

Pray for Kings and All in High Positions

by John Piper

We should pray for all men, including kings and all in high positions, because prayer taps the power of God on their behalf, is the easiest step of love, and reaches farther in its effects than anything else we can do, and because we want to see the advancement of the gospel and the salvation of men.

Scripture: Proverbs 21:1, Isaiah 10:5, Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27, 1 Timothy 2:1

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Intercessory Prayer"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of prayer, specifically focusing on 1 Timothy 2:1-4, where the apostle Paul urges believers to pray for all men, including kings and those in high positions. Paul emphasizes the paramount importance, wideness of scope, and content of these prayers, highlighting the significance of praying for others to maintain a clear conscience and vibrant faith. Piper explains that prayer taps into God's power, is the easiest act of love, and reaches farther in its effects than any other action we can take. He challenges listeners to expand their hearts to embrace the world in prayer, including even those who may seem difficult to pray for, such as rulers who may be distant or godless.

Transcript

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1 Timothy 2:2

The apostle Paul has a word from God which we need to hear all the time but especially the Sunday before a presidential inauguration. The word is found in his first letter to Timothy, chapter 2, verses 1-4:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thankgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior who desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

The main point of the text is the command to pray, and Paul mentions three things about this command to pray that we should listen to very carefully. First, he mentions its paramount importance: "First of all I urge you to pray!" Second, he mentions the wideness of its scope: "Pray for all men, especially kings and all in high positions." Third, he mentions the content or aim of these prayers: they include thanksgiving and the request that our lives be spent in peace and tranquillity to the end that men might be saved and come to a

knowledge of the truth.

Let's pray that God cause His word to sink into us this morning.

Father, grant, I pray, that no one here today will have a hard and impenetrable heart. Take out of us the heart of stone and put in us the tender, sensitive heart of flesh and cause us to hear and to love your instruction and to walk in it not begrudgingly---but with all our heart. Grant us to sense the paramount importance of prayer for others, and help us have hearts big enough to embrace its tremendous scope and pure enough to pray the right things with the right motivation. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

First, let's focus on the paramount importance of the command to pray for others. Why Paul thinks this is of first importance becomes clear when we look at the preceding context. Notice the word "then" or "therefore" in verse 1: "First of all, then (or therefore) I urge that you pray for all men." That word alerts us to the fact that Paul's command to pray for all men is an inference or a conclusion that follows from something he had just said. In the preceding verses (1:18-20) Paul charged Timothy to "wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience." And he warns Timothy that, if you reject a good conscience, you may make shipwreck of your faith, like Hymenaeus and Alexander did. A good conscience is a conscience that does not condemn you for the things you do or don't do. And, therefore, what Paul is saying is that in order for your ship of faith to stay afloat you need to see to it that you don't do the things your conscience condemns or leave undone the things which your conscience demands.

I think we can all understand this connection between a clear conscience and a vibrant faith if we just think about our own experience. At least my experience confirms it. If I fall into a habit that my conscience condemns, what eventually happens is that my conscience begins to say, "Piper, all your talk about trusting Christ is a lot of hot air, because if you really trusted Him you wouldn't go on in that behavior or that attitude." And so a bad conscience begins to drill its little holes into the belly of the ship of faith until one of two things happen: either we confirm the genuineness of our faith by changing our ways and plugging up the holes of a bad conscience, or we show that our faith never was seaworthy and sink into unbelief and blasphemy like Hymenaeus and Alexander. So, Paul's charge to Timothy to hold on to faith by keeping a good conscience is tremendously important and any help Paul gives how to keep a good conscience should be received with open arms.

That is what I think Paul does in verse 1 of chapter 2. Since you must keep a good conscience in order not to make shipwreck of faith, therefore I urge you first of all to pray for all men. At the top of Paul's list of things that we must do in order to keep a clear conscience is to pray for other people. In order to see why failing to pray for people will lead to a bad conscience and so jeopardize our faith, we have to ask, "What is it that will prick a Christian's conscience in his relations to other people?" The answer to that question is clear from the whole Bible. All God's instruction is summed up in this: Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore anything we do to people that is unloving will prick our conscience and threaten our faith. With that as a foundation we can start to see why prayer for other people is at the top of Paul's list of things we must do in order to keep a clear conscience.

