**1 Timothy 2:1-6** July 24, 2022

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 *1 Timothy 2:1I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—2for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Most of you have enough years to have been an important influence in someone else’s life. As a parent or grandparent, as a superior in the workplace or rank, or an upperclassman trying to help a poor, little lost freshman, you have had chances to positively influence other lives.

 If you could sit down and think and then give one overarching word of advice to a generic somebody, what would it be?

* “Stand up for yourself. If you don’t respect yourself, no one else will.”
* “Get your finances in order. If you don’t get a handle on money, you’ll always be a victim.”
* “Be kind. A lot of bad happens in this world. Just be kind.”

 Well, the Apostle Paul, and the Apostle Paul isn’t like a lot of us, this is how he started the spiritual advice part of his letter to Timothy: ***“I urge, first of all, that prayers, requests, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone…”*** His first word for Christians is

**Be Better Prayers!**

**A. By making prayer a priority
B. By praying for others, even those we don’t want to
C. By praying with God’s will in mind**

 He puts a lot of weight on prayer.

 You know, the subject of prayer comes up at least once a year, every year, in our schedule of Sunday readings. It doesn’t just get mentioned, it takes center stage. Every year! It’s a really important part of being a Christian. And just so you don’t think we are merely fulfilling a curriculum requirement, think of Jesus’ attitude about prayer. Think of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane and on the cross, through the night on a mountain, and outside a Galilean village before sunrise. Think of Jesus’ two or three parables about prayer, and the two times he taught the Lord’s prayer. Prayer is important, really important.

 Now here’s my confession: when I find the subject of prayer on my desk on Tuesday morning—that’s when I usually start sermon preparation—part of me wants to skip it. You know why? A guilty conscience. I am embarrassed. I look at my own life of prayer and I know—without even thinking about it too much—that I do not pray nearly as often or as fervently as I should. Every year, bringing up the subject of prayer makes me aware of a deep need to go to God asking his forgiveness for my neglect of prayer.

 I can’t speak for you, but how good it was for me to start today’s service singing, *“Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.”* (CW 562) Yes, for our every sin, for all of our neglect of prayer, there is complete cleansing in Jesus.

 And now, leaving the embarrassed, guilty conscience behind, knowing that you all can call me a hypocrite but that God’s people are far more gracious and forgiving than that, I hope that I can help you hear God’s instructions to be better prayers.

**A. Prayer Must Be A Priority** First things first. Prayer needs to be a priority. There should be a time and place, or should I say times and places?, built into your every day for prayer. When Paul wrote these instructions, he put it into perspective when he said, ***“I urge, then, first of all, that prayers, requests, intercession and thanksgiving be made…”*** ***“Urge”*** and ***“first of all”*** tell us that this is really important stuff. It is the hallmark of a Christian.

 But Paul doesn’t “command” prayer, he “urges” it. If he were to command it, it would defeat the point of prayer. It’s the reverse of the hero in a movie who urges an assailant not to pull the trigger, to put the gun down. He can’t command it; he urges it. Paul doesn’t command us to pray, he urges us to pray. There’s a difference. Parents don’t force a child to ask for help. That would undermine the whole point of it. It needs to be done freely! So, too, prayer is a privilege just as much as it is a duty, and so to demand prayer it is kind of like forcing an apology.

 In order for us to be better prayers, we need pair up with the Holy Spirit in us to war against our sinful natures When the sinful nature has an excuse not to pray—and it always does—we need to call it out. What’s *your* sinful nature’s favorite excuse? “Too tired”? “Too personal”? “God wouldn’t listen to me.” “Too busy”? That’s a favorite—too busy. Or here’s one: Do you find that your 21st century mind, as soon as you try to calm down and channel your thoughts toward God, that your mind starts racing over all the things you need to get done, or want to do? Me too!

 Prayer is some of the hardest work you will ever do! To pray, you will have to fight! Prayer usually isn’t easy, isn’t natural. Make a point to force yourself to fold the hands and close the eyes at some point in the day when you currently don’t. Maybe your first prayer needs to be that pray better!

 As you close your eyes to pray, you think, “I’ve got my eyes closed. Now what?”

 **B. Prayer Is Mostly for Other People** ***“I urge… that prayers… be made for everyone.”*** Prayer isn’t supposed to be mostly about you. Prayer isn’t supposed to be something you only do when *you* see *your* life flash before *your* eyes; when *your* kid gets in a car accident; when *your* boyfriend breaks up with *you*; when *you* don’t know how *you* are going to pay *your* bills. Prayer can and should be for those sorts of things, but prayer, like money, is best used when it is used for others. Make a healthy portion of your prayers about others.

