

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-6

PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO GOVERN

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”¹

The Apostle’s words in our text lead to the conclusion that prayer—especially for those who govern—must be of first importance to the faithful. If the public prayers offered in church services are any indication, one must wonder if modern Christians are convinced of this truth. If people could hear the prayers Christians offered in the privacy of their homes during the previous days and weeks and months, I wonder whether those listening would be convinced that praying for those who govern is a priority in the lives of contemporary believers.

The message today is intended to serve as a challenge—a challenge exacerbated by changing social conditions. The message is a challenge to examine our prayers, which in turn reflect our own attitudes and our relationship to the True and Living God. Join me in study of Paul’s instruction to a young pastor concerning prayer for those who govern.

PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO GOVERN MUST BE A PRIORITY — Who was the Emperor at the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy? What social conditions dictated the reception of believers within that ancient society? The questions are not incidental to Paul’s instruction to Timothy—they are both germane and central. The answers to such questions will provide occasion to discover our own responsibilities to government as followers of the Risen Christ.

The Emperor at the time Paul wrote this Letter to Timothy was Nero. Nero reigned from 54 to 68 A.D. In the year 64 A.D., about the time Paul wrote this letter, a fire began in the southeastern angle of the Circus Maximus. The blaze spread rapidly through the many shops clustered near where it had first begun. After a week, it was thought the fire was controlled; however, the blaze broke out anew, continuing to burn for nearly a fortnight until the flames had destroyed ten of the fourteen Augustan regions into which Rome had been divided.

Though Nero was adulated by the Greek population, he was in substantial disfavour with the Roman populace. The fact that neither Nero’s mansion nor that of his advisor, Tigellinus, were damaged, led to speculation that Nero himself had set the fire. It was commonly bruited that the fire was set deliberately, and that Nero was responsible for the conflagration. Though he likely didn’t set the fire, his lack of popularity fuelled the speculation; and the fact that he seized the occasion to rebuild Rome to fulfil his own desires only added to popular resentment.

Nero and Tigellinus realised that if they could charge someone with the fire they would divert attention from themselves; there was a group at hand—Christians. Christians refused to worship the Emperor, they lived lives that were generally odious to the population, they met in secret, they spoke often of the destruction of the Empire and of the coming of their God. It was even said that they were cannibals, eating the flesh of their god and drinking his blood.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Nero instigated the slaughter of Christians in large numbers within the city of Rome; their deaths were brought about in the most vicious ways imaginable. These hated Followers of the Way were exposed to wild beasts in Nero's Circus, they were crucified and they were smeared with pitch before being set ablaze to illuminate the night. The executions were so grisly that even the populace became sympathetic to the victims of Nero's madness. Ultimately, Nero's vicious assault failed to induce the populace's adulation.²

Judaism was a *religio licita*. Jews were numerous, but persecution of Jews because of their religion would have caused problems for the government. Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, and because the Jewish religious leaders persecuted the Christians, in the eyes of the government Christianity was considered *religio illicita*. Hence, throughout the Empire, persecution of Christians was tolerated because the Followers of the Way were unpopular.

Armed with this knowledge, consider how radical Paul's instruction to Timothy appears. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions." The instructions are radical precisely because Jesus' disciples are called to adhere to His instruction. On at least two occasions the Master spoke to this issue. "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" [MATTHEW 5:44-48].

Another time, the Master is recorded as teaching His disciples, "I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" [LUKE 6:27-36].

It is obvious that praying for people who oppose you because of your faith do not merit your prayers. However, your prayers reflect the transformed character that results from the presence of the Spirit of God who lives in you. This is the reason Peter could speak with such confidence to believers who were suffering unrelenting persecution because of who they were. "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing" [1 PETER 3:9]. It explains Stephen's response as he was being martyred. "Falling to his knees [Stephen] cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" [ACTS 7:60]. It explains how the Apostle could be magnanimous even when deserted. "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them" [2 TIMOTHY 4:16]!

² Cf. J. L. de Villiers, "The Political Situation in the Graeco-Roman World in the Period 332 BC to AD," A. B. du Toit (ed.), **The New Testament Milieu: Vol. 2, Guide to the New Testament** (Halfway House: Orion Publishers) 1998

I have spoken to this point of prayer for those who stand opposed to us, both as individuals and because we follow Christ the Master. To be certain, we are charged to pray for such individuals. However, the broader context in which Paul's instruction is given reveals his concern that Christians evangelise! In other words, the focus of our prayers is not solely to seek relief for ourselves—the focus of our prayers must always seek God's glory.

