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1 Timothy 2:1-8

Fifth Message

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## RESTORING THE HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

The theme of our text from Paul's letter to Timothy is prayer. As we were singing Dave Burns's rendition of the Lord's Prayer, the words "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10) remind us that our prayers play a vital role in bringing God's will in heaven to earth. Yet, how can we be certain of what God's will is? And how can we be confident that he will answer our prayers? Many people find it difficult to pray with confidence, because in their experience that for which they prayed most earnestly for was not granted. A child dies, the dreaded divorce happens, or the job is lost. So we wonder, "Why pray? Does it make any difference?"<sup>1</sup> Of all the divine mysteries, prayer seems to be the one in which we remain most childlike, yet none is more vital to our spiritual lives. As with breathing, we can't live without prayer, but when we have to be intentional and deliberate about it, we often draw a blank. Though we will never be able to fully probe the divine mysteries surrounding prayer, the apostle Paul would not have us remain ignorant about certain foundational truths that will give us greater freedom and supreme confidence in our prayers.

In the opening chapter of this letter, Paul gave Timothy his mandate to silence the false teachers and get the church back on track, with sound teaching that produces love from an internal transformation of the heart. The speculations and legalism of the false teachers had caused the church to become *self-absorbed* with theological controversy and *elitist* in their relationships. This inward focus had the disastrous affect of down playing God's mission to the gentile world. In response, Paul took decisive action and delivered the ringleaders over to the power of Satan.

If that reaction seems severe to us, we should remind ourselves of the holy zeal that consumed Jesus for the sanctity of his Father's house. Finding the court of the Gentiles overrun with shopping carts and ATM machines, he made a whip of cords and drove every last vestige of merchandising memorabilia out of sight. His rationale for his bold actions was: "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it 'a den of robbers?'" (Mark 11:17). With similar passion Paul cleansed God's new temple of those who were robbing it of its sanctity. The false teachers now silenced, he directs the congregation to revive their worship in accordance with the gospel, so that it is once again global in its concerns and holy in its character.

### I. The Priority and Scope of Prayer (1 Tim 2:1-2)

**I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, 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. (1 Tim 1:1-2 TNIV)**

#### A. The priority of prayer: "First of all"

The first order of business for the believers in Ephesus was to renew their calling as priestly intercessors for the world. Somehow in the melee of theological controversies they had lost their identity papers and forgotten who they were in relation to the world. When Israel was first called into a relationship with the Lord at Sinai, the Lord granted her the most privileged status among nations: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my *treasured*

*possession*. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a *kingdom of priests* and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). As a priest is uniquely set apart to God to mediate God's life among his people, so Israel was set aside to mediate God's life and blessings to all the nations.

This was in fulfillment of God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's seed: "in you all families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3 NASB). Israel's obedience to the covenant was designed to transform an ordinary nation into a holy nation, "mirroring *I AM's* character by their deeds and thereby sanctifying the world."<sup>2</sup> Could there be a higher calling or purpose? While the rest of the nations were building kingdoms based on raw power and oppressive control, Israel was designed to bring heaven to earth.

But sadly, Israel abandoned her calling, and instead of blessing the nations she was cast into exile. Yet because of God's faithfulness, Isaiah prophesied that God would send the remnant that survived the exile as messengers of good news to the nations. In response to God's invitation, "turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth" (Isa 45:22), the nations would make an eschatological pilgrimage to Zion and God would extend the privilege of being priests to them as well:

**"They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD... And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the LORD. (Isa 66:19-21)**

Isaiah looks forward to this historic moment with consummate joy, for then God's house will indeed be fulfilling the purpose for which it was made, to be "a house of prayer for all nations":

**"And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him...**

**these I will bring to my holy mountain**

**and give them joy in my house of prayer.**

**Their burnt offerings and sacrifices**

**will be accepted on my altar;**

**for my house will be called**

**a house of prayer for all nations." (Isa 56:6-7)**

Now that the day of the New Covenant has arrived, all who put their trust in Jesus Christ are given this treasured status of priests. As Peter writes, "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). Paul's words remind us as well that we must never forget our high calling as priests to the world.

