1 Timothy 2:1-4 *Pray: Talking to God on Behalf of Your Neighbors*

***At the Dentist***I went to the dentist this week.

Now, before I tell you my story, I want you to know that this is not one of those bash the dentist stories. I know some people are scared of the dentist. But not me. I actually like going to the dentist. I’m somewhat obsessive about brushing my teeth, and in my entire life I’ve only ever had one cavity filled (and I still dispute the legitimacy of that cavity). The biggest complaint my dentist has about my teeth is that I brush too hard and I’m at risk of brushing away the enamel.

So, I don’t mind visiting the dentist. But, when I do go to the dentist, there is one thing I worry about: I worry that the oral hygienist is going to want to have a conversation. Now, again, nothing against oral hygienists. There are several of them who attend our church. Wonderful people.

But, when you are getting your teeth cleaned, and this person is scraping with those little metal tools, spritzing in there with the water, and then sucking all the water and spit out with that little vacuum straw, it’s kind of hard to carry on a conversation.

Plus, I’m always a little bit afraid that there’s going to be some piece of food stuck way back there, or it’s going to be obvious that I haven’t flossed, or some other unsightly thing that is going to be discovered about my mouth.

So, my preferred strategy for a getting my teeth cleaned is just to lay back, cross my feet at the ankles, put on the sunglasses they give me, close my eyes, open my mouth, and hope that we get through it with as little talking as possible.

Back to this week. I went in on Wednesday and my hygienist was someone I had never had before. And she was pretty quiet. So things were going great.

But as I was laying there I started to think about this Neighboring Life series we are in; and I thought about the quote I read last week that said it is more important to be interested than interesting; and I became convicted that I should really make an effort to get to know this gal who had her fingers in my mouth. So, in between the scraping and the spritzing and the sucking, I started asking questions.

I found out she was new to town, I found out where she was from, I found out she had a little boy in pre-school. She saw on my chart that I was a pastor, so she asked me what church I was at. So then I got a chance to tell her about Hope and invite her to bring her son to Trunk-or-Treat. We had a nice conversation. Nothing earth shattering. I don’t know if they’ll come to Trunk-or-Treat or not, and it’s o.k. if they don’t. But I never would have had the chance to invite her if I hadn’t taken an interest in her.

I was a reading a book called *Next Door As It Is In Heaven* this week and I came across this quote:

Among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa, the most common greeting, equivalent to “hello” in English, is the expression: *Sawu bona.* It literally means, “I see you.” If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhona*, “I am here.” The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It’s as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence.

The authors of the book go on to write this:

When we merely move through our days without seeing people as people, then as far as it matters to us in that moment, they really don’t exist. We are busy people, living in a busy world. Yet, we are called by the Lord to bring out the “God-flavors” [in] the places we carry out our lives (Matthew 5:13, MSG)—salting the earth with joy, kindness, smiles, laughter and more. **Being conscious of how we approach** people we encounter through the normal routines of our day is a step toward bringing out the tastes of heaven here on our patch of earth. (p. 76)

We are called to “see” our neighbors. To make space in our lives for them. To take an interest in them.

And one of the best ways to do that is by praying for them.

***Praying Without Results***Now, I know that we all know about the importance of prayer. And I’m sure most of us feel like we should pray more. But, I’m guessing that, for a lot of us, prayer can be a struggle.

Sometimes we don’t pray as much as we should because we don’t know what to say. We don’t feel particularly articulate, and we stumble over our words. Or, we get distracted. We set out to pray with the best of intentions, but our minds start to wander, we have all these things that we want to pray about and they race through our mind one after the other.

But one of the biggest reasons we struggle to pray more consistently is that we have a “results-oriented” view of prayer. We have this idea that prayer is this super-spiritual procedure which will get results, and when we don’t see those results, we conclude that there is something wrong with us or with the words that we are saying.

A man named Steve Hawthorne says this, on the website waymakers.org:

Prayer is usually presented as a procurement process or a problem-solving method that mysteriously “works,” but only part of the time. We have somehow thought that we could motivate people to pray by convincing them that prayer works. But by that same logic, if it doesn’t work, we should stop praying. And for the most part, we have.

