



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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First of All Pray

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I Timothy 2:1-8

SERMONSPICE VIDEO: “Focus This Way”

Song: *Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face.*

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace.

Hebrews 12:2 – “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith”

INTRODUCTION

A comedian by the name of Gallagher has a list of *human oddities*:



- Why is it called a *hamburger* when it’s made out of beef?
- Why do you put suits in garment bags and put garments in suitcases?
- Why doesn’t glue stick to the inside of the bottle?
- Why do banks charge you a non-sufficient funds fee on money they know you don’t have?
- Why are they called *apartments* when they’re stuck together?

WHY? Probably the most asked and least answered question in the English language.

I would add one more oddity to Gallagher’s list. Perhaps the strangest of all is **why do we not pray more fervently than we do?**

Not just us. There’s something about human nature. Consider Jesus’ disciples: After 3 years at His side, why did they find it so difficult to watch & pray with him? Why is it that too often prayer is our **last resort > first impulse?**

Oh, we come to church and mouth Paul’s great benediction in Ephesians (3:20f): “Now unto Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us. . .” We read in John’s Gospel how Jesus said to the Woman at the Well: “If you only knew the gift of God. . .” (John 4:10).

But then we look at our situation → all that vanishes → wring our hands and say, “All we can do is pray.” And we look at the world’s situation, and we don’t even bother.....

That’s not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches us that **first of all we should pray.**

Look at **I Timothy 2:1-8** with me [NIV in italics; NLT in non-italics]:

¹*I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--* ²*for kings and all those in authority, so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and holiness.* ³*This is good, and pleases God our Savior,* ⁴*who wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.* ⁵*For there is one God and one mediator who can reconcile God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus.* ⁶*He gave himself as a ransom for all. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time.* ⁷*And for this purpose I was appointed a preacher and an apostle—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.* ⁸*I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer,*

without anger or disputing.

Because the Apostle Paul knew and believed in the power of prayer, his charge to Timothy and the church at Ephesus was to PRAY. Let's step back and look at the backdrop...

I Timothy is one of 2 (really 3) books we call *the pastoral letters*. In them Paul packs everything he wants his churches & pastors to know and be committed to:

- The authority of Scripture
- The message of the Gospel (the correct teaching / preaching of it)
- The development of quality leaders
- The right priorities about money & possessions
- The courage to stand firm by their convictions (cause there was a lot of dangerous false teaching threatening this church at Ephesus)

In Chapter 1, Paul alludes to some of the doctrinal challenges facing the church. Chapter 2 (today) begins with HOW to handle the situation. "*I urge your, first of all. . .*" And what follows is a call to prayer—NOT as a last resort, BUT as a first impulse!

I believe that the church God wants to build (here) will be first and foremost a praying church. Prayer is critical to the life of the church. Minus prayer we are but a social group—cut off from the One for whom the Church exists. This place should be a place of prayer. We should be a people of prayer—both when we come together (worship, et.al.) and when we are scattered. This text makes it clear that we are to put prayer first—not "slide it in" in the middle of all our busy-ness. . .nor is it what we do after we've tried everything else. FIRST OF ALL. . .PRAY!

ILLUS> A young man went to a logging crew and asked for a job. The foreman asked for a demonstration of his skill. The young man felled a tree (with ease). "You start Monday".

Monday he reported for work. He worked alongside some pretty strong (and experienced) lumberjacks. He worked hard and thought he was doing a good job. Monday rolled by, then Tuesday, then Wednesday. Come Thursday, the foreman called the rookie in and told him to pick up his paycheck. He was being let go.

"But I'm a hard worker. I don't understand. I arrive first, leave last, and even have worked through my coffee breaks!" Foreman asked, "Have you been sharpening your ax?" Young man replied, "I've been working too hard to take the time." You see, working hard is one thing (good), working smart is another (better). The sharpness of the ax is as important as the strength of your swing.

Do you see the message in that little story?

What comes first (lest we be consumed by busy-ness)? Prayer. JESUS knew it. He prayed often and before every critical juncture in His ministry & life. When he confronted the money-changers, He said: "My house is a house of prayer." Any place dedicated to the worship and preaching of the Gospel is a place of prayer.

The EARLY CHURCH considered prayer a priority. Daily those early Xns. prayed / had fellowship / soaked up the Apostles' teaching / witnessed / shared & cared for one another—and the church grew (by leaps & bounds). Whenever a decision needed to be made, the church prayed. When choosing who would take the place of Judas, they prayed. When Peter was in prison, the church prayed. Should it be any different for us? Prayer comes first!

