

Session 5: Corporate Prayer, Part 2

2018 Fall Bible Conference

By Pastor George McDearmon

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: 1 Timothy 2:1-8
Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2018

Grace Reformed Baptist Church
5645 Hunter Hill Road
Rocky Mount, NC 27804

Website: www.grbcm.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/grbcm

Well, brethren, we're going to take up where we left off in the last hour. I will set out the five lines of consideration related to the matter of corporate prayer in the church, those five lines we covered in the first hour this Lord's Day: corporate prayer prophesied, Isaiah 56:7; corporate prayer purposed, Mark 11:17; corporate prayer's promises, Matthew 18:19-20; corporate prayer practiced, the six occasions in the book of Acts; corporate prayer petitioned, the eight requests that we find beginning in Romans 15:30 and moving through the epistles. Now in this hour, we will attend to a sixth and final heading and it is corporate prayer prescribed, and you could open your Bibles now to 1 Timothy 2 and our concern is going to be in verses 1 through 8. Corporate prayer prescribed, that is, corporate prayer taught, laid down, and we come now to the text announced, the text which expressly addresses the subject and, indeed, this subject is encompassed by Paul's statement of purpose found in the text we considered on Friday evening, 1 Timothy 3 at verse 15, "I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God." 1 Timothy 2:1-8 sets forth the conduct of public or corporate prayer.

Now follow as I begin and do some fairly fast-paced exposition beginning at verse 1. Paul says or writes, "First of all, then," and I pause to note that what is conveyed by those opening words is not the idea of the first of several subjects to be addressed. Now, indeed, it is the first to be addressed but that is not the sense of, "First of all, then." The language is the language of primacy, the language of what is to be imminent and central. In other words, what follows is not to have a marginal place in the life of the church, is not to have a small place, a peripheral place, in the life of a given church, but rather a place of high rank, something that is front and center, something that is center stage in a local church's life. It is to be highly regarded. It is to be regarded of great importance. That is the kind of sense that is bound up in the language, "First of all, then."

Again, I appeal to the interpreter's words, Edmund Hiebert, the words mark not priority of time but of dignity. He will give the matter of prayer the first place in the treatment of church affairs. Barnes writes the thing that is to be regarded with primary concern. It does not mean that this was to be the first thing in public worship in order of time, but that it is to be regarded as a duty of primary importance.

"First of all, then," and now what follows, "I," that is, Paul, "urge." The verb "urge" is conveying Paul's passion for this aspect of corporate church life. He urges, he earnestly exhorts, he sets before you following our text, "that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men." Now expressed here are the variety of the modes of prayer that are to be employed in our corporate praying. The list is not exhaustive but is rather representative of all sorts of prayer and we could add to the list here in verse 1, prayers of penitent confession, prayers of praise, and again when fitting, of imprecation, and such manifold corporate prayer – note – is for all men, that is, as this text, I believe, makes clear as it unfolds, for all sorts of men, all kinds of men, and among them an example, verse 2, "for kings and all who are in authority," that is, those in civil authority and the rationale for including this classification of all sorts of men is that in order, "that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and discipline," that is, pray for your civil leaders as they have been prayed for this morning because their temporal power, policies and decisions, can powerfully affect the people of God. A tranquil and quiet life will afford much liberty and facilitate the kingdom's work while turbulence, conflict and persecution at least temporarily will be an obstacle and a hindrance. Thus pray as you pray for all men, for this category of all men, those in civil authority.

In verse 3, Paul gives a high commendation for this matter of corporate prayer. He says, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." Again in the language of the commentator Hiebert, excellent in its nature and characteristics and is well-adapted to its ends, good and wholesome in the spirit which it reveals and beneficial in the results that it achieves.

Following in your Bible, note verse 4 to 6. Verses 4 to 6 in the context is a theological redemptive explanation for the wide scope and extent of such corporate praying for all men. The scope of our corporate prayer is warranted by the scope of God's saving work in Christ as described in the next three verses, "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time." Again, the point is this in the context: we pray for all men because of the warrant given us by the scope of Christ's redemptive work. The larger truth is this: our corporate prayer must be shaped and supported by revealed truth, as is the instance before us in chapter 2. To say it differently, doctrine must undergird and give warrant for what is prayed in the church. The church's praying is to be within a framework of truth, the truth giving reason, the truth giving motive, the truth giving direction, the truth revealing aim for what is prayed.

Verse 7, "For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth." Prayer, in other words, prayer for all men, verse 1, is not only consistent with the scope of Christ's redemptive work, but is consistent with Paul's office as an apostle, his apostolic work central to which was his teaching of salvation to the Gentiles, another example of all men.

Now resuming the exhortation with which chapter 2 began, "First of all, then, I urge," and in summary that corporate prayer be exercised, resuming the exhortation of verse 1, after this digression, Paul now writes at verse 8, "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension." Here Paul answers the question, "Who shall lead in this first of all work of the church? When the church is assembled to pray, who is to audibly lead, to set the pace, to take the initiative?" And the plain answer that still applies in our egalitarian society is the men. It is the privilege and the duty of any local church's men to be the mouthpieces of the brethren when they have gathered to pray. This does not mean that our sisters are not to be present, it does not mean that our sisters are not to pray, it does mean that men are charged to take the lead, to open their mouths, to lift their voices in corporate prayer, and men must overcome their self-consciousness, their shyness, their reticence, and men must act like men, and here in the way of giving verbal leadership in corporate prayer, "I want the men in every place to pray."

Now in this connection, particularly with respect to men who are reticent for whatever reason, embarrassment, not good with words, for whatever reason reticent to be the pacesetters in the gathered church, I want to offer what I believe is a classic illustration of how men should approach their duties of churchmanship in Christ's church, and specifically this one.

The account comes from R. L. Dabney's "Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson." Its setting is the 1850s in Lexington, Virginia, and I take up the narrative at this point, "The Presbyterians and other evangelical churches in Virginia, have long had the usage of meeting about the middle of the week in a social assemblage, under the superintendence of the pastor, for the especial purposes of concerted prayer and praise." A few lines later, "Jackson was, of course, from the beginning, the most punctual of attendants on these meetings. The prayers were usually offered, under the pastor's direction, by the elders of the church, or other experienced Christians. Dr. White," Jackson's pastor at the Lexington Presbyterian Church, "Dr. White took occasion, in his Sabbath instructions, to enforce the advantages of these meetings, and said something of the duty of those who could appropriately lead the devotions of others, to render their aid in that way, overcoming, if necessary, false shame.

"In the course of the week, Jackson called to ask him," his pastor, "if he thought him," Jackson, "one of the persons to whom the latter exhortation was applicable. He," Jackson, "proceeded to say that he was unused to all forms of continuous public speaking; that his embarrassment was extreme, especially upon so sacred a topic, in expressing himself before a crowd; and that he had therefore doubted whether it was for edification for him to attempt the leading of others at the throne of grace." Now maybe there are some brothers here who can identify with that, or at least maybe you have in the past. Continuing, "Yet, he," Jackson, "knew that, inasmuch as these concerts of prayer were of eminent utility, the general duty of participating in their exercises was indisputable, as to Christian heads of families, and other suitable persons." And now Dabney, and I guess he heard this from Jackson, quotes the words of Jackson addressed to Dr. White, his pastor. "'You,' he said, 'are my pastor, and the spiritual guide of the church; and if you think it

my duty, then I shall waive my reluctance, and make the effort to lead in prayer, however painful.' He closed by authorizing him to call upon him for that service, if he thought proper. And his diffidence in all this was so clearly unaffected, that no mortal could have mistaken it.

"After a time, the pastor called upon him to pray. He obeyed, but with an embarrassment so great, that the service was almost as painful to his brethren as it obviously was to himself. The invitation was not repeated for a number of weeks, when, meeting Dr. White, he," Jackson, "noted that fact," that fact, "Well, you haven't called on me since that time, and indicated that he supposed the motive for sparing him was an unwillingness to inflict distress through his excessive diffidence." His reserved nature, his shyness.

"The good minister could not but admit that he had thought it best not to exact so painful a duty of him, lest his comfort in the meeting should be seriously marred." Now this account comes to its consummation, words of Jackson to his pastor. 'Yes,' said Jackson, 'but my comfort or discomfort is not the question; if it is my duty to lead my brethren in prayer, then I must persevere in it, until I learn to do it aright; and I wish you to discard all consideration for my feelings in the matter.'" Dabney writes, "He was again called on; he succeeded in curbing his agitation in a good degree; and, after a time, became as eminent for the gift, as he was for the grace of prayer."

Well, brother, it's those words, "my comfort or discomfort is not the question; if it is my duty to lead my brethren in prayer," and Paul says it is, "then I must persevere in it, until I learn to do it aright; and I wish you to discard all consideration for my feelings in the matter." Brothers, that's the mindset that you should bring to this first of all work. That Jacksonian resolve that defies whatever's going on inside of us in the way of embarrassment and stumbling over our words and shyness and whatever else we could add, if it is my duty to lead my brethren in prayer and plainly, indisputably it is, then I must persevere in it until I learn to do it aright.

