

I Timothy 2:1-8 *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— 2for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, 6who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. 7And 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. 8Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

This past week I finished listening to a leadership book entitled, *Extreme Ownership*, written by 2 former Navy Seals. The Seals you know are the elite forces of the Navy. They are highly focused, mission oriented, tough individuals who take the fight directly to the enemy and put themselves in great risk and danger to carry out their task. Among the many different leadership points which they took from their days in the Seals and apply to leadership in general is to remain focused on the mission at all times. When you are on a small fire team or your platoon is out in enemy territory with a possible insurgent around every corner and a possible IED buried under every place you set your feet, you don't have the luxury of letting your mind wander or losing focus. But your life and those of all your team members depend on keeping your mind totally focused on the mission. You have to be focused 100% on the mission and your task every second. It is literally a life and death matter.

We might not feel that our spiritual situation is quite this dire—i.e. life and death every second—but it is. The devil is a wily, crafty foe. He seeks any advantage he can get and looks for any crack he can find to exploit and pull you away from your Savior. It is a matter of our eternal life and death that we as God's people are 100% focused on our mission every minute of every day in every aspect of our life. Specifically today, our lessons apply this encouragement to our possessions and our prayer life. This may seem like an odd combination at first: the proper use of our possessions and what the content of our prayers are. Yet, if you step back and think about it, it does make some sense. We typically pray for what is foremost on our minds. Think about the content of your prayers. What do you pray for? Do you pray more for things or for people? Do you pray more for wants or needs? Do you pray more for others or yourself? It's easy to pray for luxury or success. It's tempting to pray for wealth and security. It's so easy to get wrapped in ourselves, even, perhaps especially, in our prayers. The thinking of the world that "It's all about me" can all too easily take over our prayer lives as well. Too often, it doesn't even cross our minds to pray unless all else fails. Prayer becomes simply a last resort tool to try and make things work out for us the way that we want or hope them too. Why is this content of our prayers? Because that is where our focus is. As Paul talks about our worship life together in this section of I Timothy chapter 2, he encourages a different focus on our prayer life—the spiritual welfare of others and the salvation of their souls. He wants us to have **Mission Focused Prayer**—a prayer life that is focused on the mission which God has given to us.

If we had to develop a simple definition of prayer, we would say: Prayer is talking with God. Prayer is the great privilege God's people have of approaching his throne of grace and bringing our praise and thanksgiving before him as well as our needs and concerns. Prayer worships God by recognizing him as the giver of all gifts, the Great Physician, and the one who rules on heaven's throne with all power and authority over all things for the good of his people. So if we have the great privilege to speak directly to God through prayer and bring our requests before him, we would want those requests to fall in line with those things which God wants. What does God want? That's easy. It's the center of this text and the main focus of Paul's encouragement: God "*wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*" God's mission first and foremost is the salvation of souls. This has been God's focus right from the very beginning when he promised to send a Savior into the world who would crush the devil's head and rescue his people. The entire Bible centers around this mission: the OT focusing people's attention on the Savior who would come for their salvation and the NT proclaiming how Jesus came as promised to win salvation and will come again to take his people into eternal life. The focus of God's work among his people has always been the salvation of souls.

God's mission is our mission. This is why we are here on this earth. This is why God brings us into contact with people each and every day. This is why God brings us together into congregations and church bodies—to be about the work he gave to us before he left this earth to go back into heaven: "*Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*" This is what our lives and our work are to be focused on. Rather than chasing after the gathering of earthly things and the seeking of earthly goals, we as God's people above all things are to be mission focused on the work of making disciples. Remembering that God's mission is the salvation of souls and therefore our mission is to proclaim God's salvation for the salvation of souls, we want to keep first and foremost in our prayer life the people who will hear the message that we share. We want our prayers not to be selfishly focused on our wants and desires but rather mission focused on those who will hear the message of God we share. When our minds are focused on the mission...our prayers will be too.

Who are those people? Paul leaves it wide open. God wants "all people" to be saved. Therefore, he wants us to pray for everyone who will hear his word. That includes those members in our congregation who are sick and suffering. It includes those who have suffered through difficult situations or deaths in their family. He wants us to pray for newborn infants who will grow in their faith and teenagers and young people are learning to make their faith their own. He wants us to pray for newly-wed couples who are just beginning their lives of service to God together and those who have been together for 50 or 60 years and now are heavily leaning on each other just to make it. He wants us to pray for our church leaders and our pastors and

teachers who share God's Word with us and our children to give them strength, zeal and wisdom in their work. We could split hairs over the meaning of the different words Paul uses for "*petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving*", but the focus is more on the fact that whatever type of prayer or request or thanksgiving you bring, it should for all people that no matter what they are facing, God work through his Word to focus their hearts on the salvation that has been given to them in Jesus to give them peace, hope and strength regardless of what they are facing.

