

Main Idea: 1 Timothy 2:1-4 gives us two reasons as to why prayer, and particularly, prayer for the lost, should be a top priority matter for us as a church and as individuals.

I. Pray because of God's command (1-2).

A. The first question is *how*?

1. It doesn't just happen.
2. It involves variety.

B. The second question is *for whom*?

1. We're to pray for all men.
2. We're to pray for authority figures.

C. The third question is *for what*?

1. We desire opportunity to live quiet lives.
2. We desire opportunity to live godly lives.

II. Pray because of God's character (3-4).

A. Remember who He is: *God our Savior* (3).

1. Prayer is the right thing to do.
2. Prayer pleases God.

B. Remember what He desires: *to save people* (4).

1. Do God's desires affect the way I *pray*?
2. Do God's desires affect the way I *live*?

Implication: The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Current Series: “The Most Important Thing We Do in the Church” 1 Timothy 2:1-8

April 17—1 Timothy 2:1-4

April 24—1 Timothy 2:5-8

May 1—Prayer Service (using as a guide Ephesians 3:14-21)

I want to begin a mini-series I'm calling, “The Most Important Thing We Do in the Church.” Or if you want the longer title, “The Most Important Thing We Do (and Often Fail to Do as We Ought) in the Church.”

One of the greatest challenges to being a God-honoring church is *busy-ness*. Do you realize how much activity is associated with a church even our size? Quite frankly, it's easy to equate busy-ness with godliness. “Well, look at all I'm doing for the Lord! Surely, God is pleased with me.”

This evening, the following question will bring us to our study of God's Word. The question is this. What is the most important thing we do in the church? Opinions fly when you ask a question like that, so let's investigate the Scriptures.

Let me give you what I think is the answer, and then support it from Scripture. We're going to see two reasons as to why prayer, and particularly, *prayer for the lost*, should be a top priority matter for us as a church and as individuals. We'll find those reasons in 1 Timothy 2:1-4. According to verses 1-2, here's the first reason.

I. Pray because of God's command (1-2).

“I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Notice the words "first of all." Remember the context. Timothy is on pastoral assignment in Ephesus as an apostolic representative. He's doing some local church trouble shooting. His task is to help the established First Church of Ephesus, which has been in existence more than a decade, to move to the next level of kingdom effectiveness. For that to happen lots of issues would need attention, which Paul will address in this letter: such as the roles of men and women in the church (ch. 2), guidelines for choosing church leaders (ch. 3), how to care for widows (ch. 5), and money issues (ch. 6). Those are important. If a church is to be effective, if it's to grow, it must address issues. It can't ignore them. *But*, of greater importance than any *issue* is this: *prayer*.

"I exhort, therefore, that *first of all*." First, not in the sense of time, but of importance. Paul is saying, "This is critical! You may be thinking, 'I've got so much to do I don't know where to start.' Well then, start here!"

We should pray because God commands us to pray. The importance of prayer is supported by *Jesus' example*. Before choosing the twelve, what did our Master do? According to Luke 6:12, He spent the night in prayer. And may I remind you that before the Cross was the time of prayer in the Garden?

The *apostle's example* supported the importance of prayer, too. Remember Acts 6? When the church grew and the needs of caring for the widows became a concern, the Apostles delegated this ministry to seven, Spirit-filled men, with this explanation, "We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention *to prayer* and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4)."

The *example of the early church* supported prayer's importance. The church was birthed in a prayer meeting (Acts 1:14; 2:1). The young church devoted itself to continual prayer (Acts 2:42). Then when persecution came, the church responded to the crisis by doing what? By praying! (Acts 4:24)

So Paul's command fits the consistent model of Scripture, "I urge then, *first of all*," that the church devote itself to prayer. Which raises three questions, each of which Paul answers in our text.

A. The first question is *how*? How are we to pray? Verse 1 tells us, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone." When it comes to the *how* of prayer, we learn two lessons from verse 1.

1. *It doesn't just happen.* In our text, Paul describes prayer in a rather interesting way. He says we "make" it. The Greek verb actually means "to make" or "to do." "I urge...that prayers be made for everyone."

Prayer doesn't just happen. We must be intentional. Prayer is something we must choose to do. Which implies there are other things we could do with our time that we must choose not to do so as to devote ourselves to prayer.

The sad reality is that some churches spend more time on their announcements than they do in prayer. I am convicted at this point. As a pastor, I need to give more attention to prayer. As a church, we need to give more attention to prayer. It doesn't just happen.

