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First of All, Pray!

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Series: I Timothy

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Life's so complicated,
There's just so much to do.
There seems to be no earthly way,
In one day to get through.

And so we rise, and as we do
We find our daily fate,
Is knowing that before we start,
Already we are late.

And so we scurry, hurry, fret...
And move into the day
And think, "Dear Lord, tomorrow,
I'll have the time to pray."

We run and rush into the world
Without our armor on,
And Satan has a field day,
Before the day is gone.

You'd think we'd learn our lesson,
But ere the next day starts;
We find ourselves so burdened down
With all that's on our hearts,

That we have even less time
To do the only thing
That to our lives stability
And peace and rest can bring.

Tomorrow, Oh, dear God,
One of Satan's greatest lies...
Tomorrow...is a trashcan
In grandiose disguise.

Tomorrow's not the time for us
To plan and to pray;
If we're to do the will of God,
That day must be today!

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Prayer! The one thing in life that *can't wait for tomorrow*. And yet, how many of us live as though it can. It is the prime essential of the Christian life. It is the one thing Jesus could not do without. It is something the Apostle Paul did *without ceasing*. It is the one thing that all of the greats who have changed the spiritual course of history have in common.

William Carey was once rebuked for spending so much time in prayer that he was accused of neglecting his business. "Prayer is my business," he responded, "cobbling shoes is a sideline."

When William IV of England died, there was a young girl spending the night at the palace. They awakened her and told her she was now the Queen of England. The first thing she did was fall to her knees and ask God to guide her through the years to come. For 64 years, Queen Victoria, as she became known, kept that priority; and God kept His Word.

Fanny Crosby shared that *never would she write a song without praying first*. She spent much time on her knees for she wrote 8,000 songs. But she tells of one day when the words just wouldn't come. Suddenly, she realized, this time she forgot to pray. She fell to her knees and asked God to write through her. She arose and dictated, as fast as her assistant could write, the words to "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross".

You and I can live our lives the way most do, trying to find the time to pray occasionally, or when the bullets are flying too fast to dodge; but we will never come close to spiritual greatness. Spiritual greatness is reserved for the faithful few to whom prayer is not an addendum to their schedule but *the main event*.

It was John Wesley's goal to spend at least two hours a day in prayer. Samuel Rutherford rose each day at 3 a.m. to be with God. Think of David Brainerd dying at the age of 29, and Henry Martyn at the age of 31, yet their names stand out among the brightest stars in the missionary firmament. It was not their actual labors that set them apart, it was their prayer lives that set them apart, and the character that prayer produced.

Nothing is harder to do, for nothing we try to do produces so much Satanic opposition. Paul knew that, so as he wrote a letter from Macedonia to his young protégé in far-off Ephesus, he decided that you simply couldn't remind a young disciple too often about what was and what wasn't essential in the Christian life. Those words are etched in the fabric of his first letter to

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Timothy and are found in the opening verses of chapter two. It is there that we find our resting place for a lesson or two, as we attempt to dissect the sense of priority that Paul placed on prayer at a time when the sense of urgency would seem to dictate action instead. Our passage reads like this:

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.

This is good, and pleases God our Savior,

who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

who gave Himself a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.

And for this purpose, I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. (1 Timothy 2:1-8 NIV)

It seems as though with every word, Paul gets nearer to the heart of God. And yet, at a simple glance, it would appear that the apostle has shifted gears quite quickly. How did he get from shipwrecked saints to an exposition on when to pray, how to pray, why to pray, for whom to pray, and what happens when you pray. Well, the first three words give us a clue. *He hasn't changed subjects*. This is not a new issue. This is a continuation of what he has been saying. And what he has been saying is:

a) There are problems in the church. Certain men are teaching false doctrines.

b) There are problems in the world, so the law has been put there to stop lawbreakers, adulterers, perverts, murderers, and terrorists.

c) There are problems in certain believers' lives, problems so severe that they have blasphemed God and become shipwrecked, so Paul has had to turn them over to Satan to learn their lessons.

In the process of explaining all of this, Paul has had time to share his personal testimony and the credentials he possessed for

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being an apostle...he was a blasphemer, a murderer, and a violent man; but he was shown mercy so that Jesus, who was looking for a worst-case scenario to magnify His Grace, would have an example to show the world. So Paul has painted a somewhat dismal picture of the challenges facing this young interim pastor who has been left, apparently over the lad's objections, to tend to the wayward Ephesian church while his spiritual father continued his missionary efforts through the Macedonian countryside.