#### B. The scope of prayer: Universal

To help the believers in Ephesus recover their priestly ministry of intercession, Paul uses four different terms to describe their prayers: *petitions*, *prayers*, *intercession* and *thanksgiving*. Taken together they convey the idea of "completeness – every dimension and action of prayer being focused on the need at hand."<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Paul's list focuses the entire energy of the church outward instead of inward. In contrast to the false teachers, whose heretical teaching was insular in its thinking, these multifaceted prayers are to be made "on behalf of *all* men," without distinction.

For the Jews who had come to faith in Christ, this unconditional acceptance of gentiles as fellow heirs of the grace of life was very hard to accept. For centuries God had instructed the Jews to be distinct and separate from the nations, with clear boundary markers of circumcision and dietary laws to preserve those distinctions. But with the death and resurrection of Christ God has thrown the door wide open, offering the gifts of forgiveness and new life of the Spirit to the whole world. If we are ever tempted to harbor prejudice and limit the scope of our prayers, we need only remember God's pointed words to the apostle Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

## II. The Desired Results of our Prayers: Salvation that comes about as a result of...

### A. A peaceful social environment – "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives"

Paul doesn't explicitly say what we are to pray for, rather he assumes his hearers know the obvious: the salvation of *all* men and women, including the Roman Emperors, whom most Jews viewed as implacable enemies. Rather than stating the obvious result, Paul's focuses on the *means* that achieves this end – something the church had been neglecting in its prayers.

There is an important interrelationship between the church and the state that, when functioning properly, fosters God's rule on earth. The prophets gave Israel a new understanding of how the messianic kingdom of God was going to irrupt on earth. After the exile God's people would no longer possess the "sword" (i.e. political power) to implement God's rule on earth. Instead, God was going to raise up pagan rulers like Cyrus whom God called "my shepherd" (Isa 44:28) and "my anointed" (Isa 45:1), to accomplish his political agenda (Isa 45:13), which will set the stage for the redemption of the world. With this in mind, Jeremiah commands the exiles to give their loyalty to the existing power structures in Babylon, and to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer 29:7).

Though Paul detested the blatant idolatry and vile immorality of the Roman and Greek world, he knew that behind the egomaniacal emperors of his day was God's sovereign hand that had instituted Greek as a common language, imposed peace (the *Pax Romana*) on a war-weary world, and built an excellent system of military roads, making passport-free travel possible over incredibly large distances. This encouraged "trade and the fostering of social intercourse between different nationalities of the Empire, thus forging an increasingly homogeneous civilization in the Mediterranean world."<sup>4</sup> All of these good gifts made world evangelism possible, perhaps more than in any other period in world history.

Therefore Paul commands believers to pray for all who are in authority, that God would grant them wisdom for effective political leadership that would create a peaceful social environment. Paul's desire that Christians are able to live "peaceful and quiet" lives doesn't necessarily imply a trouble free life, but rather a relatively safe environment where citizens are protected from violence, chaos and anarchy. Corrupt government can lead to social unrest and violence. At such times it is virtually impossible for Christians to openly confess their faith and demonstrate godly character since they often have to go into hiding. Paul did not need to remind the congregation of that critical moment in its history when the whole city could have been taken over by a riot had it not been for a courageous city clerk, who bravely stepped into the midst of the angry mob and with wise words quelled the emotions of the outraged silversmiths (Acts 19:35-41).

### B. A public display of Godly character – "in all godliness and holiness"

When good government establishes a well-ordered social environment and protects the rights of its citizens, Christians have the freedom to live out their faith in practical ways that are observable to the world. Paul sums up Christian character in two words, "godliness" and "holiness." Taken together they reflect a moral earnestness, dignity and respectability that arise out of a devout faith. Without this vital human link evangelism is severely hindered and ineffective. Praying for the salvation of others is vain if we fail to realize that the development of our own character is critical to the process. Often today when churches come together to pray for our nation I sense this "link" is forgotten. As Christians we are outraged at the moral condition of our world, and rightly so, yet when we pray for political and social change, we neglect to repent of our isolation from the world, coupled with our failure to lead exemplary lives before the world. But when Christians are intentionally and actively engaged in the world, and demonstrate a dignity of character that is well above the ordinary, the world recognizes that the source of their life must be supernatural.

