

SERMON

In our current polarizing atmosphere, it can be difficult to explain and defend why we should remain kind and loving. When narratives are created to paint one side as righteous and the other as evil, and when people feel personally attacked, belittled, or misrepresented, the tendency to be hostile and aggressive and to repay evil with evil rises within us. A desire to see the downfall of those who have opposed us quietly builds.

When people feel this way, it's not irrational or inhumane. These are very valid feelings and thoughts. However, the Apostle Paul offers a radical and challenging instruction. He says, "First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions."

For everyone? Maybe Paul didn't know the times that we live in when he wrote this letter. Am I supposed to pray for leaders and people who are openly against my well-being and progress, who degrade me, think I'm not good enough, and prevent me from having equal opportunities? Should I pray for people at my workplace who are hostile and antagonistic toward me? Should I pray for those who, out of favoritism, bypass me, giving others positions and promotions even when I am the most qualified? Should I pray for the person in my class who bullies, lies, and speaks ill of me? Should I pray for the family member who mistreated, abused, and even abandoned me?

No! Paul probably didn't know what he was talking about when he said this, because how dare he tell me to pray, intercede, and give thanks for all these people?

However, as I ask these questions, I remember that Paul was writing to Timothy, a leader in the church in Ephesus, a city in the Roman Empire. The very "kings and all who are in high positions" that Paul was talking about were the ones who had a track record of oppressing Israel and, more recently, were persecuting Christians. The Roman authorities crucified Jesus and would later imprison Paul himself. Yet, he still said to pray for these people. So maybe he did know what he was talking about.

Paul gives us two reasons for this strange instruction. First, he says it is so that "we may lead a peaceful and quiet life." This implies that when I pray for people who have caused me harm, it is primarily helping me, not just them. It ends up being as much for my benefit as it is for theirs. It seems that when we engage in the simple, yet powerful, acts of prayer in the midst of chaos and adversity, there is a divine supply of peace, stillness, healing, and wholeness, first within us and then in our external world. So, we could say, "I am not praying for you because I like you, but rather because I like me."

Paul then says the second reason we should pray for everyone is that "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 a knowledge of the truth."

We pray for everyone because we recognize that prayer is a means by which God touches people and reconciles them to Himself. Therefore, recognizing our role in the ministry of reconciliation, we humbly obey.

And yes, it is difficult and hard to pray for people who hate, belittle, and malign us. But we realize that this is what distinguishes us from them; it is a sign of true, mature Christian faith.

As a song by the band For King & Country says, "And they'll know we are Christian by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christian by our love." Our witness in a world filled with all kinds of darkness and evil is the love of Christ. As we show this love through prayer, forgiveness, and compassion, we not only challenge but also invite others to embrace and fully walk in the life and love of God. Amen.