Paul knew that Timothy had no chance in his own energy at all. This was heavy-duty spiritual warfare, and the battle was not against flesh and blood. Only God could handle the pressures and the problems that faced this young man and this young church. So Paul, having clearly stated the problems, begins to uncover the solution. He says, "Dear Tim, First of all, pray!" Not after you've tried everything you know to do. Not after you've fretted and worried and been out of fellowship. Not after you've called half the city and told them what Paul said. No, *first of all*, pray.

There is the solution in a nutshell to most of our problems. But it's so simple, we refuse to believe it could work, and it gives us no glory at all, so we try everything else first.

THE PLEADING

Paul begins by pleading with Timothy to pay attention to what he's about to say. It would be, in our language, like saying: "Tim, if you never hear another word, listen to what I'm about to tell you." Paul was about to unfold for this young lad a principle that could revolutionize his life and the life of that faltering fellowship he had been called to rescue. He was about to teach Tim the cardinal rule of spiritual warfare: "When in doubt, pray."

The word *urge* is the Greek word *parakaleo* that is a strong exhortation in the form of an entreaty. It literally means *to call one near or to pull alongside and beg them to come along*. It was a gentle word, but a persistent one. Paul knew that Tim had to make this decision on his own, but he knew that he must understand the intensity of the need. So he urged him with all his heart to do so.

The second word we look at is the word *then* and refers to what has gone before. "I urge you then," Paul said. *Then* simply means "in the light of everything I've already told you in chapter 1, Timothy, this what you have to do". It means, "Yes, Tim, there are

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false teachers in the church, so what are you going to do? *First of all, pray.*” If only the pastors and the elders of all the churches in the world today would look at Paul’s order of solving problems the church would regain and capture its power. First of all pray. “Yes, Tim, there are lawbreakers everywhere, threatening the peace of the fellowship. What do you do? First of all, you pray.”

It means, “Yes, Tim, there are men in the church who have turned aside from the Gospel and shipwrecked their lives. What do you do? Well, first of all, Tim, you pray. Before you do anything else, you pray. In the light of all that’s facing you, young man, before you do anything else, you pray.” If we never heard another word the Apostle Paul wrote his faithful disciple, we ought to hear that one. “First of all, pray.”

THE PRIORITY

Having told Tim when to pray (before he does anything else), he now tells him for whom to pray. This is one of the most exciting explanations of the heart of God found in Scripture. It is a Jehovah-designed prayer list. Want to have a prayer list like God’s? Get out your pencil. Ready? How big is your paper? Okay. Let’s go. First write down everyone!

Everyone? That’s what Paul just said. Everyone. What does that mean? Does it mean every believer has to pray for every person in the world? No. Then what does it mean? Well, first of all it means there are no limits for whom you are to pray for. To look at our prayer lists, one would think God told us to pray for our children, our families, our pastors, a few missionaries who happen to have made an impact on our lives, and the lady in the hospital who was mentioned in the church bulletin last week. I don’t think that’s everyone.

What about that child in the tattered clothes you saw outside the grocery store? What about the lady who works in the office across the hall from you who looks so troubled? What about your great Aunt in New York City who has never trusted Christ? What about your ex-boss who was so unjust and unfair to you? You have a *special responsibility* to pray for him, according to Matthew 5:44. What about that Sunday school teacher you had in the fifth grade who led you to Christ? What about the kids in that third grade class you taught a year ago? What about the guy who lives up the street you’ve never met who’s in a wheelchair? What about that clerk in the grocery store who gets on your nerves?

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Why do you think God has placed *all those people in your path*?

Somebody has to pray for them. Why? Because God—

Wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.
(1 Timothy 2:4 NIV)

And you're His agent of record. You're the one assigned or one of the ones assigned to those people He has graciously put in your path. No, you can't pray for all of them forever; you'll run out of hours. But most of us never even utter their name to God or write down their name so we can remember to pray for them. But if no one had prayed for us, many of us might still be outside the Kingdom waiting.

