

Prayer & The Church
I Timothy
May 3, 2020
Downtown and Lexington

What do you do when it seems like there is nothing you can do?

Maybe your boss or a government official made a decision and it means you lose your job.

Maybe there is someone that, more than anything, you want to come to faith in Jesus but despite your best efforts to share the gospel with them... they are just incredibly uninterested.

Maybe you have a friend who is outright choosing sin over Jesus... and you've talked to them, showed them what God says about it in His word and they refuse to listen.

I'm a parent, and I don't know if any of you relate to this... but this is my lived experience - things beyond my ability to control live in my house... One thing I'm very quickly realizing my kids becoming followers of Jesus and making wise decisions with their life... is wildly out of my hands.

What do you do then?

I find we have what one writer calls, "a bias towards action." When we are faced with problems or difficult situations our default is to spring into action. We want to do something about it! We want to affect things, improve our world, solve problems... which is a wonderful thing!

But, what do we do when our springing into action isn't enough... or worse, when it's not even an option?

That is something the Scriptures are going to answer for us today. Let's look together at 1 Timothy 2.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

[1] 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.

To bring you up to speed, Paul began this letter to his apprentice Timothy by doing two things:

- 1.) Calling Timothy to lead the church to stand firm in truth. Specifically, to shut down teaching that is contrary to the gospel.
- 2.) Reminding them that this *gospel* - the good news that Jesus Christ saves sinners like you and me... is the very thing we're built around and we should guard against drifting away from it...

And then the very first thing he instructs them to do out the gate is to pray. Specifically to pray for all people. The first call to action as God's people in light of the gospel is to become a people of prayer.

Now Paul uses four different terms here to talk about prayer and this is really one of those moments where you can tell he's a preacher - because he basically just repeats himself for effect.

- **Supplications** - not a word we use often, but it means asking, or seeking, or more accurately

begging

- **Prayers** - dual meaning - exchange of wishes and communion with God.
- **Intercessions** - petition (like what you'd make to a king or a government official). Greek word here basically means coming to the table for a specific purpose.
- **Thanksgivings** - gratitude

He's essentially saying: Beg God, ask God, plead with God, oh yeah and while you're at it, thank God, too.

The foundation he's laying is that God's people are a praying people. It's a benchmark of who we are. We are a people who seek the Lord. Who petition Him, who run to Him. Who aren't afraid to ask Him for what we desire or need. Who live in deep communion with God. Go to God in times of trouble.

And we do this not just for ourselves but for who? for all people - For me, for you, for everyone.

Notice specifically, the example that he uses to clarify what he means when he says, "all people." for kings and all who are in high positions

It's important here to take our 21st century American lenses off for a minute and remember who this letter is being written to.

The Ephesian church is a small group of Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus - who were outcasts within their city.

Many of the Gentiles around them hated them. Ephesus was something of an epicenter for the worship of the false goddess Artemis. In fact, when the gospel first reached the city riots broke out from adherents to the cult. But, **the Jewish community around them also hated them.** Because they professed that Jesus, who was killed by the Jews, was the long-awaited Messiah.

They essentially have enemies on both sides. Couple that with the fact that it's most likely that Nero was Emperor in Rome around this time and if you know much about history, you know that Nero was not very nice to Christians. He blamed Christians for a fire that burnt down a bunch of Rome that led to widespread persecution of the church and he was likely the Emperor that executed Paul... it's essentially, Paul's way of saying, "if I'm talking about these people, who am I not talking about?"

Pray for the people you're close with, for the people you're not close with, for the people who are on your side, for the people not on your side... for the people in charge and for the people not in charge. Pray for your friends, pray for your enemies, pray for your family... pray, pray, pray, pray, pray, pray, pray.

Which if you think about it is an incredibly beautiful, but an incredibly audacious instruction to give.

And the question I think this begs for us is, why? Why would this be the *first* thing he tells them to do? Out of all the possible things they could do - go preach, go share your faith, go serve - why *prayer* first?