The strength of Paul's conviction came from his own conversion. Before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road he was a man of authority, breathing threats and insults against the church. Yet what brought Saul to Christ was not a Christian political lobby in Jerusalem coercing him to change the edict against the Christians. No, it was observing the life of Stephen, the martyr. As Stephen gave his final sermon and prayer of intercession just before his death, his face looked like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15). Luke describes Stephen's response as he was being pelted with stones:

**But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' ... While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:55-56; 59-60)**

Stephen's exemplary life and devout prayer broke the heart of the arrogant tyrant. As priests to the world we are to pray for the salvation of all men, knowing that the means of their salvation will be the public demonstration of godly and devout living that defies human explanation. And we must not neglect the giving of thanks for the freedoms we have, for it takes good government to protect the rights of its citizens so that they may speak openly about their faith and demonstrate that faith publicly with sacrificial character. John Stott sums up the distinct roles of the church and the state:

It is the duty of the church to pray for the state, so that its leaders may administer justice and pursue peace, and to add to its intercession thanksgiving, especially for the blessing of good government as a gift of God's common grace. Thus church and state have reciprocal duties, the church to pray for the state (and be its conscience), the state to protect the church (so that it may be free to perform its duties). Each should acknowledge that the other also has a divine origin and purpose.<sup>5</sup>

## III. Being Personally Involved In the Answers to our Prayers

### A. Personal involvement with government leaders

One of the difficulties we have in interceding for leaders in government is that we feel removed and distant from them. The thing that gave Paul added impetus to pray for those in authority was the fact that God told him he was going to be personally involved in witnessing to kings. As the Lord said to Ananias, "This man is my chosen instrument

to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their *kings* and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Throughout Paul’s journeys there was hardly a city or port of call where he did not have opportunity to give witness to the gospel before those in authority. In Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul, believed after Paul witnessed to him. In Corinth, Crispus and Sosthenes, the leaders of the synagogue, came to Christ in the midst of great persecution. In Jerusalem, Paul spoke with Ananias, the high priest. In Caesarea, he addressed Felix, the Roman Governor, and eventually in Rome, he spoke before Nero.

If we believe that God is going to use us or others whom we know in the process of witnessing to those in authority, then prayer takes on a whole new dimension. I’ll never forget how surprised I was on a flight out of Albania to discover that the prime minister of that country was boarding the plane. He was seated just a few feet from where we were seated. Shortly after takeoff, his chief of staff, who was seated directly in front of us, attempted to purchase a tomato juice from the stewardess, but she couldn’t make change from his 50 Euro note. Frustrated by the encounter, he gave up on and tried to sleep. When the stewardess came to our aisle, my friend Ken was not about to miss the opportunity. He purchased two cans of tomato juice and instructed the stewardess to deliver them to the prime minister’s chief of staff. After he received the juice, the man turned around and with a big smile said, “Who are you guys?” That began a conversation that lasted all the way to Vienna.

Closer to home, several of us became friends with the former mayor of Cupertino, who made it a practice to have breakfast meetings at my favorite restaurant. She would often meet there with city officials or law enforcement officers and wouldn’t hesitate to ask us to pray for her, which we gladly did. We should also remember that in our own congregation, several members work in law enforcement and the judicial system. Because of their willingness and courage to confront evil, our streets and neighborhoods are safe and secure. Others among us travel to international centers of commerce to meet with government leaders of different nations. We should give thanks for these brothers and sisters and pray for their witness to those “in authority.”