You say, "But does it matter?" If it didn't matter, God wouldn't have told us to do it. And don't overlook the second exciting aspect of this passage. Paul is reminding us that this Gospel of ours is a universal Gospel. That means that no one is excluded. No one is too sinful. No one is too rich. No one is too poor. No one is too religious. No one is too irreligious. God's heart longs for all to be saved, so He wants you to pray for all men He sends your way. You say, "But I don't have time." Beloved, time is all we have. And as long as there is breath within us, we have time to pray. If Jesus has time to ever live to make intercession for us, how can we not have time to pray?

The problem is that we think of prayer in terms of a specified activity at a specified place at a specified time. We call it *prayer time* or *quiet time* or *devotions* or whatever. That's not what Paul meant. He said, "Pray without ceasing." That means as you start your car pray, as you drive pray, as you wait for the next appointment pray, when you see someone in need pray. All day long you stay in an attitude of prayer. E.M. Bounds, in his book, *The Purpose of Prayer*, wrote about Stonewall Jackson. "Jackson", he writes, "was a man of prayer." He said of himself, "I have so fixed the habit of prayer in my mind that I never raise a glass of water to my lips without asking God's blessing, never seal a letter without putting a word of prayer under the seal, never take a letter from the mailbox without a prayer, never change classes in my lecture room without stopping to pray for those who go out and those who come in." That's prayer—for all men—all the time. And Paul said, "That's what I want you to do."

But there is a second part of Paul's command that carries with it equal billing. We are not to limit our prayers to those we

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love or those we know or those we like. We are rather to pray only with the limitations God has on whom He will save, and there are none. So secondly, we are to especially pray for (that is, never overlook), a certain category of people who are particularly near to God's heart. We are commanded to pray for kings and all those who are in authority.

All those in authority. The President. The Vice-President. The Senators. (You mean from my state?) Doesn't say that. I think it means all of them, especially those from your state. It means the representatives, the judges, the governor, the city council, the county commissioners, your boss, your spouse, your parents, anyone God has placed over you to act as His divine authority in your life. Now, don't tell me you can't come up with a prayer list. And it doesn't matter if they're Republicans or Democrats, liberal or conservative, Christian or non-Christian; because they are in authority, pray for them. Of course, it also means those who are in spiritual authority: your pastors, your elders, your teachers, and your group leaders in Bible study. The word translated *authority* in this passage is the word *huperoche* a word that literally means *in a high position; elevated*. It is a word used of a mountain peak. It means anyone over you. Pray for them without ceasing.

Why? Paul knew you'd ask that, so he answered you in advance.

[Pray] for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

(1 Timothy 2:2 NIV)

We need to look at those words. The words translated *peaceful and quiet* are two Greek words that stand for two kinds of peace—*peace without* and *peace within*. One means *the absence of unnecessary external strife*. It is the cessation of hostilities, freedom from physical warfare, the absence of frustrating conflicts. Wuest translates it as, *keeping aloof from political agitation*. That would have controversial connotations in our day, to be sure. But it means you pray that God will touch the hearts of those in authority not only to save them for *He desires for all men to be saved*, but also to protect you and your family from unnecessary hostilities. I believe that means it's not wrong to pray for those in authority over you with partially selfish motives. I know wives who are ashamed because they pray for their husband's salvation, not just because they want him saved, but because they want the hostility to end. Based on this passage, I'm not sure that's wrong.

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The second word *hesuchios* stands for *inner tranquility*, It is the peace of God that rules your heart when it is free from hostility to the sovereignty of God—when you're willing to rest in the outcome and leave it in God's hands. We are praying for those in authority that we may live peaceful, quiet lives, and concentrate on the business at hand, which is seeing to it "that all men come to a knowledge of the truth". And I believe the most obvious missing ingredient in the Christian's world today is not the absence of Christians involved in causes. The most obvious missing ingredient may well be the empty prayer closet, the absence of a commitment on the part of the body of Christ to agonize before God so that He may intervene in the moral and political affairs of men and so that He, in the process, may receive the glory.

Active involvement is often necessary and very difficult to do. If God is calling you to that arena of life, obey. But in the final analysis, He has called all of you to remember that the battles are won or lost in the heavenlies, and the "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual to the pulling down of strongholds"¹. And while these other things are necessary, praying may still be the hardest work of all. It is far easier to be *against* something our government is or isn't doing or against someone or against some evil in our society than it is to fall on our faces before God, day and night, without ceasing, on behalf of those He, in His sovereign wisdom, has placed in power.

