

# Prayer, Politics, and Priority One

1 Timothy 2:1-7  
November 6, 2016

Earlier this year, Pastor Jerry asked me to preach the Sunday before the election and to say something relevant to what's happening in our nation this week. What were you thinking, Jerry? Anyway, I said that yes, I would be happy to preach. What was I thinking?

As it turns out, my sermon this morning is not so much about politics as it is about answering this question: how should we as Christians live in relation to politics? How should we respond to our current political climate? Behind this question is a bigger question: what is our primary mission as Christians? What should be our focus as we live out our faith in this world? Let's take a look at 1 Timothy 2:1-7. This passage offers us a powerful perspective on what God wants his church to look like in relation to the political realities of our world.

In the book of 1 Timothy the Apostle Paul writes to warn against the dangerous influence of false teachers. We could spend more time on that, but suffice it to say that Timothy and his Ephesian church were living in a hostile environment, surrounded by deceitful teachings, sinful lifestyles, and lost people. Let me say that again: deceitful teachings, sinful lifestyles, and lost people. Does that sound at all familiar to you? The people in Timothy's church didn't face the same political problems we are dealing with in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, but they certainly faced some of the same underlying issues.

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul gave instructions about the responsibilities of the church for living in an environment like this. What were those responsibilities? We can summarize them with three "P's": Prayer, Peace, and the Priority of the gospel.

## Prayer

Let's start with what Paul says about prayer. He writes "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and those in authority..."

That's one of the first things we should do as Christians in response to our political situation. We should pray for our leaders. That sounds so simple, doesn't it? But what is it like for us to really pray for our leaders and our candidates? Paul mentions different kinds of prayers we should pray: besides prayers in general, these include petitions, intercessions, and thanksgiving. What are those?

A petition is simply a prayer in which we ask God for something we need or desire. We voice our desires to God, including our political desires. There's nothing wrong with that. Of course we shouldn't assume that what God wants is exactly what we want, and we need to pray "Thy will be done." But God still eagerly hears the desires of our hearts. We need to cry out to God about the issues that concern us, or the things that sadden us or anger us in our country. We can pray for outcomes in this election that we believe to be best (as long as we remember that God knows that better than we do.) We can pray that those in power will make decisions that are good for us, our children, our neighbors, and our world.

When we petition God in prayer on behalf of country, it may seem as though we are praying *against* our leaders at times. And that's okay. As we read through the Psalms and the Prophets in the Old Testament, we see a practice called *lament*. If you are frustrated or angry or saddened by what we see going on politically, it's appropriate to cry out to God. It's okay to pray *against* the wrongdoing of leaders.

We are also told to pray prayers of intercession. Intercession is like petition but on behalf of other people; in this case, on behalf of our leaders. Even while we pray against decisions that we don't like, we also need to pray *for* our leaders. We pray for their needs. We pray that they will have the wisdom and insight that they need to lead well. We pray that they will make good decisions. We can pray for their health. And we can certainly pray for them spiritually, that they will respond to God in their own lives. This could sometimes be a challenge for us. I think of the all of angry things which are said against our president and against our current candidates, or anyone we disagree with politically. There's nothing wrong with feeling those feelings. But what if those emotions cause us to forget that those people we disagree with are human beings who are loved by God? Can we truly pray for their good?

There is a final kind of prayer Paul mentions here that might be the most challenging of all, and that's thanksgiving. We should give thanks for our political leaders. We might want to protest that one. Was Paul really being realistic? When he wrote that, did he have any idea what American politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be like? No, but he knew exactly what Roman politics was like in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Who was

the highest human leader in the Roman world at that time? Emperor Nero. Nero was a brutal and oppressive tyrant. He was also probably insane. Tradition has it that he “fiddled while Rome burned.” That may or may not be true, but in any case, it shows the kind of reputation he had. And yet in this context, Paul told his audience to give thanks for him, among their other leaders.