Weigh the import of the latter portion of the text: “[Prayer for all people] is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” [1 TIMOTHY 2:3-6]. Prayer beyond our immediate personal needs is commended because such prayer glorifies the Master through seeking the salvation of lost people.

On the basis of the text, I challenge each of us to weigh our prayers in light of the Word. Sometimes our prayers reveal our fear because we are facing a terrifying unknown. There is nothing wrong with praying for courage, asking God to encourage us through His presence. Other times we will ask fellow Christians to join us in praying for friends, acquaintances and loved ones who may be injured or ill, who have suffered some devastating loss or who are facing serious challenges. Undoubtedly, our request for others to join in these prayers primarily arises because we are a compassionate people. Surely such compassion reflects the compassion of the Master who is touched by the infirmities of broken humanity. However, if our compassion fails to move us to seek the salvation of the lost, our heart cannot be said to be beating in synchrony with the Master's heart. When we pray, we must seek the Master's glory in the salvation of those who are lost. Let each child of God determine to keep the glory of Christ our Saviour as the primary focus of supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings.

Let me speak a moment longer in order to address the text in tangential fashion. Our prayers tend to be small because we do not see our God as great. The manner in which the Apostle frames his injunction encourages Christians to pray big prayers. What is a big prayer? We are inclined to think of “big” prayers as those that result in significant benefit to ourselves. Perhaps we ask for some gift to ease our life, or we request health for some friend or family member that will permit us to enjoy their presence for a longer time, or perhaps we seek some special ability or protection so we can avoid unpleasantness—all these can be good things. However, there is a saying that was once current among the saints—“Good is enemy of the best.”

What would happen were we to ask specifically for that which glorifies the Lord God? When we pray, we should seek some great thing that will honour the True and Living God. Perhaps we could ask for the salvation of some individual standing opposed to the advance of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we could ask God to send revival to our community, asking especially that He would make us amenable to doing whatever was necessary to ensure that such a revival could happen. Perhaps we could request that He would empower believers in dead churches to seek His face. Perhaps we could ask that He would energise pastors to speak with power as evidenced by transformed lives. This is the thrust of Paul's instruction.

As an example of great prayers, Paul urges Timothy to pray for all people—even for kings and all who are in high positions. Here, then, is the question we must face. Have you given thanks for the Premier of your province, asking that God would graciously speak to her or his heart that she or he might be saved? When did you last ask God to be gracious to the Prime Minister, pleading that God would be glorified through him? Have you ever prayed with thanksgiving for the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada? Do you regularly pray that God would move the heart of the President of the United States to seek Christ as Master of life?

The call Paul issues is a universal call—Christians are to pray for all people. However, having presented the necessity of evangelistic praying, the Apostle makes a point of stressing the necessity of praying especially for those in high positions. There is a tendency to neglect powerful individuals when we evangelise. Powerful people—parliamentarians, legislators and notable individuals are often ignored when we present the Gospel; seldom do we pray for individuals such as these. God’s people seldom pray for those who shape culture to such a great degree—singers and musicians, actors and actresses, writers and entertainers. We tend to place these individuals in categories allowing us to ignore their most basic need—the need to know Christ as Master and Saviour. We are more likely to praise such people, asking for an autograph or standing awestruck than we are to ask of their relationship to the Risen Saviour!

Indeed, within the churches of our Lord, we mouth pro forma prayers for the lost; however, few saints know the agony of prevailing prayer for specific individuals who are lost. There was a day when mothers would pray with tears for their lost children; too often today, mothers excuse their children as “good kids who are just a little bit rambunctious.” It has not been that many years ago that fathers would pray with broken hearts because their children were lost and under condemnation; now, fathers seen determined to defend the wayward acts of their children as mere youthful hijinks. We mouth the excuse, “They’ll find themselves eventually.” Our prayers seldom rise even to the level of mild concern for the lost. We are quite prepared to pray about illnesses and injuries; but we are hard-pressed to pray for our enemies. Those in government or tyrants wearing ermine trimmed robes who expect to be addressed as “My Lord” or “My Lady” are seldom the focus of prayers offered by God’s people—they should be!

Take special note that prayer and missionary advance is a task entrusted to each believer. Churches do not “hire” pastors to do the work of the congregation; each member of the Body is divinely assigned responsibility to employ the gift(s) given by the Spirit of God. Churches do not “hire” evangelists to bear the light in a darkened world; each believer is called to do the work of an evangelist, telling of the grace of God and urging outsiders to receive this gift of life. Likewise, churches do not “hire” missionaries to penetrate the darkness of this fallen world; each Christian has a role to play in advancing the cause of Christ! Especially, each believer in the Risen Son of God shares in the advance of His glorious Kingdom through prayer.