Our men, the men of the church in Ballston Lake, the men of the church here in Rocky Mount, should assess not only their silence when they should be lifting their voices, but they should assess their absenteeism. Whenever your church gathers for this great work, they should assess their absenteeism in view of the first of all significance of corporate prayer, and in view of their role in corporate prayer. The substance of a reason for absenteeism ought to be weighed in view of the apostle's directive, "I want the men in every place to pray." Like it or not, the absence of a church's men can impact a prayer meeting, can cost a church as male living stones are absent can bring weakness to the spiritual house. We need our men to be present, we need our men to be prepared, we need our men to be willing to take the initiative and to persevere in their plainly apostolically revealed duty to lift their voices as the mouthpieces of the people of God.

Verse 8 again, "Therefore I want the men," and I would add by exposition, this is the gender specific word for man, it is not generic anthropos, mankind, the gender specific term for men, "I want the men," the male members of any given local church and now

Paul writes, "in every place," that is, in every place where there are churches. The phrase gives expression to the universality of Paul's directive, that is, wherever there are local churches, I want the men "to pray." This is not time-bound, this is not culturally-bound, in every place, I want the men to pray, inclusive, the general term to pray as an infinitive of all forms and modes of prayer, the present tense indicating this should be the continuous practice of the church and the men leading the church, "I want the men in every place to pray," and now note, brothers, "lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension." Generally speaking, including language of verse 8, answers the question: is any man, at any time, in any church fit to lead audibly his brethren in prayer? The answer is no. No, he must be a man who can lift up holy hands without wrath and dissension.

Now let's consider what could be viewed as qualifier. Lifting up holy hands, on the face of it is obviously an expression of posture. It is one of several postures connected to prayer in the Bible. The uplifted hands is a bodily posture expressing dependence upon God. I'll quickly name some of the other postures found in the Scripture connected to prayer: there is the posture of standing, the posture of hands spread out and/or lifted heavenward, the posture of bowing the head, the posture of lifting the eyes heavenward, the posture of kneeling, the posture of falling down face to the ground, and here lifting up holy hands.

William Hendrickson has an apt comment about these postures. "Posture in prayer," he writes, "is never a matter of indifference. The slouching position of the body while one is supposed to be praying," and he writes here rather strongly, I'm just quoting him here, "is an abomination to the Lord. On the other hand, it is also true that Scripture nowhere prescribes one and only one correct posture during prayer. Different positions of arms, hands and of the body as a whole are indicated. All of these are permissible as long as they symbolize different aspects of the worshiper's reverent attitude and as long as they, these varying postures, truly interpret the sentiments of the heart." That's right on. Right on. In other words, bodily postures are not to be a show, an outward display, a veneer beneath which there is no corresponding reality of heart.

Returning to our text, the posture signifies the lifting of holy hands. What is Paul conveying? He's signifying that the hands belong to a man living a holy life, a man walking in communion with and obedience to God. His heart is true to God and his conduct is upright. The man who is to lead the people of God in prayer does not have hands, that is, a life soiled with impenitent, unconfessed, stubbornly indulged sin. He is not living impenitently in known sin. Positively, there is holiness. There is Christ-likeness in heart and conduct. As he lifts his voice, his brethren know he is a man of consistent integrity and godliness of truth, faith and obedience.

And in particular, there are two sins that must not be upon the hands of the men who lead the church in prayer. "Lifting up holy hands without," and now the first of the two, "wrath." The term "wrath" is a term that most literally speaks of something that is teeming, t-e-e-m-i-n-g. It denoted plants swelling with juice. In reference to people, what might you think it represents? It represents what we call that slow burn anger, that brooding, swelling, slow burn anger and resentment to another. It signifies an attitude of an incrementally increasing ill-will and bitterness to another. Then there's the word

"dissension," another sin that's not to be on the hands of a brother who lifts his voice in the assembled church. The term "dissension" denotes an attitude of doubt about, an attitude of suspicion of that leads to your avoiding, it leads to division from others. Those men qualified to lead the church in prayer are those men free of resentment and discord regarding others. Anger and division do not mark their relations, the relations between the man praying and his brethren. There are not unresolved offenses, there are not broken relations, rather harmony and unified relations as well as holy lives characterize the men who are to lift their voices in the local church.

