

A Healthy Life of Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we are continuing our study on 1st Timothy and we're going through this letter to think through what it means to be a healthy gospel church. One of the main reasons we're doing this series is because it ties in with the vision agreed by the Free Church of Scotland at the General Assembly last year that there will be a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland and we're using 1st Timothy to unpack more of what that means.

And 1st Timothy is a fantastic letter for doing that because it's got so much theology and so much practical application that will guide us as we want to, as we think through more of what this means. At the heart of what this letter teaches is the fact that as a church we are to hold up the gospel, that we are to be totally committed to the truth that has been revealed in and through Jesus Christ. And as we've been seeing that was one of the great challenges that Timothy faced, that in his congregation people were being diverted from the truth by false teachers. And so we are to hold up the gospel. We are also to hold out the gospel, not just holding it up for ourselves, holding it out for other people so that we can show that truth to others and we can invite them in to the family that God is building through his Son Jesus Christ. And this letter gives us some brilliant teaching for thinking through how we are going to do that. Now I want to just take this opportunity to say that thinking through what it means to be a healthy church doesn't mean that we're saying that you're all unhealthy. That's not what we're saying because there's so many ways in which you are healthy, which we are healthy as a congregation and that's a huge encouragement for us. But even if you look at your own body, we can instantly see that health is something that we need to guard and it's something where there's always potential for more. I'm sure all of you can look back at the past week and think of things that you've done that have been good for your health. And I'm sure that you can all look back and think of things that you've done that maybe weren't so good for your health. I know that

I certainly can. And exactly the same applies to us as a church. We're so thankful for the ways in which we are healthy, but we need to protect those areas and we want to nurture those areas where we see and recognise that our health could improve. And that healthy, unhealthy balance is something that we're constantly battling with as Christians and it's actually something that's so evident in our community because here in Carlyway we've got two churches and there's so many ways in which the two churches are really healthy. Both these churches preach the gospel. Both these churches are full of prayerful people. Both of these churches are trying to reach out with the good news of the gospel.

And all of that is so healthy and it's so good. But at the very same time, the fact that there's two churches, the fact that God's family is divided in our community is desperately unhealthy and it's totally unbiblical. And so there's always that balance and tension, health and unhealthy. And that's why this is such a helpful topic for us to think about.

Today we're coming to the first half of chapter two and our focus is on prayer. Timothy, Paul writes to Timothy saying, first of all then I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people. And what I hope we'll see today is that a healthy gospel church has a healthy life of prayer. That's what we're going to think about. And in particular, this passage gives us answers to three crucial questions which affect our life of prayer as a congregation. And these three questions are going to be our three headings today. Who do we pray for? What do we pray for? And why do we do it?

[4 : 25] So first question, who? This takes us to verses one and two. Who do we pray for? And if you look at that passage on the screen before you, you might be tempted to say, well, okay, who do we pray for? The answer, the answers in verse two, look, it says we pray for kings and for those who are in high positions. And that's part of the answer. But it's not the main answer. The main answer to the question, who do we pray for? Is something else? Can you see what it is? You have to look and see. The main answer is not in verse two. The main answer is in the verse one. The main answer is that we pray for all people. A healthy Gospel church prays for all people. Now, this is one of these statements in the Bible that is so easy to read quickly, whiz past and not think about. And yet it's so crucial.

God expects us as a church to pray for all people. Now, what does that mean? Because those two words, all people, that's describing an enormous entity, isn't it? All people is a vast number. And sometimes when something is so big, we can actually make it quite small in our minds because you think, well, that's just sort of, it's too big to be realistic.

You know, we can't really do that. But we must take this phrase seriously. And we must try and understand what God is wanting us to do. Now, I don't think that God is telling us to try and pray for all 8 billion people on the planet at once. And nor is this a kind of catch all Lord, we pray for everybody kind of phrase that you can, you know, maybe, maybe say thinking, well, I don't want to miss everybody out. So Lord, we just pray for everyone. I don't think that that's what's being emphasized here. What I think is being emphasized here is that if we are to have a healthy life of prayer, that means that everyone is to be included in our prayers. And absolutely no one is to be left out. In other words, everyone that we see and know this week should be brought into our prayers as individuals and as a church.

