

THE FIRST THING: PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

The first assignment the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy in regard to the church at Ephesus was to correct the teaching, which had begun to drift from the apostolic revelation into controversial areas that were destructive to faith. Timothy was to set that straight, using Paul as his model. He was also to stress the need for obedience -- that people actually do what they teach. That is always the first step toward vitality in a Christian's experience.

In Chapter 2 of First Timothy we now come to the second assignment the apostle gave to Timothy, and that is to set in order the public worship of the assembly in Ephesus. That is a relevant subject for us, because that is why we come together every Sunday morning. Public worship is a very revealing indication of what is going on in a church.

You perhaps remember the story of the man who was going through a church building one day with his son. The boy noticed a bronze plaque on the wall and asked his father what it was for. The father replied that it was a memorial plaque to commemorate the young men who had died in the service. The boy asked, "Which one, the morning or the evening service?"

The factors that make for life in a service are the same today as they were in the early centuries, i.e., the elements of Christian worship are basically the same -- prayer, praise, and preaching. This is what the apostle says to Timothy (Verse 1):

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. {1 Tim 2:1-2 RSV}

Paul gives a little priority list here of the elements that are to be emphasized:

First of all he lists public prayer: the people of God encountering God himself on behalf of their fellow Christians and people in the world around. That is to be the primary factor in terms of emphasis in a gathering of the church. I wonder how much we have drifted from that pattern today?

The apostle put prayer first for two very good reasons.

1. First, because prayer focuses people's hearts and eyes on God right at the very beginning. What makes a church service different from the gathering of the Kiwanis Club, or the Rotary, or whatever, is that God is recognized; he is in our midst. To acknowledge the power, the beauty, and the liberty that the presence of God imparts is to immediately give a sense of reality and vitality to a service.
2. Then, second, to begin with prayer means that we get our own humanity in perspective. Every one of us comes away from some situation at home with which we are still at least partially involved. Perhaps we are thinking of the dirty dishes in the sink, the hassle we went through getting the children dressed in order to come to church, or the fact that the car was almost out of gas, the upsetting phone call we had earlier this morning, or whatever it may be. But when we come together and the service starts with the recognition of the presence of God, then somehow all those human problems pale. We begin to see them in the right perspective. God and his world, what we are doing with our lives, who we are, how we are intended to function -- all these begin to take on increased importance in our eyes when we come to church. That is what a church service is about.

I know that many Christians think they do not need to come to church, that they can worship God just as well by staying at home, working in the garden or watching the television. There is a certain degree of validity about that: God is not found only in church. But there is a reason why the Scriptures tell

us, "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together," {cf, Heb 10:25 KJV}. Somehow, when we come together and focus upon the greatness of God, there is a ministry to our own hearts that nothing else will convey. That is why it is important to keep up attendance at church.

Oftentimes the problems of life are solved by coming to church. We have a different perspective; we see solutions that we never saw before. This is the continual and frequent experience of the people of God. In the 73rd Psalm, the psalmist speaks of how he was having a difficult problem in his life for which he could not find the answer until, he says, "I went into the sanctuary," {Psa 73:17}. There he saw things in their proper perspective. So when the people of God come together, the first thing to be concentrated on is prayer and the recognition of God's presence.

Paul now goes on to list three forms of prayer and one form of praise:

1. First, he says, there are "supplications." This is a word which means, "the requests of the people." Every week we have prayer requests turned in here at PBC which appear on our Need Sheet. These requests reflect actual situations of people who are going through times of heartache, struggle, pain and pressures. These people are attempting to share these needs with us so that we can "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ," {Gal 6:2}. So when you read these requests, pray about them at home, alone or in small groups. God can oftentimes meet these needs through the agency of human beings.
2. Then the second category is "prayers." That sounds so general for us in the English translation that it does not help us much, but in the original language this is a special word that is only used for requests which God alone can meet. The first kind of requests, "supplications," are requests that we can get involved in. If you are praying for somebody who does not have enough food, the Spirit of God is very likely to say to you, "What about all that food you have in your cupboard? How about taking some over there this afternoon?" But all of us know that there are some requests that only God can meet -- somebody is heartbroken, somebody is suffering from some terrible experience he does not understand and nobody can explain it to him. Only God can meet that need. That is the kind of request Paul is talking about. We are to bring those before the Lord and pray about them together.
3. The third form of prayer is "intercessions." Again, this is a word that has other people in view. It means, "an intimate petition made by a friend to a king on behalf of someone else." This is a beautiful expression of corporate prayer, as a church. Because we are children of the King, we come to our heavenly Father and in the intimacy of that relationship we share with him special needs and special problems that others have. Thus, we "make petitions" on their behalf. When you pray together in this way, remember that, as the hymn puts it,

Thou art coming to a King,
Great petitions with thee bring,
For his love and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.