2. *It involves variety.* There are four different Greek nouns for prayer used here. Though related, the various terms help us to see that prayer should involve variety.

The first is "requests" ("supplications" in the AV). The term itself is not a religious word, but means "to lack or be without something." Isn't that why we pray? Because there are needs that we can't meet. But God can! So we ask Him to supply a need.

The second term, translated "prayers," is a general word for prayer. Unlike the first word, in Scripture this one is used only in reference to God.

The third word, "intercession," can be translated "petition." The only other place it appears in the Bible is in 4:5. Barclay suggests it contains the idea of entering into a king's presence and submitting a request to him. It's a word of advocacy, empathy, compassion, and involvement (MacArthur). It reminds us that prayer is not merely reciting cold, lifeless verbiage to God. It's coming to a King who cares.

Someone has put it this way, "Thou art coming to a King; Large petitions with thee bring; For his grace and power are such, none can ever ask to much." (Barclay)

But prayer is more than just asking God for things. The fourth word is thanksgiving. When we pray we are to express our gratitude to God for what He's done and will do.

That's *how* we should pray, with requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving. As a church, realizing prayer doesn't just happen, we must devote ourselves to this kind of prayer.

B. The second question is *for whom?* Our passage specifies two objects.

1. *We're to pray for all men.* Verse 1 concludes, "Be made for everyone." Or more literally, "in behalf of all men." MacArthur suggests that this is a call to prayer for the lost, that this entire section deals with evangelistic praying.

Apparently, there was an exclusive spirit in the Ephesian church to which Paul was reacting here. Notice his use of "all men" in this section: prayer is to be made for "all men" (1); God wants "all men" to be saved (4); Christ Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for "all men" (6).

I admire Jeremiah. He's called the weeping prophet because he grieved so for his people. Did you realize that three times God told Jeremiah *not* to pray for his people? Why? They'd gone too far: "So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you [Jer. 7:16; and in 11:14 and 14:11]."

Apparently the problem in the Ephesian church was just the opposite. The church wasn't praying for the lost. Why not? Because of an attitude of exclusivity. Some had a self-focused perspective. How'd they get it? There were two possible sources (MacArthur).

One, there was a Judaizing element in the church. Judaizers were people who said to be a Christian you had to be a Jew or a Gentile proselyte, and keep the law. They were very narrow-minded. Like Jonah, they didn't want to see God extend His kingdom blessings to non-Jews. If that was your attitude, you certainly wouldn't make evangelistic praying much of a priority.

A second source of the exclusivism was a form of intellectual elitism called Gnosticism. There were people in Ephesus who taught that salvation was only for the elite, for those who were able to attain high levels of spiritual knowledge. Again, if you believed that salvation was only for the spiritually elite, you wouldn't have much motivation to pray for "ordinary," lost people.

Don't miss this or you'll think Paul sounds like a universalist in a moment (in verse 6). He's not. He's simply responding to dangerous, elitist false teaching that narrowly viewed the gospel as being only for certain people. It's not. The gospel is for all men, red, yellow, black, and white, they are precious in His sight. For that reason, we're to pray for all men.

You might wonder, "How does this emphasis on 'all men' in 1 Timothy 2 relate to the doctrine of election found other places in the Bible?" MacArthur's comment is helpful (63), "We are not to try to limit the gospel call or our evangelistic prayers to the elect

only. After all, we have no means of knowing who are elect *until* they respond to the gospel call." Our job is to give the gospel to all men, and pray for all men.

The 17th century English Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: "Oh, if you have the hearts of Christians or of men in you, let them yearn towards your poor ignorant, ungodly neighbors. Alas, there is but a step betwixt them and death and hell; many hundred diseases are waiting ready to seize on them, and if they die unregenerate, they are lost forever. Have you hearts of rock, that cannot pity men in such a case as this? If you believe not the Word of God, and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not bestir yourself to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned, so you be saved? If so, you have sufficient cause to pity yourselves, for it is a frame of spirit utterly inconsistent with grace....Dost thou live close by them, or meet them in the streets, or labour with them, or travel with them, or sit and talk with them, and say nothing to them of their souls, or the life to come? If their houses were on fire, thou wouldest run and help them; and wilt thou not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell?"

We're to pray for "all men." In addition, we're to pray for...

2. *We're to pray for authority figures.* Verse 2, "For kings and all those in authority." J. Vernon McGee tells that many years ago a famous chaplain of the Senate was asked by a visitor, "Do you pray for the senators?" He replied, "No, I look at the senators, and then I pray for the country!"