 Like whom? Well, how about the poor, the suffering, and the downcast. They need help. Here’s a thought: How about also praying for the wealthy, the healthy and the happy, too? They probably need your prayers even worse because when things are going well, people feel the least need for God. Should we pray for family and friends and neighbors? Yep. Then Jesus would add, *“and pray for those who persecute you.”* Living in the Roman Empire, in a pagan culture full of sensuality, the Apostle Paul urged his Christians that prayers ***“be made for everyone!”***

 To push the point a little further… In our politicized days, as podcasters, newscasters and radio hosts rail against their favorite targets, we absorb that mentality and start to think of the other side (whoever that might be to us) as the enemy. We must remind ourselves what God wants us to do: to pray for them. We need to make their good our goal.

 Here’s an example of what I mean. Sometimes you are watching the television and someone comes on screen, and you just can’t stand that person and just have to turn the channel or turn it off—don’t cross that person off your prayer list. And when you do pray for them, I don’t mean pray the prayer of the Pharisee who prayed, *“God, I thank you that I am not like this sinner.”* No! Make requests, prayers, intercession, even thanksgiving for them.

 Our Scripture today doesn’t let up. ***“Prayers…[ought to] be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority.”*** Those whom we are most likely to brand as opponents are those with influence. Include them. That’s why in the prayer of the church in our hymnal—maybe you are starting to get used to it by now—the worship leader prays, *“Guide and bless all who make, administer, and judge our laws.”* And the congregation responds, *“Give them wisdom that they may promote justice and hinder evil.”* We pray that no matter who is in the Oval Office, the governor’s mansion, sitting on the supreme court, or in the state legislature. We pray for them because God tells us to ***“pray for all those in authority.”***

 Pray for them so ***“that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”*** And I think, “Oh, now I get it. I pray for them so that life is good and we can get down to the business of making money and fulfilling our dreams; praying like Paul Simon (a popular singer of the 70s and 80s) as he once sang, “God bless our standard of living.”

 That’s not why God wants better prayers! God’s vision of what he accomplishes through our prayers is so much bigger than such self-serving considerations. The point of praying for a well-led and orderly society is the subject of the third part of the sermon reading.

**C. Prayer Is Concerned about God’s Will** Now when Jesus, in our Gospel reading, taught the Lord’s Prayer, he taught, *“Our Father, in heaven, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come, your \_\_\_\_\_.”* Your what? *“Your will be done.”* What is God’s will? You might say, “Well, that depends on the situation.” What do you mean? “God might want me to succeed at one job interview, but not another. He might choose to protect me from one disease, but let another enter my life according to his purposes.” Okay. So, in a way, God’s will depends on the situation.

 But our reading tells us about God’s will in the big picture: ***“[Prayer] pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved.”*** That is the big-picture view of God’s will: it’s all about people being saved. That’s what God is always working toward in every answer to every prayer.

 When we pray, *“Your will be done,”* as we should be praying in all prayers, we ask God’s blessing always with one eye on the bigger picture of salvation. And so when we pray ***“for those in authority”*** praying about things much bigger, better and more permanent.

 When those who have charge of society are guided by God, we all benefit. Government functions in its place. There is peace. Crime is held down. But here is the bigger and better thing: Christians live godly lives with less opposition. The Church does its work in peace and freedom tending Christian souls and spreading the Gospel.

 That’s why this paragraph in the Bible connects prayer with a short summary of the Christian faith: ***“[Prayer] 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.”***

 These truths need to be at the core of our prayers. God and we want people to know the only true God, the God revealed in the Bible. We want people to know the only mediator between sinful human beings and a holy God: Jesus Christ. And Jesus is important, not because he is the best example of godliness who shows us how to live right and ascend to God’s presence, but because Jesus is the ***“ransom,”*** he is the payment for sin’s penalty for hopelessly lost people like us. That truth pushes us to be the best pray-ers possible. Seeing God’s grace in Jesus leads us to pray that we remain in that faith, and that others are brought to it.

 Pray, remembering that all other blessings need to serve the greatest blessing of ***“being saved and coming to a knowledge of the truth.”***

 Be better prayers. Make prayer a priority. Pray for others, all others. Pray, keeping in mind God’s will that all be saved. Amen.