

“One Mediator between God and Men” (1 Timothy 2:1–7)

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I’m sure we all have people in our lives whose names cause us to go “ugh.” I don’t mean that literally, of course. But when we think about certain people, whether we know them personally or only because they’re famous, we tend to have negative reactions. That seems to be the case when it comes to politicians. Donald Trump could cure cancer tomorrow and some people would still hate him. Barack Obama could have brought about world peace, and others would continue to speak poorly of him. Hilary Clinton lost an election and is no longer in any government office, yet I still see people who claim to be Christians post negative memes about her on Facebook.

If we’re honest, we all have a list of people who we don’t like, people who we think belong in a “basket of deplorables,” people we think we’re better than, people we think are beyond redemption. I don’t think we consciously think this way. But the reality is that we don’t treat people equally, we often forget that everyone is made in God’s image and that no one is beyond being saved by Jesus Christ from sin, death, and condemnation.

Christians, how often have we prayed for politicians we dislike? How often have we prayed that they would come to a true knowledge of God? How often do we pray for our favorite athletes? We may love watching Tom Brady play, but how often do we pray that he would know Jesus? We may hope our doctor can heal us, but we often treat him or her more as an instrument, a thing that exists for us, instead of a soul in need of salvation. The same is true for that neighbor we don’t care for, or that in-law who we might be happy never to see again. Whether we realize it or not, we seem to act as if these people don’t need Jesus. Or, if we realize it, we don’t care to do anything about it.

Throughout history, there have been people who have rather consciously thought that certain types of people could never be right with God. That seems to have been the case almost two thousand years ago in the city of Ephesus, part of modern Turkey and then part of the Roman Empire. In that city, there were people teaching that only some people could be God’s people. It appears they might have thought that only law-abiding Jewish Christians could be God’s people. But since this is not the case, the apostle Paul wrote to his younger associate, Timothy, to tell them that this is not the truth.

Today, we're continuing our study of Paul's first letter to Timothy. And in today's passage, 1 Timothy 2:1–7, we'll see that Paul tells Timothy a few important truths. One, Christians should pray for all people. Two, God desires all people to be saved. Three, there is only one God and one way to God, Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. And, four, Paul was sent by God to preach the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, which shows that not only Jews could come to know Jesus. All of these points focus on the fact that all people need salvation from the condemnation that comes along with our sin and that Jesus is the only way to be saved. Since condemnation is our biggest problem, and salvation our biggest need, and since there's only one way to be saved, we should put great emphasis on the gospel in our prayers, our personal lives, and in the life of the church.

Let's read 1 Timothy 2:1–7, and then I'll explain those points in more detail.

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. ⁷ For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.¹

At this point in the letter, Paul begins to tell Timothy how people in the church should behave. He says that they should pray. He uses various words for prayer—supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings—that cover the range of prayer requests. The point is that we should pray on behalf of others. We should plead with God on their behalf. If these people aren't Christians, they probably aren't praying for themselves to the one, true God. They certainly aren't praying for their own salvation. We may be the only ones praying for those people, whoever they are.

Though Paul doesn't mention this idea here, all Christians are royal priests, priests of the king. The apostle Peter tells Christians, in 1 Peter 2:9–10:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Priests intercede on behalf of others to God. They mediate God's blessings to others. That's what Paul has in mind here.

Paul stresses that they should pray for *all* people: Jews and Gentiles, rulers and slaves, men and women, rich and poor. We should pray even for civic rulers, "kings and all who are in high positions." We should pray that they would rule wisely and righteously. We should pray that they would fulfill the God-ordained purpose for government. Peter, in 1 Peter 2:13–17, says,

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Paul writes about the government in a similar way in Romans 13:1–7. The government has been established by God to punish evil, to provide order. We should pray they do their job.

Keep in mind that the emperor of the Roman Empire at this time was Nero (ruled 54–68). He was, to say the least, a sketchy character. His mother, Agrippina, was from the imperial family of Augustus. It's rumored that she had an incestuous relationship with her own brother, Caligula, who was emperor (37–41), and whom she plotted to kill. She later married her uncle, Claudius, who was the emperor after Caligula (41–54). It seems that she poisoned Claudius so that her son, Nero, could become the next emperor. Nero had been adopted by Claudius and married Claudius's daughter, Claudia Octavia, his step-sister. When he had been emperor for five years, he had his mother killed. He cheated on his wife with his mistress, Poppaea, and had his wife banished and then killed. It's possible that he also killed Poppaea, his second wife, by kicking her in the abdomen when she was pregnant, though we may never know the truth. There were many other sexual misdeeds and murderous intrigues in his life, but he might be best known for blaming a raging fire in Rome, which occurred in 64, on Christians. This is what the historian Suetonius says about Nero's treatment of Christians:

