**GOSPEL CULTURE IN GOD’S HOUSEHOLD**

***A Series on 1 Timothy***

**THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF PRAYER**

**1 Timothy 2:1-7**

**INTRODUCTION**

If you were asked to give advice to a young pastor who was planting a new church, what would you say? What would you identify as the most important feature of a healthy church?

Some might say, “You need to make sure that you create a welcoming atmosphere.” You need smiling greeters around every corner. You need good signage with bright colours and strong branding. You need to be a pastor who’s always chipper and funny and communicates in an engaging, inspiring way.

Others might say, “You need to put on an excellent Sunday service.” The lighting needs to be just right. The washrooms have to be immaculate. The sound has to be perfectly tuned to please the human ear. The pastor has to look cool and dress in a way that others can relate to him. The worship team has to look and sound like it just performed at a concert last night. If everything just looks and sounds the right way, people will come and the church will flourish.

We may all have our own advice, but have we stopped to ask what the Bible says about what’s most important? One of my concerns is that, when churches are thinking through what to focus on and invest their resources in, they rush to what’s catchy rather than to what’s biblical. They look at what the big, seemingly successful churches are doing and try to imitate them. But if you follow those models, you might get some short-term results, but you won’t get any fruit that lasts.

The fact is that the Bible tells us what is most important to build a healthy church, and if we miss those things, we’re going to miss what God wants the church to look like. No book in the Bible more comprehensively sets out the priorities of the church than 1 Timothy. That’s why it was written. Paul wrote this letter to a young pastor named Timothy who was pastoring a young church in Ephesus so that he may “know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God.”

That’s what we want to know as well. We want to know how we ought to behave in the church, because the church is God’s household. Our church doesn’t belong to us to shape and mold however we like. It belongs to God, and that means that we need to shape our vision, priorities, and practices by looking to his Word.

We saw last Sunday that the Apostle Paul began this letter by focusing on the importance of sound doctrine. Nothing was more pressing to Paul than this, because you can’t have a healthy church if you don’t have healthy doctrine that culminates in a healthy view of the gospel. What we believe and teach is fundamental, because it will shape who we become. Healthy churches must have healthy doctrine which in turn creates a healthy culture.

But now that Paul has addressed the urgent needs in the Ephesian church, where does he go next? What’s the next building block to creating a gospel culture in God’s household? The answer will surprise you. The next priority for a healthy church to pursue is prayer.

Prayer is essential not only because of what it accomplishes, but what it reveals. Charles Spurgeon called prayer the “true gauge” of spiritual health. It’s one of the most important ways for us to measure how mature we are as a church. Healthy churches pray together, because prayer reveals how much we trust God. You can’t be spiritually mature if you don’t trust God, and you can’t trust God without prayer.

John Calvin called prayer “the chief exercise of faith”. There are many ways in which we exercise our faith, but chief among them is prayer. Prayer distinguishes between those who trust God, and those who don’t. That’s why one of the chief distinguishing marks of the evil kings and the good kings in the Old Testament is whether they prayed. Those who did what was right stopped before making significant decisions and inquired of the Lord. Those who didn’t just went ahead and suffered the consequences for it.

That is why we must pray. Prayer is both an expression of faith and a catalyst for faith. It reveals the faith that we have, and it gives us the faith that we don’t have, so that we would continue to mature as a church.

The title of this sermon is **The Transforming Power of Prayer.**

We will have two points today:

1. **How Prayer Transforms Others**
2. **How Prayer Transforms Us**

(1) **HOW PRAYER TRANSFORMS OTHERS**

Notice how Paul opens verse 1:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for allpeople”.

Paul’s emphasizing the importance of prayer in this verse. He’s saying that prayer is of first importance to the life of a healthy church. He’s *urging* the church to make prayer a priority.

But what kind of prayer is he urging? Remember the context. Paul isn’t writing to Timothy about how individual Christians ought to behave. He’s writing about how the church ought to behave. So when he urges that we pray, he’s urging us to pray together.

In other words, he’s talking about prayer meetings. Prayer meetings are of first importance to the life of a healthy church. That is what Paul says is of first importance. He’s saying, “Listen Timothy, the first thing I want you to know about building a healthy church is that you have to be committed to prayer.”

Who are we to pray for?” Paul says “all people” in verse 1. We’re not just meant to pray for ourselves, or for our families, or for fellow believers. We’re to pray for all people. No one should be outside of the scope of our prayer lives. Not the neighbours on our streets. Not our co-workers at the office. Not even the political powers that rule over society.

Paul makes that clear in verse 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.”

We are to pray for the government that God has ordained for this time and this place. We are to pray for our Prime Minister and our MPs. We are to pray for our Premier and our MPPs. We are to pray for our Mayor and our City Council. We are to pray for our judges. But why? Verse 2 says, “That we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

Don’t misunderstand. Paul’s not urging us to pray for our government just so that they would leave us alone. He’s urging us to pray for our government so that we would be free to live our Christian lives in such a way that many would be saved.