I see three reasons why prayer for other people is of first importance in keeping a clear conscience, in view of Jesus' teaching that love is our greatest duty. First, prayer taps the power of God on behalf of others. We could try to help others, even presidents and congressmen and governors and mayors and aldermen and police chiefs without praying for them. And, judged from a very limited perspective we might do a little good that way. But the little good that we could do by our little power is not worthy to be

compared with the great good God can do for people that He sets out to work for. So if we want the best for people, if we really love them, of first importance will be prayers on their behalf. The first thing you do for a person if you love them is to ask God to work for them. Of course, God's answer to your prayer will almost always include your work of love, but it will also include much more than you alone could accomplish.

A second reason prayer is of first importance in keeping a clear conscience is that it is the easiest step of love. You don't even have to get out of bed to pray for kings and all those in high positions. It requires no financial sacrifice and no great physical exertion. Of all the forms that love for others can take, prayer is the easiest. And isn't it true that if you are unwilling to do something easy for the good of another, then it is very unlikely that you will be willing to do something hard for them. So it makes sense that Paul, in urging us to keep our consciences clear, would first of all urge us to do the easiest act of love, to pray for people.

And the third reason prayer is of first importance in keeping our consciences clear is that it reaches farther in its effects than anything else we can do. Before the satellites were orbiting the earth we could broadcast a T.V. program live across the country but not around the world. But now it is easy to reach the other side of the world with a live broadcast by sending our signal out into space and bouncing it off a satellite.

That is the way it is with prayer. Without it we can influence things nearby and if we wait long enough, our influence may spread around the world. But God's influence is everywhere and immediate, and so if we send our signals to Him we can reach around the world in an instant. If a broadcaster wants to get a message to the most people possible in the smallest amount of time, he will send it first away from the people to a satellite. If a Christian wants to do the most good possible to the most people in the short time he has, he will turn to God first whose influence reaches, without interruption, to every molecule and every mind in the universe.

So, if we would not make shipwreck of faith, we must keep a good conscience. And therefore, I urge you first of all to fulfill the love command by praying for all men, because prayer taps the power of God on their behalf, prayer is the first and easiest step of love, and prayer reaches farther in its good effects than anything else we can do.

And that brings us to our second major focus, namely, the breadth or scope of Paul's command to pray. "Make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions." Have you ever been tempted to pray like this: "God, bless everybody in the best way possible. To You be the glory. Amen." That covers everything, right? A text like this, that commands us to pray for all men, might tempt us to pray in sweeping generalizations like that, since you can't begin to name all men. But God has not taught us to pray like that, and we can be sure Jesus couldn't have spent whole nights in prayer if that is how He prayed. It is a great blessing if each day we have our daily bread. It is a blessing if our trespasses are forgiven. It is a blessing if we are not led into temptation but delivered from evil. But Jesus does not teach us to say, "Bless the Lord." He teaches us to say, "Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." We have not been taught to pray in broad sweeping generalities, like "God bless the missionaries." We have been taught to pray about particular kinds of problems. And when Paul needed help, he asked it for himself in particular. Therefore I do not think the demand of 1 Timothy 2:1 will be satisfied by praying, "God bless all men everywhere, Amen."

If we give Paul a sympathetic reading what he seems to be saying is this: "Timothy, push out the boundaries of your concern. Do not let your prayers be limited to any one group of people or kind of people. Enlarge the circumference of your love. Do not be provincial, sectarian, nationalistic, elitist or racist in your prayers. Let your prayers embrace all kinds of people: high and low, white and black, democrats and republicans, Soviet premiers and Iranian Ayatollahs. Enlarge your heart until it embraces the world. Go to school at Calvary until you can hate the bigotry and racism of the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, but can pray with yearning love in your hearts for these men and women."

Isn't Paul's point the same as Jesus' when He said,

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 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

To put it another way, there is no category of people of whom it can be said, "You should not pray for them." Here is a message for this hour, isn't it! The decade of the 80's is on the way to becoming the decade of hate and, O, how easy it is for us aliens and exiles on the earth to get sucked into one group and begin to hate the other. Jesus warned us in Matthew 24:11, "Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray and because wickedness is multiplied most men's love will grow cold."

Some say the world will end in fire

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if I had to perish twice

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

(Robert Frost)

May it not be said of Bethlehem Baptist Church that we have contributed to the destruction of the world through icy hate. But let it be said, "Look how they love each other! Look how they do good to those who hate them, and bless those who curse them and pray for those who abuse them (Luke 6:27f)! Look at the wideness of the scope of their prayer!" And then people will see that there is a God of grace in heaven and that He has on earth a peculiar people who are not conformed to this age nor this decade.

