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How to Pray for God's Desires

Review: Last week we talked about two shipwrecks. I'm not talking about the Mary Rose of 1545 or the Titanic of 1912—I'm talking about Hymenaeus and Alexander—two former leaders in the church whose faith Paul describes as having been shipwrecked. As we thought through our own lives I mentioned three things in the text that can keep our faith from being shipwrecked. 1. We need to engage in the war to win people to Christ. Satan does not want us to engage—he wants us to be passive so he can attack us like a sitting duck. 2. Secondly, we need to hold fast to our faith with every ounce of strength we possess, particularly in the tough times when life is hard. This might mean appealing to God with an earnest desire to increase your faith. 3. Thirdly we must strive to maintain a clean conscience as we live out our faith. This is accomplished by commitment to godly living, daily confession, and through repentance, which means to turn away from the sin that ensnares us. If you commit yourself to these three things you will be able to avoid personal shipwreck. Paul reminds Timothy that Hymenaeus and Alexander could not and their faith was sunk.

Purpose of Book: As we read through Timothy it is important for us to keep in mind the purpose of the book. Paul has placed Timothy in charge of the church of Ephesus so he can put it in order. There are problems in the church and they must be fixed immediately if it is to function the way God intended it. The problem we will look at today involves prayer in the church. Now we all know that God wants us to pray, that is no surprise. What is surprising is the content of our prayers.

Today's Issue: In my experience as a pastor the thing that stands out like a big pimple on the nose is that the church struggles with prayer, specifically with investing quality time in prayer. It is hard to invest the time in prayer because it means something else must be minimized in our lives, like television, the internet, spending more time with your friends, sleep in the morning or evening, sitting on the couch and relaxing, or just plain doing nothing. I've also discovered that when we finally do approach God in prayer it is usually brief because we don't know what to say beyond our own needs and wants. Often, we simply don't know what to say and our prayers seem repetitive. As we contemplate this passage today maybe the problem lies not in so much what to say—but what God wants us to pray. You see the difference. One says, what should I pray for; the other says what does God want me to pray? Let's hold that thought for a moment as we study this passage. If we are honest, I think we would all admit that we could use some help in our prayer lives. Let's read together what Paul tells Timothy should be of primary importance in the church.

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. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who 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. 8. I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;

Historical Context: Notice verse 3. Paul says, "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior." What is good? Verse 1-2. The church ought to be praying for all people, including kings and those in high positions. Here is why this is radically significant. The king at the time of this letter was Nero. Nero was the one who burned Rome and blamed it on the Christians. He was having Christians be put to death left and right. At the time of this letter to Timothy, Paul was a prisoner awaiting his own execution. The last thing you'd expect was for Paul to suggest they pray for Nero and his governing officials. They were the enemy! Yet Paul doesn't just encourage Timothy to pray for Nero and his officials, he URGES them to do it. If I were to pray such a prayer I might say something like, "Lord change Nero's heart. Allow him to see that Paul is innocent and to release him." That would probably be the extent of my prayers. But Paul wants the church to be more God focused in their prayers. He wants the church to pray for the salvation of Nero and his household. Not just one time—but consistently! Notice he states his appeal in the plural. They are to offer supplications! Prayers! Intercessions, and Thanksgivings! Why? Because it

is good and pleasing in the sight of God. We must remember Paul is laying down a universal mandate of how the church must function. This is what they are supposed to do. As a pastor this is very helpful to me. If Paul says this is urgent for the church then I need to make sure it is important to us—especially with the elections not far away.

Focusing on what God wants in prayer: Why would a man about to be executed make such a request? Because Paul did not want to focus on his own needs—He wanted to focus on how God wants our hearts wired when it comes to prayer. The church is not going to continue to exist by fighting the government—it will persist by praying for the government. The most powerful tool we have is not our fists, our pens, or our pickets, no, the most powerful weapon we have is unified prayer. Paul wants the church to pray for these people so that Christians may lead a peaceful life. Peaceful in the sense that we can serve Christ faithfully while living at peace with our government.