#### B. Broadening the scope of “those in authority”

There is still another dimension to our priestly role of intercession that we should consider in our modern world. If we extend the definition of “those in authority” beyond the political world to the business arena, the iron might strike a little closer to home. In our global economy it may not be too much to say that businesses exert as much if not more influence on economic and social environments than local, state and national governments. Though we think we live in a free market economy, capitalism can be just as oppressive as communism. Competing in today’s global markets can be so difficult that many companies are forced to turn to cheap labor overseas, yet they may be blind to the oppressive labor practices they are perpetuating. As big businesses bring in huge profits for their stockholders and upper management, there is an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, which poses a serious threat to world peace. Who is praying for and giving witness to these leaders who set economic policies that impact emerging nations?

If we take our priestly role seriously, we ought to include the CEO’s and upper management of our high tech companies in our intercessory prayers. May God grant them wisdom to create equitable working environments so that believers, who work in oppressive environments at home or deplorable conditions abroad, be given greater freedom to demonstrate their godliness and dignity of character. And perhaps, like Paul, God will use you in your company to be an advocate for the poor, bearing witness of the gospel to those in authority.

## IV. Our Confidence In Intercessory Prayer (1 Tim 2:3-7)

This raises the question: If we are called to pray for the whole world, how can we be confident that God will answer our prayers? Lack of motivation is perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome in cultivating a consistent life of prayer. Paul knows that our motivation to pray is based on our understanding of who God is and what he is doing in the age in which we live. If we have a distorted view of God’s character, or are ignorant of his divine purposes, we’ll get it all wrong and be disappointed. Therefore to strengthen the believers’ confidence to pray, Paul gives the theological basis for his command to the church to intercede for the nations.

**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 human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the 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 true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles. (2:3-7)**

Praying for the salvation of others is good, first of all, because it accords with God’s will, who by his very nature is “one,” and therefore all must have access to his salvation, both Jews and Gentiles. As Ezekiel proclaimed, God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23). It has always been in his elective purposes to bless the nations through Abraham’s seed. Therefore to pray for the salvation of all people is “good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.” Towner observes that Paul’s language reflects the Old Testament description of “acceptable” sacrifices to God (Lev 1:3; 19:5; 22:21; 22:27; 27:9, 11):

The effect of placing the activity of prayer into this OT legal and cultic framework is to underline its intrinsic importance to God and to his people by comparing it with the role of sacrifice in the old system. Prayer has replaced sacrifice for the messianic people of God...It is not simply an optional church practice that pleases God, but a practice as integral to the church’s life with God as was sacrifice in the time before Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that God is desirous that all be saved and “come to a knowledge of the truth” reflects a careful, reasoned presentation of the gospel, combined with the ethical implications that it produces. Once again, this assumes that Christians are engaging the world and sharing the gospel in thoughtful and effective ways, so that commitments to Christ are not shallow decisions based on emotion, but rather are rational, thoughtful, and well grounded in the truth. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, “we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2).

Our motivation to pray on behalf of the world is founded, firstly, in the character and will of our *one* God. Secondly, it is based on the work of God’s redemption, which he has accomplished in the person of Christ. It is not enough to know that God is *willing* to save those for whom we pray, we must also be convinced that he is *able* to save them. Therefore Paul outlines three provisions that have made salvation for all people possible.

The first is God’s gift of *one* mediator for *all* men: “the man, Christ Jesus.” The second is the sufficiency of the *one* atoning sacrifice that was adequate to save *all* men. Both provisions stress the humanity of Christ in the work of salvation. The first makes Christ our representative, as he fully shared in our humanity; the second makes Christ our unique substitute, as one “who gave himself as a ransom for all people.” Jesus’

voluntary act of self-sacrifice pays our ransom and secures our release from bondage to sin. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he publicly demonstrated that he was satisfied that the ransom payment for sins had been made in full (Rom 4:25). John writes, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Though not everyone will respond in faith, we can still confidently intercede “for all people,” because of what Christ has done “for all people.”