4. With this, Paul then links a form of praise, "thanksgivings." When we gather as Christians we ought to give thanks to God. Usually this is what we are doing in our hymns, and this is why the singing of hymns has always been an important part of the Christian's life from the very first centuries.

The words of hymns are usually either prayers addressed to God, or the expressions of praise, thanksgiving and adoration voiced in the hearing of the people. The hymn we sang this morning,

Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son,

is a word of praise, of thanksgiving, out of adoration of the greatness of our Lord.

I would urge you never to sing a hymn in a mechanical way. Do not mumble the words without realizing what you are singing. It is sometimes amusing to look out on a congregation and see them singing things you know they do not mean. I have often thought, as we were singing the words,

"Take my silver and my gold
Not a mite would I withhold,"

"I wish they meant that! Then our financial problems would be over!" We ought not to sing something that we do not mean. Sometimes when I am singing a hymn, I will come across a sentence that I do not believe, so I will not sing it. Not because that makes any difference (nobody knows it but me), but I do not want to utter things that I do not feel. So when we sing we are to sing personally. Let the words be a form of thanksgiving expressed to the greatness of our God.

That is why I love some of the old hymns:

Amazing grace!
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!

Or,

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

When a whole congregation sings that, it is a beautiful expression of praise, thanksgiving and adoration. That is what the apostle is seeking. He says, "When you gather together this is what your services ought to be like; that you sing and pray and praise God."

Paul now moves on to give us the objects of prayer. Who should we pray for in a congregation?

First of all, he says, "for all men" -- for everybody.

Then, "for kings and all who are in high positions." That is a very helpful word. It means we are not to ignore governmental leaders and politicians. We are to be ready and willing to pray for anyone. It is very important that we understand what the word "all" means here. (When it says, "all men," it does not, of course, mean just males. There is great controversy today about this. Some people want to change these expressions in the Bible to read, "persons," but that is to deny the usual expressions of language. "Men" in this case means "mankind," and always has meant that; it involves both the sexes. In this case, however, it might be proper to substitute the word "persons" -- "To pray for all persons.")

The stress is on the word *all*. This does not mean all mankind, without exception. We would never get through praying if we tried that. It means "all" without distinction, i.e., all kinds of people, all sorts of needs are proper subjects of prayer. This little word *all* appears four times in this passage, and in every case it means "all without distinction," not, "all without exception."

Then, among all these people, the apostle points out, we are to pray for kings. We ought not to forget our leaders. They may not be godly men at all, but still we are to pray for them. The interesting thing is that when these words were written the Emperor was Nero, one of the cruelest of Roman Emperors, who already had launched a bitter persecution against the Christians. Yet when Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus, and told him what to pray about, he said not to forget to pray for the king, for Nero. This recognizes that all forms of government come from God's hand. We are taught that very plainly in Romans 13. That is why rebellion against government itself is always wrong. We may need to use the powers that are given to us in politics to change governments, but government itself comes from God. So these men and women in public office need our prayers.

Tertullian, one of the early church fathers who lived in North Africa at the close of the second century, gave us a list of some of the things he prayed for the Emperor:

- First, for long life;
- Second, for secure dominions;
- Third, a safe home;
- Fourth, a faithful senate;
- Fifth, for righteous people; and
- Sixth, for a peaceful world.

That is how the early Christians prayed for governmental leaders.

Then, we are to pray "for all in high positions," (Verse 2). This covers all the subordinate positions in government, down to the local level. This again is not a universal "all," but one without bias for all kinds of people, even those who are unrighteous and ungodly, even those who are cruel and vicious. They are, nevertheless, to be prayed for, that God will open their eyes and use them in ways that will bless and help and strengthen. God can use a wicked as well as a righteous man, as Proverbs reminds us: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever he will," (Prov 21:1 {KJV}). In the Scriptures, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus the Persian and others are called, "the servants of God," even when they were being used to punish and persecute the people of God. That is why we are to pray for men and women in these offices.

