

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PRAYERS FOR THE PRESIDENT

1 Timothy 2:1-6

I don't know if you've heard – the presidential inauguration is coming up this week. It's only a couple days away now. You may have seen some stories in the news about it. Something about heightened security measures, huge crowds (between two and four million people expected to descend on Washington), and, by the way, some road and bridge closings on Tuesday that may cause some minor “inconveniences” for commuters trying to get into the District from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Just thought you'd like to know!

On Tuesday, my little sister Lisa will turn 50 years old, and Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. I don't know how big a deal it will be to Lisa, but it will be a truly historic day for America, as Mr. Obama becomes the first African-American in our nation's history to occupy the Oval Office. Aside from the temporary inconveniences we may all experience, it is a day which has been eagerly anticipated by millions of Americans and millions more around the world.

Whether or not you supported Mr. Obama in the November presidential election, regardless of whether the election turned out the way you hoped, Barack Obama is our president (or, he *will* be, in two days). And the Bible says that we have a sacred responsibility to pray for our leaders, including – and especially – our president.

If you've been following the news, you probably know that even praying for the incoming president has become a controversial subject. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren was asked to give the invocation at the Inauguration this Tuesday, an invitation which set off a firestorm of criticism from both liberals and conservatives. On the left, the objection to Warren centers on his support for the pro-traditional marriage initiative approved by the voters of California in November. In the eyes of at least some vocal Obama supporters, Warren's opposition to “gay marriage” should have disqualified him from public participation in the Obama Inauguration. On the right, some have criticized Warren for giving even the appearance of endorsing some aspects of Mr. Obama's political and social agenda by praying at his inauguration.

Also invited to pray at one of the inaugural events is Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, and the first openly gay man to become a bishop in the Episcopal Church. He is scheduled to pray at an event to be held today at the Lincoln Memorial, with both Mr. Obama and Vice-President-elect Joe Biden expected to be in attendance.

When asked about his prayer last week, Bishop Robinson said he didn't know yet what he would say, but he was sure he would not use a Bible. In addition, he said: “I am very clear that this will not be a Christian prayer.”

Let me ask you: What kind of prayer should a Christian minister who professes to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ pray? We can applaud Bishop Robinson's desire not to give

offense to people in the audience who may not be professing Christians. It is good to be sensitive to the dynamics in our audience, and to be winsome in both our demeanor and words. But if we compromise the historic Christian faith and our fundamental allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, what is the point?

Praying for the president, it seems, can provoke controversy.

I remember one occasion, about ten years ago, when I spoke on “How to Pray for the President.” It was right after the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Clinton in 1998. It was not my intention on that occasion to go political, but to make a pastoral statement and to give some guidance from God’s Word on how, as Christ’s followers, we should pray for our president in a time of crisis. I took some heat for that sermon. I think one family (just one) left the church. They thought I was too charitable toward the president, and did not come down hard enough on him. I’m sorry that happened. I’m sorry they decided to leave. I pray that won’t happen with anyone as a result of this message today. This message is not intended to be political, except where God’s Word intersects with our political life as a people.

So, with his inauguration about to take center stage here in Washington, I want to talk with you today about prayers for our new president.

Our mandate to pray is found in 1 Timothy 2, where Paul urges prayers not only for our leaders, but for everyone. The paraphrase of verse 1 in *The Message* says: “The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know.”

Here is a more literal translation: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people” (ESV). All kinds of prayers. For everyone.

Here is something to think about: Do you know anyone who doesn’t need prayer? Anyone in your family? Anyone where you work? Any of your friends? Anyone in the church? Anyone in leadership in the government or the military?

There is not a single person you know, not a single person in the world, who does not stand in need of prayer. If you’re not sure who to pray for, look at the prayer insert in your bulletin. Go through the church directory. Or the directory at your workplace. Go down through your friends on Facebook. Or your email address book. You’ll find plenty of people you can pray for. Everybody you know needs prayer, just like the billions of people you don’t know.

