**GOSPEL CULTURE IN GOD’S HOUSEHOLD**

**FIRST OF ALL, PRAY**

**1 Timothy 2:1-7**

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1953, Anglican priest Theodore Wedel wrote a parable that sets the stage for our text today:

“On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station grew.

“Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

“Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club’s decorations, and there was a liturgical life-boat in the room where the club’s initiations were held.

“About this time a large ship wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

“At the next meeting, there was a split among the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station. So they did.

“As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.”

This is a parable about the church. More specifically, it’s a parable about the dangers that local churches face in losing their quality as life-saving stations and becoming exclusive clubs instead. It’s about how easy it is for churches to lose the mission that Christ has assigned to us to make disciples of all nations because they become too busy with their social functions and activities.

The question that we need to ask ourselves as a church today is, what are we? Are we more like a life-saving station, or are we more like an exclusive club? As the people around us make a shipwreck of their lives, are we receiving them with the love and care that befits the gospel, or do we see that kind of work as “unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of our club”?

That’s the problem Paul faced with the church in Ephesus. In Chapter 1, Paul was concerned that the church was losing its quality as a herald of the gospel and becoming a theology club instead. There were certain teachers that were only interested in debate, or what Paul calls “myths and endless genealogies” and “vain discussion” rather than reaching the lost with the gospel.

That’s not something that Paul would tolerate, because to him, the gospel was infinitely precious. In 1:15, he wrote, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” He had made a shipwreck of his life, but the Lord rescued him. And now he wants the church to do the same for others. Paul knew that the gospel wasn’t meant to be dissected. It was meant to be shared.

That’s Paul’s concern as we transition to Chapter 2. Paul wants to help Timothy lead the church in such a way that it functions as a life-saving station and not as an exclusive club, and the first thing he begins with is prayer. It’s not just prayer for those who are already insiders. It’s for everyone. And as we will see, it is prayer that preserves the life-saving, gospel-proclaiming quality of a church.

The title of this sermon is **First of All, Pray.** My aim today is to show you that **Prayer Keeps the Church Engaged in the Mission of Saving the Lost.**

We will have three points today:

1. **The Priority of Prayer**
2. **The Purpose of Prayer**
3. **The Power of Prayer**

(1) **THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER**

Let’s begin by remembering why Paul is writing this letter to Timothy. The purpose of this letter is to teach Timothy how to put the local church in good order. It’s like an instruction manual on how to build a healthy church.

When it comes to some of the books of the Bible, we need to do a lot of hard work to try to guess why that book was written, things like identifying phrases or themes that are repeated over and so that we can arrive at a reasonable conclusion about the original author’s intent. That’s not the case with 1 Timothy, because Paul himself tells us very clearly why this letter was written in 3:15:

“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

So what does behaving in the household of God look like? Paul says that it begins with prayer. Verse 1: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *all* people”. Since we know that Paul’s intent is to teach Timothy how to put the church in order, we know that Paul’s not just talking about any prayer. He’s talking about *corporate* prayer.

Now, notice how he opens verse 1 with “First of all”. Paul’s saying, “The first thing you need to know about building a healthy church is that it all starts with prayer.” Charles Spurgeon likened prayer to the “engine room” of a mill. He said,

“If the engine room is out of action, then the whole mill will grind to a halt. We cannot expect blessing if we do not ask.”

Prayer is the engine that keeps the church running. It’s the fuel that keeps the church burning hot with passion for the glory of God and for the sake of the gospel.

You may be wondering, “How is prayer of first importance when he’s only beginning to address it in Chapter 2? Can’t we say that what is truly of first importance is all that he wrote about in Chapter 1?” That’s a good question. I believe that what Paul was doing in Chapter 1 was addressing the unique circumstances of the Ephesian church. There were false teachers in the church who were threatening the gospel, and if they prevailed, the rest of the letter would be redundant, because there wouldn’t be a church for Timothy to put in order.

We know how pressing this issue was for Paul because of how he begins Chapter 1. Paul almost always begins his letters with a greeting, followed by prayer and thanksgiving. But in 1 Timothy, he follows his greeting immediately with instruction (“charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine”). In his mind, it was the most urgent issue that Timothy needed to address.