Can we agree with Paul on this as we pray? Can we thank God for Barrack Obama? Will we be able to thank God for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton? Thanking God for someone doesn’t mean agreeing with everything that person does or says. But we can thank God that we do have leaders. They play a necessary role in the world. And our president, our congressmen and women, our supreme court, and others have incredibly difficult jobs as they work for the common good.

Petitions, intercession, and thanksgiving. We need to pray for our leaders and our country. There will be an opportunity to pray especially for our nation this afternoon at 4:00. But let’s also take a moment to pray right now.

*“Father, we want to pray this morning for our nation and for our leaders. We thank you that you invite us to come before you with our prayers. As we approach this challenging time of election, we petition you for the good of this country. We pray first of all, your will be done. We confess that we easily fall prey to fear or hostility, but we know that you are in control and that we can trust you. And yet Lord, we do voice our desires to you. We pray that our president, our president elect, our congressmen and women, and our judges would honor and promote human life and flourishing in all its forms: born and unborn, rich and poor, male and female, black and white, Hispanic, and Native American. We pray for justice against those who do wrong and for compassion for those who suffer. We pray for peace, and for the wisdom to pursue it in the face of the conflicts in our world.*

*“We also pray on behalf of our leaders and candidates. We pray for their wellbeing: physically, mentally, emotionally, ethically, and spiritually. We pray above all that our leaders would be responsive to you in their hearts and in their lives, that they would know you and that they would live in the truth.*

*“And Lord, we also give thanks for our leaders. We thank you for their willingness to do jobs that are incredibly demanding and for which they often endure ceaseless mocking and anger. Even though we don’t agree with all the decisions our leaders make, we are thankful that you use them to provide the leadership and order that our world needs.*

*We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.”*

## **Peace**

The second responsibility of God’s people which Paul mentions here is peace. He says that the ultimate reason we should pray is “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” This is part of what we are to pray for. We should pray that those who govern would lead well so that we are enabled to live peaceful, God-focused lives. But living this way is also our responsibility, no matter what our environment may be like.

What does it mean for us to live peaceful and quiet lives? First, “peaceful” does not mean “passive.” It doesn’t mean apathetically sitting back and watching the world go by. Having a quiet and peaceful life in this context means living a life that is focused on God’s Kingdom rather than on human conflicts. Paul connects this peaceful life with godliness and holiness. It’s a life in which our energy is directed toward pleasing God, loving our neighbor and working out his purposes rather than getting sucked into the endless power struggles that are so common in our world.

Maybe that sounds like an excuse to disengage or to sit on the sidelines, but I think it is really the opposite. To be committed to living a peaceful life for the good of others under the Lordship of Jesus actually requires a good deal of courage. In an environment in which the accepted means of getting something done is to shout louder and longer than everyone else, living peaceful and quiet lives for good of those around us can be an act quiet of protest. In a world that feeds on anger and outrage, a commitment to peace can be revolutionary. It means that we need to resist the pressure to jump onto the bandwagons of fear or hostility. It means a quiet but firm stand against evil. To live the life Paul describes here is a courageous stand for God’s kingdom.

## **The Priority of the Gospel**

That brings us to the final point which Paul makes. Here Paul explains that the ultimate focus of our lives and mission in the world is the gospel. He writes

“This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”

Paul then goes on to say that this is the driving purpose behind his own calling as a missionary:

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

Paul’s priority in life was the gospel—the good news about salvation through Jesus Christ. He wanted his audience to share that priority. This statement that “God wants all people to be saved” and that Jesus is a ransom for all people is the culminating point in the passage. Notice Paul’s repetition of the word “all.” He says to pray for *all* people and *all* those in authority. God wants *all* people to be saved. Jesus is a ransom for *all* people.

And, all people *need* to be saved. The problem of sin is not limited to certain people in certain places or nations. This problem of separation from God is universal. All are sinners, and God wants all to be saved. But there is only one way to be saved: Jesus. That’s why this message and this mission are so urgent. Being right with God is the most important thing in everyone’s life. God cares about everybody. Jesus is the only way. And God wants everybody to know this truth. That was Paul’s mission. That was Timothy’s Mission. That is supposed to be our mission, too.