Hawthorne goes on to say that we need to pray differently:

We do our best praying when we pray beyond our personal needs and persistently pray toward the great things that God has purposed to accomplish in history. We do our best praying for others when we envision and intercede for the good things that God has desired for them. We do our best praying as a people, united and focused by God’s word.

One of the best ways to bless our neighbors and our neighborhoods is to pray for them. And one of the best ways to improve our prayer lives is to pray differently. Instead of judging our prayers for the results that they get, we need to see prayer as talking to God on behalf of our neighbors about things that we know He wants for them.

***Prayers Made for All People***Let me share a passage of scripture with you. It’s **1 Timothy 2:1-4:**

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— **2**for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. **3**This is good, and pleases God our Savior, **4**who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Let me make a couple of quick observations about this passage before I get into our main points.

For one thing, I am making quite a bit out of the words “all people.” When the Apostle Paul urges us to pray for “all people”, he means “all people.” And that includes your next door neighbors.

Now, don’t think that this means you can say a quick little prayer like: “Dear Jesus, please bless all the people of the world. Amen” and think that covers you. That’s not what Paul means. When he says “all people”, he means all categories of people. Pray for the people who live next door. Pray for the people affected by the violence in Las Vegas. Pray for the people displaced by wildfires. Pray for all categories of people, but pray specifically.

And my other observation is this: we often think of this passage as instruction to pray for our leaders, our governors and senators and the president and so on. And, it is certainly that. The very example of a category of people that Paul suggests that we pray for is “kings and all those in authority.” But I’m not really going to talk about that. We are going to talk about what this says about praying for our neighbors.

Except, let me point out that when Paul urges Timothy to pray for kings and authorities, he’s not talking about people who were exactly fans of the Christian movement. This would have been a time when Emperors like Nero and provincial governors were cold towards Christianity, if not outright hostile.

Over 35 years ago John Piper said this about this verse, words which seem eerily relevant still today:

…what [Paul] seems to be saying is this: "Timothy, push out the boundaries of your concern. Do not let your prayers be limited to any one group of people or kind of people. Enlarge the circumference of your love. Do not be provincial, sectarian, nationalistic, elitist, or racist in your prayers. Let your prayers embrace all kinds of people: high and low, white and black, democrats and republicans, Soviet premiers and Iranian Ayatollahs. Enlarge your heart until it embraces the world. Go to school at Calvary until you can hate the bigotry and racism of the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, but can pray with yearning love in your hearts for these men and women.” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/pray-for-kings-and-all-in-high-positions>

So, with those things in mind, let’s look at four suggestions from this passage for how we can pray differently for our neighbors:

***Pleading Their Case***First, we should **Pray like an attorney.** We should see ourselves as speaking to God on behalf of our neighbors. **Let’s look again at verse 1:**

1I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—

You’ll notice that there are four different words for prayer given here. “Petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving.” When I first started working on this sermon I thought that would be my outline. I’d just take each word, talk about the unique aspect of prayer it represents, and wrap it all up with a nice story or something. But the more I looked into it, the more I realized there really isn’t that much difference in meaning for these words. They are common words for prayer, in Greek just like they are in English.

What does stand out in this verse, though, is that Paul is urging that prayers be made *“for”* all people. He is urging us to pray on behalf of others.

This is often called intercessory prayer. In fact, a definition I found for the word intercession is: “an intimate petition by a friend to a king on behalf of someone else.” We are being urged to see ourselves as advocates—that’s what I mean by praying like an attorney—speaking to God on behalf of others.

In fact, this metaphor, of us as attorneys pleading a case before the judge of heaven, is one of the ways we can move away from a results focused view of prayer. Steve Hawthorne explains:

I don’t think heaven's court and the throne of God are mere imagery. There is too much consistency throughout the Bible to seriously think otherwise. Every time God reveals Himself in full blazing glory in scripture, He reveals Himself seated on a throne, surrounded by angelic majesties, governing all things with astounding righteousness and never-dying love…We have wrongly regarded heaven as just so much eternal reward, merely some puffy clouds and mansions for our bliss. Heaven in the Hebrew mind is God’s throneroom…

What then is prayer in this paradigm? Prayer is approaching God Almighty as a king who is governing all things in real time. All the cities, peoples, and persons of the earth are open cases before Him. He monitors the story of every breathing person. He doesn’t need prayer to accomplish His purposes, but prayer could be His favorite way to glorify Himself and even honor those who pray.