Prayer for those who are on the front lines of spiritual conflict allows each believer to share in the victory that shall be won by our Lord Jesus Christ. As the Apostle to the Gentiles was closing his admonition to enter into the fray, he issued the following stirring command. “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” [EPHESIANS 6:16-20].

Important as prayer for the lost is, and important as prayer for those serving Christ in the trenches is, in the text, Paul teaches that prayer for those who govern is of first importance. Prayer for civic, provincial and national leaders is vital to the life of the congregations of our Lord primarily because we seek freedom to serve Christ unhindered. We seek opportunity to fulfil the divine mandate we have received. The Great Commission has been issued and it has never been rescinded: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:19, 20].

PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO GOVERN IS PLEASING IN THE SIGHT OF GOD OUR SAVIOUR — Clement of Rome has provided an example of prayer offered for rulers by primitive Christians. “Thou, Master, hast given the power of sovereignty to [those who rule over us] through thy excellent and inexpressible might, that we may know the glory and honour given to them by thee, and be subject to them, in nothing resisting thy will. And to them, Lord, grant health, peace, concord, firmness that they may administer the government which thou hast given them without offence. For thou, heavenly Master, king of eternity, hast given to the sons of men glory and honour and power over the things which are on the earth; do thou, O Lord, direct their counsels according to that which is “good and pleasing” before thee, that they may administer with piety in peace and gentleness the power given to them by thee, and may find mercy in thine eyes. O thou who alone art able to do these things and far better things for us, we praise thee through Jesus Christ, the high priest and guardian of our souls, through whom be glory and majesty to thee, both now and for all generations and for ever and ever. Amen.”³

This may be the same individual who was named as serving with Paul in Philippi. Perhaps you will recall that Paul wrote in his Letter to Philippian Christians, “I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

[**PHILIPPIANS 4:3**]. Whether he was the same individual or not, his missive to the Corinthians is dated near 95 A.D., or near the time that the last of the Apostles, John, is thought to have died. Clement is identified as one of three elders, together with Linus and Cletus, serving the Roman assembly who are said to have perished during the Neronian purge.⁴ Knowing something of Clements’s life and the persecutions he witnessed and endured, we are humbled at his gracious attitude and his obedience to the Word displayed in the prayer he pens for the Emperor.

Having established that we Christians are to pray for those in authority, it is worthwhile to consider why we should pray for those who govern. In the broadest possible sense, prayer for those who govern is pleasing to God. The reason such prayer is pleasing to God is twofold: we seek to live quiet and peaceful lives; and we want to evangelise the lost without hindrance. There is a personal reason and a much broader reason for such prayers. I have already alluded to the desire to evangelise, and I hope to speak to this somewhat more completely in a short while. For the moment, I want to focus on the desire to lead lives that are unmolested and serene.

Significantly, Paul states that the first reason we are to pray for those in authority is so “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” When Paul said we are to seek to “lead a peaceful and quiet life,” he was teaching Christians to pray for a life that is tranquil and undisturbed—in short, he advocates prayer for those who govern so we might enjoy freedom from war, freedom from rebellion and freedom from anything that would disturb the peace of the realm. Believers are instructed “to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” [**1 THESSALONIANS 4:11, 12**]. Grasp this truth and incorporate it into your life—we pray for our leaders so that we may be free from the fear of war and free from the threat of insurrection.

³ Clement of Rome, “First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” Kirsopp Lake, **The Apostolic Fathers: An English Translation, Loeb Classical Library (vols. 24 and 25)**, (Harvard University Press, 1912) 115-117

⁴ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (eds.), “Introductory Note to the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” **The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus** (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY 1885) pp. 1-2

It seems to me a tragedy of monstrous proportions that many among the professed people of God seek to be undisturbed, but their focus is solely on a benign environment for themselves. Too often, professing Christians appear unconcerned about the condition of the nation; or if they express concern, it is only in relationship to their own situation. We are not encouraged to pray seeking our own comfort; our prayer is to seek an environment that permits us to serve Christ without hindrance. The righteous person longs for freedom from outside disturbance because he seeks freedom for the people of God to advance the Kingdom of God.