Now, the text uses four different terms for prayer (v. 1): *requests / prayers / intercession / thanksgiving*. All generally refer to the same thing. We might make some fine-line distinctions, say between "requests" (or "supplications") and "intercession":

- Supplication == praying for something.
- Intercession == praying for someone. An intercessor takes on the burden of the other.
- Prayers == a general term that means "asking". The point here is that we are NOT talking to ourselves / thinking positive thoughts / wishing real hard; we are coming before the King of the Heaven

- Thanksgiving is in there too. Consider what Paul says in **Phil. 4:5b-6** – “*The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything. But in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*”

The NLT puts it all together this way: “*I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them.*”

Let me try this out on you: “*Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of His Spirit, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies.*” [REPEAT] You might recognize this as coming from the **Westminster Catechism**.

I. CONSIDER WHO WE ARE TO BE DOING THIS FOR

Paul provides us a prayer list. He specifically mentions “kings and those in authority” (v. 2). What could be more appropriate at this time—as we are selecting new leaders + upholding those currently in office who are dealing with economic issues (figuring out how to bail us out) / foreign affairs / the threat of terrorism and nuclear re-armament.

How does this work, you ask? Can we swing the election if we get more people who think like us to pray along with us? Does it mean in the Red States more Republicans prayed + in the Blue States more Democrats prayed? ☺ I don’t think it works like that. There’s a lot about prayer that we don’t understand (i.e.: many mysteries).

So why bother, you ask? Because we believe our God is the ultimate ruler. He raises up and takes down the mighty. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We know (whether others do or not) that our ultimate security as a nation rests in the hands of the Almighty. [He may use the military—so we pray for them—but ultimately it’s all in His hands.] Our strength is not our military might or our economic wealth, but our faith! *In God we trust!!!*

Therefore, we pray for our leaders, no matter who they are. The *conservatives* need to pray for the liberals; the *liberals* need to pray for the conservatives—that God’s perfect plan will come about (no matter how long that takes). We have as much a duty to PRAY as to VOTE. We cannot afford to lapse into complacency → “whatever will be will be”. I believe we are being called by the H.S. to stand against the tide of fear and darkness that threatens to sweep across our land and the world. In fact, this passage says it’s the only way we can “live peaceful and quiet lives” (v. 2) → have inner tranquility / freedom from worry & concern.

Will things get better if we start to pray? Eventually! Can you imagine what the effect would be if a movement of prayer got started that matched in intensity the disgruntlement / the negativity / the despair that we feel all around us?

HOW can I pray for my leaders + those in authority? Here are some ideas:

- Give thanks for the successful passage of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act. Ask God to lead and guide those who now discern how the funds will be used.
- Pray for the candidates as they prepare for the election and possible office. Pray for their health and strength and for both men to portray their views and policies effectively and accurately so voters can choose wisely on November 4th.
- Pray for the next president of the United States—that he will govern “in the fear of the Lord” (by which I mean “lean on” / “depend on” / “trust”).
- Pray for our country as we struggle through this season of economic difficulty. Pray that the strongholds of greed, wherever they lie in our nation, will be removed and be re-placed by repentance and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

- Pray for the people of Galveston, TX as they continue to deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Ike. Pray for comfort and strength for those who have lost loved ones.
- Pray for our troops as they work to protect citizens abroad and at home, asking God to provide each one with His mighty protection and cover. Pray for those who have lost loved ones to know God's presence and love, and pray for them to know the gratitude of Americans whose freedom they safeguard.

Might I suggest you log onto www.presidentialprayerteam.org and join the bandwagon of those praying for our leaders. You will find this site to be unbiased and non-partisan.

II. WHOM ELSE DO WE PRAY FOR?

Paul broadens out when he urges prayers & intercessions be made *for everyone* (v. 1).

That might include, among others:

- Missionaries we support...protect and give them fruit for their labors.
- Places like Kurdistan (where Chuck White just went)...that there would be an open door for the message of the Gospel.
- Friends & neighbors + whole people groups who are pre-Xn. + those who are ethnic Xns.
 - That their minds would be open to the Gospel and their hearts would soften;
 - That they would see how good God already has been to them and how little this world really has to offer without God.
- Our church, that we would be a missional church (i.e.: a church that goes > gathers).

We can pray for one another in the church:

- Staff / Teachers / Cell Leaders
- Those who work with our youth & children
- Our youth & our children ⊆ those who've recently been baptized
- Homebound / Ill / Unemployed

You should pray for whatever tugs at your heart:

- Is there a social concern that you're passionate about?
- A ministry direction you're faithful and fervent in supporting?
- The needs in your home / family / the village / the schools.
- Pray for a greater atmosphere of faith & spirituality in our community.

Now let me push it a step farther by asking: Would you be willing to pray for your enemies?

- Those who hurt you / drag you down / take you out ⊆ ex-family members; maybe current
 - Those who have been unfair / unkind / lied (to, about) you ← back to your childhood
 - Those of other races or ethnicity (e.g.: Arabs, Muslims, Terrorists)
- [Consider who was on the throne when Paul wrote these words == NERO, one of the most violent, anti-Xn. men in history. Paul was praying for his salvation + heart change.]