But once he concludes those instructions at the end of Chapter 1, Paul then returns to his regularly scheduled programming and starts talking about the building blocks of the church. He’s essentially saying that, assuming you have a church of people who are genuinely saved by Christ through belief in the gospel, this is where you begin their discipleship. You begin with prayer.

A healthy church needs a healthy prayer life, not just separately, but *together*. That’s why we do our Wednesday night prayer meetings. That’s why we pray for thirty minutes before every service. That’s why we always include what we call a pastoral prayer in every Sunday service.

The question you need to ask yourself is, “How much of the corporate prayer life of the church am I a part of? If a healthy church needs a healthy prayer life, not just separately, but together, am I part of helping the church stay healthy?” Some of you may feel that you’re not eloquent enough to pray with other people. Your prayers feel clumsy and juvenile in such a way that you actually feel embarrassed when you pray.

If that’s you, I want you to know three things. First, you don’t have to speak in order to pray with other people. When someone leads the church during our pastoral prayer, the rest of us aren’t meant to be passive observers. We’re meant to be active participants. We’re not just listening to them pray. We’re praying along with them in our hearts, so that when God hears their prayers, He’s not just hearing the prayers of a single person. He’s hearing the prayers of the entire church.

Second, prayer is like any other skill. It needs to be learned. You’ve probably heard a parent or Sunday-school teacher telling a child that prayer is just talking to God, and that’s true, but that’s not all there is to prayer. Prayer isn’t just about what we want to say to God. It’s about what God wants us to say to him.

Do you remember why Jesus gave us the Lord’s Prayer? It was because his disciples were asking him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). This is also reflected in verse 1, where Paul writes, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people”. Paul doesn’t just say “pray!” He uses four different words for prayer. Although Bible scholars can’t agree on the different meaning of these four terms, we can at least conclude that there are different ways to pray, and Paul wants the church to learn how to pray in all of these different ways. That takes time. It takes training. We need to learn how to pray well, and there’s no better way than to pray with others.

Third, we pray together because it makes God happy. In verse 3, Paul says, “This (that is, praying together) is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour”. Praying together is good because it pleases God.

This may seem strange to us, because we don’t often think about pleasing God, do we? When we’re planning out our week, we tend to think about what will make *us* happy, not about what will make *God* happy. But if we truly love God, we will desire to please him, because that’s what love does. Love aims to please. When I take my day off on Mondays, you’ll often find me vacuuming the house or cleaning the toilets, not because that pleases me, but because it pleases my wife. I love to please her, because I love her.

If we love God, we will love to please him, and what pleases him is when we join with others in corporate prayer. It doesn’t matter if you go to a prayer meeting and don’t say a word. If you’re praying along with others in your heart, you’re pleasing your Heavenly Father, and that’s always a good thing. And with time, you will find yourself more and more comfortable with adding your voice to the prayers of God’s people as you learn how God wants you to pray.

 (2) **THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER**

Prayer must take priority in the life of the local church. But what are we to pray for? This leads to our second point: The Purpose of Prayer.

I should begin by noting that our text today doesn’t tell us everything about the purpose of prayer. For that, we would need to look at the Psalms. The Psalms are the Christian’s prayer book, and they show us the full spectrum of things we ought to pray about. They teach us about confession. They teach us to pray for justice. They teach us to voice our complaints to God and to express the deepest longings of our hearts for him. Nothing trains us better to pray than the Psalms.

The lesson that we learn from our text today is much narrower but still extremely important. At first glance, we might think that this lesson is simply that we should pray for our government, which is essentially what verse 2 is about: we should pray “for kings and all who are in high positions”. While we should certainly do that, Paul’s ultimate concern here isn’t just that Christians pray for their governments. It’s that Christians pray for the lost so that they may be saved.

That’s apparent as we follow the logic of the text. In verse 1, Paul says that prayers should be made for *all* people. Then in verse 2, he specifies that prayers should be made for “kings and *all* who are in high positions”. Paul’s not just saying, “Remember to pray for your government”. He’s saying, “Remember to pray for *all* people, including all the people in your government.” Then in verse 3 he says that praying for all people is good and pleasing. But then notice what he says. He doesn’t just say it’s “good and pleasing in the sight of God”. He says it’s “good and pleasing in the sight of God *our Saviour*.”