We see that by reading verses 3-4. Right after Paul urges us to pray for kings and all who are in high positions, he writes,

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

That is the real reason why we want a “peaceful and quiet life”. We want it so that our gospel witness wouldn’t be compromised by political interference. We want it so that the ministry of our church wouldn’t be distracted by legal controversies. We want it so that the lost can freely hear the gospel without fear, and see the power of the gospel on display in local churches.

We pray for our government, because we want people to be saved. We want those in power to be saved, and we want those around us to be saved, but the people around us won’t be saved if the church doesn’t exist. So we pray that the Lord would grant us favour with the state, that we might live a “peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way”.

If you’re like me, you probably have to confess that, as this pandemic has continued, you’ve spent a lot of time complaining about the government and not a lot of time praying for the government. A peaceful and quiet life won’t come from complaining. It will only come from praying.

That’s one of the main things that God wants us to pray. It’s not the only thing he wants us to pray. To understand all of what he wants us to pray, we need to study the Psalms, which is the church’s prayer book. But as we pray, we must not forget to pray for all people, including kings and all who are in high positions, so that our witness would not be compromised.

Verse 4 reminds us that we can pray this with confidence, because God himself “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Now we know that God doesn’t save everyone. Some are objects of his mercy, and some are objects of his wrath, but that doesn’t change the wonderful reality that God’s heart is one of compassion. His heart is full of mercy. Yes, God is just, but he is not justice. The Bible doesn’t say, “God is justice”. It says, “God is love”. God is who he is at all times, and yet there are some qualities that are closer to his heart than others, and chief among them is love. That is why Lamentations 3:33 says,

“He does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.” (Lamentations 3:33)

Affliction doesn’t come from his heart. *Love* does. Rest for our souls and satisfaction in him. Jesus himself said,

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

So when we pray for the government, and we pray that people will be saved, we can pray with confidence, because that’s God’s heart. He desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The truth, of course, is the truth of the gospel, which he sets out in verse 5:

“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.”

“There is one God”, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who was, the one who is, and the one who will be, the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God. And “there is one mediator between God and men”, only one who can go between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of men and bring us back together, and that is the man Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came into the world as a man, so that he could be the one mediator we need before the one God of all.

This mediator didn’t just speak on our behalf. He died on our behalf. He “gave himself as a ransom for all”. He paid the price for our redemption. He gave us life by his death. He satisfied the wrath of God against us on the cross, so that we could go free.

That is why we pray for all people. We pray that they may come to the knowledge of this truth that there is one God and one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.

Paul says in verse 7 that this is what he lived for. He lived to proclaim this message, because God had appointed him as a preacher and an apostle to go to the Gentiles, the people of the nations, to lead them in faith and to teach them in truth. We may not have the same call, but we should all have the same passion: to see the gospel go to the nations. And so we pray. We pray that the Lord would do this.

(2) **HOW PRAYER TRANSFORMS US**

That’s how prayer transforms others. It leads them to the one God through the one mediator Jesus Christ. But how does it transform us? That leads to our second point.

In verses 8-10, Paul addresses the men and the women in the church. He gives each of them something to do, and something not to do. To the men, he says “pray, don’t quarrel”. To the women, he says, “be committed to good works, not to good looks”.

On the surface, they seem to be very different instructions, but at the heart they’re really the same, because they both address the sinful tendency to want to outdo other people. For men, they want to outdo one another by the force of their arguments. For women, they want to outdo one another by the beauty of their appearance.

The root of both is pride. It’s wanting to present yourself as being better than others. It’s the desire to receive glory from other people as they bow down to your superiority. This may find different expressions in men and women, but the sinful root is the same. That’s why women can struggle with anger too, and men can struggle with vanity. The sinful root can produce the same sinful fruit in men or women. But in general, you’ll see more men struggle with anger and quarreling, and more women struggle with vanity.

What does this have to do with prayer? To begin with, verse 8 says that anger and prayer don’t go together:

“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.”

There’s a direct correlation between the quality of our relationship with God, and the quality of our relationships with others. If one goes downhill, the other does as well. There’s no such thing as a man who is prone to anger and devoted to prayer. You won’t see it, because anger comes from pride. Prayer comes from humility.

Anger and prayer come from different dispositions. Anger comes from depending on yourself. Prayer comes from depending on God. Angry people are more aware of other people’s sins. Prayerful people are more aware of their own sins.

Prayer takes humility. That’s why angry people don’t pray. They’re not humble. They’re not broken and contrite. They’re fixated on the failings of others rather than their sinfulness before God.

If you would pray, you must be committed to humble holiness. John Calvin wrote,

“No heart will ever rise to genuine prayer that does not at the same time long for holiness.” – John Calvin

Brothers, God wants us to be men of prayer. Our Heavenly Father wants his sons to be known not for what they do, but for how they pray, and that means that we must learn to lift up holy hands without anger or quarreling.

But when are we to pray, and where? Verse 8 says, “I desire then that in *every place* the men should pray”. Our Heavenly Father wants our communion with him to be so rich and deep that we can pray in every place. In the solitude in our homes. In the gatherings of the local church. In the hustle and bustle of day to day life.