And that's reinforced by what Paul goes on to say in verse 2, where he starts at the very top of society. He gives a specific example and he goes straight to the top, we're to pray for kings and for those who are in high positions. Now for Paul and for Timothy, that meant the Roman emperor and the numerous regional governors that you had scattered across the empire. You'll remember that Timothy is in Ephesus, which is in Turkey, what we would call Turkey today. That was all part of the Roman Empire. You had the emperor in Rome, you had regional governors, that was where authority lay. The fascinating thing is that all of that means that Paul and Timothy are living in a totally un-Christian society.

Paul is telling Timothy to pray for their un-Christian and often anti-Christian rulers. Now if we dig into the historical circumstances of this letter, it becomes even more astonishing.

[7 : 44] Paul is writing this letter around the year 62. And some of you who've maybe studied the classical period will know who the emperor was. Don't worry if you don't, but if anyone knows, you can answer the question in your head, who was the emperor right now? The emperor was Nero. Now Nero is one of the more well-known Roman emperors and the reason he's so well known is because he was so awful. He committed the most horrific atrocities as emperor and after a devastating fire in Rome he launched a brutal persecution on Christians. And there's several historical records that indicate to us that it was Nero who executed Paul probably around the year 68 or something like that. That means that Paul is telling Timothy in verse 2 to pray for the man who's going to kill him. And that's an incredibly powerful reminder that no one should be excluded from our prayers. The scope of Paul's prayers is huge. And verse 2 highlights that in the second half of the verse because he goes from the emperors at the top right down to the reality of day to day life. Our day to day lives are to be characterised by living peacefully quiet, peaceful, quiet, godly, dignified lives. And I love the way Paul goes from the very top of society to the very normal day to day routine of ordinary people. Our prayer lives should encompass all of that from the very top, including the names that are stamped in the history books, right down to the most ordinary person living the most quiet life that hardly anyone knows about. Now, push it all makes perfect sense because the day to day lives that we live as Christians as a church family are affected so much by the decisions that are taken by those who have power over us. Part of the reason we pray for those who are in authority is because it affects the way we're all going to live our lives week to week. And you see that so clearly when things are going horrendously wrong. And you see it so clearly in Ukraine just now where the ordinary lives of people have been thrown into chaos because of the decisions that have been taken by rulers. All of this is a brilliant reminder that all people means all people. And so as we pray week to week as a church family, as individuals, we want to bring everyone we can into our prayer. So for Paul and Timothy that was Nero, the emperor. It was the local authorities in Ephesus. It was the families who were part of the church community there. It was neighbors and friends who lived around them. It was business owners in that city. It was the slaves in the household of the wealthy. It was the beggars sitting on the street. For us, it's Queen Elizabeth, Boris Johnson, Nicholas

Sturgeon. It's our governments in London and Edinburgh. The civil service, local councils, our schools, the staff in the hospital and the surgery. The retired, the students, the school children, infants, rich, poor, the addict, the successful, the strong, the weak, all people. And that includes people who don't believe what we believe. People who don't believe in God. People who would think very differently about sexuality and gender and relationships. People who vote differently. People who don't come to church at all. And it also probably even more importantly, it includes the people that we struggle with.

People who've hurt us. People who frustrate us. People we've maybe fallen out with. I once heard somebody talking about a Christian who had had a difficulty with another Christian and there had been a big sort of fallout. And this person had said, you know, I can't even pray for them. And they said it in a way that it was almost like a sign of their sort of righteousness and their commitment to their cause that, you know, they'd been so badly wronged by this person and they'd been such a bad fallout, I can't even pray to them. And it was kind of said, you know, in an admirable way as though it was a sign of holiness. It is absolutely not a sign of holiness. That mindset is never right. We pray for all people and that's giving us all a crucial lesson for any of us who have been hurt or if there's people that we struggle with. Now, I'm not saying any of this to kind of, you know, to kind gloss over what it's like to be hurt. Getting hurt hurts. It really hurts and it's horrible when someone hurts you and it's really horrible when that person is a fellow believer. And I'm not saying that that's an easy thing to go through. It's an incredibly difficult thing to go through. But if you experience that, if you find someone difficult, if there's somebody who kind of just makes you angry, if there's somebody who makes your blood boil, if there's somebody who has let you down, if there's someone who just does your head in, what should you do? You should pray for them. And the more they drive you mad, the more you should pray for them. Because if Paul can pray for the psychopath who's going to execute him, then surely we can pray for the people that we struggle with.

