him, so that more and more people see His glory and give Him the worship He deserves. Remember the words I quoted at the outset? "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate not missions, because God is ultimate, not man." And so we pray and preach the gospel and make disciples and send out missionaries not for man's sake, but for the glory of God. "The goal of missions and everything else we do is to bring the nations of the world into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory." Shall we pray?