The defining characteristic of the godly man isn’t how well you can debate theology. It’s not how many weights you can lift. It’s not how much money you can make. Prayer is the mark of the godly man. That’s what God is looking for.

How about the women? What does our text say about the relationship between prayer and vanity? At first glance, it may seem like Paul isn’t talking about prayer any more, but if we look a little deeper, we’ll see that verses 9-10 are still very much about prayer. We see that in verse 9 when Paul uses the word “likewise”. He’s saying that what he’s about to say to the women is related to what he just said to the men.

But we also see it in verse 10 when he calls women to adorn themselves with “good works”:

“likewise also that women should adorn themselves…with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.”

“Good works” includes many things. Paul gives us some examples in 1 Timothy 5:10:

“…having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.”

This isn’t an exhaustive list, but it gives us a good idea of what the Bible means when it talks about “good works”. It’s doing what is good for the good of others. Surely that includes praying for other people. I think that’s why Paul says in 2:3 that “This (prayer) is good”. Prayer is a good work, because it’s an example of doing what is good for the good of others.

This reveals why vain people don’t pray. They’re too absorbed in how good they look to consider the good of others. They’re more concerned with looking good than doing good, when it should be the other way around. Verse 9:

“likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire…”

Now, Paul doesn’t have anything against braided hair or jewellery or nice clothes *per se*. He’s against what they communicate: an obsession with looking good. This description in verse 9 actually mirrors how the “pop culture icons” dressed in 1st century Rome: their hair was elaborately braided and piled together like towers and decorated with gems and gold and pearls. It was a status symbol. It communicated to those around them that they were rich and beautiful and therefore superior.

So when Paul says that Christian women shouldn’t dress like this, he’s saying, “Don’t send people the message that your value is tied to your appearance, or that your identity depends on your beauty. Instead, dress in what is respectable, modest, with self-control.”

Don’t dress to impress. Dress to honour the Lord. Exercise self-control in your fashion choices so that people can see that your identity isn’t wrapped up in what the world thinks of you, but in what God thinks of you.

Only then will you discover the freedom of doing good for the good of others. You’ll become more focused on doing good than on looking good. You’ll adorn yourself with good works done for the glory of God. That’s true beauty. True beauty is found in the day to day grind of raising your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. It’s found in showing hospitality as you welcome the outsider into your home. It’s found in washing the feet of the saints as you humble yourself to do the simplest, most menial tasks. It’s found in caring for those who are afflicted. It’s found in praying for all people.

That kind of beauty is far greater than any beauty you could get from your youth, or jewellery, or clothing. All of that beauty will fade with time. It won’t last. But this beauty is *imperishable*. It will last *forever*.

You may not see it now, but the day is coming when you will realize that what you did with your life was far more important than how you looked. In God’s eternal economy of what really matters, good works will always outshine good looks.

**CONCLUSION**

This is the transforming power of prayer. It takes angry men and makes them gentle. It takes vain women and makes them servants. It takes people who are proud and makes them humble, because those who pray know that they no longer live for themselves. They live for the one who died for them on the cross. They go through this life with the singular goal of making less of themselves and much of Jesus, and they do that when they pray.

Do you want to grow in prayer? Perhaps you want to but you’re not sure where you stand with God. You’re too covered with shame to approach his throne and fear that he will reject you. My friend, don’t be afraid, because you don’t approach him on your own merits. You approach him on the merits of Jesus Christ.

He will be your mediator if you would only trust in him for salvation. Christ died for the worst of sinners. He gave his life as a ransom for many. He went to the cross so that we could enter God’s throne room of grace with confidence knowing that our sins are washed away. Come to him, trust in him, and commune with him freely without any fear through prayer.

For those who are followers of Jesus, we all must admit that we need to grow in prayer. None of us pray enough, because all of us trust more in ourselves than in God. That’s my experience every single day. But I can tell you that the best way to grow in prayer is to pray with other people. Our prayer meetings have done more for my prayer life than all the books I’ve read, all the resolutions I’ve made, and all the willpower I’ve disciplined myself to use.

We are meant to pray together. Like the time of Jehoshaphat, we are meant to assemble to seek help from the LORD together, and when we do, he will provide it. He will do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think, but we must pray together.

People sometimes ask me how they can serve in the church. They’re expecting me to plug them into a ministry or a program. But do you know what I usually say to them? I say two things: build relationships with people, and pray with us. Prayer is one of the best ways you can serve the church. It’s one of the best ways that you can support your pastors. We are nothing without the prayers of our people.

Charles Spurgeon said,

“We cannot all argue, but we can all pray; we cannot all be leaders, but we can all be pleaders; we cannot all be mighty in rhetoric, but we can all be prevalent in prayer.” – Spurgeon

Will you pray with us? Will you pray to God in the presence of God’s people? Don’t wait until you feel like it, because that moment will never come. If you want to grow in prayer, then put it in your calendar. Commit yourself to it. If we do, I believe that God will graciously do a work to transform us, and transform others, so that many would come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved.