

**“Prayerful Living” (I Timothy 2:1-7)**  
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I don't believe I've ever preached on this text. In fact, I often avoid the lectionary texts from the letters or epistles, as they are called, because I find them so difficult to preach on, and this is because they are so centered within the culture of days and places very long ago. Now the lectionary cuts off the suggested reading at verse 7 where Jerry ended, but let me read to you the rest of this chapter.

*I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.*

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

I don't think I need to list all the “issues” I have with these verses. Today when people pass judgment on the scriptures of other faiths, I believe it is important to know what our own Bible actually says. This passage starts out with encouraging us to pray and ends up with an admonition against women's rights in the church.

Let's remember that I Timothy was written after the life of Paul and the church as it existed in the first century. It was written by one speaking in Paul's name (perhaps a student of Paul's teachings) and it was written in the 2nd century when the church was trying to “fit in” to a culture where women had limited roles.

Now today we've come to understand this passage as one specific to the culture and context of the that day and age. Ironically, what's written ends up undermining the actual message of Paul, because Paul's message was of radical inclusion of all persons, including women. But later when I Timothy was recorded, the 2nd century church didn't want to stand out too much.

I Timothy is a handbook for church growth and practice. It helped the 2nd century church know how to survive in what was not a very church-friendly environment. It tries to help the church then (just as we do now) relate their faith to everyday living. In the religious world of the Roman empire, sacrifice was a way in which human beings could connect to their gods.

For Christians, understanding Jesus' death as a sacrifice was a means for them to connect to their God. This is why we read words like “ransom” and “mediator.” And other words and phrases emphasizing “salvation” and “knowledge of the truth” helped these Christians understand their faith over and against Greek and Roman philosophy. And of course, all the while, God's Spirit was flowing through the processes of life. Just like us, they tried to live faithfully in their time and place, and just like us, they searched for the language to make their faith relevant and understandable.

One lesson we learn from studying these texts is how to do Bible study. I grew up being taught that every word in the Bible was exactly chosen by God (I guess in English) and miraculously recorded on parchment. When I was about twelve, I remember being very troubled by this passage. So troubled, in fact, that I refused to wear any jewelry that was gold (never mind that

my jewelry was dime-store gold). And I didn't braid my hair or wear pearls. I tried very hard to do exactly what the Bible said to do until finally it was about to drive me crazy and my parents, who had taught me to do exactly what the Bible said, got so worried about me that they took me to a psychiatrist. My focus on "words" (with a small w) as opposed to God's Word (capital W) was making me crazy!

I came to understand that I needed to focus on the big Word, God's Word, behind the English words I read in the Bible. If we can learn how God's essence is revealed through our holy scripture, we will better deal with the circumstances of our own cultural context. What we do know is that the Bible is very clear about the heart of God as the essence of compassion.

While there are some passages like this one that may take us aback, one in 11 (on average) verses consistently portray what is important to God, which is to care for the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and provide for the widows and orphans who were the destitute of ancient days. So if we do these things, then we can live pretty confidently that we are following the compassion of God and Christ. And this is why our Food Bank, our Walk for the Hungry, and our Neighbors and Need offerings are so very important. So when we received letter this week saying that in 2009 our Neighbors in Need offering placed us in the top 5% of all UCC churches in both total and per capita giving, I was very thankful to be joining you in ministry in this place. This tells me your hearts are close to the heart of God; because the justice that Neighbors in Need endeavors to do is to work for what God cares deeply about. It tells me that I can learn from you and journey with you as my best self.

Another valuable lesson from this text is the importance of prayer. Now prayer takes many forms. It can be quiet, centering prayer, when we intentionally open ourselves to the divine without needing to fill the space with words. Prayer can be pleading for justice through words, walks, or actions. Prayer can be interceding for others through words or deeds. Prayer may be the stitches of our prayer quilts done all the while thinking of someone in need and longing that God will be with them. Prayers can be said for anyone, great or small in power or influence, because we all are "standing in the need of prayer." And when we pray in all these various ways, our lives become one big prayer. It is what the Bible calls "pray without ceasing."

Last Sunday evening I watched 60 minutes and they interviewed Beyonce. I'm not an expert on popular music, but I was intrigued by the interview because she shared quite openly how her faith and upbringing helped her avoid the pitfalls of many superstars. Even now with her well established and profitable career and performances, they showed her holding hands with her stage crew and praying like she does before every concert. Today when faith is not always shared openly, it was inspiring to see this very public and popular star open about her "prayerful living."

"Prayerful living" is much more than simply making sure we say or think the right words at the right time; it is the intentional actions we do because we've given ourselves heart and soul to God. To pray is not to give God our laundry list of desires, but to place our lives in the places where God needs to be present whatever the outcome, good or bad. Today (unlike ancient Rome) we do not kill and sacrifice on the altar so that God will act on our behalf. Rather we bring to our altar our whole lives committing ourselves to the prayerful living, day in and day out, that God calls us to do and be. We bring to the altar our gifts of money and resources, but most of all we bring ourselves and here we promise to try our best to be something beautiful for God.