So, Paul says, pray every way you know how – with requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving – for everyone you know. Then he moves from the general to the specific and tells us to pray for our leaders. For our rulers. “For kings and all who are in positions of authority” (2:2). We don’t have kings here in America. But what Paul says applies to our president and to all who hold positions in public service, whether elected or appointed. Whether they serve in the executive, legislative or judicial branch of government.

Our prayers for the president and all our leaders are not to be an afterthought. In verse 1 Paul says: “First of all,” which is to say: “This is of first importance.” Prayer is of primary importance in the lives of believers and in the life of the church. It is an integral part of both public and private worship, and we risk our spiritual health and wellbeing if we neglect it.

Our current president (for two more days), George W. Bush, expressed his appreciation for the prayers of the American people when he said: “Prayer is central to the lives of countless Americans, including Laura’s and mine. We have been blessed by the prayers of millions of Americans. We could ask for no greater gift from our countrymen.”

There is perhaps no greater gift you and I could give to President Obama – or anyone who serves as president of this nation – than to pray for him regularly, thoughtfully and passionately.

Notice that Paul did not say: “Pray for your leaders – if they are godly.” He did not say: “Pray for your leaders – if they love God.” He did not say: “Pray for your leaders – but only if they are good.” He did not say: “Pray for your leaders – but only if they affirm Christian values.” He did not say: “Pray for your leaders – but only if you agree with their political philosophy.” No. His call to prayer is not conditional. It is not contingent on their character or record or religious faith.

Do you know who the king was when Paul wrote these instructions to Timothy? It was Nero, who ruled Rome as emperor from AD 54-68. Nero was a brutal leader who was most likely responsible for the deaths of both Paul and Peter. In AD 64, when he needed a scapegoat for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome, Nero blamed the Christians of Rome in order to divert attention from himself and his culpability in the fire. His actions set off a wave of persecution against Christians throughout the empire.

The obvious lesson we should learn from this is that we are to pray not just for leaders we may happen to like. Not just for leaders with whose views we may happen to agree or who share our priorities. Not just for leaders who exhibit wisdom and integrity. Whoever our leaders may be, even if they are ungodly or untrustworthy or unscrupulous – like Nero – and regardless of the kind of government we live under, we are to pray for them.

Praise God that we don’t live under the rule of an emperor like Nero. Or an oppressive rule like communism.

Here are several ways we can pray for our new president as he takes office this week.

1. HIS FAITH

Pray for the authenticity and the strengthening of his faith in Christ. The greatest need of any person, regardless of his or her position in life, is to be in a right relationship with God. And the only way to be right with God is through faith in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Only Christ

can take care of the problem of our sin and make us right with God. That's the way it is, whether you're the president of the United States or dependent on public assistance.

I don't know Mr. Obama's heart. Only God knows it. He professes to be a believer who has put his trust and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. I pray that the faith he professes is real, engaging his heart, mind and will. Pray that his heart-commitment to Christ is genuine and, if not, that the Lord will graciously draw the president to Himself in a living, saving, personal faith. That is the most important thing.

2. HIS MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Second, pray for the president's marriage and family – for his wife Michelle and their daughters Malia and Sasha. Marriage is hard enough under ordinary circumstances, without the press and other politicians dissecting every public word you speak, every action and every nuance in your relationships, not to mention the constant demands of the presidency. The public glare will make it difficult for the president's family, like others who have preceded the Obamas, to live a "normal" life. Pray for a hedge of divine protection on the Obamas' marriage. Pray that God will bless the Obamas in their marriage and family life. Pray for the safety and protection of the Obama family. Pray for their protection against the schemes of evil men to bring harm to them in any way – whether physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, or any other way. And pray for the safety and protection of the president himself against any enemy of America or political opponent who would seek to harm him.

