

1 Timothy 2:1-7 “Pray for Who?!”

Okay. You can probably tell from the sermon title, the picture on the monitors and the first verse that Jerry read where I’m heading this morning. And if you’ve been paying attention to what I’ve been preaching, you’ll also notice that I’ve been focusing on how important the “all” in our “all means all” is. Then last week, I talked about how we need to quit talking about *those people* and start talking about *we people* and refrain from “othering.” So if you *have* taken note of this, you’re probably a little curious about where I’m going to take things from here. We are a diverse congregation in many ways, so I imagine there are as many folks here today who are thinking, “Yes ... do it ... preach it!” as there are thinking, “No ... please ... you can’t say it ... you’ll ruin my day!” But here’s the thing. I *don’t* have to say it. The scripture says it. Ready to hear it again? Because I’m going to read it again in case it slipped by when Jerry read it. Verse one and two - “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *everyone*, for kings and *all* who are in high positions.”

Oh dear. Is Jesse going to get all ... *political* on us this morning? Which I think is funny ... because honestly the whole Bible is political. You can practically flip to any page in the Bible and there’s a 75% chance that what’s on the page is political. The heart of God’s message to the whole created order is, “Get ready for the Reign of God, because the Kingdoms of Earth are all corrupt and unjust.” The Old Testament prophets said it. Jesus said it. Paul said it. It’s woven into the creation story. It’s in the story of the patriarchs. It’s in the story of Israel becoming a nation. It’s everywhere. Everywhere you look in the Bible, in some way, shape, or form the message is political. “Look out y’all, the Kingdom of God is at hand.” But as Jerry, Barbara and I were discussing on Thursday morning, there’s a difference between “being political” and being partisan. That’s where things get sticky. Being political when you look at it from a Biblical perspective means, “All human-made attempts to rule over others is at some level corrupt and

inferior when compared to the mercy and justice that is at the heart of God's reign."

Being partisan is where we can get in trouble. And here we are, in yet another awkward season in our nation's history where divisive partisanship has reared its ugly head again, leaving us with three questions – 1.) "How should we, as followers of Jesus, relate to, or even think about, our nation's leaders?" 2.) "How should our commitment to the ways of Jesus affect the way we vote?" 3.) "Why can't we all just get along?" And again, here's Paul in verses 1 – 4 of our text for today saying, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." In other words, "Pray for your leaders, whether you like them or not."

Here's where I want to put things in perspective though. Remember that any time we read the Bible, we're reading a collection of books that were written between two and four thousand years ago. We understand the words that are on the page, because those words have been translated from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into modern English. What we don't always get is the cultural gap. We have a tough enough time here in the 21st century trying to understand cultures outside of our own. We read about Middle Eastern cultures, Far Eastern cultures, tribal cultures, Latin American, African, Scandinavian. We can barely get our heads wrapped around Canadians and most people in the world can't tell the difference between us and them. Never underestimate the impact of culture gap when it comes to understanding the Bible. Now this may be the place where you might be thinking, "He's doing it ... he's about ready to come up with some lame excuse why we *shouldn't* pray for our leaders and then blame it on 'culture gap.'" Nope. I stand by Paul's words. "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *everyone*, for kings and *all* who are in high positions." Pray

for your leaders. No matter who they are. All means all. Everyone means everyone. Pray for them with supplications, intercession and thanksgiving. You do not get a bye on that one. You don't get to say, "I'm not praying for *that person*" (whoever *that person* may be.)

Is that a tough thing to do sometimes? Of course it is! Especially if we disagree with the policies our leaders support. It's even tougher when we don't like their leadership style. It's exceedingly difficult when we believe that a leader's moral character is antithetical to God's principles. We say, "What if the person is just plain evil? If I lived in a country somewhere in the world under a dictator who throws human rights out the window and nerve-gasses his own citizens ... would I have to pray for *that person*?" Ah ... now we're getting somewhere. Good question. God stands against evil, so wouldn't it stand to reason that if that was the case, we wouldn't be required to pray for blatantly evil rulers?" Here's where it's good to understand the context when we're studying scripture. Think about the main reasons why we resist praying for our leaders today: They lobby for or support policies that clash with my values. They fund programs and institutions that I don't agree with. They lack the personality or characteristics that I believe one needs in order to lead a nation. Or maybe it's something as simple as, "I think the person is an arrogant jerk." Okay. I'm not here to delegitimize any of those feelings you may have. But is it a reason to not pray for someone? Here's where a little history lesson can help us get our heads wrapped around what Paul was trying to say to Timothy and why it was *way* more radical than me standing up here and saying, "Make sure you remember to pray for Donald Trump *and* Nancy Pelosi."

