

"Proper Praying"  
1 Timothy 2:1-6

September 22, 2019

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

One of my favorite cartoons shows a preacher standing outside of the church and greeting people as they came out of the worship service. In the thought cloud behind his head, you can see the preacher thinking, "Oh, oh, here comes Bob. I told Bob I would be praying for him. Dear God, please bless Bob." And then, in the balloon showing what he's actually saying, the preacher shouts, "Hey there, Bob! I've been praying for you."

The cartoon is funny because it shows, despite how much we claim to value prayer and the practice of praying, how lightly we take prayer, especially prayer for other people. Like the preacher in the cartoon, we may tell people that we're praying for them and then forget to do so. For example, have you ever said, "I will keep you in my prayers," after hearing the details of someone's personal tragedy? Do you really pray for that person or did you say the part of about prayers because you didn't know what else to say? Some people, when learning of or discussing some national tragedy or natural disaster, always use the "go to line" to post on Facebook: "My thoughts and my prayers are with you." Besides the glaring theological error here (our prayers should be with God and not the afflicted), the sheer repetition of this phrase has changed this promise of prayer to an annoying catchphrase. I've seen a couple of recent tragedies where victims, after hearing the phrase, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you," for the umpteenth time have responded in frustration, "We don't want your thoughts and prayers. We want your help."

Why do we do so little praying for others, even though we may talk a good game? Is it because we and all of our family, friends, and acquaintances have all that we need? Is it because we and everyone we know have no pain or suffering? Is it because God has done nothing for which any of us have need to thank Him? The answers to all of these questions are obviously no. Then why don't we pray?

Our sinful human nature convinces us that we can handle our problems on our own. We can take care of ourselves just fine, thank you very much. By hard work, we can supply everything we need to support this body and life. We take it for granted that others can too. However, when we have problems, when our lives are broken, when we are unable to supply all that we need for ourselves, we may pray then. At those moments in life, we may say and may hear others say, "Well, we've thought of everything we can think of. We have tried everything that we can try. We have done everything that we can do. Now, all we can do is pray." Prayer becomes nothing more than a last resort, rather than a first option; more of the "good luck charm" which we hope will work than true communication with our Lord and our God who can make everything work.

The simple truth is that sin is the reason for our apathetic or nonexistent praying. Our sin has separated us from God and has caused us to ignore God's command for us to pray and to not believe God's promise to answer prayer. When urged to pray, we

may not believe that God is even listening or that he even cares. This causes us to look for solutions in other areas: medicine, technology, money, physical strength, and even in ourselves.

As long as we put our trust in ourselves and the things that we can do, not only will we not pray, but we will see no need to pray. The conflict between God and sinful humanity will continue to rage on without any answer or hope. Our sin causes us to think more highly of ourselves than we should so that we continue on, thinking we can take care of ourselves and not even considering the problems or needs of anyone else. Our sin also causes us to think less highly of the Lord than we should. He becomes nothing more than a last resort after we have tried to do everything ourselves.

Our only hope is not just to command people to pray or force them to do so. This likely would not have much benefit and could make things worse. The first thing that must be done is to settle the conflict which caused us to draw away from persistent and prioritized prayers. Once the conflict between God and humanity is resolved, then prayer will flourish.

In our text for today, Paul says we have just the person to resolve this conflict. He writes, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Jesus came into this world to resolve the conflict between God and humanity caused by sin. He is the perfect mediator between God and man because he is true God and He is true man. He bridges the gap between a holy God and sinful, wretched people. "On the cross he did what only God can do – offer a sinless life of perfection. On the cross he did but only man could do bleed, suffer, and die." (Reed Lessing)

Having lived a sinless life of perfection to be offered on the cross as a ransom to buy us back from sin, from death, and from the devil in hell, He is able to bleed and die as that offering. Jesus' death on the cross has broken down the barrier between God and us. Jesus' resurrection from the dead has opened the way into eternal life. We are at peace with God and with one another. The sin which made us so self-centered that we did not pray to God for others and only selfishly prayed for ourselves is gone. There is nothing blocking us from going to God in prayer. There is nothing blocking God from coming to us to answer prayer.

The Good News of God's saving grace for us not only affects our relationship with Him, but affects our relationship with each other. We are moved to not only approach our Heavenly Father for our needs, but also for the needs of others. That which blocked our access to our Heavenly Father for our own needs, as well as that which blocked our access to our Heavenly Father for our neighbors needs is gone..

