

The sermon “First of all, pray”
From 1 Timothy 2:1-7
By Rev. Peter Blank
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Imagine with me, it’s March 1861. Abraham Lincoln has just become our 16th President. Seven states have seceded from the Union, and Virginia is on the brink. You’re sitting in a Virginia church as I stand up to read these words:

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Now imagine that same congregation a year later—March 1862. Virginia has seceded. They no longer claim Lincoln as their president but Jefferson Davis. Same text. Same command. But how differently would those words land?

That’s the tension of this passage. Our prayers for leaders often shift depending on who’s in power. But Paul’s command does not.

Paul’s instruction is clear: the people of God are called to always pray for those in authority, for the good and godliness of everyone.

First of all, Pray: Praying for Our Authorities

Church is not easy. Paul wrote Timothy to help lead the church through conflict and confusion. He begins with politics: “requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for kings and all those in authority.”

That was controversial in Rome, and it would be controversial in Virginia in 1861—or in America today. We dull the edge of Paul’s command by tailoring our prayers to our political preferences.

Sometimes our only “thanksgiving” is that our side won. Other times our prayers sound more like the rabbi in Fiddler on the Roof: “May the Lord bless and keep the Tsar... far away from us.”

Paul, however, is specific. He lists four types of prayer.

Requests: Ask God to give leaders what they need to govern well—wisdom, courage, restraint, humility—so that all people can live peaceful, quiet, godly lives. That means praying not just for policies that fit your agenda, but for the welfare of store owners, seniors, Asians and African Americans, police officers, immigrants—everyone.

Prayers: Remember you are addressing God, not lobbying God. Prayer is submission, not a political manifesto. God may see what our nation needs very differently than we do.

Intercessions: Put yourself in someone else's shoes and pray accordingly. If you were the president facing a national crisis, what wisdom would you need? If you were a teacher navigating crowded classrooms, a single parent juggling work and childcare, a nurse working double shifts, a retiree on a fixed income, a police officer's spouse, a small business owner, or a young adult carrying student debt—what would you hope leaders would do? Bring those appeals before God.

Thanksgivings: Give thanks for leaders, even the ones you dislike. That may seem impossible, but remember who was in power when Paul wrote this—Emperor Nero. The same Nero who lit Christians on fire for sport. Yet Paul still said to give thanks. If he could command thanksgiving for Nero, we can certainly find reasons to give thanks under any president.

Only Jesus deserves your full allegiance. Every other leader—good or bad—is temporary. If you long for Christ's kingdom 'to come here on earth as it is in Heaven,' let that shape your prayers.

First of all, Pray: The Good and Godliness of All

Praying for leaders isn't ultimately about them. It's about everyone under their authority, "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

God cares about the quality of this life—justice, safety, daily bread. God sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous alike. So, our prayers must be practical: schools that function, courts that are fair, neighborhoods that are safe. [A note on safe neighborhoods. You don't know this about me: I moved my family to Oregon to get away from the gun violence of Fresno, CA. There were regular drive shootings in the neighborhood where I lived. I feared for my children's safety every day.] If your spirituality doesn't move you to care about your neighbor's welfare, it isn't the spirituality of Jesus.

But Paul doesn't stop at peace and quiet. He adds godliness and holiness. Only the gospel brings that. God wants all sorts of people—rich and poor, black and white, native-born and immigrant, conservative and liberal—to come to the knowledge of the truth.

That's why politicizing the gospel is so dangerous. The church has survived under emperors, prime ministers, communists, and dictators. The prayer remains the same: that people would meet Jesus, the one mediator between God and humanity, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.

Think of the Disciples Matthew and Simon: Matthew the tax collector and Simon the zealot—political enemies who became brothers because Jesus was greater than their politics. That's the unity God desires, and it begins when we pray for leaders, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as citizens of heaven.

Conclusion

So: pray for President Trump. Pray for Speaker Mike Johnson. Pray for Chief Justice Roberts. Pray for Governor Kotek. Not because they're on your side, but because God has put them in place, and their decisions affect everyone. Pray that through their leadership people might live

peaceful, quiet lives—and that through the gospel, people from every background might live godly, holy lives.

This is the unity God desires, not through compromise, but through Christ—the one mediator, the ransom for all. Pray for that. Amen.