

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

1 Timothy 2:1-8

By

Steven J. Cole

February 6, 1994

Copyright, 1994

February 6, 1994  
Lesson 6

## The Priority Of Prayer 1 Timothy 2:1-8

One day Hudson Taylor was traveling on a Chinese junk from Shanghai to Ningpo. He had been witnessing to a man called Peter who was resisting the message, but was under deep conviction. In the course of events, Peter fell overboard. Taylor panicked when he saw that no one made any effort to save the man. Instinctively, he sprang to the mast, let down the sail, and jumped overboard in hopes of finding his friend.

A fishing boat was close by, so Taylor tried to solicit their help. But they wouldn't stop their fishing to look for this drowning man unless Taylor agreed to pay them. Not only that, but to Taylor's consternation, they wanted to barter for every penny he had. Finally, after he agreed to pay them a sizeable sum, they agreed to help. In less than a minute after dragging with the fishing net, they found Peter. But it was too late; Peter was dead. They had been too busy fishing to worry about a drowning man.

What a tragic story! How callused and self-centered those Chinese fishermen must have been to realize that a man was drowning nearby and yet to be more concerned about their own financial gain than about saving his life.

But before I condemn those fishermen, I need to take the log out of my own eye. How concerned am I with people around me who are perishing without Jesus Christ? Do I care more about my own comfort and financial gain than I do about people dying without the Savior? Do I go on about my business day after day, week after week, without any burden for those who need to know Christ as Savior?

You say, "Well, after all, what can I do? I'm just one person, and there are billions who don't know Christ."

For starters, you can commit yourself to prayer. You can meet with others to pray for those who are lost and perishing without the Savior.

You say, "*Prayer?* Come on, I thought you were talking about a way I could *really* get involved. You know, a way I could do something that would really make a difference."

That's precisely what I'm talking about. Prayer *is* doing something. Prayer will make a tremendous difference. The amazing fact is that the sovereign God has chosen to work in response to the prayers of His people.

As Paul begins to tell Timothy how to conduct oneself in the local church (3:15), he puts prayer as the first priority (2:1, "First of all"). But Paul is not just talking about the need for prayer in general. He is talking about the need for prayer as it relates to the salvation of the lost. He repeats some words and ideas in 2:1-8 that show what he is driving at: "all men" (2:1); "all" (2:2); "God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved" (2:3, 4); "mediator ... between God and men" (2:5); "a ransom for all, the testimony" (2:6); "preacher and ... teacher of the Gentiles" (2:7). Paul is talking about *men*—people—and not just about a certain few, but about *all* men. And he is talking about the *Savior*. His concern is that all would be saved. What he is telling us is that,

Prayer that all people may be reached with the gospel  
should pervade the life of the church.

We should have such a burden for those who are perishing without Christ that we're driven to entreat God, who is the Savior, that all people might be reached with the good news that there is a Mediator who gave Himself as the ransom for their sins.

Does such prayer pervade *our church*? Does such prayer pervade *your life*? Does such prayer pervade *my life*? I confess that I fall far short here. I would guess that many of you do too. It's easy to get like those Chinese fishermen, so busy with our own interests that we're indifferent to those who are "drowning" nearby. Your prayer life (what you pray and how much) reveals the intensity of your concern. Allow God's Spirit to speak to you through this portion of His Word.

1. Prayer that all be reached with the gospel is in line with God's plan (2:1-2, 8).

Prayer is not a nicety, but a necessity. God is sovereign, yet His sovereign plan includes the prayers of His people. If we are involved with God's plan for the world, then we will be praying in line with His plan. We can see four facets of God's plan in these verses:

- A. God's plan involves all kinds of prayer for all kinds of people.

In verse 1 Paul uses four different words for prayer. The words are not altogether distinct in meaning, but there are nuances of difference that reveal different needs that require prayer:

"Entreaties" = prayer stemming from a sense of need. Sensing our lack and God's sufficiency, our impotence and God's omnipotence, should move us to pray.

"Prayers" = a general term for prayer to God. One commentator suggests that the word here refers to requests for needs that are always present, in contrast to specific and special needs (William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary* [Baker], p. 92). This would include prayer for more wisdom, godliness, repentance, revival, etc.

"Petitions" = means to converse freely; it pictures someone who can go into the presence of the king and talk freely with him on your behalf. It is used of the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit and of Christ on our behalf (Rom. 8:27, 34; Heb. 7:25). It points to the fact that we can go freely before God at any time or in any place to talk with Him on behalf of others.

"Thanksgivings" = this points to the fact that we must express not only our petitions, but our gratitude to God for His gracious answers.

The point of all these words is that we have different needs at different times. But at all times we need God and, therefore, we need to pray.

Not only do we need all kinds of prayer, but also we need to pray for all kinds of people. We have already noted Paul's emphasis on "all men" (2:1, 2, 4, 6; in these verses Paul uses the Greek *anthropos*, a generic word for "people"). No person is too far gone, too lost in sin, whom God's grace cannot reach. Nor is there any

person so high and mighty, in a position of governmental authority, who does not need God's grace. All people are sinners who need to know God as Savior. Maybe you cannot speak to the person about God; but you can always speak to God about that person.