They were covered with the skins of wild beasts, and torn by dogs; were crucified, and set on fire, that they might serve for lights in the night-time. Nero offered his garden for this spectacle, and exhibited the games of the Circus by this dreadful illumination. Sometimes they were covered with wax and other combustible

materials, after which a sharp stake was put under their chin, to make them stand upright, and they were burnt alive, to give light to the spectators.²

This was the “king” that Paul wanted Christians to pray for! Paul surely wrote this letter before the year 64, but he was aware of the emperor’s bad character. He must have known how corrupt kings could be. Yet, still, he asks that Christians pray for these people. Jesus told us to pray for our enemies, not just the people we like or agree with (Matt. 5:43–48).

Praying for these people can have many positive results. Though Paul doesn’t mention this here, praying for people who, we don’t naturally like can reduce feelings of hate. Also, God hears our prayers and will act on them to help these people. That’s what John Chrysostom (c. 349–407), a famous preacher around the time of Augustine, said. In one of his sermons, over sixteen hundred years ago, he said this about praying for all people, including kings:

From this, two advantages result. First, hatred towards those who are without is done away; for no one can feel hatred towards those for whom he prays: and they again are made better by the prayers that are offered for them, and by losing their ferocious disposition towards us. For nothing is so apt to draw men under teaching, as to love, and be loved. Think what it was for those who persecuted, scourged, banished, and slaughtered the Christians, to hear that those whom they treated so barbarously offered fervent prayers to God for them.³

Imagine how different things would be if we were known more for praying for people who are opposed to us.

Paul says here that the purpose of such prayers is “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” I believe that Paul means that we should pray that these rulers—whether presidents, congressmen, governors, Supreme Court justices—would do their job so that there can be peace and order in our time. And if we have prayed for them, we can rest knowing that we have done what is godly.

We shouldn’t just pray for peace so that we can live easier lives. We should pray that there would be peace and righteousness so that the message of Jesus can be freely

² C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Nero 57*, in *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, ed. Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

³ John Chrysostom, “Homily VI,” “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. James Tweed and Philip Schaff, vol. 13, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 426.

communicated. Evil regimes have a way of hindering the progress of the gospel. Yes, nothing can stop the word of God from being spread, but when governments make it illegal to own a Bible or to gather together in a church, it's a lot harder to disciple new Christians or to tell others about Jesus.

If you read the book of Acts, you can see that there were times when even Paul benefitted from the protection of the Roman Empire (Acts 19:23–41; 21:27–36; 23:12–35). Of course, Paul was also imprisoned by the Romans and would eventually die at their hands. But he knew that when the government functioned according to God's revealed will, things go well for the gospel.

I think Paul wants us to pray for all people because God wants all people to be saved. That's the second point we see in this passage. What does this mean?

Does God want each and every person to be saved? If that is the case, God certainly has the ability to save each and every person. He can direct their hearts to believe in Jesus. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." If he can direct the king's heart where he wills, he can direct our hearts.

Well, it's possible that Paul means God wants each and every person to be saved, and yet he can't save each and every person for some good reason.

Some people believe that God can't save all because he must respect each person's free will. These people will say that real love cannot be forced, that God must allow us to make the choices. So, free will is more important than the salvation of each and every person.

The problem with this view is that it rests on things that aren't in the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible is there an extended discussion on free will. Are we truly free to make any choice? The Bible does say that "no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). The fact is that because the power of sin has corrupted the world, our hearts are corrupted as well. If we are left to our own free choices, we would never choose God or love him.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that no one can come to him for eternal life unless God the Father has drawn that person. And if God the Father has drawn that person to Jesus, that person will be raised to eternal life on the last day, the day of judgment (John 6:44). That means that only those who will receive eternal life are drawn by God to Jesus. Jesus also says that unless one is first born again by the Holy Spirit, that person can't even see the kingdom of God, much less enter into it (John 3:1–8). The only way we can choose to believe in Jesus, love him, and obey him, is if God empowers us. And the one who is empowered will do that.