This naturally leads us to the results we can expect from prayer. Paul puts it in a twofold way:

First, he says, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Did you ever realize that the peace of our community is related to the prayers of God's people? That is what this is saying. Lately we have been passing through a great period of violence. Attempts have been made on the life of the President and on the life of the Pope. There have been outbreaks of terrorism in various parts of the world. Some nations are on the verge of war. In this area we have been hearing of the capture of a vicious "trail-side killer" who, perhaps, was responsible for the deaths of as many as fourteen people in recent times. Every night the television has a continual report of murders, rapes, muggings and other violent actions. It may be that God is trying to tell us that the reason why we have so much violence is because we have not been praying for our public officials and our public life. Perhaps the words of James, "You have not because you ask not" {cf, Jas 4:2}, apply here.

Some of the young Christians who work in Vacaville prison tell me that the Christians there regard themselves as the control apparatus to keep the peace of that prison. When riots threaten or when violence breaks out in the prison, the Christian prisoners gather together and ask themselves, "What has gone wrong with us?" When discord is present among the Christians, they always expect, and almost always see, immediate restlessness in the whole prison. They have learned that God will keep the prison peaceful when the Christians are at peace, and in right relationship with him. That is a very significant confirmation of what the apostle is stressing here.

In fact, one of these men told me that some months ago the chief psychologist of the California prison system was asked by the Prison Board why was it that Vacaville prison had fewer riots and less trouble than any other prison in the state. The man said, "The only thing I can suggest is that there is a group of Christians up there who pray for Vacaville prison. That may not mean much to you," he said, "but that is what appears to me to make the difference."

This is what Paul is talking about. There is a direct relationship. We can lead quiet and peaceful lives when we are faithful in prayer for those who are involved in governmental matters.

Prayer also has an effect upon us. There is something accomplished outside of us because of prayer, but something is also accomplished inside of us when we pray. Paul tells us what it is. It is translated here by two words: "That we may be *godly* and *respectful* in every way." Both of those words are very hard to translate; it is difficult to find synonyms for them in English. I do not think that these two words, "godly," and

"respectful," are very accurate translations. The first word is a word in Greek, *eusebeia*, which is really not used of "godliness" so much as it is used of "a consciousness of what is required in life with respect to God, to your fellow man, and to yourself." "Realism" would be a better word to use -- to live realistically, to pass through life knowing what is required in all circumstances, to understand the reality in which you live. This is one of the great things that prayer accomplishes. When you pray for the government, for the world, for your friends, for those in need, you understand more realistically than ever before what is really happening to them, why they act the way they do, what are the forces that are at work in society. To continue in prayer like that is to start to live with a sense of assurance, a quiet realization that you understand what is happening in life. That is what this word means.

Coupled with this is this word, *semnotes*, which is translated, "respectful." That is not a bad translation, but a better one, perhaps, would be "courteous," understanding that people are not the problem, they are the victims. So a second effect of prayer is that you become invariably courteous to people; you have a kind of graceful dignity with which you pass through life.

In reading Corrie Ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*, I have been impressed at the way her father conducted himself. (In fact, she has now written a book about her father.) When the Nazis came to their house, her father was as courteous to them, as he was to the Jews they were seeking. He knew that everybody deserves a sense of respect, because, if nothing else, all people are in the image of God. Again, this is the effect of realistic prayer for people.

The second thing that prayer accomplishes is that it fulfills the will of God. This is the way the apostle puts it:

This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 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, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. {1 Tim 1:3-7 RSV}

Paul is saying here that the prayerful life is good and acceptable to God because it is God's way of opening up men and women everywhere for salvation. "God is not willing that any should perish," Peter tells us {cf, 2 Pet 3:9}. Here, Paul says, "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." So prayer is the first artillery salvo that opens up a territory to possess it for God. Thus, when we pray for people we can expect that they will hear truth that they have never heard before. We can expect that they will see things in a different way than they ever saw them before. Prayer does not change them immediately. It is not a magic wand. But there comes a gradual dawning light. The darkness disappears, and people start for the first time to understand their own nature, and the reality of life around them. This is in line with God's great purpose, for he desires that all men shall be saved. Here is a particular place where the word *all* has to be clearly understood. It does not mean "all without exception." It means "all without distinction," without bias toward anybody. All kinds of people might be saved. There are no human barriers to men and women coming to God. It does not matter what the color of your skin is, what your social class, your background, may be, your national origin or the state of your heart, how bad you have been, etc. Paul stresses that there are no distinctions. God desires all kinds of people to be saved.

The wonderful thing is that as you pray in this way, all kinds of people do come. I have been amazed at some of the people God has reached. I have prayed for people I never expected God to reach, but he did. There were others I never had any heart to pray for at all, but God reached them too. So God desires all kinds of people to be saved. There is no barrier in life to that salvation when the Spirit of God starts to draw.

