

“Praying for Everyone”

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¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. ³This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, ⁶who gave himself a ransom for all-this was attested at the right time. ⁷For 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. (1 Timothy 2:1-7)

The first letter to Timothy sometimes comes across more like an instruction manual than a source of spiritual inspiration. As one pastor has observed, it reads more like the advice of a plumber than the musings of a poet.¹ A nicer way to say it is that much of this letter is practical – kind of like a “how to” book for young Christians. “I am giving you these instructions,” the letter says, “... so that by following them you may fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience.”² Not a bad goal. A “self-help” book can indeed be very... helpful.

This does not mean, however, that helping ourselves will be easy, and we need look no further than the first line of today’s reading to see that. “*First of all,*” the letter states, “*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone.*” Prayer is always a good answer, but really... for everyone?

Admittedly, it is a logical first step given that Jesus set the bar pretty high in the Sermon on the Mount. “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’*” Jesus preached. “*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*”³

If the mountain we must climb is loving our enemies, it makes sense to start by praying for them. But even that lower bar can seem daunting to reach. An old English commentary from the late 19th century mused that, when Timothy first read this advice that he needed to pray for everybody, he may have had an interesting walk home. He “probably walked along the marble colonnade of the great temple of Artemis,” the commentator wrote, “or heard the hum of some twenty thousand Asiatic Greeks crowded in the vast theatre to witness the gladiatorial fight, or encountered a procession of [Bacchus worshipers]... and saw the averted looks, and felt the bitter hatred of some old friends.”⁴ Back in the day, Timothy would have been surrounded by opponents, detractors, and people who were just out to get him... and he was supposed to pray for *them*?

¹ Matthews, William P. “Homiletical Perspective” on 1 Timothy 2:1-7, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2009), p. 87.

² 1 Timothy 1:18-19.

³ Matthew 5:43-45.

⁴ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/1_timothy/2.htm



When we hear this advice today, what kind of walk do we take through our own consciousness? Who are the people in our own orbit who are difficult to pray for, let alone love? We think about the latest Russian attacks on Ukraine... we hear about politicians using busloads of people as political pawns... we turn the corner in the grocery store and run square into that person who did that hateful thing to us that time.

Back when I was a seminary intern, I was an adult advisor for the youth group's trip to Montreat in the North Carolina mountains. The Montreat Youth Conference is an amazing event that brings big groups of high school youth together for a week of fun and faith formation. I am thrilled that Anna Grace is planning to take some of our youth to experience this event next summer. I was excited to be going there back in the summer of 2007, but one evening at that conference was not at all easy.

The full group of 1,000 people had gathered in the big auditorium for the evening worship service. The sermon topic that night was God's grace. God's grace is deep and wide, and that is a good message to preach. In fact, you could say that there is no one beyond the reach of that grace – no one whom God does not love -- which is also a good message to preach. That night, the preachers wanted to make those very points in a memorable way. So, when they told the crowd, "There is no one beyond the scope of God's grace... there is no one that God does not love," they began to flash up pictures of people who we might believe are beyond the reach of God's love, and the last picture in the series was of Seung-Hui Cho, the graduate student who, just three months before, had killed 32 people and wounded 17 others in a mass shooting rampage on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. It was one of the chilling photos he had circulated to the media the morning of the massacre – menacing photos of him wielding the weapons that he would use to murder innocent and unsuspecting people that very day.

The theological point was a valid one, but in the crowd that night there happened to be a group from a church in Blacksburg, Virginia. For them, the violence had literally hit very close to home. And for them, it was just too much, too soon. From where I was sitting, I could hear the gasps that rose up from their corner of the auditorium when that picture flashed up on the screen. So, I was not surprised when a few of them got up and walked out. Yes, this letter to Timothy says that everyone in that auditorium needed to be ready to pray for everyone, but for those people, on that night, the idea that they would pray for Seung-Hui Cho was just too high a mountain to climb.

And yet, that is the mountain we are called to climb. As Saint Augustine once wrote, God "loves each individual as if there were no one else in all the world to love, and he loves all as he loves each."⁵ That kind of love often seems out of reach for us, but we are still called to walk in that direction. And to get there, the best place to start is by pushing ourselves to pray for everyone – even people who are difficult to pray for.

And then the letter mentions a particular class of people who deserve prayer -- people in high places. Prayers and petitions are particularly needed for "kings and all who are in high positions." Once again, the letter is imminently practical with its advice. Pray for the people who keep order, the letter says. Pray for the people who keep things calm... pray for the people who keep things running smoothly... because when we live in a world which is

⁵ John R. Claypool, "Theological Themes II - Timothy 2:1-7" <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=2973>

ordered, calm, and running smoothly, it makes it much easier for us to concentrate on climbing this high, daunting mountain of love that Jesus wants us to ascend.