The truth is, we are commanded to pray for our leaders (and not the prayer, "Dear Lord, I don't like that leader so please get rid of him"). Remember something. When Paul gave this command, the man in power in Rome was bloody Nero. Nero was not only a corrupt, immoral leader, but he authorized the brutal execution of Christians. Yet Paul says we are to pray for whoever is in power. Whether the leaders are corrupt or not, whether they're your political party or not, whether you voted for them or not, they are God-ordained ministers in the civil arena (Rom. 13:4).

We're to pray for "kings" (like Nero), but more than that, "for all that are in authority." Paul knew that the local officials often opened or closed the door to the gospel, humanly speaking. In Acts 13:6-7, he saw God open the door in Cyprus by touching the heart of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. Later, according to Acts 16, the city magistrates in Philippi arrested Paul and Silas (20), and later requested they leave the city (39). On still another occasion, according to Acts 19, while Paul was in Ephesus [where Timothy was now], a riot broke out, until the city clerk intervened (35).

Yes, Paul knew the influence that both high and low level government officials could have on the gospel. So he commanded, "Pray for them."

The truth is, even a corrupt government, if it really governs, is better than no government. Yes, much of politics is crooked, but it's better than anarchy. Civil government is a gift from God according to Romans 13:1-2. We ought to give thanks to God for it and pray for it.¹

Tertullian, the late second and early third century theologian, wrote: "Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a

¹I've read (Kelly, 61) that in Judaism sacrifice was regularly offered in the Temple and intercession made in the synagogues for the pagan civil powers. History verifies that the church as well took seriously its responsibility to respect and pray for the government.

virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish. These things I cannot ask from any but the God from whom I know I shall obtain them..."

The second century apologist Theophilus of Antioch likewise stated, "I will rather honor the king [than your gods], not, indeed, worshipping him, but praying for him. But God, the living and true God, I worship, knowing that the king is made by Him."²

I don't need to convince you that we should pray for our leaders. But...

C. The third question is *for what*? Verse 2 tells us, "That we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." What's to be our aim as we pray for our government officials? We are to have a twofold desire.

1. *We desire opportunity to live quiet lives.* And secondly...

2. *We desire opportunity to live godly lives.* Don't misunderstand. This isn't a request for the easy life. It's a request for an opportunistic life, a life that can maximize use of time for the spread of the gospel.

What would indicate that? The connection with the verses that follow, verses 3-4, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." See the flow? We pray for our leaders (1-2), asking God to grant us opportunity to live peaceful and godly lives. Why? So God our Savior can use us to accomplish what brings great delight to Himself (3-4), the salvation of lost people!

So that's what we're to pray for--for opportunity to live peaceful, godly lives, for conditions conducive to the spread of the gospel.

Beloved, there are believers in this world who don't have that--who can't meet to worship Christ in peace, who can't teach their children the Bible without the fear of arrest, who can't tell their neighbors about Jesus without paying a severe price for it.

But, beloved, we have this. We have freedom. We have opportunity to live godly lives in relative peace. The question is, what are we doing with it? Indeed, we must not take for granted the freedoms we enjoy.

Prior to being promoted to heaven, J. Vernon McGee offered this prediction (37), "I believe that we are actually going to see the persecution of Christians in this country in the future. I do not mean the persecution of church members--the liberal church is so compromised today that they will go along with whatever comes along. I am saying that genuine believers in Christ may encounter persecution. Paul was beginning to experience persecution himself, and he said the believers were to pray for the leaders who were responsible for it."

Yes, we must pray. Why? Reason #1, because of God's command. Now reason #2...

II. Pray because of God's character (3-4).

There are two things about God that, if we remember them, will motivate us to pray.

A. Remember who He is: *God our Savior* (3). "This is good and pleases God our Savior." *This* is good. What? The commandment to pray for the lost. Do you need motivation to pray? Here are two motivators.

1. *Prayer is the right thing to do.* "This is good." It's intrinsically right to do.

2. *Prayer pleases God.* It's "acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior." Paul loves to refer to this attribute of God in the pastoral epistles. Our God is a *saving* God. The Father is depicted as God our Savior (in 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4). Jesus is called "our Savior" in Titus 1:4, 2:13, 3:6, and in 2 Timothy 1:10.

²in MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, pp. 64-5.

If you need something to prod you to pray for more fervently for unsaved people, here it is. Remember who God is. He is God our Savior. Then secondly...

B. Remember what He desires: to save people (4). "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth." The two phrases go together. When people come to a knowledge of the truth (about Jesus and His payment on the cross), when they submit their lives to that truth, what happens? They are *saved*.