And the answer is fairly simple: Because, for Paul, as well as Jesus and the rest of the writers of Scripture - **prayer is a means for effecting change.**

Or to say it a different way - **prayer gives us access to something greater than what is in front of us.** Access to the One who is in control when we feel out of control. Access to the One who can not only meet our needs but actually do something about what we sense needs to be done in our lives and the world. Access to the One who can do the things we cannot do.

You might consider this a silly example, but I think it fits the bill on what Paul is saying here. Have you ever been in a situation where you are talking to an employee of a store or business and something has been done wrong and you're asking them to make it right - maybe they've charged you more than you were supposed to be charged, maybe they didn't deliver what they were supposed to deliver - and the person you're speaking with just won't do anything about it. Despite the fact that you have all the proof that they are in the wrong. They just look at you and say, "I'm sorry, sir. There's nothing I can do about it."

At that point, what do you do? You say, "Okay, well... *Steve*... I'm going to need to speak to someone who *can* do something about it. Let me talk to your boss. Let me speak to the manager."

And I know that illustration runs the risk of making it sound like God wants His church to be filled with a bunch of "Karens" (which if you don't know what that is, google it and enjoy) but, if you read Luke 18, that's kinda how Jesus makes it sound we ought to pray and Paul is implying here that prayer is essentially the ultimate opportunity to "speak to the boss. To talk to the manager."

In fact, it's probably even better than that... Jesus says that when we come to God in prayer we're coming to our Heavenly Father and one of the best things about being a child is knowing that Daddy can fix anything. When I scrape my knee, or the kid at the playground is picking on me... I know all I gotta do is call on Dad and *this* is getting handled.

The point is when things are not happening as they should, prayer is access to the One who can do something about it.

Look back again at verse [2] "for kings and all who are in high positions,(pray for them) *that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.*"

This is a persecuted minority. They have no power, no cultural influence or respect to speak of. This is not 21st century democratic America - they have no rights to vote on government officials. They have no say or influence regarding how they ought to be treated. There is literally nothing they can do to prevent Rome, or anyone else, from attempting to stamp out their little Jesus-movement. There is nothing they can do to ensure peace in their lives.

In most societies, where people are being oppressed and persecuted without any semblance of hope, rebellion and revolt become the only plausible responses for positive change. But, the Scriptures imply - that is not the case for them. They have access to something greater that can actually influence those in the world's positions of authority.

There's a song in the musical Hamilton in which Aaron Burr sings, "I want to be, I've got to be, in the room where it happens, in the room where it happens." It's his cry to be involved - to be a part of the

shaping of the nation and the decisions being made. To not be left out. To have influence in what's happening.

And what 1 Timothy implies here is that this is actually what prayer does... it gives us access through the Spirit of God to every meeting room in the world. Into spaces you were never invited. With the potential to directly affect them. Prayer can change things.

Now, someone will certainly ask, "But, Bailey how does all of that work with God's sovereignty? If He's sovereign, does it really matter if we pray? Or if He's sovereign, do our prayers really do anything?"

The answer to both of those questions according to the Scriptures is "yes. Absolutely". God is sovereign and that actually means that your prayers both matter AND do something... because according to the Scriptures - God in His divine wisdom has sovereignly chosen to work through the prayers of His people.

Yes, God could do whatever he wants - far more than we could imagine - at the snap of his fingers, but He has chosen to invite you into the process. He is sovereign over both the ends and the means. And he has determined that prayer is the vehicle that moves the arms that hold the world.

As one Christian thinker commented: "We are not merely passive set pieces in a prearranged cosmic drama, but we are active participants with God in the writing, directing, design, and action that unfolds. Prayer, therefore, is much more than asking God for this or that outcome. It is drawing into communion with him and there taking up our privileged role as his people. In prayer, we are invited to join him in directing the course of his world."¹

Or like Blaise Pascal says that in prayer God has given us "the dignity of being causes."²

Prayer is much more than asking God for particular outcomes. It's joining God in directing the course of his world.

Truthfully, that's kinda scary... if that's the way God responds to prayer, you might say, "Be careful what you pray for because God might say yes to it." Now, He's a good loving Father so he knows when to say yes and when to say no... but the point is you and I have a role to play.

What do we do when it seems like there is nothing we can do?... we pray and God responds.