Paul here singles out for prayers those in positions of authority in government. In his case, this included the cruel maniac, Nero, who later executed both Peter and Paul, who lit his gardens in the evenings with Christians covered with pitch, burned as human torches. And yet Paul does not call Christians to political revolution, but to prayer. Prayer is God's means for removing tyrants and establishing peace. Thus the plan of God involves all kinds of prayer for all kinds of people.

- B. God's plan involves the spread of the gospel so that all may be saved.

That, I take it, is Paul's train of thought between 2:2 and 2:3 & 4. We should pray that those in authority would govern so that we might enjoy a tranquil and quiet life. But the purpose for such a life is not that we might be comfortable and happy, but so that we can grow in "godliness and dignity" with a view toward the maximum spread of the gospel. Both words, "godliness and dignity," point to the outward manifestation of Christian virtues. Paul is concerned here with the testimony of God's people. Under persecution, some professing Christians cave in. In times of peace, there is more opportunity for their good deeds to be seen. So the idea is that we should pray for political peace so that we can live in observable godliness so that lost people will be saved.

- C. God's plan requires holiness and harmony among His people.

We are to live in "godliness," which means being reverent or devout. We are to live in "dignity" (a quality required of church leaders, 1 Tim. 3:4, 8, 11) which has the nuance of commanding respect. A person with these qualities takes God seriously. He doesn't joke about the things of God. In verse 8 Paul says that men should be "without wrath and dissension." We are to work out anger and relational problems in private so that we can pray without hypocrisy in public. We can't pray and work together for God's

plan in the world unless we are walking in holiness and harmony as God's people.

D. God's plan designates men as taking the leadership in prayer.

God wants "men" (the Greek word in 2:8 means "males," men in contrast to women) to take the leadership in the prayer life of the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:13 Paul indicates that women may pray in public as long as they are obviously in submission to men ("heads covered"). But both there and here he makes it plain that men are to take the leadership in the church, including this matter of prayer. The same applies to the home: Men, you need to take the initiative in prayer!

Note briefly the posture of prayer. In Paul's day one posture was to stand and lift their hands toward God. If you study the various postures for prayer mentioned in the Bible, you'll find standing, kneeling, and falling prostrate; sitting is only mentioned once, to my knowledge (2 Sam. 7:18). You'll find the hands lifted heavenward and spread out, but never folded. You will find the head both bowed and lifted up with the eyes looking heavenward (so far as I know the eyes are never closed; see Hendriksen, pp. 103-104). We shouldn't become legalistic about it, but I will suggest that our casual posture in prayer may indicate a casual attitude toward God. In public, Paul and his friends knelt down on the beach and prayed (Acts 21:5).

We've seen that prayer that all people may be reached with the gospel is in line with God's plan.

2. Prayer that all be reached with the gospel is in line with God's pleasure (2:3-4).

Note the words, "good" (beautiful, pleasant), "acceptable," and "desire." God's desire is for the salvation of all men. The Lord told Ezekiel (33:11), "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live." When Christians pray for civil rulers so that there is peace, it allows for the gospel to be preached and men to be saved, which is good and acceptable in the sight of God, who desires the salvation of all people.

I can't answer the theological conundrum, "If God desires that all be saved, why doesn't He save all?" The Bible is clear that God has sovereignly foreordained some to eternal life, while passing by others. Scripture often sets together in the same context the seeming contradiction that God is sovereign and yet men are responsible to repent and believe (Rom. 9:15-18; 10:13). Jesus, who was going up to Jerusalem to die for our sins according to the pre-determined plan of God (Acts 2:23; Luke 13:33), lamented, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" (Luke 13:34; see Luke 10:22 for contrast). In our text, Paul's concern was to counter the Jew who said that God wishes to destroy sinners and the spiritually proud who said that salvation is only for the elite, by saying, "No! God desires to save all men."

I once heard a man who has a deep burden for the lost tell of how he was praying for the conversion of his neighbor, a man named Ray. Every morning this man would pray fervently for Ray's salvation. On many mornings, he said he would have to wipe the tears from the pages of his Bible as he pled with God for Ray to come to Christ. Then one morning he got the frightening thought, "What if Ray isn't one of the elect?" So he said he prayed, "Lord, if Ray isn't on the list, then You put him there! Make up a new list, if you have to, but bring Ray to know You!" Eventually, Ray did trust in the Savior.

Maybe his theology wasn't precisely correct. But don't get hung up on the theology and miss the obvious application of verse 4: Is *my* heart in tune with God's heart? Do I desire the salvation of all people? Does my prayer life for the people I know who are without Christ reflect God's pleasure to save all people?