To be certain, we pray so that our lives will be free of conflict as citizens of the nation; but take note of how we are to live when enjoying national peace—we who follow the Master are to be godly and dignified. These two ideals are great concepts that are casually dismissed by the pulpits of this day, I fear. When Paul stated that our lives are to be “godly,” he used a word that is almost incapable of being translated in English. I suspect that whenever we hear the word “godly,” we tend to think of “piety.” Unfortunately, though “pietas” in Latin conveyed a concept quite close to the Greek term that is used in our text, it has come to mean something quite different in this day. Too often, we think of piety as describing an individual who is stilted, ostentatious, focused on performance of religious duties rather than one who is truly godly.

This Greek word the Apostle used speaks of reverence toward God and respect for man. To the Greek mind, godliness was more an attitude than it was an action. Thus, godliness, as presented by the Apostle, cannot be manufactured; it must be cultivated. Godliness in our lives marks us as people that always remember who God is and who also treat all people with respect. This is not an “either/or” concept; it is a “both/and” ideal. You can see, then, how this is more a matter of attitude than it is an action. One cannot teach how to be godly, though one can model godliness; and those observing the life of a godly person can model their own lives after the godly individual. Thus, it could rightly be said that godliness is more easily caught than taught. We can address specific acts in a given circumstance, but ultimately we are compelled to acknowledge that godliness flows from within, and reflects our view of God and of man.

The second ideal that Paul says is to mark the lives of God’s people is that they should be “dignified.” Again, this Greek term is difficult to translate into English. R. C. Trench says that the man who is “dignified” “has on him a grace and a dignity, not lent him from earth.”⁵ Without demanding it, the individual possessing “dignity” inspires reverence from others. Aristotle said that the dignified individual lives at a mean between subservience and arrogance.⁶ The dignified individual lives as though his or her life was the Temple of God and never forgets the dignity of other people. The Christian is to seek peace in the nation so that he or she may live a godly and dignified life.

I have already spoken of the universal aspect of our prayers and I have briefly addressed the matter that we should be a compassionate people. I am concerned, however, that our prayers too often reveal a stunted view of God. John Stott speaks of attending a service of worship in which a lay elder led the pastoral prayer. Stott expressed disappointment in the prayer offered. “He prayed that the pastor might enjoy a good vacation (which was fine), and that two lady members of the congregation might be healed (which was also fine; we should pray for the sick). But that was all. The intercession can hardly have lasted thirty seconds.”⁷

⁵ Richard Chenevix Trench, **Synonyms of the New Testament** (Macmillan and Co., London 1880) 346

⁶ Cited by William Barclay (ed.), **The Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon** (Westminster John Knox Press, Philadelphia, PA 1975) 61-2

⁷ John R. W. Stott, **Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus, The Bible Speaks Today** (InterVarsity, Downers Grove, IL 1996) 61

What disturbed the noted theologian, and what should disturb us, is what was omitted; there was no prayer beyond the immediate church family. It was as though the church worshipped a little village god of their own creation. In the prayer Stott heard, there was no recognition of the needs of a dying world and no attempt to embrace the world in prayer. When we review the prayers delivered from this pulpit and when we review the prayers we offer up in our homes, can we say we demonstrate that we worship a great God who is Creator of all things? Do we reveal a greatness of heart marking us as worshippers of the True and Living God? Above all else, we Christians long to please the One who has redeemed us. If the text is to be believed, prayer that embraces this dying world is pleasing in the sight of Christ the Lord. And prayer that will embrace this dying world will likewise embrace those who occupy the halls of power within the nation. We will seek God's glory through salvation even of those who govern.

PEACEFUL LIVES AND EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM IS THE GOAL OF PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO GOVERN — We are undoubtedly witnessing a paradigm shift in social attitudes toward the Faith. Attitudes toward the Faith are being transformed at a bewildering rate in these past several years. Increasingly, proclamation of the grace of God and proscriptions against sinful behaviour are openly assailed in society. It is not only those attending church that are uncomfortable with pronouncements of divine condemnation of sinful behaviour, people who would never attend a service of worship now hold the churches to a novel standard of civility defined by shifting cultural mores rather than being defined by what God has said in His Word.

A few examples should suffice to demonstrate the new rules being set in place in our day. A crowd of men and women at a Pridefest in Seattle mercilessly beat two preachers, justifying their acts because the preachers should not have been present.⁸ It was noted that Christians wishing to hold a Christian Pride parade were denied a permit in the same city.

