

Proper 20C: We Are Intercessors for the World

1. This week we continue our brief survey of Paul's first letter to Timothy
 - a. Remember last week we said that this was one of his pastoral epistles (I and II Timothy and Titus) where he gives instructions to leaders that he had placed in churches to continue the work of the Gospel
 - i. He began by reminding Timothy that the ministry and ability to serve and preach were not given to Timothy or even Paul because they deserved it but rather by God's grace.
 - ii. As Paul considered his life in relation to God's Word, he was made to humbly acknowledge that truth as he said, **"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."** (I Tim 1:15)
 - iii. That's what he wanted to instill in Timothy before he even gave him any pastoral instruction – remember who you really are before you can teach and preach to others.
 - iv. But knowing that Paul encouraged Timothy to use that humility for the Gospel, **"But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."** (I Tim 1:16)
 - b. This week Paul gives his first instruction to Timothy as a pastor – it is to pray; the role of pastor is one of intercession not just for your congregation but the world
 - i. And while Paul is particularly giving instruction to Timothy as a pastor that same applies for all of us in the Christian life.
 - ii. We are intercessors for the world, bringing Christ to the people and people to Christ by the power of prayer!
 - iii. As Paul notes in our reading today, **"First of all I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people..."** (I Tim 2:1) – we are intercessors for the world
 - iv. But he goes on, **"for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."** (I Tim 2:2) – we don't pray for any particular party or philosophy but rather peace and the ability to live out our faith.
2. That doesn't sound so amazing but remember the historical context of when this letter was written – we think in the 60s AD
 - a. In the summer of the year 64 AD, $\frac{3}{4}$ of Rome was consumed by a fire
 - i. The emperor Nero was on the throne (he came to power in 54 AD), many believed he had set the blaze, but in order to deflect criticism he blamed Christians
 - ii. A few were rounded up and under torture implicated others
 - iii. Soon the church in Rome was under attack, the first persecution of Christians had begun

- iv. They were tortured and killed in a variety of ways for the amusement of the emperor and the populace - some were even tarred and hung on crosses burned as evening torchlight in the emperor's garden – it wasn't a pleasant time for us
- b. Somewhere around this time Paul pens this letter to Timothy in Ephesus
 - i. But if this was written during Nero's reign, as we suspect, things weren't going to be peaceful and quiet (if they weren't already)
 - ii. In fact, we believe that Paul was beheaded under Nero's persecution following the burning of Rome.
 - iii. Yet he gives the same advice to Titus, who was pastor on the island of Crete, during that time, "**be submissive to rulers and authorities...be obedient...be ready for every good work...**" (Titus 3:1)
- c. Who in their right mind prays God's blessing on those who are actively persecuting them?
 - i. With logic like that it's a wonder the church ever got off the ground in the first place!
 - ii. That kind of advice goes against every fiber of our being especially when we or someone we love is under attack
 - iii. Christianity, true biblical Christianity, is the hardest thing we can ever do it takes much more courage and strength than we could ever muster
- 3. But from God's Word we learn that His command to pray for those who hate us flows from the very essence of Who Christ is and what He's done for us and our salvation
 - a. As our Lord hung on the cross, He prayed for those who crucified Him and were taunting Him, "**Father forgive them for they know not what they do.**"
 - i. In the Sermon on the Mount He said, "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**"
 - ii. Some would see this as a mark of weakness, an unwillingness to face conflict and stand up for yourself
 - iii. But which is easier, to hate those who hate you or to pray for their good?
 - iv. And in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "**forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**" (Mt 6:12) – we are called to be like Jesus on the cross to forgive even as we are sinned against because we recognize that we sin against God all the time.
 - b. Also in the Lord's Prayer He taught us how to pray and for whom, "**thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...**" (Mt 6:10)
 - i. What is God's will on earth? Paul tells us in our reading.
 - ii. He prays for all people including rulers (good or bad) because, "**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.**" (1 Tim 2:3)

- iii. Prayer is a powerful weapon given us by the Father to change the course of events in our lives and the world
- 4. And even if our prayers are of no avail in bringing others to faith, God still works His will through nonbelievers for the benefit of His Kingdom
 - a. By the year 313 Constantine was in power and after many years of suffering and prayer by the church he was persuaded to end Roman persecution of the Church.
 - i. But it's not just rulers who persecute us, we run into opposition to the Christian life from all quarters
 - ii. And while that opposition probably will not result in physical danger like the early Christians faced from the empire it's still hurtful
 - iii. But irrespective of what someone might be doing to us at a given moment Christ still died for them
 - iv. Just because they're against us doesn't mean that God's against them
 - v. Our response remains the same, to pray for those who persecute us rather than return evil for evil
 - b. But how do we go about doing something that's so against our nature like praying for those who hate us?
 - i. First, we pray for ourselves, that through His Holy Spirit God would remind us that it's by grace alone that we too aren't hostile to the Gospel
 - ii. The greatest power of prayer is the transformation it brings in our lives, as we pray, "Thy will be done not my will."
 - iii. And then we fortify ourselves with the gifts that God has given to transform our hearts and minds: word, worship, body and blood
 - iv. By these means, so easily overlooked, God brings change first to us and through us to the world
 - c. You are intercessors for the world stand boldly on the promises of God that your prayers and supplications are heard before God on His throne.