Let's take this passage past, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *everyone*, for kings and *all* who are in high positions." Why? Why are we supposed to do this? Last part of verse two – "So that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." Okay, we might read this today and think, "Yeah, that makes sense. If we pray for our leaders ... *all* of our leaders no matter what party they belong to, we can live a more quiet and

peaceful life.” We’ll minimize the chances of there being partisan squabbling in our churches and at our family dinner tables because we’ll all be committed to praying for *all* our leaders! Yeah! That’s it! If it were only that simple. But it goes a lot deeper than that. Let’s think about when this letter was written. Depending on which Bible scholar you’re reading, this letter was written no earlier than 60 CE if you’re sure Paul wrote it, and no later than 160 CE if you’re even a little iffy about whether Paul wrote it. Either way, what’s important is how Christians were perceived during this time. It’s even more important to understand how the *rulers of the land* perceived them. During that time and place in history, you had religious leaders and political leaders. You had the house of Herod and you had the house of Caesar. “Christians” were what folks called the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They were the ones who believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God and bore the title “Lord and Savior,” which I might add was a title reserved only for whoever sat in the Roman Emperor’s seat. The Christians were the ones who carried out Jesus’ mission and ministry. How did things go for Jesus as far as his relationship with the religious and political leaders of the day? Not well at all! In fact, he was such a threat to them that they put aside their considerable differences and conspired to kill him. And they succeeded. What they did not take into consideration was Jesus’ resurrection and the impact that had on the Jesus movement. Instead of eliminating the Jesus movement, his death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the remaining disciples in Jerusalem made that movement stronger than ever!

If Jesus and a relatively small group of his followers were such a big threat to the Roman government and the corrupt religious leaders of the day, can you imagine how much of a threat a group of Jesus’ followers who “the Lord daily added to their number those who were being saved” must have been? (Acts 2:46-47) How do you suppose those early Christians who Paul wrote to were treated? A whole lot worse than those of us in the church of today are, that’s for sure. We get all bent out of shape and think we’re being persecuted when some of our elected officials who are just looking out for citizens who may not be Christian

say, “Maybe we shouldn’t be forcing a particular religious practice on kids in our public schools by praying to God in the way that only a percentage of Christians pray to God!” “Oh! Look what they’re doing! They’re taking prayer out of schools!” No they’re not! I’ll guarantee you that in every public, private, or charter school in this nation, mere minutes before an AP Calculus test there are multitudes of prayers for mercy and grace being lifted up. Prayer is alive and well in our schools! *Nobody* has “taken prayer away.” (You went and did it anyway preacher ... you got political! Mea Culpa. You got me.)

Christians living in the Roman Empire during the first two centuries were persecuted to the point of imprisonment and even death. That’s what persecution looked like for them. Nobody was boycotting Target because they were wishing all people of all faiths, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” To follow Christ was to put your life on the line. Proclaiming your allegiance to God’s Kingdom rather than Caesar’s Kingdom could get you arrested and killed. It was dangerous and potentially lethal to be a Christian. And yet. And yet Paul wrote to Timothy: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for *everyone*, for kings and *all* who are in high positions,” (Yes, even the ones who are actively trying to eliminate you by whatever means necessary!) Why? “So that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” Maybe by lifting those leaders up in prayer, they may one day ... what ... quit persecuting us? Leave us alone maybe? Let us live peacefully? Why should we pray for people who want to kill us? Paul writes, “Because this is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Everyone? *Everyone*. Even *those* politicians ... *those* rulers. They are created in the image of God as we all are. May our prayers be with them during these times of trouble and turmoil.