A couple of years ago when our Lexington church was just getting going. Brandon and I were looking over the budget and we had one of those... "Oh crap" moments. We were looking things over and it became really clear that if something didn't change and change fast, our little church wasn't going to exist in a year. We needed to be bringing in about \$4k more per month than we currently were. We didn't know what to do or where that was gonna come from... so we prayed. Two days later, we were hanging out at Brandon's house prepping for a Midtown class and Brandon, out of the blue, gets a phone call from a member who said, "You know I realized I needed to start contributing to what God is doing around here. I'm going to start giving \$4k a month." I. Kid. You. Not.

What do we do when it seems like there is nothing we can do? When the situation before us seems

¹ This one is in Comer's book *God Has a Name*. Need to find the reference.

² Blaise Pascal; *Penses*, p. 320

audacious, insurmountable, unassailable? We pray and God responds.

Now, I know there's been a trend recently in the public sphere after national tragedies like school shootings or natural disasters where people will tweet or say - usually to politicians or Christian leaders - "How about instead of offering prayers, you actually do something about it."

And certainly some of that is warranted. When God has put people in positions to take decisive action and they don't, that's a misuse of the position God has given them, for sure.

But, let's not be deceived. **Prayer is action.** In fact, in many cases, prayer is the only and best action that can be taken.

And for what it's worth, the Bible is not arguing for prayer in lieu of action because prayer actually moves us into further action - because it moves us into closer contact with the heart of God and His desire for the world. In fact, I'd go as far to say that the reason many of us don't act much, is because we don't pray much.

My question for us would be what if we were to channel all of our angst, all of our frustration, all of our anxiety and our worry, all our desire for the healing, hope and good of the world... what if we were to channel all of that into the heart of God through prayer.

What would happen? What would change? I believe we would find the words of German theologian Karl Barth to be true when he said that, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

And listen, this is a bit of a side note to this sermon - it's not really what it's about, but can we just think about the implications of that for our current season?

I find myself asking questions like: How do I love my neighbors if we have to social-distance from them? How do I shape and change the world, if I'm supposed to isolate from it? This unexpected season ought to remind us that outward activity is not the only way we affect the world. There is another powerful and mysterious force available to us—prayer.

And I would hate for us to miss the one-to-one when Paul says to pray for for kings and all who are in high positions

While we are a bit different from the Ephesians in that we get to vote on our leaders - in many respects our authorities still make decisions that affect us at a significant distance from us. And everyone has an opinion about how good or bad of a job they are doing.

Can I ask you a question → **How much have you prayed for those making the decisions compared to how much you've criticized them?** I mean, how much have you legitimately sought the Lord and said - God you're in control of all things, would you give these men and women Your wisdom here? If the Bible is to be believed here, it's telling us, you have an access that can affect those decisions. Do you even think about it that way?

But zooming back out, the big reason why Paul encourages us to pray is because, humanly speaking, the most unassailable and uncontrollable thing there is - is the human heart.

The one thing that you and I have absolutely no power to change... is someone else's heart. That is spiritual work, which means it requires the Spirit to do it.

This is the dot that Paul connects...

I Timothy 2: 3-7

[3] This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, [4] who desires all people to be saved (see the connection there...pray for all people, this is good because God desires all people to be saved) and to come to the knowledge of the truth. [5] 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. [7] 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.

Ultimately the reason why prayer is the first thing we need to do is because there is one mediator between God and man - Jesus. He is the only hope for the world. Everyone one needs him and He gave himself as a ransom for all - and if anyone's heart is going to be changed - if anyone is going to be saved - if anyone is going to be awakened to this good news and move from death to life... it's if God is the one who instigates it.

There is a famous British pastor from the 1800s named Charles Spurgeon. One of the things he did as a pastor was host a school, where he would take young men and train them to be sent out as pastors throughout England. And one of the things he would do with his students is he would take them to a cemetery. And he would say, "Alright, I'm gonna leave you for an hour or so, and while I'm gone I want you to command these people to get out their graves."