Modern Day Illustration: One of my favorite authors is Randy Alcorn. His book *Heaven* is the best book I have ever read on what we can expect to see and experience there. But before he became a renowned author he was a pastor at a church in the Portland area. He became a public figure because of civil disobedience. He was convicted that he should protest abortion clinics. He would gather a crowd full of Christians and physically block the entrance of abortion clinics. The clinics in turn called the police and Alcorn was arrested on several occasions. Finally, the government issued a lawsuit against Alcorn and had permission to garnish his wages to the tune of 8.2 million dollars. This forced Alcorn to sign over his assets to his wife and quit the pastorate at Good Shepherd. By quitting he would avoid being garnished and forced to financially support the clinic. Now Alcorn was a great role model to many Christians—but he was an antagonist to the people who worked at the clinic and to those in public offices in the Portland area. In other words, he was an antagonist to the people who did not know God! This is not what Paul is advocating here. That's not the kind of mindset that will win non-Christians to Christ. The way you win them to Christ is through prayer and peaceful relationships.

What would Jesus do? Now some of you might be thinking what should we do if we are being taken advantage of or being persecuted? I would respond by saying what did Jesus do when he was being persecuted? Answer: He did not fight back. Instead he spoke the truth in love and when he was hanging on the cross without warrant—He looked down at the men who were shouting “crucify him” and offered a prayer to God: “Forgive them they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).” His very actions caused one of the Roman soldiers to conclude; **“Truly this man was the Son of God! (Mark 15:39).”** If the church expects to see change on a larger scale it won't be through civil disobedience—it will be through prayer and by living in peace with those in power. The ultimate goal is not to win your personal fight—the ultimate goal is for people who oppose you to become Christians. It is not surprising that Jesus taught us to love those who persecute us. What's the best way for us to love someone who antagonizes us? It is to pray for them.

Matthew 4:44-45

4 "But I say to you, love your **enemies**, and pray for those who persecute you 45 in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous.

Personalizing the Passage: So let's personalize this for a moment in our time: Think about a foreign person in power who hates Christians and wants to kill them. The first person I thought of was Osama Bin Laden. Are we really supposed to intercede to the heavenly Father for Bin Laden? Paul says that is exactly what the church should do. Okay, let's focus on our country. Don't just think about the public figures you like—think about those you don't like and are far from Christ. Think about those public figures you think are worthless and not worthy of your thoughts and time. Go ahead—spend some time thinking of those men and women right now (Pause). Okay, now I want you to think about those who serve in public offices in your community. Charlie, Tomlinson, the mayor of Corvallis, those in the city council, those who represent the school district who seem very liberal and you know are not Christians (Pause). Now I want you to think of athletes, or professors or employees at Oregon State, teachers in the school district. Think about doctors you know, dentists, rich people that tick you off (Pause). Now I want you to think about people you know who are not Christians and you don't particularly care for. Be honest! This is between

you and God (Pause). I suspect you thought about several people who fit into those categories. You may have even become a little irritated just thinking about them. As a church we are supposed to be praying for them on a regular basis. You might think that is not the kind of prayer I want to pray. You are right it is not—but it is the kind of prayer that God wants to hear from you.

Those kinds of prayers are pleasing to Him. “God I pray for Osama Bin Laden. I pray that your Spirit will penetrate his heart and regenerate him so that he turns to Jesus.” “Lord I pray for those in Washington, the white house, congress and the senate who don’t acknowledge your laws as absolute. Holy Spirit, convict them of your ways by regenerating their harden hearts. “Lord I pray that you allow me to form a relationship with the gay activists so they can see Christ in me and turn to you.” “Lord I pray for those who are on a mission to remove any mention of Christ in the schools—that you’re Spirit make them see the error of their ways and come to you and acknowledge you as Lord of Lords and King of Kings.” “Lord I pray for my in-law who hates me; my boss who mistreats me; my friends who reject me; that you would use me and lead them to Christ.”

God’s Desire: There is a lot we can pray for that God wants to hear. Why does He want to hear them? Let’s read the end of verse 3 and verse 4. **3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.** Now some have mistaken this to say that God decrees every single person on earth to be saved. This leads to universalism. If God’s will was for every single individual to come to Christ—then all people would come to Christ. But we know that is not true. The majority of the people who live won’t come to know Jesus. So what does this verse mean then? It means that God desires *all kinds or classes* of mankind to be saved, even the wicked ones. This would explain why Paul urges the church to pray for the very people in charge that will soon execute him. We need to pray for wicked kings who worship other gods, immoral rulers who have no conviction of right and wrong, and left wing government officials that deny the Bible. These represent the different classes of men and women who by nature we would not pray for. God desires all classes of people to come to Christ. No one is excluded—not the terrorists like Bin Laden, or atheists like Richard Dawkins who’s made it a mission to disprove God, nor your stepmother who thinks you are evil and brainwashed. God desires every class of people to know Him.