Others who acknowledge the language of God choosing and predestining people believe that God wants to save everyone but can't because his plan to save only some, the ones he predestined to salvation, brings him greater glory. While this may be hard to digest, I think there is truth to this.

But this ongoing debate probably isn't what Paul has in mind.

I think we get confused by the language of "all." We tend to think it has to mean "absolutely all" or "each and every." But look at the way "all" is used elsewhere.

In just a moment, in verse 6, we'll see that Jesus "gave himself as a ransom for all." That means he paid the penalty for sin, he paid the price for our redemption. Yet it can't mean that Jesus redeemed each and every single person. If that were true, no one would be condemned. No one would go to hell. But the Bible clearly states that there will be some—many, really—who reject Jesus and stand condemned. We don't revel in that truth. It's something that should bother us. But it remains the truth.

In 1 Timothy 4:10, Paul says that God "is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." If God is the Savior of each and every single person, then all would be saved from condemnation. But I think Paul doesn't mean that. Again, in Titus 2:11, Paul writes, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people." I don't think Paul means "each and every person is saved." So, what does Paul mean?

I think Paul means that Jesus is the Savior of all types of people, Jews and Gentiles, rulers and slaves, rich and poor, men and women, people of all nations and languages. Sometimes this is expressed as "all without distinction." Jesus is the world's only Savior. There is no other. If Paul meant "all without exception," then you would have to believe in universalism, the idea that every single person will be saved, that no one will remain in hell. We might wish this to be true, but it's not.

The truth is that God will save whom he wants to save (Rom. 9:15, 18, 19–24). But we don't know who those people are. We should strive to bring all people to the knowledge of the truth, even if we know that not all people will believe.

That brings us to third point in this passage. Look again at verses 5 and 6: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time."

There is only one God. Paul is probably making an allusion to the great Jewish confession of faith, the Shema, which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” There is only one God—not a god of the Jews and another god of the Romans and yet another god for Americans. And there is only one way to God, and that is Jesus. He is the only mediator. Here, Paul stresses that Jesus is a man. But Jesus is also God. In Titus 2:13, Paul says that “our blessed hope” is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Jesus is the God-man, the only one who can stand in the gap between God and human beings. Because Jesus has two natures, a divine one and a human one, he can unite both parties.

And that indicates what our problem is. We are separated from God. The reason that is so is because the first human beings rebelled against God. They didn’t trust him. They turned away from God, and the world has been a mess ever since. We are born with hearts that don’t love God the way we should. As a result, we do ungodly things. Our hearts and our actions separate us from God. And the only way back to God is through Jesus.

Paul says that Jesus gave himself as a ransom. The language of “ransom” refers to a price that is paid to bring us freedom. We are in bondage to our sin, enslaved by our desires, and bound in the chains of condemnation. We cannot free ourselves from this position. But Jesus offered his own life to pay the penalty for our sins. God is a righteous judge. He must punish sin and sinners. But God is also merciful and gracious. So, he gave his only Son, and his only Son laid down his life for his people. That’s why Jesus says of himself, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Notice that he said he gave his life as a ransom for “many”—not all.

As a man, Jesus could die for other men. (To be clear, Jesus was a human being who died for other human beings, not just males.) As God, his sacrifice can pay for a vast number of sins and sinners, throughout space and time. The fact that it took the death of the Son of God to pay for our sins shows how problematic sin is, and how our salvation comes at a great cost.

And since there is only one God, there is only one way to receive the benefits of Jesus’ sacrifice. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he writes,

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Rom. 3:29–30).

We are not saved through our own efforts, obedience, or goodness. We can only be right in God's eyes by trusting in his Son. The same is true for Jews and Gentiles, for Romans and Americans, for emperors and presidents and illegal aliens, for straight and gay, men and women, adults and children. The only way to be made right in God's eyes is to receive the perfect status of the only sinless man who ever lived, and to trust that this man's death wiped away our sins.

Since Jesus is the only way to God, we should strive to bring people to a true knowledge of Jesus. That knowledge is more than knowing facts about Jesus. That knowledge is a relationship of trust, love, and obedience. Real faith leads to knowing facts, but it also leads to trusting a person, the God-man Jesus Christ.

Paul could say all of this because God appointed him to be a preacher of the gospel. He was sent to the Gentiles to tell them about Jesus. That's the fourth point he makes in these verses.

Paul knew he couldn't reach everyone, but he did what he could so that many souls could be saved. In another letter, 1 Corinthians, he writes this:

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19–23).