And everyone would give each other weird looks. He'd leave. Come back in an hour - "What's the problem? I only see you guys." And his students would say something like, "This is impossible, we can't raise the dead." And Spurgeon would reply, "You're right. You can't raise the physically dead, and neither can you raise those who are spiritually dead. Don't spend your ministry thinking you can just talk people up out of their graves, you need a move of God to awaken the dead."

The point is, as followers of Jesus, everything we want to see happen in the world - the lost found, the broken made whole, the wounded healed, the captive to sin freed - all of that begins with prayer.

In fact, if you go back and look at the history of revivals - times when it seems God just woke people up - in mass - to the truth of the gospel - no matter which ones we're talking about - the Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, the Welsh revival, even Pentecost itself in Acts 2... they all began with men and women begging God to move. Men and women inwardly groaning for God's kingdom to come. Men and women whose groaning became prayer which became revival which led to more prayer and more new life.

And, of course, other things were involved, like living faithfully as disciples and sharing the gospel with those around us - and Paul talks about those later in 1 Timothy - but all of it began with prayer.

Prayer is the essential first step of action to the gospel advancing in our city. In fact, I will go as far to say - and I believe this is reflected in the teachings of Jesus - that the primary way - over and above everything else - the primary way we join God in bringing His Kingdom to earth - is through prayer. This is why it's literally the second line when Jesus teaches his followers to pray. If...

- You want to see your friends and neighbors trust and follow Jesus?
- You want to get around the baptismal pool and hear people share their story about how they were lost but then Jesus found and rescued them from their darkness to His light?
- You want to see people brought from death to eternal life in Jesus?

We must learn to pray. Because Jesus saves people, not us. But prayer gives us access to rooms and hearts we wouldn't naturally have because when **God's people pray, God listens and responds.**

Now, I imagine... and maybe this assumes too much... that most of us would say we believe that statement, but - I would also imagine, if you're anything like me - that if we were to take an honest examination of our prayer life - it might leave someone wondering if you actually do.

Imagine this: what if I reverse engineered it? What if I constructed what God was like and what He was able to do based solely on your prayer life? What would I find? What would I walk away believing Him to be?

To ask it another way, "If God said "yes" to everything you prayed for this week, what would be different?"

Spurgeon again once put it really well when he said, "The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if he be not there, one of the first tokens of his absence will be slothfulness in prayer."³

Prayer is the barometer of our faith and hope. It tells us who or what are we hoping for? Where are we placing our greatest trust? What do we actually believe matters most or holds the most power in the world?

Whether we care to admit it or not, our prayerfulness - or lack thereof - reveals what we functionally believe about God.

At the risk of painting with too broad of a brush: **We don't pray because we don't believe God is the real boss. We don't believe He's our Father who can make it all right.**

If prayer is missing from your life it reveals your functional belief that there are some rooms He's not permitted to be in. That there are some situations outside of His ability to control. That there is a bully out there greater and more powerful than He is. Or maybe more acutely - that there are some things, that you

³ Tom Carter, *Spurgeon at His Best*. p.145

can just handle better on your own.

So, what does your prayer life say about you? And listen, I don't ask that to your shame. The cross has done away with our shame - in Christ, God is not embarrassed or offended by your lack of prayer. Rather, I ask this for your good. Because there is something God has for you in prayer. There is something God has for the world *through* your prayer.

I found these words from Jim Cymbala, of the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City to be particularly encouraging and challenging and I just wanted to speak them over us today. He says,

“If we call upon the Lord, he has promised in his Word to answer, to bring the unsaved to himself, to pour out his Spirit among us. If we don't call upon the Lord, he has promised nothing - nothing at all. It's as simple as that. No matter what I preach or what we claim to believe in our heads, the future will depend on our times of prayer.”⁴

So, I don't know where you're at this morning or what you're going through. I don't know what situations in your life feel uncontrollable, or unbeatable. I don't know entirely what worry or anxiety keeps you up at night. I don't know what problems, or issues or people in your life you've essentially given up hope for...that feel too far gone or too out of reach... but what I do know is that God is the real boss and your Heavenly Father and He's ready and willing to respond when you call.

The only question is “what will you do when it feels like there is nothing you can do?”

⁴ Jim Cymbala; *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, p.27