God is many things. He is righteous. He is just. He is wise. He is loving. But here, Paul chooses to dwell on the fact that God is our Saviour. Saving is what he does, and saving is what he desires. God wants people to be saved, because he is our Saviour. That is gloriously true, not just for a particular ethnic group or social class, but for *all*, which is why verse 4 says, “[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” God delights in the salvation of the lost because he is our Saviour.

Some people take this as a knock on the doctrine of election. They say, “If God desires *all* people to be saved, he must not be sovereign over salvation.” Those who raise this objection don’t picture God going after lost sinners and bringing them to himself with irresistible grace. They picture God waiting for those lost sinners to find their way to him.

In response, Philip Ryken notes in his commentary that the word “all” isn’t always given a literal meaning. For example, in Luke 21:38, speaking about Jesus teaching in Jerusalem, it says,

“Early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.”

Does this mean that every single person in Jerusalem went to hear Jesus? Of course not. Luke’s using the word “all” generally to describe a large group of people.

That seems to be the way Paul uses the word “all” in our text:

* In verse 1, when he says that prayers should be made for “all” people, he’s not saying that Christians have an obligation to pray for every human being in the world. He’s saying that Christians should pray for “all kinds” of people without discrimination.
* The same is true in verse 2 when he says prayers should be made “for kings and *all* who are in high positions”. Again, this isn’t a call for Christians to research the names of every single person who occupies a government position across the entire world and pray for them, which would what a literal reading of “all” would require. Paul is simply saying that Christians shouldn’t forget to pray for the officials who serve under the Emperor.
* Lastly, verse 6 says that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for *all*”. To ransom someone is to pay a price to free someone from captivity. Is that what Jesus did when he died on the cross? Did he ransom *all*, without exception? No, he did not, because there are people all around us who are still slaves to their sin. Jesus died to ransom those who belong to him. As he said in Mark 10:45,

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

(Also John 10:14-15: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me…and I lay down my life for the sheep.”)

So when we see in verse 4 that God “desires all people to be saved”, we’re not to read it as saying that God wants everyone to be saved but is powerless to bring that about. We’re to read it as saying that God wants *all kinds* of people to be saved – whether Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, male or female, young or old – God wants people from every race, nation, language, and class, to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

This tells us what Paul wants the church to pray for. He wants the church to pray that people would be saved. God is pleased when his people ask for the things that please him, so if saving people pleases God, then asking that he would save people pleases him as well.

This helps us understand verse 2. When Paul urges that prayers be made “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”, he’s not saying that Christians should pray for the government so that people would leave us alone. He’s saying that we should pray so that the peace of our society would give us the fullest opportunity to put the godliness and dignity of our lives on display.

I used to think that I should pray for persecution, because that would shake the church in the West out of its complacency. I remembered how the early church father Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”. But do you know what the church looks like now in the land that Tertullian once lived in? It’s almost completely disappeared. Tertullian was a Christian leader and author in modern-day Tunisia, which is 98% Muslim and 2% “Other”. War and persecution have bloodied the church so badly in those parts of the world that the gospel has largely gone into retreat.

That is why we are to pray for peace. We are to pray that the Kings, Presidents, and Prime-Ministers of the world would govern in such a way that Christians would be free to worship and witness.

(3) **THE POWER OF PRAYER**

Paul ends his reflection on prayer with a glorious statement about the gospel, leading to our third point: The Power of Prayer.

In verse 5, Paul reveals why it pleases God when we pray for the salvation of the lost. It pleases God because he has already done all that is required to save them. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”

Let’s not miss how Paul begins verse 5. “There is one God”. Not a pantheon of gods. Not a plurality of gods. Not a local tribal god for every little village or nation. There is one God who is above all, and through all, and in all (Eph. 4:6). Christian doctrine doesn’t get more basic than that. We are monotheists, believers in one God.

And yet, it is so easy to live as functional polytheists, isn’t it? It’s so much easier to say to the Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu, “We’ll worship our God, and you worship yours” than to say, “There is *one* God, the Triune God of Scripture, and if you’re not worshipping him through Christ, you’re not worshipping God at all.” You may be worshipping a demon. You may be worshipping a figment of your imagination. You may be worshipping a mere man who lived and died under God’s eternal wrath. But you are not worshipping God unless you worship him in Christ under the authority of his Word.

