

HOW TO PRAY FOR THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES

Introduction

In Scripture we are told to pray for those who are in positions of political authority:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Tim. 2:1-2)

But how should we pray for them? What should we ask that will be in keeping with God's will? We find some instruction from our next topical study in the Book of Proverbs, a study that directs our attention to civil authorities and how they should govern.

I. Pray that the Civil Authorities would Govern with Righteousness (Proverbs 16:10; Proverbs 20:8; Proverbs 16:12; Proverbs 29:4; Proverbs 18:5)

A divine utterance is on the lips of the king; his mouth shall not transgress when pronouncing judgment. (Prov. 16:10)

This proverb is emphasizing the fact that the civil authority speaks with an authority conferred upon him by God. The proverb literally says, "*divination*" is on the lips of the king. The N.I.V. renders the passage: "*The lips of the king speak like an oracle;*" i.e.; the ruler speaks with authority from God. Here we should take note of the Apostle Paul's comments about the civil authorities:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted ... ⁴... he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer ... ⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. (Rom. 13:1-2a, 4, 6)

Consequently, in rendering decisions, "*his mouth shall not transgress when pronouncing judgment*"—i.e.; he must not speak perversely; he must not speak what is contrary to God's justice. This is not a declaration that the ruler never errs or that he never willfully sins against the LORD's commandments. On the contrary, it is a strong warning of the ruler's responsibility to make righteous and godly decisions. The statement, "*his mouth shall not transgress when pronouncing judgment,*" has the same connotation as the "You shall not's" of the Ten Commandments. The civil authority is not to be a law maker, devising his own

standards of justice; rather he is meant to be a legislator, enacting and applying the commandments of God to given situations.

This is the message of this particular proverb: Because of the divine authority conferred upon him, the civil authority must not do what is perverse (or, crooked;) on the contrary, he must administer righteousness according to the law of God found in the Scriptures and written upon every human heart, note Romans 2:14-15,

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the [written] law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the [written] law, ¹⁵since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. (Rom. 2:14-15)

A king who is seated on the judgment throne scatters all evil with his eyes. (Prov. 20:8)

Ideally, the civil authority, as God's appointed minister, should be a true representative of God Himself: "*Jehovah ... will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth*" (Psl. 96:13.) Just as evil cannot stand before the holy presence of God, neither should it be able to stand before His appointed ministers of justice.

To be faithful to their calling, civil authorities need to be men of spiritual discernment and moral courage. As a contrasting example of how the civil authority ought not to act, consider the case of Pilate as recorded in Luke 23:20-24,

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. ²¹But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" ²²For the third time he spoke to them: Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him chastised and then release him. ²³But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate decided to grant their demand. (Lk. 23:20-24)

It is detestable for kings to commit wickedness, because the throne is established by righteousness. (Prov. 16:12)

All practice of wickedness in the land is evil, but when it is done and tolerated by those whom God has appointed to be His ministers in civil government, it is "*detestable.*"

At the very outset of his ministry, Moses was emphatically taught the lesson: the greater the measure of authority granted by God, the greater the degree of responsibility to perform according to the standard prescribed by God:

At a lodging place on the way, Jehovah met [Moses] and attempted to kill him. ²⁵Then Zipporah took a flint knife and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at his feet. She said, "You are surely a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶So [Jehovah] left him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood," referring to the circumcision. (Ex. 4:24-26)

The LORD threatened Moses' life because Moses had failed to carry out the command to circumcise his son, which was a sign of the covenant (note Genesis 17:10, "*This is [the sign of] my covenant that you shall keep—the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.*") Moses was being emphatically taught that he, as the divinely appointed leader of God's people, must be in submission to God and His law.