And that thrills the heart of God. That's what He desires. He wants all men to be saved.

Which raises some important questions. In what sense does God desire all men to be saved? What does Paul mean by "all men" here? Since everybody will not be saved, does God desire something He can't have, something He's not able to pull off?

In interpreting Scripture, a fundamental rule is this. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Donald Grey Barnhouse used to put it so clearly, "You very rarely have to go outside of the Bible to explain anything in the Bible." Howard Hendricks elaborates, "The more you compare Scripture with Scripture, the more the meaning of the Bible becomes apparent. The parts take on meaning in light of the whole."³

Some people use this verse to teach universalism. They argue that if God desires the salvation of all men, then all men will be saved. But that doesn't fit with John 3:36.

Others argue that "all men" means all classes of men, not every single person on the planet, which was how Paul used the term in verse 1 (trans. "everyone" in the NIV). He's not telling us there to pray for every person, but is responding to the exclusive attitudes of the Judaizers and Gnostics.⁴

Warren Wiersbe offers this perspective on the issue (216), "Jesus died on the cross that He might draw 'all men' to salvation (John 12:32). This does not mean all people without *exception*, for certainly the whole world is not going to be saved. It means all people without *distinction*--Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, religious and pagan."

A proper understanding of what Paul means by "all men" is but one question. And whether you interpret that as "all people" or "all classes of people," the key is to realize this. The Bible speaks of God's will in more than one way.

Some verses speak of God's will of decree, which is His eternal purpose (as in Rom. 8:29-30). Other verses speak of God's will expressed as desire, as in our text. Theologians often make this distinction by referring to God's secret will and His revealed will.⁵

The truth is, God desires things that He does not decree. It was never His *desire* that sin exist, was it? Yet the existence of sin was something that God allowed in His eternal decree (Isa. 46:10).

Remember what Jesus desired when He lamented over Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together...but you were not willing (Mt. 23:37)."

You say, "I can't fathom this. How do you reconcile God's decree and God's desires?" The answer is, you don't. You *can't* according to Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us."

³Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, p. 231.

⁴Commentator J.N.D. Kelly says the reason Paul here emphasizes the universal scope of God's will to save was because he was taking issue with two destructive influences in Ephesus: one was "the Jewish belief that God willed the destruction of sinners and the salvation of the righteous alone;" and the second was the Gnostic theory that salvation belonged to the spiritual elite alone.

⁵I am indebted to observations by John MacArthur here. *1 Timothy*, p. 70.

The truth is, God does desire all men to be saved. It is their willful rejection of Him that sends them to hell. The doctrine of election does not cancel out man's responsibility, nor does it suggest that God is a stern, disinterested tyrant. The God of the Bible is a saving God who truly desires all men to be saved. Which leads us to ask two questions.

1. *Do God's desires affect the way I pray?* That's the point of the passage, remember. When you're gripped by who God is and what He desires, you'll pray!

2. *Do God's desires affect the way I live?* My friend, is it your passion, as it is God's, to see sinners saved? If it is, what are you doing in your life to give evidence of it?

C. T. Studd used to repeat a little poem, "Some want to live within the sound of Church or Chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

That was the passion of a great saint by the name of Toyohiko Kagawa. He went to Shinkawa to reach men and women for Christ, and deliberately chose to live in the filthiest and most depraved slums in the world to do so. Barclay describes the situation:

"His neighbors were unregistered prostitutes, thieves who boasted of their power to outwit all the police in the city, and murderers who were not only proud of their murder record but always ready to add to their local prestige by committing another. All the people, whether sick, or feeble-minded or criminal, lived in conditions of abysmal misery, in streets slippery with filth, where rats crawled out of open sewers to die. The air was always filled with stench. An idiot girl who lived next door to Kagawa had vile pictures painted on her back to decoy lustful men to her den. Everywhere human bodies rotted with syphilis."

Why did Kagawa go to a place like that? Because he had a heart like his God's, a heart that desires the salvation of people, all types of people, even people in the most deplorable of conditions. How great is your desire to see lost people get saved?

Why should we pray? Because of God's command and God's character. In God's eyes, prayer is the main thing. What's the implication for us?

Implication: The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Response Time: If God has convicted you about the need for prayer, here are some opportunities to consider:

1. On Wednesday evenings...
2. Men, we have a ministry called the "Pastor's Prayer Partners." Groups of men meet weekly for prayer for the ministry here. If you are interested, see Dan Edwards, coordinator.
3. Let's pray right now as a congregation, then in small groups around the building.