

## **1 Timothy 2:1-7**

### **Above all, pray**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, as we celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving, we certainly have a lot to be thankful for. Last year we were blessed with a good season and plentiful harvest, especially compared with the previous few years. And we were blessed to have a stable and effective government that could deal well with the coronavirus pandemic, keeping us fairly healthy and safe, especially compared with other places around the world. We should certainly give prayers of thanksgiving for the year that has been.

In our epistle reading today we get St Paul's encouragement to pray for our public officials, our leaders who have authority over us. Prayers of both thanksgiving and intercession. And this is not some added extra to our lives as Christians. Prayer is not a filler to throw in when there's nothing better to do.

St Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, "In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). And he urged the Colossian Christians to "Devote yourselves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). Here in First Timothy, he says, "I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them."

It sort of sounds like Paul is starting to make a list of what the Christian life should involve. First of all, pray. And then... well, there's actually nothing after that here in First Timothy. Instead, we should understand this phrase as 'above all' or 'the most important thing is'. Above all else, pray. The most important thing to do is pray. First of all, pray.

St Paul uses four different words for prayer to drive home this point. Pray for all people. Ask God to help them. Intercede on their behalf. Give thanks for them. Pray, ask, intercede, and give thanks. There are more words that he could have used, but these four are enough. They cover the whole range of prayers that we might pray. They cover particular needs, urgent requests, general petitions, simple blessings, expressions of gratitude for who God is, and thanksgiving for other prayers that have been answered by our good and gracious God.

All this prayer, this important and first priority thing, is especially prayed for kings and all those in authority. But with a specific purpose in mind – that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. Now in the first century when St Paul wrote this, this immediately brings to mind the persecution of the church.

So, they prayed for the civil leaders to simply let them be. And the outcome is a lifestyle that does not present an immediate threat to the Roman Empire. They can't get arrested for disturbing public order if they never disturb public order. But there's more to it than that. The idolising of the Roman Emperor is also in view. When Julius Caesar was assassinated in 27 BC, he was soon proclaimed divine and accepted among the gods of the state, officially allowing for this worship. This worship of the Emperor only grew, and it would become part of the social fabric. It was a stabilising force for the Empire, uniting it around the god-like Emperor.

It's into this setting of Emperor worship, that St Paul says to pray 'for' kings. Unlike the pagans, who now prayed 'to' their kings, St Paul recognises the one true God. Any other earthly ruler, like everybody else, depends on the guidance and mercy of God. And this praying 'for' the kings implies that they are not divine, but mortal humans like you and me. And St Paul carries on to make a public confession of the one true God. "For, there is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5, NLT). It's a bit of an odd addition to this passage about prayer. But it does fit into this challenge to the status of the Roman Emperor.

If there is only one God, then all the multitude of Roman gods, including the deified emperors, are not true gods. Early Christians were thus asked to worship the one true God while rejecting the cult of the Roman Emperor. And of course, this still applies to us today. There is still a tendency to somehow 'divinise' humans. Those who are successful in public life, or sports, or show business, are often celebrated and "worshipped" as "stars." They, too, need our prayers for them, as there is only one God who saves us all. And they too need our life of godliness and dignity, that bears witness to the new life that we have in Christ through our baptisms.

This is all part of the larger call to proclaim the good news and to make disciples of all nations. The emphasis here on God's salvation plan for all people balances out the possible inward focus on our own virtuous life that can happen in our prayers. The whole point of this life blessed by God is that others may see it and come to salvation. We are witnesses as we live, because this life of gratitude, of always giving thanks to God is different. When the harvest is good, we thank God for the harvest. When the harvest is bad, we thank God anyway. And this response is not the usual self-centred response we might expect. It reflects a different attitude. It glorifies the one true God. And it testifies to the salvation found only in Christ Jesus.

So, as we do give thanks for the harvest today, may the way we do it draw others to Christ. May the Spirit dwelling in us cause us to live in such a way that people come to know the truth of God's salvation plan. And may we never forget to thanks. And always, first and foremost, praying for all people for their good and to the glory of God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.