With the exposition concluded, I finish in this hour with several lessons that are rooted in what is revealed. The first is this: a first of all mindset, going back to verse 1, "First of all, then," a first of all mindset should impact our preparation for, our attendance at, and our participation in corporate prayer. An exercise that too often may be regarded as expendable, dull and boring. "No big deal if I'm present or absent. I have so much to do. I'm so tired. I'll be up late. The children will be up late. I'll not be missed anyway." The answer to all that? "First of all, then."

Secondly, a corporate prayer meeting should be marked by a variety of prayerful forms or modes. Going back to verse 1, entreaties, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings. Paul in Ephesians 6:18, with all prayer, praise for who God is in his person and works. Thanksgiving for his bestowal of benefits. Confession of sin. Petition for inhouse matters. Intercession for brethren beyond our locale, and again imprecation upon the malicious blood-thirsty persecutors of God's people. Thus beware of getting into a narrow rut of the same mode of prayer often petitioned, as well as beware of using meaningless rote cliches, conventional phrases that are so worn that they're offered without any conscious sense of what is being voiced, and in that connection, beware of info praying, beware of preaching praying, beware of giving commentary on a passage praying. We do pray praying.

Thirdly, corporate prayer should focus on matters pertinent to the advance of the kingdom as exemplified back in verse 2, matters of consequence for our own church and for the broader progress of the Gospel in the earth. Not trivialities. Not naming everyone with a sore muscle or headache. I quote the words again of a man who's had such impact on me, Pastor Martin, to whom I give attribution for understanding and preaching of this message. He said and I quote, concerning our corporate prayer meetings, "They must not degenerate into sessions of corporate whining to God of petty concerns." That's memorable. It must not degenerate into sessions of corporate whining to God for petty concerns. Our corporate prayer should focus on matters pertinent to the advance of the Gospel.

Fourthly, by way of blessing. The men of any particular church ought to take the lead and I say to you brothers here, if you are covenant members of this church, this is your responsibility and perhaps it's the same for you as our brethren in Ballston Lake, your presence and your participation perhaps is costly. You're working long days and I'm thinking in terms now of the mid-week meeting, there are other circumstances but there are commutes and you have to sacrifice in terms of time, a late meal, having your evening meal at 10 or 10:30 at night maybe, in terms of fatigue, in terms of sleep. Those things

are true and men of God must reckon with it. "Yes, they're true and I'm charged with this duty in my assembly and my brethren need me to be faithful. It's part of acting like a man in Christ's church."

Fifthly, men must bring to the prayer meeting in view of what we've seen in verse 8, lifting up holy hands without wrath and dissension, men must bring to the prayer meeting present tense, consistent holiness and peaceful, brotherly, charitable relations with one another. Men must deal with known sins before entering the assembly. Beware, brothers, of playing the hypocrite particularly in the presence of your wives and children, playing the hypocrite by lifting up your voice and you know things are not right at home and you have not yet sought to resolve and make it right. At the same time, beware of misguided accusing conscience that says perhaps as you drive into the parking lot here, "Surely you've sinned today. You're not all that you ought to be, you'd better not pray tonight." That's not what this text means. If that mindset prevails, what's going to happen in here? You're going to sit in silence. Nobody is going to pray. Remaining sin and struggle are not excuses for silence. That's part and parcel of the Christian life. Impenitence, indifference, stubbornness, hypocrisy, yes, they are, they're disqualifications but not a brother who's struggling, falling, getting back up, pressing on, falling again. That's the territory of the Christian life. Beware of an accusing conscience. Beware of the accusing work of the evil one who would keep you mute when you've been called to lift your voices.

Sixthly, brotherly relations to be cultivated and maintained. Again, lifting up these holy hands without wrath and dissension, keeping short accounts, guarding the tongue, guarding the ear, praying for one another privately unto the end that unified brotherly relations are maintained.

My final word this morning has to do with the ladies and it's this: sisters, with regard to the assemblies, the mixed assemblies of your church wherein the work of corporate prayer is to be done, I offer to you Samuel's mother, Hannah, as an instructive example. 1 Samuel 1:13, "As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart." Our women are not to sit back in the assembled church with their minds and hearts asleep and tuned out. Far be that! They are to be earnestly praying, they are to be following the leads of their brothers and brothers, your sisters are counting on you to lead them. When there is that temptation to an easy-going absenteeism, drowsiness, lethargy, meet it and turn it back with a keen awareness that, "My sisters in Christ are going to be present and they need me to act like a man and lift my voice and audibly lead." Brothers, may you encourage your sisters. Their edification in the assembled church for corporate prayer in a good measure depends upon you acting like a man.

And in all of this, we come offering our spiritual sacrifice of prayer acceptable to God through the merits of Jesus Christ. He and He alone is to be our confidence.

Let's bow.