One God / One Mediator: Why would He desire such a diversity of people to know Christ? Because the text says there is only one God and one mediator. **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.** When someone tells you that all roads lead to God and that he will sort it out at the very end—you must meditate on this Scripture because it clearly articulates two important truths for all mankind to acknowledge. First, there is only one God. Second there is only one mediator between God and man—the man Christ Jesus. This is the exact reason why God wants us to pray and live at peace with all mankind. There is no other way to God than through Jesus Christ.

Objection: Now you might be thinking. “What about the devout Muslims who worship Allah? Pray for them. What about the Buddhists who live peaceful and tranquil lives? Pray for them because there is only one God and one mediator for mankind and they don’t know Him. Those of us who are privileged to know Christ must understand this is a serious matter. We have to develop the kind of hearts that yearn for others to come to saving faith in Christ.

Ransomed for Us: The text tells us his life was a ransom to all. What that means is that he ransomed his life to purchase our sin. Think about it this way. This is a terrible sounding illustration but it captures what Jesus has done. When someone is kidnapped because they are deemed valuable; the kidnappers often offer to set them free for a ransom. That’s the hope at least. They establish a price. In the same way God demanded a payment for our sin, otherwise we stood condemned. Jesus lived a perfect life and purchased our sin and presented his life to God as a ransom. He is the only mediator who had the clout to pay such a ransom.

That is why we adore Jesus at Northside and worship him. That’s why we declare Sunday as his day. That is why we can confidently pray to God. That is why we are partakers of His wonderful Holy Spirit. That is why we make it a point to proclaim his gospel every Sunday. The author of Hebrews puts it this way.

Hebrews 9:15

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Jesus is the only mediator who is Holy enough to approach God and offer himself as a ransom. We receive eternal life because of him.

The Pastor's Mandate: Paul closes this letter by showing Timothy the driving motivation that must be innate in a pastor each passing day. . **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. 8. I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;**

Paul is saying to his understudy that he has been appointed a preacher to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. Some of you might ask, "What about the Jews? Well it was Paul's custom out of respect for the nation of Israel, God's people, to first preach the good news of Christ to them and then to the Gentiles. At the time—no one had preached God to the Gentiles. Let's put this into perspective. Today there are only about fourteen million Jews in the world today. That represents .02 percent of the earth's population. That puts things in perspective. Jesus also died for the rest of the 99.8 percent population today. That is what Paul is trying to communicate here when he says in verse 8 that he desires that all mankind should pray without anger or quarreling. No ethnicity, no race, race, no follower of another God. No atheist, no terrorist, no criminal, no drunkard should be exempt from our corporate prayer for the lost. God desires that all mankind be saved.

Practical Application: Our challenge today is to do our homework. Take time to learn who your leaders in the government are nationally and locally. Pay attention to those who are not Christian and oppose God's standards. Put those folks in your prayer book. Pray for them regularly. Pray that God's precious Holy Spirit would convict their hearts and lead them to Christ. It can happen? It happened with Paul. He witnessed the martyr of Stephen and gave his approval. But before Stephen died he prayed to the Father, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution (Acts 7:60-8:1). About a year later, God revealed Himself to Paul. The rest is history. Humanly speaking you may think it is impossible for someone like Osama Bin Laden to come to Christ. It is, humanly speaking. But as the angel Gabriel told Mary "For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37)." Do you believe that? Do you believe nothing is impossible with God? We have to avoid the belief that states nothing is impossible with God—but this situation involving my spouse, my in-laws, my boss, my co-worker, my friend is. May we always remember that God can change the heart of any person just like He changed yours. So keep praying not only about the things that you want—but more importantly what God desires. In the end, He desires all kinds of people, from the wicked, to the bum on the street, to the good person who is moral to be saved. May we always remember that is His desire and it is pleasing to Him when we pray in that direction.