

“How to Pray for Pastors”
1 Thessalonians 5:12-25
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost; October 25, 2020

I remember a bizarre story in the newspaper a number of years ago about a pastor in Cleveland. I clipped the article out — because that’s how you saved information back in those day — and then misplaced it somewhere, but I remember it quite well. The people at some Baptist church had a rude interruption during the worship service. Three guys wearing ski mask burst into the sanctuary. They pulled out what looked like guns and announced that the worshipers were to hand over their purses and wallets and remove their jewelry and rings. It was a tense moment for this congregation — a couple of people fainted, children cried. But this hold-up wasn’t what it appeared to be.

It turned out that the church’s pastor staged the robbery to teach his congregation a lesson. The sermon that day was about “robbing God.” He said the lesson was to teach them about “responsibility, accountability, and dependability.”

I will never forget his nincompoop quote about his little staged drama. He said, “It’s my job to convey God’s word. There’s nothing

comfortable about telling God’s word.” Well, needless to say the police



had a different take on the incident. They described the lesson as a dangerous game.

This was before the heightened sensitivity regarding gun violence. But even so I doubt

whether this knuckle-headed pastor would understand the fuss even today. He said, “I teach practical lessons to my congregation every week.”

A bizarre example to be sure, and you can be assured that I tend to be a bit more thoughtful when it comes to sermons and worship planning. The ground on which I’m working on this morning is a bit more modest. It comes from one of the simplest verses in the Bible. This is the apostle Paul’s instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:25: “My dear family, pray for us.”

Because of its modesty, it’s easy to overlook this verse and thus its significance. Paul, remember, was a missionary pastor. He was one of the original itinerate preachers who traveled all around the Mediterranean world. By his own admission, he was a fair speaker at

best. He probably wasn't very good looking and seems to have had health issues — both pre-existing and related to the physical abuse he endured. Yet he founded churches such as the one in Thessalonica and poured-out his heart for the gospel wherever he went.

Paul's simple sentence suggest that pastors need to be prayed for. If you have ever even casually observed pastors with their various strengths and weaknesses, that much should be pretty obvious. But rarely will you hear a pastor stand-up in front of his or her congregation and speak directly to this need. To do so, we fear, would make us sound pretentious on the one hand and vulnerable on the other. Vulnerability isn't such a bad thing. Most congregations, I'm assuming, would like for their pastor to come across as a live human being having to deal with the stuff of everyday life. But the pretentious part can be a real put-off.

And so, with that in mind, I'm really intrigued by Paul's request for prayer from the Thessalonians. In fact, Paul asked for prayer quite often throughout his letters – but without any pretension. Have you ever noticed that Paul, like Jesus before him — and despite all the terrible things that happened to him (like getting flogged and stoned and

challenged around practically every corner) — Paul never played the victim card? None of the New Testament writers for that matter, most of whom suffered bloody martyrdom, seems to have been caught-up in pretension, whereby they exaggerated their own importance, worth, stature or even their problems in comparison to those of others. There was no wallowing in self-pity. Or if they did wallow on occasion, they didn't get stuck there. Their faith in Christ moved them forward against tremendous obstacles. For Jesus, Paul, and the rest, life in ministry was hard — way-harder than anything I have ever been up against. I'm humbled by their example. So I hope I'm not sounding pretentious when I say that praying for pastors is actually beneficial for the entire church.

Such a request begs a practical question: how do we pray for pastors? Well, Paul himself gives us several good places to start. As mentioned, he asked for prayer often in his letters. Three of those passages in particular show ways that a pastor can be prayed for.

Prayer #1 — Please pray for a ministry that overcomes opposition.

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans while on his way to Jerusalem, where he faced a double challenge. He had been warned of threats from unbelievers there, who had tried before to kill him. Additionally, he was bringing gifts from Gentile believers to the Jewish believers there, who still struggled with racial arrogance. So he wrote: Pray “that I might be rescued from the unbelievers in Judaea...[Pray also] that my service for Jerusalem may be welcomed gladly by God’s people” (Romans 15:31).