The courtroom model does not promise that any prayer instantly sways the mind of God's counsel. Many appeals are not upheld. Some motions are not sustained. But we can count on God to wisely weigh the lives and words of those who pray in light of His purpose as it unfolds throughout all the earth…

I suppose it’s okay to say that prayer works. But I think it may be more accurate to say that God is at work. Prayer is His way of getting us to work with Him. He never intended us to think of prayer as a problem-solving, goodie-getting procedure. He has always been summoning people to work as His accomplices in His court. Should you answer His call, He’ll probably assign you to serve as a court-appointed attorney for people who can't or won't cry out for themselves. <https://waymakers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/BeAssured.pdf>

So we should see ourselves as attorneys pleading the cause of our neighbors before God. Sometimes God will be moved, sometimes He will have different plans, but either way we are joining Him in His work in a way that He desires.

***Peaceful and Quiet Lives***A second way for us to pray differently for our neighbors is to **Pray for People Instead of Merely Praying for Problems.** We should not just focus on circumstances, but pray for God to be at work in the entirety of life for the people we are interceding for. **Look again at verse 2:**

**2**for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

We have a tendency to pray “fix it” prayers. We are often prompted to pray when there is a crisis, and we pray for as long as the crisis is foremost in our minds, and then we move on.

But a sustained ministry of prayer for our neighbors should be about more than whatever problem appears to need fixing at the moment. We should be praying for the well-being of our neighbors. In the words of verse 2, we should be praying for things like peace and quiet and godliness and holiness.

When we only pray for circumstances to change, we can overlook praying for the long term work God may want to do our neighbors’ lives. Of course, it’s good to pray about obvious issues and needs. We certainly should pray in the midst of crisis.

But we should also make a practice of praying God’s blessings on our neighbors and our neighborhoods. I think of the passage in Jeremiah 29 where God tells the exiled Israelites living in Babylon that they should pray for the peace and prosperity of the city they are in. God specifically says: “Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:7)

It is in our best interest, as well as the interest of our neighbors, that we pray for God to bless their homes.

***Pleasing God***A third way we can pray differently for our neighbors: **Pray with Confidence in the Midst of Uncertainty.** What I mean by this is: when we are praying God’s purposes and promises over our neighbors then we can pray with confidence that God hears our prayers and is pleased by them. **Look again at verse 3:**

 **3**This is good, and pleases God our Savior

Scripture declares that God is pleased when we intercede on behalf of others. It is good when we take up the cause of our friends and neighbors before God’s throne.

So, again, we may not always know what the results of our prayers will be. When there is a crisis, we cannot think that we are in a position to dictate to God what should happen. But, when we are praying God’s purposes and promises we know that God is pleased and that He hears and that He will do what is right.

So, how do you know God’s purposes and promises? That’s where the Bible comes in. That’s why it is important that we read His word and know His story. When we read about what He has accomplished and we read about what He plans our vision for what He wants to do in the lives of our neighbors will become much clearer.

If you don’t really believe that God is listening, you probably won’t pray much.

And if you think prayer is only worthwhile when God gives you what you want, you’ll give up on prayer pretty quickly too.

But when you are certain that God is pleased when you come before Him on behalf of your neighbors, and that He listens to what you have to say and will take it under advisement as He governs the universe; then you will keep on persisting in prayer.

***He Wants All Men to Be Saved***Then, the fourth way to pray differently is to: **Pray with the End in Mind.** That is to say, remember the ultimate goal is that everyone would know the saving love of Jesus. **Verse 4**:

 **4**who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

The ultimate reason God wants us to pray for all people, and the ultimate goal for every person we meet, should be that they know the truth about who Jesus is and that they accept Him as their Lord and Savior.

