

How Can I Pray for Them?



Purpose

To help us experience the reconciling power of praying for everyone, even those we do not like

The Scripture for this lesson is 1 Timothy 2.

Listen

1 Timothy 2:1-8

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone,

2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,

4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human,

6 who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time.

7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

8 I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.

Key Verse: First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone.(1 Timothy 2:1)

Look

Paul begins our Bible Lesson by urging that prayers be offered for “everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1). Have you considered what a tall order that is? Dr. Edward Bosworth, professor of New Testament at the Oberlin Theological Seminary, was known for his faithfulness in prayer. A man whose daughter was having some emotional problems wrote to Dr. Bosworth asking him to include “Mary” in his daily prayers. In his reply, Dr. Bosworth expressed his concern for Mary but said it was impossible for him to include her on his prayer list because the list was already full. He went on to say:

I do not think I should have more people on my list than I can attend to thoughtfully and prayerfully in the period of my day that is specifically set aside for that purpose. A man must mean business with all of the prayers of his mind and spirit when he lifts another person in prayer to God. When there is a vacancy on my list, I will include Mary.¹

If that reply strikes us as odd, it may be because we do not approach prayer with the energy and confidence Dr. Bosworth did. Nonetheless, his response to the request also reminds us that seriously praying for “everyone” is a human impossibility. Still, everyone is the word Paul used; and we can learn something meaningful about prayer by considering his urgent counsel.

Live

First Timothy is a letter from Paul to Timothy, sent while the latter was in Ephesus. The general population in Ephesus viewed Christianity, which was then a new religion, with suspicion and hostility. Thus, in our Scripture reading for this lesson, when Paul recommended that prayers “be made for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1), he was certainly including people who were not part of the church. In 2:2, Paul got more specific, stating that Christians should pray for “kings and all who are in high positions”—people who at that point were not Christians.

Some of those leaders may have been openly antagonistic toward the church. Paul, however, was keenly aware that the governmental structure and administration that Rome provided made it possible for Christians much of the time and the Empire’s residents as a whole most of the time to live a “quiet and peaceable life” (1 Timothy 2:2). An actual prayer for rulers that was recorded in the First Letter of Clement, a church document written about ad 96, reads:

Thou, Lord and Master, hast given them the power of sovereignty through Thine excellent and unspeakable might, that we knowing the glory and honour which Thou hast given them may submit ourselves unto them, in nothing resisting Thy will. Grant unto them therefore, O Lord, health, peace, concord, stability, that they may administer the government which Thou hast given them without failure.²

For first-century Christians, praying for rulers meant petitioning God on behalf of

governing authorities who were not sympathetic toward them. In our nation today, the matter of praying for those who govern us may seem less problematic. After all, many of our local, state, and national leaders attend church. We may not agree with their politics or with their personal applications of the faith, but we have good reason to believe that they welcome our prayers and believe in the God to whom we offer them. No matter what office these persons hold, they have responsibilities that have a bearing on the well-being of many. Yet it is easy to forget to pray for those who govern us. In our Bible Lesson, Paul strongly urges, not just suggests, prayers for holders of public office.

When praying for your leaders, what topics on their behalf should you address?

Praying for the Enemy

As we have said, Paul urged prayers for everyone. That raises the question of how to pray for those we do not like or who are our enemies. We could pose an extreme form of the question this way: Should we pray for Osama bin Laden? How about persons intent on destroying the church? We know, of course, what Jesus had to say: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

That would seem to answer the question. Yet there are additional questions that make it difficult to declare the matter settled.

One of these deeper questions is, "How do I deal with the fact that I do not want to pray for my enemies?" As a man I know put it, "How can I pray for bin Laden when I cannot pray for the scumbags in my own community? How can I pray for him when I cannot forgive the guy who cheated me when he resurfaced my driveway?"

There are Christians who have trouble praying for a two-timing spouse, a drug-using child, a shoplifting employee, a selfish neighbor, or the coach of their son's Little League team who never lets their boy play. There are Christian parents who refuse to pray for that trusted person who abused their child. So the deeper question is, "How do I deal with the feelings that enemies engender in me?"

A second, deeper question is, "What should I pray about my enemies?" Given bin Laden's murderous goals, should we pray for his success, health, and long life or that he dies? Should we pray that he gets converted and becomes a Christian? Should we pray that he becomes a good Muslim, since many say Islam is really a religion of peace? Should we pray that regardless of his faith, he abandons all warlike ideas and becomes a peacemaker?

What should we pray about our personal enemies? Should we pray that they come to see things from our point of view? That they become more open and sensitive human beings? That their plans fail? That they be spared the consequences of their actions?