So Paul says to first of all, pray before you do anything else. Pray for those in authority over you that there might be peace in the land (external peace—the absence of unnecessary conflict), and peace in your heart (inner peace—that ability to accept the sovereignty of God for what it is without frustration or fear).

But Paul wants more for us than that. He wants us to pray for those over us that we might live peaceable, quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

These two Greek words cover the gamut of man's relationship to God and to man. The first represents a man's attitude towards the authority of God and the holiness of God. It is a word of a submissive, uncontentious life. The second word represents the outward display of that attitude in the world as it affects our daily walk. In other words, it is your attitude towards God and your ability to live the Christian life before men and it will

¹ II Corinthians 10:4

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be greatly affected by how you pray. Do you pray peaceably for those over you without agitation or without a spirit of retaliation? Pray without bitterness or without vengeance. If they are abusing their privilege of leadership, and many of them do, guess whose problem that is? God has said, “Vengeance is mine, I will take care of it.”²

Our job is two-fold: to pray aright for those God has elevated to positions of authority in this world, and secondly, to obey the laws they place over us. That’s why Paul wanted everyone “to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.” We should have a clam, gentle, non-retaliatory spirit.

So, the command of God through the apostle to Timothy and to us, in the light of all the problems in the church, and all the problems in the world, and all the problems in the lives of those about us, even those whose lives are shipwrecked, is first of all to pray. We are to make prayer a way of life so that we actually live our lives, minute by minute, in unbroken communion with God, without ceasing. We are to make prayer for those in authority such a natural part of our lives that we plead night and day on their behalf, even while others are venting their energies and their anger on those men or their policies or their parties. We are to do all in our power within the system to elect those who will follow God’s laws, and we do all in our power to obey the laws they enact, whether we like them or not; but most of all, we utilize what is in our power, namely, the power of prayer. Paul said, “that is the first thing you ought to do”; and for most of us, it is the last thing we try.

We need to begin a list of those whom God has placed over us in this world system. It’s at least a start for a “Timothy-type prayer list”. I think it ought to include the leaders of other nations who have an impact on the world we live in, whose actions may well determine whether or not we are able to live “peaceable, quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Our first prayer for each of them ought to be for their salvation. For that is why we pray... for “God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the Truth”. That’s why we’re here not to topple governments, God does that. We are here to be instruments of God who lay hold of that awesome divine power through prayer that can change the course of history. We pray for their salvation first.

² Romans 2:19

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Then we pray for their actions, that God may restrain them from interfering with our ability to live “quiet, peaceable lives in all godliness and holiness”. Then we must remember that it is our responsibility to live that quality of life so that “men might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.”

But more than that, in closing, I beg you to do what I need to do as well, and that is get alone with God this week and stay there until you begin to grasp His perspective of prayer. He must be saying of us what He said of the disciples in the garden, “Could you not watch with me one hour?”³ We have so much time for activity, and we have so much temptation to equate activity with productivity, that we forget that the most honorable calling a believer has is the magnificent opportunity to stand before the King, clothed in the majestic scarlet robes of the blood of Christ, viewed through the lens of the cross as *holy ones* and, thus, possessing the unspeakable right to come boldly to that place and make known our needs and our intercessions.

Let’s begin this week to pray for everyone. The policeman on the street corner who, according to Paul, is an instrument of God put there for our protection. We need to pray for the judge on the bench whose heart is in the hands of our God, and that person in our world who seems so bent on destroying us and deceiving us and using us. Pray for them. God commanded you to. Pray for the parent who deserted you, that child who has rebelled and caused you grief, that self-appointed, self-righteous church member who has chosen to be your chief critic. Pray for them. Read the newspapers. They are your daily prayer additions. Pray for that criminal on trial for murder and for that sports hero accused of addiction. Turn to the obituaries and pray for the relatives of those who have just lost loved ones. Pray for everyone.

Wake up in the morning, open your eyes, fall to your knees, and before you do anything else...first of all, pray. And after that, pray some more and never stop. “I urge you,” Paul said, “first of all, pray”.

³ Mathew 26:40

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