The fact that this is the meaning of this word *all* is brought out by the apostle's argument here. This is what it means when he says, "For there is one God and there is one mediator and there is one ransom and there is one gospel." Paul brings that in because he is stressing the fact that despite all the distinctions that appear to be among men there is only one provision for their redemption: that is God. There is only one God. There is not a God for the Hebrews and another for the Gentiles. There is not a God for the Muslims and another for the Hindus.

After the first service this morning a woman said to me, "My husband is not a Christian. He tells me that his God is in him." I have heard this from many people: "I have my own God. Others have their God and you have your God." But there is not a million or a billion gods. The truth is that there is only one God: "One God and Father of us all." All mankind must relate to him, despite differences in our culture, our background, or whatever. There is only the one true God over all the earth.

And there is only one Mediator: the Man, Christ Jesus. The reason for that, of course, is his unique nature: Jesus is both Man and God. When you come to and follow that magnificent Man who obviously has solved the basic problems of life, you soon discover that you have also come to God. By coming to Christ you meet God. That is what the disciples discovered. They did not come to Jesus because they thought he was God. They believed it was blasphemy for a man to claim to be God. They came to him because he was such a glorious man. They saw him to be such a wonderful, wise teacher, a prophet, a marvelous man of God. But when the Apostle John laid his head upon the breast of Jesus and heard the beating of his human heart, somewhere along the way he realized that he was listening to the heartbeat of God; that in coming to Christ he had found the Living God. There is only One like that in all the world. Men everywhere, if they are going to come to God, must find Jesus. "No man comes to the Father but by me," said Jesus {cf, John 14:6}. Though there are many paths to Jesus, he is the only path to God. This is what he meant when he said, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leads unto life, and few there be that find it," {cf, Matt 7:14 KJV}. Broad is the way that leads to destruction, but there is only one narrow gate for those who come to life, and it is through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then there is one ransom: "He gave himself for all." Again, not universally, but without distinction. Jesus gave himself that all kinds of people, from all walks of life, may come. He did not send a committee or a group of angels to do it. He gave himself. That is the glory of the gospel.

Finally, the apostle says, there is only one gospel,

... the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle ..., a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. {1 Tim 2:6b-7 RSV}

Again, all the distinctions have been eliminated. If you are going to come to God there is only one way to do it, by the gospel, the good news that Jesus is the way, that by his life and death he has found a way to God for us.

There is only one gospel, and Paul was its preacher. This is the nature of his work. He says he glories in this. And Paul was an apostle. That is the authority with which he spoke. He was appointed by Jesus himself to say these things. Paul was a teacher. That was the method he employed. He patiently worked his way through these great doctrines with people so they began to understand with their minds (as far as the mind will go) what great things God has worked out and how they fit life itself. He was sent to the Gentiles. That was the sphere of his ministry.

You and I are here this morning because Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. How much we are indebted to this mighty missionary of the cross who awakened faith and revealed truth!

These were the results everywhere the gospel came.

This is where we rest our case this morning. When the gospel comes into your life, it brings you into touch with reality. The gospel reveals the truth. When you know that this is the way life really is, it awakens your faith, and you begin to act on what you have learned. That is where people find deliverance.

Everywhere this great gospel has touched people, through some twenty centuries now, they come

- Out of superstition,
- Out of violence,

- Out of degradation,
- Out of sexual immorality,
- Out of drunkenness,
- Out of drugs,
- Out of occultism,

and are healed. Wholesomeness comes in. Homes become happy. Hearts become bound together in love and truth.

What greater testimony could we ask for than the record of history of what the gospel does when it strikes!

A group of us who have been praying every week for the city of San Francisco have already seen that God has been answering those prayers. Teams of people from all over this area are planning to converge on San Francisco in the middle of August for a great outreach, a grassroots testimony. This will not be a crusade; no well-known speaker will be coming in. But six hundred or more of God's people will be walking the streets, telling people about a way out of all the heartache, the pressures and the problems that are destroying that beautiful city.

That is what the gospel is, and this is what the church is for. The gospel is set at the heart of life, and life will be healed when the church functions properly. The church is the key to life, the most relevant body on earth.

The church is the solution to the drastic problems that have baffled the minds of statesmen and others in our area. We hold the answer.

That is why God has called into being this most remarkable people called 'the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Prayer

Lord, we pray that you will take our lives and make them count. Help us to obey what we have been sent to do and thus release the mighty power of God in our communities, in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our groups together at work, wherever we are, that this ferment of the gospel may begin to touch lives and change hearts. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The first thing -- Prayer
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Timothy
Scripture: 1 Tim 2:1-7
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 3768
Date: Unknown Date in 1981

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