Floyd Corkins, a volunteer at a Washington, DC LGBT organisation, attempted to gain entry to the Family Research Council to kill as many people as possible; he was upset because the FRC advocate traditional marriage and he wanted to intimidate gay rights opponents.⁹

A group calling itself "Angry Queers" caused extensive damage to the Portland, Oregon campus of Mars Hill Church. The group hurled stones through stained glass windows, causing thousands of dollars of damage. The group sent Emails to a local television station justifying their hateful actions because, they said, "Mars Hill is notoriously anti-gay and anti-woman."¹⁰

⁸ Todd Starnes, "Christian Preachers Brutally Beaten at Gay Pride Festival," 6 July 2013, <http://radio.foxnews.com/toddstarnes/top-stories/christian-preachers-brutally-beaten-at-gay-pride-festival.html>, accessed 6 July 2013; "Michael Harthorne, "Video shows men attacking religious protesters at Pridefest, Jul 3, 2013, <http://www.komone.com/news/crime/Video-shows-crowd-attacking-religious-protesters-at-Pridefest-214151861.html>, accessed 6 July 2013

⁹ Carol Cratty and Michael Pearson, "DC shooter wanted to kill as many as possible, prosecutors say," CNN, February 7, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/06/justice/dc-family-research-council-shooting>, accessed 6 July 2013; John Riley, "Corkins Pleads Guilty in FRC Shooting," Metro Weekly, February 6, 2013, <http://www.metroweekly.com/news/?ak=8093>, accessed 6 July 2013; Mary Katherine Ham, "Cops: Suspect in FRC shooting volunteered at Washington LGBT center," Hot Air, August 15, 2012, <http://hotair.com/archives/2012/08/15/cops-suspect-in-frc-shooting-volunteered-at-washington-lgbt-center/>, accessed 6 July 2013

¹⁰ "Angry Queers' Smash Mars Hill Church Windows in Portland," April 27, 2012, <http://www.usanewsfirst.com/2012/04/27/angry-queers-smash-mars-hill-church-windows-in-portland/>, accessed 6 July 2013; Stoyan Zairnov, "Angry Queers' vandalise Mark Driscoll's church," 27 April 2012, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/angry.queers.vandalise.mark.driscolls.church/29761.htm>, accessed 6 July 2013; "Angry Queers' Group Takes Responsibility for Mars Hill Portland Church Vandalism," April 26, 2012,

Earlier, when the new campus of Mars Hill Church opened for the first service in Portland, Oregon, gay rights advocates shouted profanities at children, calling them “homophobes” and telling the boys and girls they would burn in hell.¹¹

The Department of Justice in the United States advises federal employees that “silence [on issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual lifestyles] will be interpreted as disapproval.” Such silence is threatened with being censured and/or punished.¹²

In almost all the cases cited, violence and threats are justified because those involved were provoked because of the presence of Christians. There is not simply a change in attitude—there is a new effort to silence those who hold to this most holy Faith. Increasingly, we are told—even by government officials such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton—that we can believe whatever we want, so long as we do not make others uncomfortable.

I am not altogether displeased at this shift in public attitude. Coming out of this changed world may arise a renewed Faith of the faithful. I am not saying that we are witnessing the end of the Faith, for we are assured that the Master has promised, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” [MATTHEW 16:18]. Our present situation is not significantly different from that in which the early church lived and thrived. What may happen as result of the new conditions is a sifting that separates the religious from the faithful. Perhaps such activity presages the return of the Master as He begins removal of weeds from the wheat.

What is vital, in the context of the text, is to recognise the critical position we Christians occupy. We must see that we believers living in the western world today occupy a position not dissimilar to that occupied by believers who were serving the Lord God under the leadership of Timothy while living in and about the city of Ephesus. They were ostracised because of their Faith; we are increasingly marginalised because of the same Faith. They were threatened because they followed the Christ; we face increasing threats because we follow the same Master. They saw families torn apart because of faith in the Son of God; we witness growing numbers of families torn asunder because some believe in the Christ while others reject His reign.

Under such conditions, the child of God occupies a vital position. It is essential that we respond to opposition in a godly manner. Paul urged Timothy to remember to pray for those who ruled over the nation. He reminded Timothy that when darkness seemed to prevail was the time when the believer’s light will shine brightest. The only way in which our presence will not be used to the glory of God is if we attempt to hide our light under a basket. So long as we serve the Son of God, we will shine as lights in the darkness, guiding some to faith in the Son of God. Ultimately, what is vital for us as Christians is the glory that rightfully belongs to the Master. And we know that He is glorified in the salvation of lost people. Thus, we pray for peace permitting us to evangelise; we pray for opportunity to point to the salvation Christ offers.