After Paul has stressed that we pray for all men, he singles out kings "and all in high positions" to make sure that we include them. Why? It is clear from verses 4-7 that what Paul wants to emphasize is that nobody be excluded from our good will, for nobody is beyond the grace of God. Why then do kings and those in high positions come in for special mention? I can see at least two reasons.

The first is that these people had characteristics that made it especially difficult for the early Christians (and for us) to pray for them. For example, they were so distant, so remote, if not in actual miles then at least in accessibility. It is hard to pray earnestly for someone you don't know, and especially hard to pray for somebody you never see. Yet, this difficulty must be overcome, Paul says. You must pray for them: emperors like Nero, proconsuls like Gallio, governors like Pilate, kings like Herod. They may seem remote and inaccessible but remember, they are not remote and inaccessible to God. And by prayer you can get as close as one of their intimate advisers.

Another characteristic that makes rulers hard to pray for is that they are often godless men, insensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This was almost universally true in Paul's day. And in most countries around the world today I think it would still be true. Even in our own country where the Chrysler Imperial is called the "born-again car" I am not automatically enthused when a politician claims to have had a religious experience. It does not matter where or when we have lived, to obey God's command to pray for all in high positions will involve us in praying for many people indifferent or hostile to our faith.

But this should not cause us to hesitate one moment to pray for them, first, because God may save them and bring them to a knowledge of the truth, and second, because God uses rulers to accomplish His purposes whether they believe in Him or not. When God wanted to punish His rebellious people, Israel, He turned the haughty king of Assyria into the rod of His anger (Isaiah 10:5), and stirred him up to attack Israel. Once Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, said to himself:

Is not this great Babylon which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty? (Daniel 4:30)

And God took away his reason and made him eat grass like an ox until he learned this lesson (Daniel 4:34,35):

The dominion of the Most High is an everlasting dominion and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing; and he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand, or say to Him, 'What doest Thou?'

No king, no president, no premier, no Ayatollah can stay the hand of the Lord when He has purposed to do a thing. The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will (Proverbs 21:1). Many are the plans of the mind of a man (of a king!), but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established (Proverbs 19:21).

Therefore, we have strong encouragement to pray for kings and for all in high positions whether they are believers or not because our God reigns and none can stay His hand!

One implication of what I've just said is that our prayers for those in high positions go beyond a prayer for their conversion or even sanctification. For that we must pray, or we disobey our Lord Jesus. But now we know also that God can do His good purposes even through rulers who remain impenitent.

This is the second reason I think Paul stressed that we must pray for kings and all in high positions, namely, because through them God is able to do so much good for others whether the kings know it or not. Paul's thought seems to be something like this, "If you want your prayers to do the most good for the greatest number of people, be sure to include in your prayers those persons whose decisions create the

conditions in which the purposes of the gospel prosper." It is important to pray for leaders because the conditions they create either advance or impede the gospel.

We can confirm that this is the way Paul is thinking when we take up our third and final major point, namely the content of our prayers for kings and all in high positions. I'll only mention briefly that according to verse one our prayers must include Thanksgivings. Even a bad king is better than anarchy. When Paul wrote this he was probably under house arrest in Rome awaiting trial before Nero who finally executed him. Therefore, Paul is not naive when he says, "I urge that ... Thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all in high positions." He sees things in much larger perspective than merely in relation to his own life or even his own ministry. The same emperor who executes Paul maintains the peace in the provinces where the gospel is spreading like wildfire. So, our prayers for kings should be seasoned with thanks.

But the main thing Paul mentions as the content of our prayer for kings and those in high positions is "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and respectfulness" (verse 2). Taken by itself that request might seem to fly right in the face of everything we've said so far. Is it true in the last analysis that all we are really after in praying for our leaders is peace and tranquillity? O, how many professing Christians there are who seem to think so!

But that would be a terrible misunderstanding of God's word. Verses three and four sharpen the focus of what Paul is really after. Why pray that rulers will keep the peace? Because "this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior who desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." God approves of our prayers for peace and tranquillity because He approves of the advance of the gospel. Peace is not the main thing; salvation is the main thing. Tranquillity is not the goal; the knowledge of the truth of God, that's the goal.

May we never forget, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are also aliens and exiles in this land. We are not at home in America or Russia or Israel or anywhere in this world. We do not pray simply for the prosperity of any land. We pray for magnificent advancement of the saving purposes of God in every land. And to that end we say, "Almighty God, ruler of heaven and earth, grant to president-elect Reagan, Governor Quie, Mayor Fraser, and the thousands of other people in high positions that the decisions they make will create the conditions in which the good news of Jesus Christ will bear the most fruit for the salvation of men and for your great glory. Amen."

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