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Now, by faith in Jesus Christ, we can go directly to God Himself to present our petitions and prayers, knowing full well that He hears them, cares for us, and will answer them in accordance with His will and for our best good.

Naturally, we pray for ourselves and our needs. There is nothing wrong with thinking of ourselves and asking God for ourselves. The psalmist writes, "Call upon me in the day of trouble." In other words, when you have need, look to me and pray for

yourself. However, this is often where our prayer life ends. Our relationship with God begins to look strikingly similar to Aladdin the genie. God is there simply to fulfill our wishes.

However, although God does want us to pray for ourselves, He doesn't want us to pray only for ourselves. We are to pray for our friends and our families and their needs and desires. This still is not too difficult to understand or do. Having been reborn in the grace of God by the waters of Holy Baptism, we have become new people with new priorities and new desires. Many faithful Christians and pious praying people would like to draw the line here and complete our prayer list of those people near and dear to us.

However, Jesus does not draw the line here, nor should we. In His well-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus surprises us by extending our care of and prayers for people beyond our family tree and circle of friends. He says, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Our act of love and practice of prayer reach out to everyone, including those who are opposing us and hurting us.

In our text, Paul exhorts us and encourages us to pray for those whom we might dislike, disagree with, and fervently oppose. He writes, "First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions." Pray for all people, those we like and those we don't like. Instead of complaining about the government and those who run it, pray for it and them. Go to our Heavenly Father on behalf of (insert name of least favorite politician here) and pray that God would bless that person or persons. Yes, even go to our Heavenly Father on behalf of Donald Trump, whether you love him or hate him. Some may find that offensive to name him or any other politician.

However, we don't pray to God on behalf of our president, our legislators, our state and local governments, or really anyone else because we like them, agree with them, or support them. We pray on their behalf because God, through His holy apostle, has commanded us to do so. To do this pleases God our Savior who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, even those in government.

We are to bring all sorts of prayers on their behalf as mentioned in our text: specific requests, all-inclusive requests, definitive petitions, and, as every prayer should have, thanksgiving. Pray for the salvation of those serving in government and for their well-being. These men and these women, unworthy and unrighteous sinners just like us, are in need of God's wisdom, guidance, and strength to fulfill vocations into which God has placed them.

And we are in need of that which those in government are in charge of creating, keeping, and maintaining: "a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." We pray for lack of conflict and abundance of peace. We pray for the ability to lead godly and dignified lives with the right to worship and serve our God, not only in our church building, but in our communities as well.

Prayer becomes much more than a religious tradition or habit. Promising to pray becomes more something nice to say to those in need. Prayer is a powerful tool given by God to us with the expectation that we will actually use it. When you see it that way,

then you will take prayer more seriously and not just relegate it to an hour on Sunday morning.

Approach your prayer life with specificity. Choose specific people for whom you will pray. Do not limit your praying to family and friends or even nice people to whom you feel indebted. Broaden your horizons when it comes to praying as Paul encourages us in our text. Pray for your enemies and those who persecute you. Pray also for those in government and authority over your lives.

In order not to become like the preacher in the cartoon who promises prayer, but fails to deliver it due to forgetfulness, schedule specific time to pray. Jesus did this often when he would go off by Himself to commune with his Heavenly Father in prayer. Like a diet or an exercise program, choose a specific time to pray – the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, during some break in school or at work. Be faithful to that time no matter what.

The only other thing to say about prayer is, in the words of sports equipment mogul Nike, “just do it.” Pray for yourself and others – just do it. Just do it, not because you have to; not because you know, like, or agree with the people for whom you pray; not to fulfill a religious duty; but because you want to. You want to be obedient to our Lord’s command to pray. You want to see the blessing of God and benefit for those for whom you pray. And you want to receive the benefits of their goodness upon you.

Prayer is an important and even necessary part of the Christian life. It is neither forced nor optional. It is necessary for the well-being of your neighbors in need, as well as to draw your attention to God and realize that all good things come from him. So, “pray without ceasing,” (as the old KJV had it) for the benefit of the nation, for the benefit of those ruling that nation, for the benefit of your community, for the benefit of your family, and for the benefit of you – properly pray. Amen.