Paul didn't sin to reach sinners, but otherwise he set aside his personal preferences in order to reach others. He didn't let his own culture be an obstacle to reaching others. Though he was Jewish, he wasn't afraid to break with the old traditions of Judaism in order to reach Gentiles. He didn't break God's moral law to do this, but he broke with the way "things were always done" in order to carry out his mission.

I want to close this message by thinking about what all of this means for us. This passage focuses on salvation, and we should, too. That is particularly true of how we think about the church.

When we don't focus on salvation and the gospel first, we forget that our greatest problem is our sin. We forget that our real need is salvation. And we forget that this is the need of every human being. A church that isn't focused on the gospel forgets that each and every

human being is a sinner in need of a rescue. Instead, we become inward focused, dwelling only on creating a nice church environment in which everyone is “happy” and “comfortable.” We focus on our personal preferences. It’s all talk of “I like this” type of music and “I don’t like that” song or sermon or whatever.

A church that has pushed the gospel to the sidelines might seem very nice and peaceful. It may seem very loving, because no one is stepping on the other person’s toes. But if the gospel isn’t front and center, that peace is superficial. That’s because the only true peace is brought about by Jesus. True peace—reconciliation between God and people, and even between one human being and another—comes only through Jesus. And if we’re not concerned about the souls of the lost, focusing our prayers and our deeds toward their salvation, we’re not loving them at all. We might even say it’s a form of hate.

Imagine this: if you had a person in your life who desperately needed a cure for a disease, and you knew where that person could get that cure and refused to tell that person where to get it, you wouldn’t call that love. You would call it hate. Christians are beggars who know where to get the bread. We should tell others where to get it. We should pray that they would take that gift.

Perhaps we need to realign the way we think of other people. Perhaps we have unconsciously thought of others as being beyond God’s reach. We may have thought, “Oh, that person will never become a Christian.” When we do that, we deny God’s power to save even the worst of sinners. When we do that, we act superior to non-Christians. We may start to think we are Christians because we are better, purer, wiser, or whatever. And when we do that, we fail to see that lost people are God’s image bearers who need a rescue just as much as we did.

If you’re not a Christian, I want to apologize if you’ve run into Christians who act as if they’re better than you. I want to apologize if you’ve never heard the message of Jesus before. And I want you to know that you have a problem. Your life isn’t centering around God. That means it’s centered around something else. Whatever that is—you, your job, your possessions, entertainment, politics, a relationship—that’s your functional god, the object of your worship. But you were made to worship the one, true God. All of us don’t worship him the way we should. We fail to love and honor our Creator, the one who upholds the universe and everything in it at every moment, the source of life and love and goodness and beauty. God is patient with you. He is putting up with your rebellion. But he won’t do that forever. God wants to restore his

creation. He can only do that by removing sin from the world. And he will one day. But he will remove all sinners, too, unless their sins have been paid for by Jesus' sacrifice. And the only way to have your sins paid for by Jesus is to trust him. You need to believe in Jesus, to be united to him by faith. That is the only way to have a relationship with God, to have eternal life. It's the only way to have true peace. I urge you to follow Jesus. And I want to help you in any way that I can.

But turning back to the church, I must say this: When we as a church don't focus on salvation, we lose our way. We get caught up in, and hung up on, our little traditions. We think church is about having our way. We fight about silly things. I think that's why Paul says, in verse 8, "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling." The men in Ephesus were fighting because they had lost their way. Again, if we take our focus off of the gospel, we focus on ourselves, our comfort, our personal preferences.

Now, this doesn't mean that everything in the church should be geared only towards evangelism. The church isn't just about salvation. We need to teach new believers, equip all believers for ministry, and worship together. We need to encourage and challenge each other, and even discipline people who have gone astray. But if we don't lead with the gospel, we will drift away from our mission.

And if we don't focus on the gospel, our worship will suffer. When we are think often of our salvation, we should remain in a state of gratitude. We have been saved by God, through no merit or effort of our own. The fact that God would save anyone at the cost of the death of his Son should lead us to praise God all the more. God's grace should lead to our thanksgiving.

If Jesus is the only mediator to God, and if he gave his life as a ransom for all kinds of people, and if God wants all kinds of people to be saved, shouldn't we do what Paul did and what he asked Timothy to do? Shouldn't we prioritize evangelism? Shouldn't we forget our personal preferences and become all things to all people? Shouldn't we pray for lost souls?

May the Lord help us to get back on track and stay there. "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."