And I think that's part of what Paul emphasises in verse 8, where he highlights the importance of unity. He's saying, I desire that men should pray lifting up holy hands without quarrelling, without anger or quarrelling. It's reminding us that prayer is one of the great antidotes to anger, quarrelling and strife. If our prayer life is to be healthy, then we should pray for all people from the highest to the lowest, from the best to the worst, from those we like the most to those we like the least. No one is excluded. Question two, what should we be praying for? Well, again, the answer to this is in verse one. Paul urges that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people. Now, this is a very interesting question because when you look at that verse, you can see that Paul uses four different words to describe the same things. He talks about supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings. Now, that immediately strikes us with a question as to how we should interpret

Paul, particularly in relation to these first three words that we've got here, intercessions, supplications, intercessions, prayers and supplications, because the words he uses are actually all very similar. And that confronts us with an interpretive challenge whereby we think, well, what does Paul mean here? Does he say that these three things, supplications, prayers and intercessions are all very distinct different things? Or is he just kind of using more words than he needs to as a general description of prayer and we shouldn't dig too much into what these words mean? So do we kind of separate each one? Or do we just put them together in a one hour? That's the choice that we have to make in terms of interpreting this verse. And to be honest, I'm a bit torn on this one. I'm not, I'm kind of concede both sides because on the one hand, I don't think that we should push these distinctions too far. I don't think Paul is intending us for us to think, okay, I'm going to do a bit of supplications just now, then I'm going to do a bit of praying, and then I'm going to do a bit of interceding. And so they're all different activities. I don't think that Paul is saying that. And so I don't think we should push the distinctions between them too far. But at the same time, if the Holy Spirit directed Paul to use these different words, then there's got to be something important in each of them. We believe in the, that the inspiration of

[16 : 51] Scripture isn't just in general terms, it comes down to the specific words that are used in every verse and every sentence. So although I don't think we should push the distinctions too far, I do think it's helpful to recognize that these words are highlighting different elements that are involved in prayer. So what do they all mean? Well, first of all, we need to think about the different actions. I love that word because it basically refers to stuff that's needed. And so the word, the Greek word is related to a word that just means something that's needed, something that's necessary. And it's reminding us of the crucial connection that we've got to make between our needs and our prayers. Our needs and our prayers. If you look at the community around us, if you look at the world, if you look at our church, you can see that there's so much that we desperately need. Every single one of those needs should fuel our prayer life and we should bring all of them before

God. Prayer, as I'm sure you can see for yourselves, is a more general word. And it's just speaking to us about someone approaching God in order to talk to him. And that sounds so simple, but it's such a crucial thing to remember. One of my favorite preachers is Malcolm McClain, who is ministering Greyfriars Street Church in Inverness. And I've benefited so much from things that I've heard Malcolm say over the years. And one of the things that I love most about Malcolm is that he just makes things so incredibly simple and memorable. And I remember hearing Malcolm talking about prayer. And Malcolm, as I'm sure you know, has read hundreds of books. And he can probably remember what every single one of them said. He's got an incredible mind. And he's spent his life involved in publication alongside ministry.

And so he's read lots of books. And I remember him saying, I've read lots of books on prayer. And I'm sure he probably has probably more than I will read in a lifetime. And he said, I actually haven't found them that helpful. Because prayer is just talking to God. And I thought that was so brilliant. Because although I actually do think that books on prayer are helpful, I've read several that I've found very helpful, I think Malcolm's point is so crucial that sometimes we can make prayer this big thing and think it's got to have this that and the next thing that it's got to be really complicated and impressive. And Malcolm said, look, prayer is just talking to God. And that's such an incredible privilege for us. It's an amazing reminder that we're going to meet all sorts of people this week.

We can talk to God about them all about the person beside you in school or at work, but your neighbor, but your family about the person who sent you an email that has created a lot of work or the person that you have to send an email to or the person that you've met for the first time. We can bring them all to God in prayer. And then the third word is intercessions. That's, as I'm sure you know, that's the idea of making a request on behalf of others to God, making a request on behalf of someone else. That's one of the incredible privileges of being a Christian. We can help other people by praying for them.