It is so devastating when civil authorities become lawbreakers, because "*the throne* [i.e., the government as the guardian and director of the nation] *is established by righteousness.*" Conversely, it collapses when its rulers and people pursue wickedness. Consider Daniel's counsel to King Nebuchadnezzar:

Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my counsel. Renounce your sins by doing what is right; and your iniquities, by showing mercy to the poor. By so doing, you may possibly continue in your honorable state. (Dan. 4:27)

By justice a king gives stability to a country, but he who extorts bribes overthrows it. (Prov. 29:4)

Justice is the key to a stable, durable society, because justice makes a nation resemble the kingdom of God: "*Jehovah reigns... ²...righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne*" (Psl. 97:1-2.)

What is justice? According to the Word of God, justice involves equal treatment before the law; the application of the moral standard without favoritism or partiality:

You shall not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. (Lev. 19:15)

... Jehovah your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. (Deut. 10:17)

Proverbs 29:4 goes on to warn, "*he who extorts bribes overthrows it* (i.e.; the nation.)" Taking bribes, and compelling men to make bribes, perverts justice and in so doing undermines the foundations of a just and stable society. The leaders of Israel were warned: "*Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous*" (Ex. 23:8.) Note, also, Deuteronomy 16:18-20,

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town Jehovah your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. ¹⁹Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. ²⁰Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land Jehovah your God is giving you. (Deut. 16:18-20)

Let us also take note of Proverbs 18:5, *"It is not good to show partiality to the wicked so as to push the righteous away in the court of law."*

Another form of injustice that subverts society is the practice of cowering before the demands of the wicked and denying the innocent their due justice. In 1 Kings 21 we find that tragically no one opposed the injustice Jezebel demanded be inflicted against Naboth:

So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. ¹²They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. ¹³Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. ¹⁴Then they sent word to Jezebel: Naboth has been stoned and is dead. (1 Kgs. 21:11-14)

Pray that the civil authorities would govern with righteousness. Pray that they would be cognizant of their responsibility to serve as God's ministers of His righteousness. Pray that they would resist the temptation to place themselves above the law. Pray that they would exhibit the moral fortitude to resist a bribe and to stand up for the innocent and against the wicked.

II. Pray that the Civil Authorities would Govern with Mercy (Proverbs 20:28; Proverbs 29:14)

Kindness and truth preserve the king; indeed, his throne is upheld by kindness. (Prov. 20:28)

Note that mercy is not set in opposition to truth and justice so as to nullify those attributes of godly government. Leviticus 19:15 warns against such an abuse of mercy at the expense of justice: *"You shall not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly."* But a spirit of kindness and mercy may move a civil magistrate to administer justice or promote justice for those to whom it has been denied: *"The king who judges the poor with equity—his throne shall be established forever"* (Prov. 29:14.) Note, once more, Daniel's counsel given to King Nebuchadnezzar:

Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my counsel. Renounce your sins by doing what is right; and your iniquities, by showing mercy to the poor. By so doing, you may possibly continue in your honorable state. (Dan. 4:27)

At times a spirit of mercy and kindness may temper the administration of justice, preventing justice from being overly harsh and insensitive. Notice how King David was willing to issue a pardon to a widow's son who was reportedly guilty of manslaughter, (it was not a case of premeditated murder and he was his mother's lone source of support):

When the woman from Tekoa went to the king, she fell with her face to the ground to pay him honor, and she said, "Help me, O king!" ⁵The king asked her, "What is troubling you?" She said, "I am indeed a widow; my husband is dead. ⁶I, your servant, had two sons. They got into a fight with each other in the field, and no one was there to separate them. One struck the other and killed him. ⁷Now the whole clan has risen up against your servant; they say, 'Hand over the one who struck his brother down, so that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed; then we will get rid of the heir as well.' They would put out the only burning coal I have left, leaving my husband neither name nor descendant on the face of the earth." ⁸The king said to the woman, "Go home, and I will issue an order in your behalf. ¹¹... As surely as Jehovah lives," he said, "not one hair of your son's head will fall to the ground." (2 Sam. 14:4-8,11b)

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches that mercy is just as much a part of the law as justice:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)

Pray that the civil authorities would govern with mercy. Pray that a spirit of compassion would guide their administration of justice and their exercise of authority. Pray, too, that they would be delivered from a false compassion that seeks to function apart from justice.

