

## **PRAYING FOR THE LOST**

Text: 1 Timothy 2:1-8

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

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A few weeks ago the concern for the refugees flooding into Europe took a big turn. Our government decided to bring thousands of refugees for resettlement in Australia. This week we have seen the Minister for Migration Peter Dutton in Jordan meeting with refugees. What created the change of heart? The vision of that one little boy who drowned being picked up out of the water. We have known for a while now about the plight of hundreds of thousands of refugees. But nothing stirred our compassion as the sight of that one little boy. Often we can be overwhelmed with the sheer size of the numbers fleeing their countries. It all seems too hard so we mentally switch off. But when we relate with one person it focuses our minds. It touches us deeply. I wonder if that is also how it is for the mission Jesus gave us to *"...go make disciples of all the nations"*. That is a huge mandate. To bring the gospel to everyone around the world. To make disciples of them all. The task is overwhelming. And our own lives are already so busy. And as we don't, and can't, really relate with them all we mentally switch off. Perhaps we need to focus on a few so we develop genuine care and be serious about bringing others to the faith. I raise this point because the Natural Church Development survey found that our current lowest factor is 'Passionate Spirituality'. And our lowest reading for all the questions in that survey is 'Do I pray for my friends, colleagues and relatives who do not yet know Jesus Christ, that they will come to faith?' Why do we have that as our lowest reading? Is it simply part of us not spending much time relating with God? Are we overwhelmed by the sheer scale of praying for all the lost? Do we simply assume no one can believe unless God's Spirit gives new birth, so we leave it to God?

This praying for the lost is what Paul is giving instruction about to Timothy in our text. What is striking about what Paul says is the passion and the sheer scope of what should be prayed for. In setting the context we see that Paul wanted Timothy to stay in

Ephesus because there were a number of serious issues in the church. There were divisions and false teaching, pride and love of money. Here in chapter 2 Paul begins to specify the things Timothy needs to do. And the first thing Timothy needs to deal with is praying for 'people to be saved'. Note in verse 1 how he says *"I urge, then, first of all..."* We get a clue as to the issue here by what he says to correct it. Paul's main concern here is pray for all people, because as verse 4 says God *"wants all people to be saved."* And in verse 8 Paul says *"I want the men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."* So the main idea here is that Timothy was to get the church to pray for the lost on a wide scale because it was not doing that. And when they did pray they were to do it as a united group and not arguing. The dispute came about because there were several groups in the church. You had the Jews who insisted that a person had to keep the Old Testament laws to be acceptable to God. And there were the Gnostics who said that salvation only belonged to the elite who had reached a certain level of knowledge. So there was a tendency for each group to say that unless you thought as they did you were not part of the 'in group'. It reminds us of Jonah a couple of weeks ago who only saw Israel as God's people. But the whole point of Israel being God's people was to bring salvation to the whole world.

This is a dangerous position for a church to be in. So Paul uses strong language to get Timothy to change that attitude. Look at verse 1 *"I urge, then, first of all..."* Paul doesn't just give Timothy a quiet instruction. What he says is deeper, more urgent. 'I urge you, I beg you, I implore you, I insist on it'. This is something that comes from the passionate heart of someone who cares deeply. To truly pray for others we need to pick up on this passion. We need this heartfelt drive to pray. A simple command which is met by a ritual prayer completely misses the mark. Now why is it that Paul urges prayer for everyone to be saved as *"first of all"*? He does so because it is the primary objective of being the church. It is what we are in the world for. Our purpose as church is to reach the lost. Our mission as Jesus said is to *"...go make disciples of all the nations"*. That is our first priority. Paul goes on after this to deal with a number of important issues for the church. Things like the leadership of the church and ensuring proper teaching. But his first priority is getting straight the matter of spreading the gospel and the need to pray for that.

When we look further in verse 1 we see that Paul doesn't just say 'Pray...for everyone' He uses four distinct words to make a strong point. *"I urge, then, first of all, that*

*petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone...*" Why does Paul, inspired by the Spirit, use four different words? He is obviously making a strong point. Let's look at the words. The word 'petitions' can mean 'request' or 'supplication'. The Greek word has the sense of lacking something, to be deprived. So there is a real sense of need. Being without something that is desperately needed, you go to the one who can supply what you need. In other words those who are without Jesus need Jesus, desperately. The need is immense. Without a belief in Jesus a person faces an eternity without God in hell. That is something we are aware of. But do we feel it, deeply? To really pray for the lost we need to be reminded of this enormous need. Richard Baxter, the Puritan pastor of the seventeenth century said 'Oh, if you have the hearts of Christians, let them yearn toward your poor ignorant neighbours. Alas there is but a step between them and death and hell. Many hundred diseases are waiting to seize them and if they die unregenerate they are lost forever. Have you hearts of rock that cannot pity people in such cases as this? If you believe not the Word of God and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not bestir yourself to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned as long as you are saved? Do you live close by them or meet them in the streets or labour with them or travel with them or sit and talk with them and say nothing to them of their souls or the life to come? If their house were on fire, you would run and help them and will you not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell?'