So somebody is in trouble, somebody faces an illness, somebody has a difficulty in their life that they face, somebody has a big decision to make. They don't have to face that on their own. We can all gather around them in prayer and support them. I have been so encouraged in my life by people praying for me. And I am sure every Christian here can say the same thing. And that's a key part of being a healthy church. We have to intercede for one another and for our community. When it comes to the people who are in our community, it's very likely to be the case that for many of them, nobody else is praying for them except you.

[21 : 26] But for that to happen more, there's one big step that we all need to be ready to take in terms of our congregation. And that is that we need to be ready to share our prayer points with one another. And that's a really important part of being a healthy church.

That we're ready to say to one another, look, could you pray for me about this? Could you pray for me because of that? And that's something that's happened, that we do a lot and it's something that we want to do more. And we do it a lot with things that are quite big in our lives. And that's brilliant. But I also want to encourage you to do that with the little things. If anybody here has got a meeting this week that they're dreading, just tell another Christian about it so that we can pray for one another. If anybody has got maybe a wee concern that doesn't seem big enough to share, but it's still kind of bothering you a wee bit, tell someone and get them to pray for you. Let's share our prayer points more and more. But that inevitably involves being ready to tell people about the things that we're struggling with. And that's not something that we find easy, particularly in our culture. We are a very private people. Islanders in particular, we are very private, we're very closed. We absolutely love talking about other people. We absolutely hate talking about ourselves. And we've got to be ready to overcome that, to share our prayer points.

You must never forget that if you look at our life of prayer, if no weaknesses can be seen in people's lives, then it's not very healthy at all. All three of these are key aspects of prayer. It's teaching us that a healthy life of prayer involves all kind of prayers for all kinds of people. And that's reinforced by the fourth word, thanksgiving.

And that one's much easier to understand, yet it's easy to neglect. Our prayer life should be full of thanksgiving. And a key part of that is to thank God for people. And I was challenged when I thought about that because I spend a lot of time thanking God for stuff, my clothes, my house, my heating, my clean water, our food. And that's good, really good.

But the emphasis here isn't so much thanking God for stuff. The emphasis here is thanking God for people. And that's a wonderful thing for us to emphasize in our prayer life. And you know, that's just a great thing for us to do, to go through our community, the people we work with, and thank God for them. But of course, it also applies to those who are in authority, as Paul highlights in these verses. And that can be harder. Some Christians might find it really easy to pray for Boris Johnson or for Nicola Sturgeon. Others might find it very difficult to express thanksgiving. It all depends on your political thinking.

[24 : 37] The key point, though, is that whether you find it easy or find it hard, God's asking us to do it. It's a crucial reminder that our prayer life ultimately shouldn't be driven by our preferences. It should be shaped by what God likes. And that brings us to the last question. Why? Why should we pray? Paul's asking us to pray all kinds of prayers for all kinds of people. But why does he want us to do that? Well, the answer is in verses three to seven. And there's a huge amount in these verses, so we're just going to pick out two or three key points. Number one, we pray all kinds of prayers for all kinds of people because it is pleasing to God. You can see that there in verse three. Such a brilliant reminder that God delights to hear you pray. Now, please, if you think that your prayers are rubbish, which I'm pretty sure everybody in here thinks, if you think that your prayers are rubbish, please remember that when you put your head on your pillow at night, when you start talking to God, you are doing something that delights God.

And it's important to remember that when it comes to prayer, that the one thing God doesn't want you to think is that you've got nothing worth saying. And please don't ever fall into that trap of thinking that. Now, I don't know if this is a helpful illustration or not, but when it comes to prayer, it's easy to think that prayers are like cakes. The bigger and fancier they are, the better. But the truth is prayers are actually far more like strawberries. Sometimes the tiniest ones are the sweetest. Second thing I want to highlight is that we pray all kinds of prayers for all kinds of people because God wants all people to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. This is such a crucial verse because it's highlighting the fact that absolutely no one is excluded from God's offer of salvation through his Son Jesus Christ. Sin has left the whole world and the whole of humanity broken and in rebellion against God, but that is not how God wants things to be. And that means that if you look at the world around you, either in your own life, in the community, in the news globally, if you see all the brokenness in the world and think, I wish it wasn't like that, when you think like that, you are thinking the way God thinks. The difference between us and God is that we look at a broken world and we feel so helpless. God looks at the same broken world and he says, I will give my very own beloved Son to fix it and put things right. And Paul explains how that works in the amazing theology of verses five and six, which I wish we had time to go through, but we don't really have time. But he highlights the fact that there's one God, no other. He alone is Creator. He alone is the one to whom we're accountable. There's one mediator between God and man, the one Jesus Christ who can stand alongside us as our fellow human who can enter the presence of God as his beloved