This may sound exclusive, and in one sense it is. But in another sense, it is wonderfully *inclusive* because this one God who is above all, through all, and in all has provided one mediator for all, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for *all*. This is the testimony given at the proper time. It’s the testimony that God our Saviour has ransomed us through the mediating work of his Son.

Christ Jesus ransomed us, not just as the Son of God, but as the Son of Man. It was the “man Christ Jesus” who ransomed us. All he did, he did as one of us, because only a man could represent mankind. Only a man could be the substitute sacrifice for sinful men and women. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, fully God and fully man, gave *himself* to pay *our* ransom.

But who was he ransoming us from? Some say it was the devil. They say it was the devil who held us captive, and the ransom he required was the death of God’s Son, but that’s not what the Bible teaches. Verse 5 says that Christ was the mediator, not between the devil and men, but between *God* and men.

Our primary point of conflict isn’t between us and the devil. It’s between us and God. It was God’s justice that held us captive. It was God’s justice that required a ransom. Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom not to meet Satan’s demands, but to satisfy God’s wrath, and he did that by giving us himself.

His life was given for ours. His death paid for our ransom so that we could be set free from God’s justice.

Paul says in verse 7 that this is the testimony that he gave his life to. This is the testimony he was appointed by Christ to bring to the Gentiles in faith and truth as a preacher and an apostle. And this is the testimony we are meant to pray for, that it might go forth across the nations so that all people might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

This is the true power of prayer. Prayer may be the engine room of the church, but the force that powers the engine itself is nothing less than the gospel. The gospel is what guarantees prayer’s fruit. The gospel is what gives us confidence that God will answer. We can pray for all, whether in our neighbourhoods or across the world, whether in low places or high positions, because there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for *all*.

We must pray if people are to be saved. But the only way we can pray is if we’re confident that God saves sinners. Prayer for gospel fruit comes from confidence in gospel power. Prayer and evangelism go together. Evangelism is fruitless without prayer. Prayer is heartless without evangelism. As Philip Ryken writes,

 “The Great Commission goes hand in hand with the Great Intercession”

**CONCLUSION**

So how do we as a church stay engaged in the mission of saving the lost? How do we, a chosen, life-saving station commissioned by Christ to call lost sinners to himself, keep ourselves from becoming an exclusive club? We must reach *out* in evangelism as we reach *up* in prayer.

Reaching out begins by reaching up. Up is the only way out, because like everything else in the local church, evangelism begins with prayer. “The Great Commission goes hand in hand with the Great Intercession.”

That begins with me. It begins with me, and Pastor Tim, and our Board as we figure out how to put the needs of the world before our church. It begins with how I plan the orders of service. Starting next Sunday, we’re going to start praying for a different nation every Sunday during our pastoral prayers. We’re going to pray that God our Saviour would also be the Saviour of the world, calling people from every tribe, language, and nation to himself. We’re also going to start praying regularly for our nation, that we might “lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

Second, I urge all of us to consider how we can be more involved in the corporate prayer life of our church. If you don’t currently go to our Wednesday prayer meetings, start by going to one a month. If Wednesdays don’t work for you, come to church 45 minutes early and join us for pre-service prayer.

Lastly, I want us as a church to prayerfully consider how we can support missions and church planting all around the world. We’ve done that by sending Rachel Parenteau to serve with 20schemes in Scotland. My hope is that we would continue doing that by supporting Paul McDonald in Serbia. Who knows what other opportunities God will open up to us in the coming years?

The challenge for us won’t just be the giving of our money. It will be the giving of our prayers. Providing money may get people to the unreached places of the world, but without prayer, nothing’s going to change. The unreached will remain unreached. But if we pray, we can have confidence that the Lord will move with power, because praying for the lost is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour. To quote Ryken once more,

“God’s plan is to build his church by the prayers of his people. Missionaries all over the world stand and wait for the Holy Spirit to bless their labor in the gospel. The Spirit waits only for the church to pray.” – Philip Ryken