The second word 'prayers' is a general word for praying. Interestingly unlike the word 'petitions' this word is used in the Bible only in reference to God. So it has the sense of sacredness. You are not just going to anybody who can meet a need. You are going to God. It carries the sense of worship. When you pray for someone to be saved it's not only because of their great need. It is also to have God honoured. It's about that great sense of praise given to God when people experience his grace. The third word 'intercessions' has the sense of being intimately involved with someone and acting on their behalf. So it's not the cool professional legal advocate. It is more like Jesus, pleading our cause in heaven as the very one who suffered hell in our place. So to pray for the lost is about having compassion and involvement with those who are in deep need. One of the reasons we don't pray for the lost is our hearts have been shut off to the shocking realisation of the desperation people face in eternity without God. The fourth word Paul uses is 'thanksgiving'. We give thanks that God is so gracious that people can be forgiven and experience his grace. We thank God for the privilege

of being a fellow worker with God to bring hope to this world. We thank God that the gospel can be extended to everyone.

The scope of those we are called to pray for is unlimited. That is what comes out so strongly in what Paul writes here to Timothy. In verse 1 he writes prayers are to *"be made for everyone..."* In verse 4: God *"wants all people to be saved..."* In verse 6 *"...the man Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all people..."* Three times in these few verses Paul makes the same point. You can't miss what he is getting at. That being the case, it's interesting that in verse 2 Paul focuses on *"...kings and all those in authority"*. That would not have come naturally to the Christians in those days. The Roman emperor of the time was Nero, who was not only a perverted and vicious tyrant. He blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome and persecuted and killed them. It would not be surprising if the Christians then had prayed for certain leaders to be removed! But Paul is urging for prayer that the emperor and other unjust leaders come to know God as their saviour. He knew nobody is beyond the grace of God. And also in the providence of God the same emperor who executed Paul kept the peace over the vast Roman empire. And because of the peace the gospel was able to spread like wildfire. That's why Paul writes that we *"...may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."* When we pray for our leaders and pray for peace in our country it is not just about having a nice quiet good life. It's about having the ideal conditions for sharing the gospel with others. Think about God's timing of the birth of Jesus. It was in the time of 'pax romana'. That's the Latin phrase which meant the huge Roman empire was at peace. In other words our prayers should always have as focus the plea for the gospel to spread.

Why do we pray that? Well in verses 3-6 Paul gives us one of the most profound statements of the saving purpose of God. One commentator calls it 'monumental stuff'. Why pray for the lost? Verse 3 *"This is good and pleases God our Saviour..."* It is good! It is right! To pray that people are saved from meaningless existence to a place where they know God and enjoy him, is the best thing in all the world to do! Paul also writes *"...it pleases God"*. The Greek here means it is 'highly acceptable', it is something God would 'applaud', he would 'heartily welcome' it. It is a very warm word. God applauds this kind of prayer because it lines up with his own character. As verse 4 says he *"...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"*. Praying for others to be saved is what God wants! That is his heart's desire. When we

pray for the lost we align our heart and passion with God's heart and passion. Paul mentions something else that is reflective of God's character in verse 5: *"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind..."* This gets to the heart of the whole Bible. There is only one God. As the Old Testament so clearly said "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one!... Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength". Serve the one God with your entire being because there is no other God. In our post modern world the view is there are any number of religions and gods that are all deemed as acceptable. As the post modernist says 'You have your god and I have mine'. If that is true we don't need to bother praying for everyone to be saved. They can all be happy with their own religion. But that's not what Paul is teaching here. Note again verse 5&6. There is only *"one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all people..."* In other words if there is only the one mediator then apart from Jesus we are all damned. If you think about it, it makes sense. If there were all sorts of ways to God why did Jesus give everything he had. In Jesus we see the astonishing love and compassion of God. God gave all he had to bring us forgiveness and hope. In Jesus we see the character and the real desire of God that everyone is saved. We should have that same passion. We should have that same heart desire that expresses itself in earnest prayer for everyone to be saved. A little deaf girl once said 'prayer is the wish of the heart'. May our hearts burst with compassion for the world. May we pray as the Reformers did. John Knox prayed 'Give me Scotland or I die!' George Whitfield prayed 'Oh Lord give me souls or take my soul'. Think of that sibling, that son or daughter, that friend, that workmate and imagine them forever lost from the presence of God. Feel that concern, that compassion and let it drive you to pray for them. Get close to God in your devotional life and feel his compassion not only for you, or your family, but for the world. Plead with God for all people to be saved. Charles Spurgeon captured that sense of passion when he said 'If sinners be damned at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go un-warned and un-prayed for.' As Paul said *"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone..."*

