

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
July 7, 2019

## **Political Prayer**

1 Timothy 2:1-7

June 2 was a pretty normal Sunday at McLean Bible Church in Northern Virginia, except for one thing. After concluding his sermon during the afternoon service, Pastor David Platt was whisked backstage and given a message: “The president of the United States was on his way to the church, would be there in a matter of minutes, and would like for us to pray for him.”<sup>1</sup> Not the way a pastor is accustomed to bringing worship to a close. But Platt saw this as a unique opportunity, and soon he and Trump were standing side by side, eyes shut, in front of the congregation. With one hand holding a Bible and the other hand placed on the president’s back, Platt offered a lengthy prayer seeking God’s mercy and guidance for our national leader. The prayer began this way:

O God, we praise you as the one universal king over all. You are our leader and our Lord and we worship you. There is one God and one Savior—and it’s you, and your name is Jesus. And we exalt you, Jesus. We know we need your mercy. We need your grace. We need your help. We need your wisdom in our country. And so we stand right now on behalf of our president, and we pray for your grace and your mercy and your wisdom upon him.

God, we pray that he would know how much you love him—so much that you sent Jesus to die for his sins, our sins—so we pray that he would look to you. That he would trust in you, that he would lean on you. That he would govern and make decisions in ways that are good for justice, and good for righteousness, and good for equity, every good path. . . .<sup>2</sup>

As you might guess, in today’s volatile and divisive political climate, Platt’s decision to pray for the president generated controversy. Some people agreed with his approach. Some thought he should have denied the request. Some thought his prayer should have been more biblically prophetic, including rebuking some of the president’s policies or rhetoric. Some thought that Platt did the right thing but wished that he had been more affirming of the president. Platt eventually wrote a letter to the congregation in which he explained his decision to welcome the president and pray for him, and tried to reassure those who felt hurt by the decision. The letter was aimed at promoting unity within the congregation.

Essentially, Platt believed he was simply trying to model what he saw and heard in Scripture about praying for those in authority. He appealed to the exhortation included in today’s Scripture passage from 1 Timothy: “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (2:1-2).

Remember that the Christians gathering in these first century house churches didn’t have the right to vote or the right to free speech. They couldn’t phone their representative or take to the streets in protest. They didn’t have access to commercial airtime. They couldn’t flood Twitter with opinions about the emperor. But they could pray. And according to our text, they should use every form of prayer available to them. Not just so they can pray for a particular subgroup in society, but for everyone. In this case, praying for their political leaders is just one example of how believers should pray broadly. They shouldn’t be

interceding only for those who agree with them and share their beliefs. They shouldn't be giving thanks only for those who have the same racial or ethnic background. They shouldn't be petitioning God only for the things that will benefit themselves. No, they should be praying in ways that express Christian concern for everyone.

Granted, the outcome of their prayers can help create space and security for them to practice their beliefs and cultivate their community of faith. They're to pray for those in authority so that "we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (v. 2). But notice that the way they pray is supposed to be grounded, more than anything, in the character and purpose of God. "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (vv. 3-4). So believers should be praying, in every way they know how, for everyone they know, because of God's concern for everyone and his saving grace toward everyone.

This kind of praying reflects the will of God and the mission of his kingdom. Remember that God's purpose is the redemption of the world. His desire is for humankind to be saved. He wants all people to come to a knowledge of who he is and what he has done through Christ. This doesn't mean that everyone will accept the gospel and be saved, but it does mean that God's faithful love reaches out to include everyone, and that the church is responsible for spreading the news about God's reign, this new reality that has arrived through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And in this kingdom, God's kingdom, there's no room for thinking, or living, or worshiping, or praying, as if only certain people matter to God. Christ's death was meant to reach to all people. God's purpose is large and expansive.

And because God's redemptive plan is so far-reaching, so Christian care and concern should be far-reaching. And one of the ways Christian care and concern get expressed and demonstrated is through prayer. Prayer that expands, prayer that reaches out to include everyone, including those in positions of authority, those who govern.

