

1 Timothy 2:1-7
June 28, 2009

South Plains

God Bless The Rulers of Every Nation

Several years ago when the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq involved even more American casualties than they do today, and September 11, 2001 was still a fresh wound on our country, a friend of mine found a bumper sticker she liked. The background was pale blue with a dove in one corner and a message that said, "God bless the people of every nation." A few days after putting the bumper sticker on her car, she found a note taped above her bumper asking this question: "Even the evil-doers?"

If we resort to reducing our faith to bumper stickers, the obvious answer to that question is, "Yes, we do ask God to bless even the evil-doers." But, that is a prayer is easier said than it is sincerely prayed when we are at war. Many of us know soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq who are at risk every day of stepping on a IED or confronting a suicide bomber. It is hard to pray that our enemies will receive anything from God except just punishment. But, First Timothy says we are to pray with supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings, especially to rulers so that we may all enjoy a quiet and peaceable life. If we must pray for evil-doers, how do we pray?

Perhaps it will surprise you to learn that John Calvin offers some help. Since this year is the

quincentenary of Calvin's birth there is no end of commentary on his life and work. I am grateful to Elsie McKee of Princeton Seminary for some help with this sermon.

Prayer was not a peripheral concern for John Calvin. His lifework was as a pastor. He did not write for the universities or the seminaries. Almost all of the 52 volumes of his collected works were written with ordinary Christians in mind. He preached or lectured several times a week. Always he begins with prayer. First Timothy 2:1-7 is a passage he refers to several times.

Furthermore, prayer for one's enemies was not a theoretical question for Calvin. Remember he lived his adult life as a refugee in Geneva because Protestants were persecuted in his home country of France. Even in Protestant Geneva, Calvin's pastoral guidance was not always welcome either by the rulers of the city or by its leading citizens. It should not be surprising that a man with so many firm opinions about so many things would have so many enemies.

Praying for everyone is not theoretical for us at South Plains any more than it was for John Calvin. Not only is our nation at war, as human beings we are often at odds with a neighbor, a family member or even the person in the next pew. Indeed, the closer we are to someone, the greater will be the challenge of overcoming enmity and antagonism. Perhaps the only disagreement

comparable to warfare is when a husband and wife are at dagger points with each other. Yet, scripture is clear:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions.

I try to pray regularly for national, state and local leaders in the prayers of the people. Of course, it's in our own self-interest to pray for those who lead our land. They ensure a quiet and peaceable society. It may seem that the Lord is asking too much that we intercede also on behalf of the enemies of the United States, especially those leaders who call themselves our enemies. How shall we offer thanksgiving for Osama bin Laden or Ahmadijehad?

Calvin might answer that question by quoting both the Apostle Paul and Jesus. Paul, he says, "not only bids us to pray for the salvation of unbelievers, but also to give thanks for their prosperity and well being." Then he quotes a familiar passage from Jesus' sermon on the mount:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-46)

God is good, not only to us, but also to the unrighteous. Which is probably a good thing since I am often among the company of the unrighteous. If we want to be children of God, we will become imitators of God, blessing our neighbors, praying for our persecutors at home and abroad; and even loving our enemies.

Martin Bucer, who was a contemporary of John Calvin and much admired by the younger Calvin, once urged that we "pray promiscuously for all." I wonder what a difference it would make in the Presbyterian Church (USA), if that kind of promiscuous prayer spread throughout the church. Suppose pro-choice advocates prayed that God would bless pro-lifers in their work, and vice versa. Suppose heterosexuals were to ask God's blessing on gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons. So much of our rhetoric is toxic. Not the official pronouncements, of course, but the unofficial remarks and exasperated sighs, the carefully crafted public relations ploys, and the intemperate explosions that we excuse as evidence that we are "only human, after all."

The example and life of Jesus tells us that to be fully human is to be fully loving. I'm afraid that means love and prayer for our enemies. I cannot help but believe that early in his ministry when Jesus goes apart to a lonely place to pray, he is praying not only for stubborn disciples like Peter, for ambitious disciples like John and James, but also for his enemies, even for Judas. He came, after all, not to heal those who were healthy, but to heal those who were sick with sin.

One of our members told me that she needs to pray for our enemies because that is the kind of prayer that cleanses her from the inside out. When we ask God for prosperity and blessing for rulers of every nation, including our national enemies, two things begin to happen. First, we open ourselves to the possibility of change. We invite grace into our own lives. In every conflict, whether the battle takes place on an international stage or inside a living, there are always two sides to the story. There is always something that each side can learn or say or do that changes the struggle. It may be nothing more than gaining a perspective enabling us to live more easily with conflict. Praying for our opponent is the first step in discovering the possibility of change.

Second, when we practice this kind of prayer we are practicing godliness. We are acting like God, imitating Christ, being led by the Holy Spirit. God is generous with God's enemies. The crazy truth about life is that we have to practice becoming the kind of people we want to become. Just as no one becomes a better golfer without practice, no one becomes a kinder person without practicing kindness. This means that some days we will be behaving in a kind and generous way even when we are not feeling kind and generous.

Two students at the University of Virginia have started a new business called "The Forgetful Gentleman." They are selling a little kit designed to help men remember to send thank you letters and act like gentlemen. The idea is that if we practice good manners

we will eventually take on the character of a gentleman. It's a substitute for those of us who didn't learn everything we should have from our mothers. It's also a tacit acknowledgement of original sin and our need for grace. We don't get better unless we enroll in God's fitness program.

One more benefit comes to those who pray for kings and rulers. Our horizon expands. The best selling point for Christianity is what Christ does for me in offering forgiveness and new life. But, if my Christianity stops at the end of my nose or with those close at hand, that near-sightedness becomes a handicap. We serve a great God who rules the nations, who aims for "justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:24)." Our God is a mighty God, Creator of heaven and earth who chose a people for himself, not because they were better but because God simply wanted to love them. It is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior to pray for all in high positions because God desires everyone to be saved.

Then this letter quotes a line that some believe must have been a confession of faith for the early church:

There is one God;
there is also one mediator
between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,
who gave himself a ransom for all.

There's the heart of the business of prayer. We are dealing with a God much greater than we can imagine, more powerful than our understanding can conceive and whose involvement in the powers and principalities of the universe simply dwarfs any of our so-called superpowers. We dare not treat Father, Son and Holy Spirit as nothing more than a little household god whose job is to fend off bad luck from our family.

In recognition of the One we worship, we pray not only for ourselves, but also for the concerns of the world, acknowledging with humility that God's blessing can do more good than ours, and that God's grace is better than our curses.

There was an occasion when one of Calvin's fierce enemies, a persecutor of Protestants in France, had died. Upon hearing of his death, some preacher called the deceased a reprobate, essentially calling him damned by God. Calvin rebuked this preacher, saying "We must guard against presumption and temerity, for [there is no one who can know that] but one Judge before whose tribunal we have all to render an account (*John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety, p. 307ff*)."

May God be merciful to us all, the great and the small, and especially evil-doers. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.