3. Prayer that all be reached with the gospel is in line with God's provision (2:5-6).

I could easily preach several messages on these important verses. They contain much crucial truth in succinct form, and may have been an early creed. There is one God, the fundamental tenet of Judaism: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one!" (Deut. 6:4). Christians do not believe in three Gods, but in one

God who exists in three persons. Although there are many different types of men, there is only one true God for all men, and He has provided only one way of salvation for all.

That one way of salvation involves a mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. In order for God to be reconciled to sinful man, man had to pay for his sin. The price was death, because the wages of sin is death. But God provided a representative man to be the substitute for all other men through His death. He became the ransom, the one who paid the price to release us from bondage to sin and judgment. This ransom is sufficient for all who will receive it.

By calling Jesus a man, Paul is not denying His deity, of course. We saw that he affirmed Christ's deity in 1:13, 15-17; he will do so again in 3:16. A bridge must be firmly anchored to both sides if it is to be usable. As mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, undiminished deity and perfect humanity united without mixture or confusion in one person forever. He was the testimony of God, revealed to man at the proper time. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Him. All who come find abundant pardon through His grace. Thus, prayer that all people may be reached with the gospel is in line with God's provision in His Son.

Prayer that all be reached with the gospel is in line with God's plan, pleasure, and provision. Finally,

4. Prayer that all be reached with the gospel is in line with God's procedure (2:7).

God's procedure for reaching people is people. Men, like Paul, who have experienced the saving grace of God in Christ are used by God to reach others. The breadth of God's concern is seen in the irony that Paul, the Jewish zealot, was made apostle to the Gentiles, whom he formerly despised. The word "preacher" means a herald--one who announced to the people the message of a king. He didn't give his own opinions. He relayed the words of the king. "Apostle" stresses Paul's authority as one sent out by God. Paul didn't decide on apostle as a career; he was appointed. Apparently some in Ephesus were challenging Paul's authority, and so he adds, "I am telling the truth, I am not lying." "Teacher" points to Paul's

function as one who explained God's message so that people could understand and apply it.

"In faith and truth" point to two sides of the message. "Truth" affirms the reliability of the gospel rooted as it is in the historically validated life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Faith" is the means by which a person appropriates the truth. You must personally put your faith in Christ's death on your behalf.

The point is, God uses those who have experienced His saving grace in Christ to proclaim and explain the message to others. As we pray that God would reach all people with the gospel, we must pray for people to tell them (Rom. 10:14). Jesus told His disciples to pray for workers for God's harvest (Matt. 9:37-38). The catch is, of course, as you begin to pray, God often taps you on the shoulder and says, "What about you? Will you talk to your neighbor about Me?" Those who pray get a burden for the lost and before they know it, they're involved in the process of telling them about Christ. That is God's procedure.

### Conclusion

A number of years ago, a man with the China Inland Mission was looking over the records of that work. At one station, the number and spiritual strength of the converts far exceeded anyone's expectations and could not be accounted for by anything unusual or outstanding about the personnel there.

The mystery was unsolved until Hudson Taylor visited England. There, at the close of his message, a gentleman from the audience came forward to greet Taylor. In the ensuing conversation, Taylor learned that the man possessed detailed knowledge of this particular mission station. "How is it," asked Taylor, "that you are so conversant with the conditions of that work?" "Oh," he replied, "for four years I have corresponded with my missionary friend there. He has sent me the names of inquirers and converts, and I have daily taken these to God in prayer." Taylor suddenly realized the answer to the mystery: the daily, specific prayers of this man in England had brought eternal fruit for God's glory in China.

Charles Spurgeon, the well-known British preacher of the past century, saw thousands of people come to faith in Christ under his preaching. His book, *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans) is one of the best

I've read on the work of evangelism. He frequently affirms the importance of prayer as the foundation for winning souls to Christ. On one of his visits to Europe, Spurgeon met an American pastor who said, "I have long wished to see you, Mr. Spurgeon, and to put one or two simple questions to you. In our country there are many opinions as to the secret of your great influence. Would you be good enough to give me your own point of view?" After a moment's pause, Spurgeon said, "My people pray for me." (In Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], p. 44).

I hope you pray for me, that God would give conversions under my feeble attempts to preach His gospel. (My office is open for prayer during both services.) Pray for yourself, that God would use you to lead lost sinners to the Savior, and don't be content until He answers. Pray for your neighbors, pray for your kids' friends, pray for family members, pray for people in this city, and pray for our nation, that God would convert many. Pray for our missionaries, that God would give them much fruit. Pray for the people groups around the world, especially where there is war or famine, and for those where there is no Christian witness, that God would be pleased to save multitudes for His glory (sign up for "The Global Prayer Digest"). Men, lead your families in praying for the lost.

God can do mighty things in response to our prayers. A. T. Pierson said, "There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer." Let's not pursue our own interests while men drown nearby. First of all, let us pray that all people be reached with the good news that Christ Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for all!

### Discussion Questions

1. If you're praying for someone's salvation, but you don't see results, is it ever right to stop praying?
2. How can a person who lacks a burden for the lost gain and deepen such a burden?
3. If God is going to save the elect, why do we need to pray?

Copyright 1994, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.