Today’s pastors face similar kinds of opposition. Even in the western part of the world, where violent opposition and government interference are relatively rare, many people outside the church openly ridicule a faithful pastor. And as pastors gain some influence, many are tempted by power, money, and sex. I don’t need to cite a specific example of such heartache, we have all heard plenty about fallen clergy. Whenever a pastor or priest slips, the world gloats. I can walk around Vicksburg in practical anonymity, but if I do something regarding the abuse of power, money, and sex — God forbid — I would be front-page news. I would be foolish to think that I’m somehow outside the circle of temptation. We must pray that clergy will not fall.

Inside the church, pastors are opposed too. Some believers are fixated on a certain doctrine or method they want taught or a personal need they demand to be met. If a pastor fails to meet a certain expectation, his or her head may be called for or the pastor may be discredited behind the scenes. Having to juggle so many expectations, every pastor experiences that from time to time. It's a grievous experience having to confront someone who has become unteachable. It's no wonder why Paul asked for prayer that his ministry be willingly accepted. Today's pastors need the same. It's good for the entire church.

Prayer #2 — Please pray that the pastor has a life that honors Christ.

Paul wrote his most joyous letter to the Philippians while he was in prison, where he kept preaching in spite of death threats. This inspired other preachers and teachers, some of whom had selfish motives. They were jealous of Paul and looking for acclaim. Paul asked for prayer that his own life would not be selfish — that he would have integrity by trusting and honoring Christ above all others. He wrote: "I know that...

through your prayer and the support of the spirit of King Jesus...nothing is going to put me to shame. I am going to be bold and outspoken, now as always, and the king is going to gain a great reputation through my body, whether in life or in death” (Philippians 1:19-20).

I confess to you: most pastors struggle with their motives for ministry. And if they don't, they should. I'm constantly probing my motives for this line of work. If it's not to honor Christ and bring benefit to the mission of the church, I have no business doing this. I have no right to a paycheck if all I want to do is settle-in with scant expectations for myself by doing as little as possible so as not to risk people not liking me. It's easy for pastor to focus on the acclaim we get — or lack of what we think we deserve — instead of living only to honor Christ. And it's tempting for us to trust our own skills, abilities, brains, and techniques instead of patiently trusting and obeying God in everything. One of the best things you can do for me is to pray that my own ego-consciousness will mean little to me and that Christ-consciousness will mean much.

Prayer #3 — Please pray for the pastor to have a consistent message that proclaims Jesus Christ crucified.

Writing from another prison — again with no hint of pretentious self-pity — Paul asked the Colossians to pray for his preaching and speaking. He wrote: “Pray...that God will open in front of us a door for the word, so that we may speak of the mystery of the king — which is why I’m here in chains. Pray that I may speak clearly about it. That’s what I am duty-bound to do” (Colossians 4:3-4).

If Paul himself needed prayer that he would clearly and consistently preach about salvation in Jesus, then every pastor needs the same. Paul had a lot of practice preaching about Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he said: “I decided to know nothing in my dealings with you except Jesus the Messiah, especially his crucifixion. My speech and my proclamation were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in transparent proof brought home powerfully by the spirit, so that your faith might not be in human wisdom but in God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:2-5). Paul was absolutely determined to preach nothing other than the crucified Messiah, but still he asked for prayer.

It's easy for a pastor to get sidetracked, and unfortunately a lot of us do. Jesus gets pushed-off to the side for something or someone deemed more worthy of our attention. Staging a robbery on a Sunday morning is probably an indicator that the pastor has gone-off the rail. The topics for which there are no pretty answers for — only Jesus — topics like sin, suffering, and judgment are not popular subjects because of human pride. Some pastors have lost confidence in the Gospel because it's hard work to preach the cross of Jesus effectively to both the young and the old, the churched and the unchurched, the dutiful and the backsliders. But it's meaningful work that takes humility, determination, and God-given wisdom. I'm so glad to have people praying, especially during the worship service. I can't tell you how much that means to me.

There are good, caring pastors. Thank God for them. “Dear family, pray for us.” Please pray for a ministry that overcomes opposition. Please pray that the pastor has a life that honors Christ. Please pray for the pastor to have a consistent message that proclaims Jesus Christ crucified.



Such prayer is for the benefit of the entire church. And the church is the Body of Christ. Prayer for the pastor honors Christ. Thank you.

Amen.