But these prayers are not to be limited to the people of our congregation. They are to be made for all people. This means our prayers are to reach far beyond our own congregation. We are to pray for our missionaries at home and abroad who are spreading Jesus' name in places you and I cannot go. We are to pray for those brothers and sisters who are facing congregational challenges or localized persecution. We are to pray for the starving in Ethiopia and India, for those affected by the hurricanes in the Caribbean and those who face hardship around the world. Even more, we are to pray for the billions of people around the world who are without Christ and without God and without the hope that you and I know in Christ our Savior. We are to ask God to send people who will share his love with them. We are to ask God to send the Holy Spirit to work through His Word to pull back the veil of unbelief and allow them to see the salvation in Jesus. We are to ask God how we might help to meet those needs whether through travel ourselves or through offerings or letters of love and support. The great thing about prayer is that this is something anyone can do. You don't have to be rich or educated. You don't have to be young or able to travel. Every one of you can sit down in the quiet of your room at home or office at work and bow your heads in prayer that God use his word to comfort and encourage someone or work faith in their heart.

Paul even goes so far as to remind us to pray for our government leaders—regardless of what party they are connected with. This becomes even more clear when you understand the ruler of that time was the Emperor Nero. Nero was the emperor who accused the Christians of starting a fire that burned down much of Rome. He is the one who hung Christians on poles, doused them with oil and then lit them on fire as he gleefully proclaimed, "See what wonderful torches my Christians make?" Whether he actually said that or not, we are not certain. We do know that he unleashed a terrible persecution on Christians. Why would God ask us to pray for our leaders, even leaders like these? He wants us to pray for them to carry out their work so that we can live quiet and peaceful lives and carry out the work God has given us. Pray that our leaders will bow their knees and their hearts before God, seeking His wisdom and his will in all decisions. If nothing else, pray that God influence these leaders to allow us to go about our work of proclaiming his gospel without hinderance or problem.

Why is this so important? Not only does God want all people to be saved, but Paul reminds us that there is only one way for this to happen. There is only one mediator between God and man and that is Jesus. He mediated for us by giving his life as a ransom for our sins on the cross of Calvary. God wants all people to come to the knowledge of this truth. Because of sin, we need a mediator. Sin has separated us and all of humanity from the one, true, only God. This separation formed a chasm that none of us could cross on our own. We needed someone who could mediate on our behalf. Jesus did that by giving his life as a ransom for us. A ransom is a payment made to free someone or redeem someone from slavery. Our enslavement to sin carried with it the penalty of death. Inherent in a ransom is the idea of a purchase or giving something in exchange. The price which Christ paid to ransom us from our sin was his precious blood which he shed on the cross. When he gave his life as a precious ransom for sin, that was not just for the sin of a few men or women or the chosen few. He gave himself for all. All includes every man, woman or child who lives now, who has lived or who will live. All human beings are encompassed by the love of Christ. All does not simply indicate a faceless sea of humanity, but includes every single person you know: your spouse and children, your family and friends, whomever you meet, do business with, work with, visit with, enjoy being with. Christ is their ransom. They need our prayers!

Maybe as you evaluate your prayer life, you are coming face to face with the reality that you haven't always been that mission focused with your prayers. Perhaps if you're honest with yourself, you recognize that your prayers have been pretty selfish and focused way more on you than anyone else. Lay that sin before your Savior and know that his ransom was given for you. That sin was washed away and paid for completely by his death and resurrection. Let the joy and peace and hope that you know from this full and free forgiveness cause you to be much more mission focused as you move forward in your life, including in your prayers.

When you keep others and their spiritual lives foremost in your prayers, when your prayers are mission focused and you keep your mind on the mission God has given to you, you will find something special happen. Not only will you pray for others, but it will lead you to look for opportunities to be your own answer to that prayer and share God's love with them. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus urged his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field. Then in the next verse he told them: you are the answer to your prayers! I'm sending you to be the ones who proclaim this message to these people. Pray for your fellow believers. Pray for those who don't yet know of their Savior. Pray for your leaders. Pray for everyone! Then go and be the answer to your prayer as you witness to all the love of Jesus their Savior. May all your prayers be ***Mission Focused Prayers***. Amen.