III. Pray that the Civil Authorities would Govern with Wisdom (Proverbs 28:16; Proverbs 29:12; Proverbs 20:26)

The ruler who lacks understanding is also a great oppressor; but he who hates covetousness will prolong his days. (Prov. 28:16)

This proverb is teaching that in order to govern effectively, a civil magistrate must be competent, he must possess skill in administration and leadership. Notice the counsel Moses receives from his father-in-law, Jethro, concerning the choosing of leaders for Israel: *"select capable men from among the people—men*

who fear God, men of integrity, men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, officials over hundreds, officials over fifties, and officials over tens” (Ex. 18:21.)

Martin Luther said, “I would rather be ruled by a competent Turk than by an incompetent Christian” (*Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.305.) Charles Colson maintained, “politicians should be selected on the basis of their qualifications and abilities as well as on their moral character” (*Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.304.)

A true competence for the office of civil magistrate involves more than administrative skills. It includes an understanding of the true role of government; namely, that its role is to administer justice and guard the peace as a servant accountable to God: *“he [the civil magistrate] is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”* (Rom. 13:4.) It also includes a true understanding of human nature, that human nature is sinful and in need of restraint from evil doing; but also that man is made in the image of God, and is therefore not “raw material” for government projects designed to create a godless utopia on earth. True government does not aim at creating a utopia on earth; it aims at preventing a hell on earth.

If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials will become wicked. (Prov. 29:12)

If a ruler demonstrates that he has no regard for truth or integrity, or no ability to discern truth, then wickedness (both in the form of corruption as well as folly) will prevail throughout his administration. What this proverb is teaching is that the character and discernment of the ruler will set the tone for the whole administration. Consider Psalm 101, the Psalm of the Righteous King:

I will sing of your love and justice; to you, O Jehovah, I will sing praise. ²I will be careful to lead a blameless life—when will you come to me? I will walk in my house with a blameless heart. ³I will set before my eyes no vile thing. The deeds of faithless men I hate; they will not cling to me. ⁴Men of perverse heart shall be far from me; I will have nothing to do with evil. ⁵Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not tolerate. ⁶My eyes will be on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me; he whose walk is blameless will minister to me. ⁷No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence. ⁸Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land; I will cut off every evildoer from the city of Jehovah. (Psl. 101:1-8)

Note that moral integrity in office stems from, and is not divorced from, moral integrity in private life; verses 2-3 of Psalm 101 are referring to the ruler’s private life, while verses 4-8 are referring to his public administration. Note, too, that both aspects of moral integrity (both personal and public) stem from a love for mercy and justice rooted in the worship of the LORD (vs. 1.)

A wise king winnows out the wicked, and drives the threshing wheel over them. (Prov. 20:26)

Borrowing the imagery of agriculture, this proverb tells us that “*a wise king*” is able to distinguish the wicked, separate them out, and remove them from his presence. A wise king actively opposes and crushes the endeavors of evil men. His wisdom consists not only in recognizing the wicked, but also in discerning the devastating consequences of their activity, note Proverbs 25:5, “*Remove the wicked from the king’s presence; and his throne will be established in righteousness.*” The implication is that if left to their evil devices, the wicked will bring to ruin the administration and the nation—that is why a wise king takes strong measures against them.

Pray that the civil authorities would govern with wisdom. Pray that they would exhibit a competence for their office and would be blessed with competent advisers. Pray that they would be able to recognize wicked men and have the moral courage to withstand them.

Conclusion

Our study of Proverbs helps us to better carry out the charge given to us in 1 Timothy 2:1-2;

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

In our prayers to God on behalf of the civil authorities, let us pray that they would 1) govern with righteousness; 2) govern with mercy; and 3) govern with wisdom.

May Proverbs 21:1 be a source of encouragement to us in our prayers: “*The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of Jehovah, he directs it wherever he desires.*”