3. WISDOM

Third, pray that the Lord will endow the president with wisdom as he governs. You remember that the Lord was pleased with Solomon when the king asked for wisdom instead of wealth or long life or vengeance on his enemies (1 Kings 3). Solomon prayed: "Give Your servant an understanding mind to govern Your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this Your great people?" (3:9). The king asked for wisdom, and God blessed him with wisdom.

Our president, no less than King Solomon or any leader God has ever put in office, needs wisdom from the Lord. Pray that he will seek the Lord's wisdom as he carries out the duties of his office. Pray that he will daily seek wisdom and guidance from God's Word.

Pray, too, that the president will surround himself with wise and trustworthy advisers. Proverbs 24:6 says: "In abundance of counselors there is victory," Pray that the president will have an abundance of wise counselors who will give him trustworthy guidance.

Pray also that the president will seek and listen to the counsel of spiritual advisers who know and love and serve God faithfully, spiritual leaders who can encourage and inspire the president, in the midst of all the duties and pressures of his office, not to neglect his soul or the spiritual implications of his policies.

4. CHARACTER AND COURAGE

Fourth, pray that the Lord will give the president the strength of character and the moral courage to make decisions which are right for the country and not to do what is politically expedient or to his short-term political advantage. Politicians in general have a penchant for avoiding hard decisions or decisions which are unpopular. The need is great at every level of government for leaders who are willing to look beyond approval polls or the next election in order to address problems most prefer to sweep under the rug or bequeath to future generations.

Pray that the president and his administration will consistently exhibit character and moral courage in addressing the difficult issues we face as a nation.

5. ABORTION

Fifth, I would urge you to pray that the Lord will change the president's mind and heart and policies regarding abortion. I apologize if this sounds political. I suppose it is, but it is a concern grounded in moral principles and biblical conviction.

In 2007, Mr. Obama told a Planned Parenthood audience that the first thing he would do as president would be to sign the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA). The Freedom of Choice Act would remove almost all existing state and federal restrictions on abortion, including the ban on partial-birth abortions and other limits approved by a number of states.

Dear friends, the freedom of choice we enjoy in so many areas of life here in America is a wonderful thing. It is a blessing. I thank God for it. But the freedom of choice is not absolute. There are limits to it. Some choices we make in life are of little or no consequence – things like which tie or shoes I should wear today. But some choices carry much more weight. Our choices are not made in a moral vacuum. So, while we value our freedom to choose, we have to recognize that not every choice is good. Not every choice is moral. Not every choice is Christian.

Proverbs 14:12 says: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” That is what the Bible says.

If that is true – and it is – we can also say:

There is a way that seems right to a woman, but in the end it leads to death.
 There is a way that seems right to politicians, but in the end it leads to death.
 There is a way that seems right to a culture, but in the end it leads to death.

I believe abortion grieves the heart of God.

I humbly ask you to pray that the Lord will change President Obama's heart and mind, and prompt him to adopt pro-life convictions and policies. Pray that the leaders of the president's party will do the same. Pray that as a nation we will do the same, and adopt policies to

protect all human life, both born and unborn. For, as David said in Psalm 139, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” and before we were born, the Lord Himself saw our unformed bodies in the womb (139:14-16).

6. A BLESSING TO AMERICA

Sixth and finally, pray that the Lord will use President Obama and his administration as His servants for good (Romans 13:4), to bring blessing to America and the world. Pray that during the Obama administration, the Lord will extend grace, mercy and peace to us as a nation. Not because we deserve it. Not because we have any moral claim on it. But because we need it. We need the blessing of God’s grace.

Pray, as the Choir sang today, that God will bless America. And that America, beginning with us in the church, will bless and honor God.

The Bible says that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings are to be made for everyone – including and perhaps beginning with presidents and all those in authority.

So let’s do it as a new president takes office this week. And let’s keep on doing it as a sign of our obedience and allegiance to the Ruler above all rulers, the King above all kings, the Commander-in-Chief above all commanders-in-chief.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.