<http://urbanchristiannews.com/ucn/2012/04/angry-queers-group-takes-responsibility-for-mars-hill-portland-church-vandalism.html>, accessed 6 July 2013

¹¹ Stephen Beaven, “Protesters demonstrate against Mars Hill Church in Southeast Portland,” October 16, 2011 http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2011/10/protesters_demonstrate_against.html, accessed 6 July 2013; Carla Axtman, “Protestors against Marks Hill Church make things worse,” October 16, 2011, <http://www.blueoregon.com/2011/10/protestors-against-mars-hill-church-make-things-worse/>, accessed 6 July 2013; Jeff Schapiro, “Mars Hill Church Targeted by Gay Groups Before Portland Launch, September 10, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hill-church-targeted-by-gay-groups-before-portland-launch-55363/>, accessed 6 July 2013

¹² See Matt Barber, May 20, 2013, “DOJ on ‘Gays’: ‘Silence Will be Interpreted as Disapproval,’” <http://townhall.com/columnists/mattbarber/2013/05/20/doj-on-gays-silence-will-be-interpreted-as-disapproval-n1600777/page/2>, accessed 20 May 2013

Persecution and opposition to the faithful has waxed and waned throughout the history of the churches of our Lord. Eventually, marginalisation of the saints in Ephesus subsided and the congregation continued for some years. New assemblies were established throughout the Empire, pushing the Faith into new territories and winning others to this Faith. Nevertheless, the advance of the Faith has never been accomplished without opposition.

The story is quite old, though it appears to have a factual basis. In the winter of 320 A.D., the Emperor Licinius, who was emperor of the East, broke his agreement, the Edict of Milan, which had been concluded with Constantine, Emperor of the West. This edict had ended the persecution of Christians. Among other laws against the faithful, Lucinius ordered all Roman soldiers to renounce Christianity and to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods and to the genius of the Caesar. To prove they were not Christians, the legionnaires would pour a libation before the altar of the gods and place a pinch of incense on the altar of the Caesar.

The emperor's edict reached the Thundering Legion at Sabaste, and the order was passed down to the legionaries. Forty Christians in the legion withstood threats, beatings and torture, all the while refusing to obey the edict, choosing instead to obey a higher authority that commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" [EXODUS 20:3-5].

In retaliation, the legion marched the Christians to a frozen lake where they were ordered to remove their armour and their clothing. They were compelled to stand naked on the frozen lake; it would be a form of torture leading to death. The legion lit a large fire on the shore with a warm bath and food to tempt the Christians to make the pagan sacrifice, renounce their Christian faith and save their lives. The commander told them, "You may come ashore when you are ready to deny your faith." The men began to pray, "O Lord, forty wrestlers have come forth to fight for Thee. Grant that forty wrestlers may gain the victory!"

The mother of the youngest legionnaire was reported to be present; she enticed her son to abandon the others. There was a centurion named Sempronius on the shore at the warm house. On the ice, the remaining Christian legionaries continued to pray, "O Lord, forty wrestlers have come forth to fight for Thee. Grant that forty wrestlers may gain the victory!" However, there were only thirty-nine still true to their faith in the Son of God. And yet, their prayer was answered.

A few hours before dawn, Centurion Sempronius, amazed by the bravery of those dying men and convicted by the Spirit of God confessed Jesus as Christ before his own men, removed his armor, weapons and clothing, and joined the thirty-nine remaining Christians on the lake. The next morning the Forty Martyrs of Sabaste were found on the ice and forever recorded their faithful resistance in the annals of history—forty men, forty faithful witnesses entered that day into the presence of the Son of God.

There exists an eyewitness account of the forty martyrs, which includes a message by the martyrs to family and friends.¹³

Truly has our Master spoken powerful words that each Christian must take to heart. Jesus promised, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" [MATTHEW 10:39].

¹³ "Centurio Sempronius & the Martyrs of Sabaste," <http://orderofcenturions.org/sempronius&40.html>, accessed 4 July 2013

We are not at such a stage—yet. However, the day may not be as distant as once thought. How shall we respond when the day comes? Shall we inveigh against the injustice of it all? Shall we curse and spew invective toward our persecutors? Or should we not learn from Him we call Master? Peter reminds Christians, “To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” **[1 PETER 2:21-23]**.

Recall the words of the Master, “I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” **[MATTHEW 5:44-48]**.

Let each of us determine that we will faithfully offer supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings “for all people, even for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” **[1 TIMOTHY 2:1b, 2]**. Amen.