Sometimes that task seems pretty easy. This past few weeks we have seen an entire nation turn readily to prayer for Queen Elizabeth the Second, who died on September 8th. In the cathedral of St. Giles, the High Kirk of Edinburgh, the Reverend Calum MacLeod, gave voice to a grieving nation:

"We gather at this time a sorrowing nation, yet remembering with gratitude the long life and reign of your servant Elizabeth, our Queen, and for the many gifts and graces with which you endowed her, for her faithfulness to the trust committed to her, and for all the benefits which through her you have conferred upon this people. High King of heaven, help us, by the faith in which she lived and died, to cherish those virtues which were dear to her heart and mind, and bring us with her when our days on earth are ended into your heavenly presence and glory."⁶

Later, Royal Chaplain David Fergusson offered these prayerful words:

"Almighty and everlasting God, before whom the generations rise and fall away, With all across our nation and throughout the world We lift up our hearts in gratitude today for the life of our Queen. For her long reign, Her delight in people, Her commitment to crown and country, To church and faith, We give you thanks. Today especially we recall gratefully her love of Scotland, Our land and our people, And praise you for all you accomplished in her life."⁷

It certainly wasn't the first time Scots and Brits had prayed for their queen, but it wasn't always that easy. At times, the Queen was a controversial figure amid the complex realities of Great Britain. She was not cherished and admired by everyone. In the 1970's, for example, punk rockers aimed some of their most visceral critiques at her, mocking her with lyrics like "God save the queen, The fascist regime... God save the queen, She's not a human being." In death, those disagreements are being largely forgotten, and the emotions we are seeing from the British people are legitimately grateful and warm.

But it is a bit harder to pray for leaders when they are alive, especially when they are leading in ways we find distasteful or harmful. In our own country, back during the Revolutionary War, the Reverend Charles Chauncey was the minister of First Congregational Church in Boston. On the day that English troops took over the city, he had been the pastor of that church for fifty (50) years. Even though he was a vocal supporter of the revolutionary cause, Chauncey was not going anywhere. He refused to abandon his pulpit or his people. When British troops came to his church to inform him that he would be holding a worship service to pray for King George, the king of England, Chauncey took this verse from 1st Timothy to heart. If we are called to pray for everyone, he thought, then I guess it is true that we should pray for King George. He opened the service with this

⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/royal-family/2022/09/12/full-order-service-todays-thanksgiving-service-queen-elizabeth/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMal0BBkxU>

⁷ <https://tko.radio/royal-chaplain-speaks-of-deep-sadness-after-queens-remarkable-life/>

prayer: "O Lord, we pray for thy servant King George. Grant unto him wisdom, for Thou knowest, O Lord, he needs it!"⁸

Or consider the Beechers, prominent pastors in the 1800s. Reverend Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, once prayed, "O Lord, grant that we may not despise our rulers; and grant, O Lord, that they may not act so we cannot help it."

His son, Henry Ward Beecher, followed in his father's footsteps, emulating his practice of giving leaders our prayers even when we don't give them our votes. He was a great opponent of the administration of James Buchanan, the immediate predecessor of Abraham Lincoln. The preacher was a staunch abolitionist, and Buchanan was a political enemy on that front. Those days leading up to the Civil War were incredibly divisive, but even then Henry Ward Beecher prayed for the President. "We pray for this administration," he once said, "that is imbecile in everything but corruption."⁹

I doubt this is exactly the kind of prayer that the writer of the first letter to Timothy had in mind, but it is a start. If you have ever seen the movie *The Help*, you know that it is a story of brave black women standing up to tell their stories of racism, prejudice, and abuse in the Jim Crow South. They shared their truths at great personal risk, and the main character ultimately pays the price for her boldness. Falsely accused of stealing silver from the family for which she cleaned, cooked, and cared, Aibileen is fired and forced to leave the only livelihood she has ever known. The movie ends with her walking sadly away from the house. The pained cries of the little girl she had cared for and loved can be heard as Aibileen's voiceover ends the movie. "God says we need to love our enemies. It's hard to do. But it can start by telling the truth."¹⁰

It can also start with prayer – truthful, heartfelt, and hopeful prayer not just for the people who are easy for us to love, but for those who are much harder to love. Death, they say, is a great equalizer. But faith is too, because all us of stand before the Lord -- and really, stand before each other -- on the same footing: Democrats and Republicans; queens and peasants; punk rockers and Scottish clergymen.

So, as we too try to fight the good fight, keep our consciences clear, and hold fast to our faith, may we too offer our supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for **everyone**, so that we too may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity, for the sake of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. **Amen.**

⁸ Adams, Doug. "The Lesson and the Arts I - 1 Timothy 2:1-7" citing his own work, *Humor In The American Pulpit From George Whitefield Through Henry Ward Beecher* (Austin: The Sharing Company, 1975), at <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=11789>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "The Help – Ending Sequence with Walkout," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rUnvW8fuoQ>