Son. There's one ransom, one price paid through the blood of Jesus so that there is one cure, one antidote, one solution. There's one message, there's no other. And that testimony has been passed from the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection, all through the nations, all through the generations.

There's one great goal so that broken lost sinners would be saved and would come to know and understand the truth that God is revealing in Christ Jesus. That's what God wants. That's the whole reason that he sent his Son to save you and to save the people in your community, the people in your family, the people all across the world. And all of that is one massive reason to pray. We pray because God wants us and he wants the people around us to be saved. But I also want to highlight a final point from these verses very quickly and that relates to this word saved. And what I want us to recognize is that that word saved doesn't just mean being converted. So yes, these verses are very important in terms of evangelism, we're reminded that our carol away is full of people that God wants to save. But it's not just a case of people being converted and getting a ticket to heaven. God's desire is bigger than that. And we see that when we remember that this word for saved that you've got on the screen there before you, that word in Greek doesn't just mean being rescued. It also means to be healed. In Mark five, when the woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years said, if I touch his garments, I will be made well. It's the same word that appears in both. And it's highlighting the fact that God's desire is not just that we would be converted. God's desire is that we would be restored. His goal is to rescue us, heal us, transform us and restore us more and more into the image of his son, more and more into the people he made us to be. That's why it's so important to learn and grow. That's why Paul highlights knowledge and teaching because what we learn from him will help us grow further in our faith. Time has gone. So I'm going to have to stop, but I want to close by highlighting two things. All of this reminds us of the importance of prayer in our lives as a Christian and in our lives as a congregation. It also protects us against two great dangers. One is elitism. That was a huge problem faced by Timothy and his congregation who had these false teachers. They were making a big show of their knowledge and of their obedience and their rules and regulations. Paul smashes that elitist nonsense by telling

Timothy to pray for all kinds of people because these are the people that God wants to save. It's reminding us that our doors have got to be open for everyone and we've got to be ready for that as a church. There are far more empty seats than full seats here in our church building today and we long for the people to come in to hear the good news of Jesus. We've got to be ready for that, ready to welcome them in, ready to integrate them into the family of God. But at the same time, we want it to be the case that long before anybody walks through that door, they have already long been among us in our prayer.

[32 : 08] And so it guards us against elitism. But I think more relevant to us, I think, is that it also guards us against defeatism. If I could spell it would be helpful, but you know what I'm trying to write. Guards us against defeatism. It's so easy to be discouraged. It's so easy to think that nothing's happening. It's so easy to think that people aren't going to come and I often hear people say that we live in a day of small things. Now I understand that statement. But theologically it's wrong. Because that kind of negativity, maybe even defeatism, has no biblical warrant. There is one God and he is still God and he is still incredibly big and his desires have not changed. He wants the people around us to be saved.

He's placed us among them to share this message of salvation and he is not and he never will be a God of small things. And that's why as a church, we are going to keep on praying to him for everyone around us and for everything that's happening. That's why the key to a healthy life of prayer is to never ever forget how big and how utterly amazing God actually is. By his grace, there will be no elitism, no defeatism. Instead, grounded and fuelled by a healthy life of prayer, we will blast on together to serve and honour him. Amen.

And we pray that the power, importance, privilege and excitement of prayer would be something that we know and understand more and more and more. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Our closing item of praise is Psalm 116. We're going to sing this thing, Psalm's version. I love these verses because they speak of God's amazing goodness and hearing our voice and answering prayer, but they also express our commitment and our desire to live for him every day of our lives while we have breath. So again, we'll use the recording with Stand Sing, Psalm 116 to God's praise.