

Prayers for People in High Places

Preached FCCW, September 22, 2019

Amos 8:4-12 and 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Awhile back, Garth Brooks had a big ol' hit song about having friends in low places, that were always there when needed to help him drown his sorrows. Those friends in low places may know how to help you forget about your problems, but if you want to *solve* your problems instead of *forgetting about* them, what you really need are friends in *high places*.

In a letter from the Apostle Paul to a young leader of the church in Ephesus by the name of Timothy, he urged that prayers be made for everyone. But then he specifically recommended prayers for "kings and all who are in high positions."

At first sight, it might seem like what Paul wanted was for Christians to be good and loyal citizens who supported with their prayers every policy of their leaders. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It's important to recall that Paul did not live under a democratic government where leaders were chosen by the will of the people. Ever since Julius Caesar overthrew the Roman Republic and replaced it with an Imperial government; the highest position of power was the Emperor. And, to make sure that the Emperor's authority was never challenged, the state religion of the Empire declared that Emperors *were* gods. "Caesar is Lord" became the Pledge of Allegiance for citizens of the Roman Empire.

That in itself was an irreconcilable difference between Christianity and Imperial Rome. As Paul reminded the church in Ephesus, "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus." In other words, their ultimate loyalty was not to any occupant of the highest of the high positions in Rome. No follower of Christ could grant any Emperor the status of Lord, because Lord was a title reserved for Jesus alone. In fact, being a *good* Christian usually meant being a *bad* Roman citizen. The foundations of the Empire's power rested on militarism, violence and injustice; which is the exact opposite of everything that Jesus stood for.

Then, as now, a Christian's primary citizenship was not of the kingdoms and nations of this world, but to the Kingdom of God; where the highest law is to love God and love your neighbor. That's why, when Paul wrote to Timothy about praying in relation to people in high positions, he never said pray *to* them, the way you would pray to a divine being. He said pray *for* them. The way that you might pray for anyone who needs God's intervention in their lives. And he was specific about the reasons why they should pray for those in high positions.

The first reason was, "So that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." The immediate justification to pray for a pagan tyrant of a heartless empire was so that the most vulnerable people in society could live quiet and peaceable lives of godliness and

dignity. Which seems like a contradiction when you consider that the most powerful people were the source of the undignified lives that people in low places were forced to live. But there is a second reason Paul gives for praying for those in high places.

Prayers for those in high places are to be made in the hope of their conversion. This reason for praying for those in high places, Paul reminded them is that it is “right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” The truth that everyone needs to come to being that there is one God and one mediator between earth and heaven. Not Caesar, and his cohorts, who *take* life from others. But Jesus, who *gave his life* as a ransom for all.

This is the life changing truth that God desires *everyone* would come to know for themselves. Including—and especially—those in positions of power. Because, if society needs to change so that everyone has the opportunity to live just and peaceable lives, the best shortcut to that change is a transformation of those who have the most power and influence to bring it about.

We whose primary citizenship is in the Kingdom of God can work for that Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven by ministering to the needs and nursing the wounds of those who are victims of oppression and injustice. But without a conversion of the sources of injustice, our mission will never progress beyond a perpetual offering of aid to their victims. As Desmond Tutu once observed: “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

This strategy for relieving the burdens of the poor and the oppressed, by converting the hearts of those in power dated back to way before Paul’s time. It was as old as the history of the Hebrew people themselves. When they were slaves in Egypt, God sent Moses to Pharaoh with a mission to persuade that absolute ruler to peacefully grant the Hebrews their freedom. But Pharaoh turned a deaf ear, with the result that his country was ruined by ten nasty plagues, including one that claimed Pharaoh’s own son. How much easier would it have been for Pharaoh and his subjects, if his heart had been converted to set the Hebrews free in the first place?

The same could be said of Israel’s own kings, most of whom also ignored God’s Word. So, God relied on prophets, whose job it was to confront these supreme leaders when they were seduced by their power, and guide them back to the fulfilling of their responsibility to the people they governed.

One such prophet was a man named Amos. Amos lived during a time of peace and prosperity for Israel. Or at least, peace and prosperity for those in high places. God gave Amos a warning to deliver, and it was addressed to those in high positions who “trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.”

Unless those in high places ceased preying upon the poor, and responded to the praying of the poor for godly and dignified lives, Amos warned that consequences would ensue that would be

felt even by those who thought their wealth and power would always protect them. God urgently called on those in high positions to have a change of heart and use the power they had wielded to *increase the burdens* of the poor, to *lift those burdens* from them instead.

Our instinctive response to the inequities and injustices of life is to pray for the victims and to minister to meeting their unfulfilled needs. But that is only a half measure, because it doesn't get to the root of the problem, which is a famine, not of bread or of water, but of heeding God's word of justice and generosity by those who are best equipped with the power to create solutions instead of being part of the problem.

What might happen if we started praying for industrialists themselves to spearhead the curbing of climate change by refusing to continue putting profits above the damage being done to God's Creation?

Imagine what could come of not only praying for improvements in the conditions of the poor and homeless, but also praying for governments to show greater resolve towards the goal of eliminating poverty entirely!

Just think about what difference it might make if we added to our thoughts and prayers for the victims of violence; prayers for a genuine determination as a society to make streets, shopping malls and schools safer places for our children!

If we truly desire for everyone--even those in low places--to have the opportunity to live the lives of peace, godliness and dignity that Paul described, let us pray *for* leaders and those in high positions to commit themselves to that same cause, by praying for them *to* the friend we all have in the highest place of all.

Jesus.

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