There is still one more provision necessary to complete the process of reconciliation. Once the sufficient sacrifice had been made, preachers were needed to announce the good news to the world. God does not want a monopoly on this life-saving process. Therefore Paul says, “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” (2:7). The fact that Paul uses three nouns to describe his office, and insists that “I am telling the truth, I am not lying,” stresses not only the divine authority of the gospel he preaches but also the divine scope of his mission. While many of the Jews in the early church were content to focus on their community of faith in Jerusalem, Paul and his compatriots saw nothing short of the world as the horizon of their concerns. Even after a full life of planting churches in Asia Minor and Macedonia, the apostle is still making plans to make Rome his new base of operations, so that he could venture to the furthest reaches of the world, such as Spain (Rom 15:24). And wherever he goes, he knows that the sovereign God has already been at work to prepare a stage for the gospel to be heard, for as Isaiah predicted, “In his teaching the islands will put their hope” (Isa 42:4).

## V. The Concluding Mandate to Pray (1 Tim 2:8)

**Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. (2:8)**

### A. The call for the men in Ephesus to repent

Having strengthened the confidence of the church to pray by grounding them in theological bedrock, Paul concludes his argument where he began, with the mandate to pray. This second command not only strengthens the first by its repetition, but also adds a note of repentance, specifically aimed at the men. The term for “men” (*andras*) is not the generic term for mankind (*anthropos*), but the more specific term for a male in contrast to a female. Paul’s directive to the men is not meant to exclude women from public prayer (1 Cor 11:5) but is designed to rebuke the *male leaders* who were responsible for curtailing its practice. Their myopic vision and insular thinking brought God’s worldwide mission to a halt in Ephesus. Instead of getting caught up in theological controversy that quickens pride and ruins souls, they are to repent and reach out in love with pure and humble hearts love to a lost world.

### B. A call to repentance for us

And so Paul’s passionate mandate echoes across the centuries. Do we too need to repent? Who do we pray for? Is it merely our family members and close friends, or do we see the world as our horizon? Are we willing to travel outside our comfort zones and venture into new worlds for the sake of the gospel? Do we view our work as our mission or simply where we secure a paycheck? Do we view our suffering as something to painfully endure or as a divine stage to demonstrate godliness to the world?

My college mentor and pastor, David Roper, was a supreme example to me of one who kept his focus outward to the lost and trained his disciples to do the same. He always made sure I was thoroughly engaged in the secular spheres where God had placed me. Whether it was an academic classroom situation, living among fraternity brothers or competing on the gymnastics team, David would never allow me to leave until I had shared the love of Christ with those around me. As a pastor, he never pulled me out of my secular world where I was forming natural relationships to engage in some “religious” program. Under his leadership I first learned about the efficacy of intercessory prayer, when I asked God to lead four of my fraternity brothers to Christ during my sophomore year. I have no idea why I picked the number four. Over that year three became Christians. On my final night in the house I was packing to go overseas, when at midnight there was a knock on the door. It was Mike. Apologizing for interrupting me at such a late hour, he said we had never had that “religious” talk he wanted to have with me, but it could wait until I returned next quarter. Fortunately we didn’t wait, and Mike accepted Christ at 2:00 am.

My greatest challenge and difficulties came as an athlete. In my junior year I was so discouraged as a gymnast that I wanted to quit the team. I shared my decision with David, thinking he would approve. But instead he responded, “You can’t quit the team! For who is going to lead those men to Christ if you leave?” His words refocused me and, though my performance in my senior year was abysmal, my friend Bob accepted Christ.

Looking back on those years I feel I could not have had a better mentor. But I must confess, as one of your leaders, I don’t think I have been as faithful to train you as David trained me. I believe we have become too inwardly focused and have lost our global concern. Over the past few years our aim has been to connect you in healthy communities, but we may have forgotten that the goal of spiritual health is to reach out to the lost. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). May God in his grace revive us in our priestly calling to intercede for the world. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> This is the title of Philip Yancey’s latest book, which I found to be an excellent and thorough treatment on the issues we grapple with in prayer. Philip Yancey, *Prayer, Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology, An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 407.

<sup>3</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 176-177.