## Application

So this is where our passage this morning has taken us. We’ve been reminded that what matters most to God and what should matter most to us is the gospel. That is our mission. But didn’t I say that I was going to address the election this morning? What does this message about the supreme importance of the gospel tell us about the election?

Here’s what I think it should tell us: that we can’t let politics distract us from the gospel. I think that often—and usually it’s not intentional—we begin to look at our faith through the lens of politics rather than the other way around. We can start to think that the most important thing is to make sure that such and such a person gets elected (or doesn’t get elected). That the right laws get put into place. That our rights and freedoms are protected. That our country remains safe. We are rightfully concerned about these political problems, and we want to see them answered with political solutions.

And yet these problems we are facing—abortion, same-sex marriage, terrorism, corruption, greed, racism—are ultimately not political problems. They’re sin problems. They all stem from the fact that we as humans are in rebellion against our Creator. The ultimate solution to this is not found in American politics. The solution is found in Jesus Christ. Even if we could accomplish everything we dream on the political scene, we would not solve the ultimate problem of sin. We would love to promote more public morality and biblical values in our nation, and I think it is right that we keep trying. But these efforts are not where we pin our ultimate hope. Our hope is in Jesus. And our most important job is to draw people to him. That was true before this election, and it will still be true when it is over. After the election this Tuesday, we will still have the same God, and we will still have the same gospel. Jesus will still be at the center of God’s plan, and God’s mission of salvation for people everywhere is still our first priority.

I believe that Christians in American have sometimes made the mistake of believing that American politics are the hinge on which God’s purposes in the world turn. But that doesn’t fit what we read here in 1 Timothy. There are many nations, but just one God and just one mediator. This is one of many elections, but there is only one Savior. And he died for all people, from every nation. God’s mission doesn’t center on America; it centers on Jesus and his church. We need to see the world from God’s point of view: a whole world of lost but loved people whom Christ died to save; who need to hear the truth of the gospel.

Let’s get a different perspective on this by looking at the early church during the Roman Empire. The Roman festivals included violent gladiator games and ceremonies worshiping pagan deities and the emperor. Or look at the sexual ethics of the time. Pedophilia was considered social acceptable. Or consider the value of human life. Unwanted babies were commonly left out in the streets to die. Or what about religious freedom: the early Christians often endured terrible persecution. Emperor Nero famously burned the bodies of Christians on stakes to light his evening dinner parties. If there ever was a time to wage a political culture war, that was the time.

And the early church did wage a culture war. But it didn't have anything to do with lobbying the government for moral legislation. They didn't try to get a Christian into the Roman Senate. They didn't trust in political strongmen to win victories for them.

Does this mean that they were passive in face of evil? That they were neglecting their call shape the culture they lived in? That they were "so heavenly minded they were of no earthly good?" Not at all. The early Christians were culture warriors, but they didn't fight with the weapons of the world. They didn't pick up swords. They didn't protest. They couldn't even vote. But what they did was no less politically revolutionary. They refused to take part in the culture of pagan worship. They would not bow before Caesar. They rejected participation in the evil behaviors that were normal in society. In the face of the forces that persecuted them, they said "you can do what you want to our bodies. You can lock them up, torture them, and kill them. But our souls belong to Jesus. None of your threats can shake our allegiance to Him."

Do you know what else they did that was politically revolutionary? They loved their neighbors. They cared for the poor. In a time when sick people were often held at arm's length, they brought them into their homes and even started hospitals. They cared for and adopted the children who were abandoned on the streets. Do you know what happened? They turned the world upside down. People saw that Jesus was worth following. The message made its way across the entire Roman world.

Of course our world is very different from theirs. We have many political freedoms such as the right to vote that we can and should use. But we can learn from their example. As Christians our most important strategy has never been about politics. It's about the gospel. It's about radically following Jesus.