Each question poses additional ones, but we must return to Paul's statement that prayers be made for everyone. Perhaps the best way to find some clarity is to begin our prayers by asking God's Spirit to intercede for us (Romans 8:26-27). As Dr. Bosworth's reply to the man requesting prayer for his daughter reminds us, literally praying for everyone is an impossibility; but Paul's use of that word tells us

that our prayers ought not to be limited to our needs and those of friends and family members. We should pray for those close at hand; but our prayers should have a broader reach, too.

We can ask God to help us know what to pray for those people we do not like. We can ask God to help us see the other person as God does. If we pray those things as we begin, it is likely that God will help us to know how to finish our prayers, too.

In what ways might praying for a personal enemy change you?

Worthy Prayer for Unworthy Persons

Paul used the word everyone twice in First Timothy. The first time, in 2:1, Paul explained for whom prayers should be made. The second time, in 2:4, he stated that God “desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth.” Paul’s first use of the word was focused on persons in high positions; the second use was directed toward all human beings without exception. This is the same “everyone” that Jesus had in mind, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

In other words, God excludes no one from the offer of salvation. Some may exclude themselves by refusing to respond positively to God’s invitation, but God does not turn his back on anyone.

For a time, there was a branch of the Protestant Reformation that argued that God had not extended the invitation to salvation broadly. These reformers argued that it is God, not we, who controls our destinies. Further, since some people are saved and others are not, God must have chosen or “elected” only some people to be saved.

The opposing view, that salvation was offered to all, became known as “Arminianism,” after the man who championed it. John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, was thoroughly persuaded by the Arminian position, which simply went back to the abundant testimony of the New Testament. In addition to John 3:16 and Paul’s comment in 1 Timothy 2:4, consider these examples:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13).

“The Lord is...patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

[Jesus said,] “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37).

God’s salvation is for all. It is not up to us to decide who is—or is not—worthy of God’s grace; it is freely offered to all. Thus, prayer for the salvation of specific “everyones” is always worthy prayer.

Whose prayers have helped you in your Christian journey?

Healing Prayer Focuses on God

In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul summed up his intent in the previous verses by saying, “I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument.” We should not get hung up on Paul limiting this instruction to men. He was speaking of the public worship practices of his time, which were generally the responsibility of men, and also of the general societal conventions, in

which married women were subject to their husbands. Given that outsiders were already viewing Christianity with suspicion, Paul likely thought it important that the conventional practice not be challenged, as that would only further alienate outsiders. Today, following current thinking, Paul would no doubt have addressed his instruction to men and women alike.

“Lifting up holy hands” was probably a posture carryover from Jewish practices that provided a physical sense that those praying were connecting with One outside themselves. Feeling connected to God was important for what Paul said next, that prayer should be “without anger or argument.” Prayer that is focused on God is far less likely to be a reprimand of another person.

Several years ago, I witnessed an example of a prayer who forgot that. It was in a worship service in which the pastor had worked with the youth group to present a gospel musical, accompanied by a jazz band, in place of the sermon. The teens were enthused. It was the practice in the congregation for a layperson to offer the opening prayer; but this particular Sunday, the man who had been scheduled to pray was not happy that the worship service would not follow the traditional pattern. When he stood to “pray,” his scolding remarks were obviously directed toward the pastor; for he concluded, “And Lord, help us to remember what church is for!” He then stomped out of the service. It was hardly prayer “without anger or argument.”

Paul’s advice about praying in the right spirit reminds us that the purpose of prayer is not to separate us from each other but to reconcile us with God and with each other. Prayer offered without anger or argument is prayer that is open to God’s leading. Humbly praying for everyone, including those we do not like, makes reconciliation possible; for it is difficult to hate those for whom we pray.

A boy angrily complained to his grandfather about a schoolmate. The grandfather said, “I too, at times, have felt great hate. But hate wears you down; it does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings. It is as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all and does not take offense when no offense is intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the other wolf fights everyone because his anger and hate are so great. It is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate me.” The boy asked, “Which one wins?” The grandfather said, “The one I feed.”

Praying for others does not mean excusing them for wrongdoing, nor does it mean we should not defend ourselves when necessary. It does mean that we try to see them as God sees them, and that helps us to feed the right wolf.

When have you experienced reconciliation through prayer?

O God, help us to know how to deal with our feelings when praying for those we do not like. Thank you that the invitation to salvation is for everyone. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 From *With Head and Heart*, by Howard Thurman (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979); page 70.

2 From 1 Clement 61, English translation of 1 Clement, by J.B. Lightfoot; <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/lightfoot/pt1vol2/translation1.html>