How limited our perspective on prayer is. How narrow our understanding about what God is doing and can do in so many areas of life. Perhaps we don't appreciate how dependent we truly are on Him. We still want to "fix it all" in our own strength → make prayer a last resort. Martin Luther had it right in his great hymn *Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (paraphrase):

*Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing (CJ),
In all our striving we would be losing.*

III. WHO SHOULD PRAY?

Obviously everyone. But Paul get more specific. He calls upon **men** to pray: ⁸*I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.*

Is this generic? Or gender specific? I think it's "gender specific"—because Paul has a corresponding instruction for women in the very next verse (v. 9: "dress modestly"). It's probably because women are more inclined to pray than men, and don't need to be reminded so much.

He says "*I want men everywhere...*" Not just the elders of the church who have more experience and tenure. Not just the "professional ministers". Not just those on Ad Council or in a leadership position. But EVERY MAN.

Can you imagine the impact of a church where there is a strong core of men whose first impulse is to pray and seek God and recognize they desperately need His provision? I can show you a church like that----- you're sitting right in the middle of it today. And I say, keep going GUYS! Bring others on board, and let's see what can be accomplished for God.

We used to have a PRAYER TEAM that met off-n-on to pray + to plan prayer events. There's nothing harder than planning a prayer vigil or prayer walk. Nobody wants to come. We're all "doers". We can round up a team to lay floor tile / work on a bldg project / prepare food or take a meal to someone in no time at all. That's *doing* something. But *praying*? Well, praying is hard work. I would challenge you to not wait for a crisis to strike before you get going.

I want to revive the Prayer Team. It's been sitting idle on the Caring Network Cell list of ministries for over a year now. I'm meeting with Betty Parsons and others I know have a heart for prayer, and we'll brainstorm some new ways to make prayer come alive in our midst. Anybody want to come on board???

Paul says: "*I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.*" It's not about the altitude of your hands < attitude of your heart. Holy hands are unpolluted hands. We can get rid of phy. dirt easy enough; we need to ask God to cleanse us from moral & spiritual contamination.

"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?" asked the Psalmist. *"He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive the Lord's blessing and have a right relationship with God his savior."* **[Psalm 24:3-5]**

Paul gets down to the nitty-gritty when he pinpoints ANGER and DISPUTING (i.e.: quarreling / being disagreeable). No angry man can be a praying man. If you're constantly in conflict with people, God won't honor your prayers. That's why Jesus instructed us to be reconciled to our brother first before bringing a gift to the altar. **[cf. Matthew 5:23f]**

~ MUSICIANS' CUE ~

CONCLUSION

May prayer become even more the unquestioned heart & center of our church.
May it become so natural that it will be your first response to anything > the last resort once you've tried everything else.

Let's go to prayer now!

Study Guide

Monday: Reread I Timothy 2:1-8. What theological truths found in vv. 1-6 form the basis for confidence in prayer? Why? What part do godliness and holiness play in successful prayer? Check out I Peter 3:7.

Tuesday: Read Daniel 9:3-19. What elements of that prayer might you use to pray for our nation and its leaders? Note praise (v. 4). . . confession (vv. 3-4, 11-14). . . the character of God as compassionate and forgiving (v. 9), also faithful and trustworthy (v. 13). Note in v. 19 that “your people bear your name”. Are you proud that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, you bear His name? And that you have a part in making Him famous (v. 15)?

Consider this comment from Walter Brueggemann in his book **Great Prayers of the Old Testament** (p. 112): “Daniel, the model Jew, turns to YHWH (God) in prayer, for surely a future for the people of Daniel can only be given by YHWH” (not the empire). In light of the current political and economic crises, wouldn’t that help you “live more peacefully” and “quiet” the fear & anxiety that’s all “around” us (and maybe even “within” us)?

Wednesday: Read Paul’s Prayer of Thanksgiving in Ephesians 1:15-19. What is the inheritance Paul speaks of in this passage? Of what importance is it to living the Christian life? In your own words, how would you describe God’s power? What, for you, is God’s greatest demonstration of this power? Why do you think God gives us this power?

Thursday: Read Paul’s Prayer of Petition in Ephesians 3:14-21. What does it mean to have God’s Spirit in your inner being? How would you explain the difference between Christians who are alive with God’s power and others who are coasting along in their faith? What is one thing you are asking God to do in your life—that only HE can do?

Friday: Pray “for all people. . . for kings and all who are in authority” (I Timothy 2:1,2). Here is a model prayer you can use. . .

Heavenly Father, we lift up our president, members of Congress, and all the lawmakers in our country. We ask you to give them wisdom and understanding to make good decisions. Lord, may our nation come to peace both at home and around the world, and prosper spiritually as well as economically. We pray for the election of godly people; help them to govern justly, courageously and righteously—so that your will might be done and your kingdom might come, and be here as it is in heaven. Lord, bring healing to our land. Cleanse and forgive us for so often turning away from you. And help us who are your ekklesia—your called out ones—to declare Your Word with all boldness in word and deed.