At this point, maybe some of you are thinking "Yes, but does focusing on the priority of the gospel mean that we live with our heads in sand; that we ignore everything else in life? Does it mean that we ignore politics because we are only interested in "more spiritual" matters? Does the gospel blindfold us to what is happening in the world?"

Those are good questions. Let's think of it this way. The gospel is not a blindfold, but a pair of glasses. All of you should have a pair of these glasses in your bulletin. I would invite you to pull them out. Our gospel glasses don't blind us to the needs and issues in the world around us. In fact, it is only through the gospel that we can see these realities clearly at all; that we can see the world as God sees it. We need to look at all of life, including politics, through the lens of the gospel.

When we look at the world through our gospel glasses, what do we see? First, we will see that our world suffers from some major problems. Ultimately, it's one big problem. We're all sinners. We are living out of step with God's good intentions. It's a problem that shows up in the moral state of our culture, in our politics, and let's not forget, in ourselves too. But here's the other thing we see more clearly through our gospel glasses: we see that the solution to our sin problem comes through Jesus. He is the mediator through whom we are reconciled to God; through whom a broken world can have hope of being put right.

So when we get discouraged about our political situation, we put on our gospel glasses. And let me be clear about something: this is not a magic solution that makes the problems disappear. The gospel glasses are not rose-colored glasses. They are Jesus-colored, and we see the problems for what they are: sinful, alienated people, ourselves included, who need a savior, a mediator, a ransom.

We need to see our candidates through the gospel glasses: as people to pray for; people whom God loves and for whom Jesus died. We need to watch the news through our gospel glasses; seeing the world not as something to run from in fear, or for us to try to control, but as our mission field.

Yes, we look at the world with urgency. But not the urgency of human fear that our world is out of control; rather with the urgency with which God enacted a rescue mission to save us and bring us into the knowledge of the truth. Yes, we look at the world with sadness, but not the sadness of human despair; rather the sadness of Jesus, who wept with compassion over his beloved city of Jerusalem, full of lost people. Yes, we look at the world with anger, but not the human anger at things which are not going our way; rather with a godly anger against the forces of sin, evil, and injustice, which ravage God's good creation.

But above all, we look at the world with faith, hope, and love. Faith in God, that he knows what he is doing and that the world has never been outside of his control. Hope, built upon our confidence that God has good purposes that he has already enacted through Jesus and will one day bring to completion. And we look at the world with love, seeking the good of our neighbors and above all sharing in God's desire

that they will come to a knowledge of the truth about Jesus our savior. And so we do engage in politics; not because they are ultimate the vehicle of God's purposes or the object of our hopes, but because our hope is in Jesus, and we are called to live out the truth of that hope in every arena of life.

You probably noticed that these are 3D glasses. Because of that, we can use them to remember three D's of the gospel that should shape the way we look at life and this election: the **death** of Jesus as a ransom for the sins of the world, the **dominion** of Jesus' kingdom over all, and that we as the **disciples** of Jesus live under this lordship and spread this message. We think about the death of Jesus and remember that our nation and our world are full of lost people who God loves. We remember that Jesus' dominion is over all. He is Lord. God is sovereign. And we remember that first and foremost, we are disciples of Jesus, seeking to follow him, to speak the gospel, and to love our neighbors for his sake.

So I invite you to put on your gospel glasses. Wear them as you face the election this week. Wear them into the voting booth. Wear them as you follow the election coverage. Wear them as you talk with your family and friends. Wear them into your conversations on social media. Wear them as you get down on your knees and pray for our nation, our leaders, and our world. Wear them as you go out and love your neighbors.

Of course I don't mean that you have to wear them literally. (Although you might stick them to your refrigerator as a reminder.) But we do need to look at this election, our nation, our world, and all of life through the lens of gospel. So let's pray for our nation and our leaders. Let's live out the peaceful revolution of God's love. Let's embrace the priority of the gospel.

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