Now, I want to revisit something that was mentioned a couple of weeks ago. Leading our neighbors to Jesus is not the only reason we are doing a series on Neighboring. I think Krista Petty said it something like this: “We don’t love our neighbors so that they will become Christians. We love our neighbors because we are Christians.”

We are called by Jesus to love our neighbors because it is the right thing to do. It is good for our communities. It is one of the ways Jesus is shaping and forming us.

So if you love your neighbors and form meaningful relationships with them and they never become Christ-followers, that will not have been wasted effort on your part. Loving your neighbor has merit all its own.

But, at the same time, we should never stop praying that they will come to know and love Jesus. We should never lose sight of God’s goal that they would come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

So as you pray for your neighbors, make sure that you are praying for opportunities to talk about your faith. Make sure you asking God for the openings share what Jesus means to you. And make sure that you are asking that Jesus would be known in their homes.

***Prayer Walking***Finally, I want to direct your attention to the yellow cards on your pews. As I said last week, there are four practices of neighboring that we are going to be talking about. They rhyme, so they are relatively easy to remember: Stay, Pray, Play, and Say.

And each week, because we want this series to be practical, because we want to do more than just talk about and think about how nice it would be if we were all better neighbors, we are going to issue some simple challenges. This week, there are something like 13 different ways you can pray for your neighbors distributed randomly around the sanctuary. And the idea is simply that you would take the card nearest you, and then do your best to do what it says this week.

And, just like last week, you can trade cards if you want. Or you can go hunt for a card that you like better. Or we have additional cards taped to the picket fence in the lobby—so if you didn’t get one last week or you finished last week’s challenge and you want to try another—you can grab one. But I really want to encourage you to assume God gave you the card He gave you for a reason and I want to challenge you to do your best to complete it.

And as we finish, I want to talk about one card in particular. There’s one out there that says: “Walk around the block and pray for each house you pass.” This is something known as Prayer Walking. And to wrap up today, to make this practical, I want to talk about what this can look like. I’ve mentioned Steve Hawthorn a couple of times today, here’s what he has to say about **how to prayer walk:**

He says prayerwalking is “praying on-site with insight.” He says it is a good strategy for helping your prayers extend beyond your own immediate concerns, focusing directly on the needs of others and opening yourself to see them with God’s eyes and heart. He says: “Prayerwalking simply helps us to draw nearer in order to prayer clearer.”

So, whether you got the prayerwalking card or not, this is something you can do in your neighborhood. Here is some coaching on how to Prayerwalk:

So, **Pray with a Partner.**

**Y**ou can prayerwalk alone, but many find that their prayers are more focused when expressed with a friend. Pray audibly for clarity and better agreement. As you finish, you can discuss – or even write down – the prayers, people, and places of most importance. You’ll be ready for the next round of on-site prayer.

Second, **Pray with God’s Spirit.**

Invite the Spirit of God to accompany you, guiding your steps and your words. Be attentive during moments of silence, allowing the Holy Spirit to help you see with His eyes and pray in accordance with His heart. Address God directly when contending with evil or its aftermath. Ask God to redeem people as he restrains the enemy.

Third, **Pray with God’s Word.**

Read Scripture aloud. God breathed it and loves to bless it. Express God’s thoughts in your own words. Carry Scripture with you. Use a small Bible, or note cards. Choose a particular verse or theme as a base for your prayers throughout one day’s prayerwalk. Use another to launch your prayers the next day, and so on.

Fourth, **Pray with Purpose.**

Pray for the present-hour needs of people and places that you see. Sketch a map to focus on select streets and homes. Pray quietly. You can be on the scene without making one.

If people ask what you are up to, simply explain “We’re praying God’s blessing on the neighborhood. Are there specific ways we can pray for you or others?”

Be persistent. Try prayerwalking the same areas near your work, school or home in a regular way. You’ll often find that your prayers deepen and your concern and awareness of God’s heart for people increases.

Praying for our neighbors is one of the best ways for us to see our neighbors more clearly. To notice them. To take an interest in them.

And for those of us who follow Jesus, speaking to God on behalf or our neighbors—arguing their case before the courtroom of heaven—is one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities we have.