One of the reasons we pray for those in places and positions of authority has to do with our responsibility to bear witness to the reign of God. Our mission of testifying to the Lordship of Jesus Christ always takes place in specific times and settings, including specific forms of government and political structures. The state is entrusted by God with the responsibility of promoting order, peace, and stability. When these kinds of conditions prevail, there can be more space and opportunity for the spread of the gospel and the extension of God's good news into the lives of more people, individually and collectively. So we don't primarily pray that those who govern will do what's necessary to make our own lives more comfortable and trouble-free. We pray that they will exercise their duties in a way that makes room for us, the church, to live out our calling and obey our Lord's commission to make disciples.

That includes praying out beyond the boundaries of our own nation and interceding for fellow believers in other parts of the world, especially those who face opposition and resistance from governing authorities. The community of believers in China is a prime example. Though the church in China has always been subject to repression by authorities, during the early 1980s, the government began giving the church more room to breathe. But in recent years things have gotten worse, especially as the administration of President Xi Jinping has torn down some churches, closed others, and tried to remake others in the government's own image. So here's a case of not only praying for fellow believers, but also praying for rulers, leaders, and government structures that oppose the gospel.

Author and editor Mark Galli has written about how, in some cases, the Chinese government has removed crosses from church steeples and replaced them with the national flag. Interior crosses have sometimes been replaced with pictures of President Xi. Some

congregations are required to sing patriot songs in worship. Galli suggests that we ourselves can take action by writing to our representatives and other officials on behalf of Chinese Christians. We can donate to international organizations that promote religious freedom. But we can also, as Galli says, “engage in the one political activity for which we are especially equipped.” We can pray.

Galli quotes a theologian who writes: “The prayers of the saints and the fire of God move the whole course of the world. They are the most potent, most disturbing, most revolutionary, most terrifying powers that the world knows. . . . All history moves at the impulse of prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

Who knows in what ways history might be shaped by the prayer that David Platt said with and for President Trump back in early June at McLean Bible Church. Inside and outside the church, opinions may vary about what happened and what was said. But just because the whole episode was controversial doesn’t mean that it was ineffective. We trust that prayer is effective, not because of our own insight or understanding, or because we always manage get it right, but because of God’s will to set things right in a world that’s gone horribly wrong. It’s his faithfulness and saving power, driven by his desire to redeem humankind, that gives us the motivation and the impulse to pray.

And when we pray for those in authority, we’re called to think big and pray big, because God’s saving purpose is big. So pray for all who lead, at all levels of government, locally and globally. Pray for officeholders with whom you agree. Pray for officeholders with whom you disagree. Pray for those you support. Pray for those you oppose. Pray for those who got your vote. Pray for those who will never have your vote. Pray for those who share your faith in Christ. Pray for those of other faiths. Pray for those of no faith. Pray for those who support the promotion of the gospel. Pray for those who resist it.

Above all, let us all pray for the coming of the reign of God in Christ, and the doing of his will here on earth as it is in heaven. Government is intended by God to be a means and instrument toward that end. So we need to be praying, in the unity of Christ, that God will give those who lead us a spirit of humility, a desire for righteousness, a yearning for justice, and a passion for peace. We need to be praying that they’ll carry out their duties in light of their ultimate accountability to God, the final judge of our lives and of the world. We need to be praying that those who govern will look outside and beyond themselves for the wisdom, understanding, and guidance that come from above. We need to be praying that they’ll steward their authority and exercise their power in ways that look out for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged, the least and the left out. In light of our bedrock belief that God’s mercy and concern are for all, we need to be praying for government that works for the benefit of all, to the glory of God.

<sup>1</sup> Allison Chiu, “My Aim Was in No Way to Endorse the President’: Pastor Explains Why He Prayed for Trump.” The Washington Post website. June 4, 2019. Accessed July 2, 2019 <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/06/04/my-aim-was-no-way-endorse-president-pastor-explains-why-he-prayedtrump/?utm\\_term=.ff4a55bce949](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/06/04/my-aim-was-no-way-endorse-president-pastor-explains-why-he-prayedtrump/?utm_term=.ff4a55bce949)>.

<sup>2</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Praying for a President Is Not that Radical: Platt, Prayer, and Polarization.” The Exchange website. June 4, 2019. Accessed July 2, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/june/platt-prayer-and-polarization-in-evangelicalism-today.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, “What to Do about Persecution in China.” Christianity Today website. October 16, 2018. Accessed July 3, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/november/persecution-prayer-china-xi-jinping.html>>.