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The limits of thoughts and prayers

But it's not enough to tweet. It's not enough, even, to pray and hope God will take action without you. Especially not for politicians. I would say to all today's leaders: God doesn't call you to stand there and look pious. He calls you to do something.

Posted Dec 10, 2017 / by **Lloyd Rang**

(<http://www.christiancourier.ca/about/authors/lloyd-rang>) in **Christ@Culture**

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When I last worked in a political office, one of my jobs was to write brief statements on behalf of the Premier of Ontario when a cop or firefighter was killed in the line of duty.

The one I remember most clearly was Cobourg constable Chris Garrett, who was ambushed by a teen with a knife back in 2004. It was the first time a cop had been killed in the line of duty in that small town. It happened late on a Friday night, and I found out about it very early the next morning.

When you write a formal statement about a tragedy, you want to make sure you have the correct information, but it was Saturday morning and there were no government staff available. So I had to take the rare step of calling the Cobourg Police Chief to confirm the details. The Chief was absolutely heartbroken and could barely speak. He told me that Constable Garrett was a hero who had literally used his dying breaths to shoot his murderer and prevent further bloodshed. When I hung up the phone, I cried my eyes out for this brave man I had never met, and for his family.

Then I drafted a statement of condolence which said, as many before it also said: "Our thoughts and prayers are especially with his parents, his wife and children."

The Premier reviewed and revised the statement, and it went out to the press.

At a time like that – when even leaders feel powerless in the face of sorrow – all you can really say to those who knew the victim is "we're thinking of you." There was nothing anyone from Police Services or the government could have done to save Constable Garrett. It was a sudden, unavoidable tragedy. The Garrett family was definitely in my thoughts and prayers. In fact, they still are. And Premier McGuinty never forgot either – and campaigned to award Garrett the Cross of Valour.

Beyond introspection

In the 13 years that have passed since that day, the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has gotten a lot more use. Politicians have been quick to tweet about their "thoughts and prayers" – particularly after mass shootings in the U.S. However, after the recent shootings in Las Vegas and Texas, politicians using the phrase found themselves facing a furious backlash.

Dr. Eugene Gu wrote: "Instead of thoughts and prayers, we need action." Kurt Eichevald wrote: "If I see one more politician say 'thoughts and prayers' I'm going to scream. Those words mean nothing but 'We are impotent to protect you.'" And Katie

Mack got straight to the point when she wrote: "At this point, 'thoughts and prayers' just means 'shut up and take it.'"

Many Christians were confused by the backlash. From the perspective of many people, saying that you're offering prayers is not only the only thing you can do, it is the best thing you can do. After all, when faced with calamity, Job turned to God and was counted righteous for it. And only a heartless cynic would suggest that politicians (or their statement writers) were not personally affected by these tragedies.

The problem for many others was not the sentiment itself – but how hollow it has begun to sound – even to someone like me who has written those very words for politicians.

If you're sending your "thoughts" to someone, it should mean you are thinking about what they are going through. It should mean you are empathizing with them. If you're a leader, it means you're asking yourself if there is anything you could do to prevent further tragedy, or should have done to prevent this one. Saying you're thinking about someone means you're being introspective, in other words.

Despite the thousands of gun deaths I've seen in my lifetime, and the regularity with which mass shootings happen in the U.S., it's clear no one is seriously thinking or talking about gun control. Politicians in the U.S. have given up trying to fight the NRA and the second-amendment lobby. As Dan Hodges wrote on Twitter: "In retrospect Sandy Hook marked the end of the U.S. gun control debate. Once America decided killing children was bearable, it was over." No one with any real power has any real "thoughts" to offer on the subject.

Petitioning God

The "prayer" part is problematic, too. I believe that it's important to pray for others in time of need. But that's only one kind of prayer – intercessory prayer. There are also prayers of petition – in which you ask God to change things. Certainly, when politicians tweet "thoughts and prayers" after mass deaths they mean both kinds – that they want survivors comforted and things to change?

And yet, nothing changes. Those with the power to re-write the laws – like Paul Ryan, the Speaker of the House – refuse to do so, even as they allegedly pray to God for things to change. When activists speak up for better laws after gun violence, people like Paul Ryan tell them: "now is not the time" or whine that people asking for better laws are "politicizing" the issue.

However, when a fire razes an apartment building or people fly planes into towers, everyone asks “what could be done to prevent this?” And politicians swing in to action – sometimes very quickly. No one calls that “politicizing tragedy” – it’s just common sense. But when guns are involved in mass deaths, suddenly those with the power to change things suddenly and shamelessly frame a safety issue as a political one.

As a result, “sending thoughts and prayers” has become shorthand for: “now is not the time to discuss gun control.” It’s a way to shut down the debate. Of course, there is never a correct time to have the conversation because there is never long enough interval between mass shootings. And so, nothing changes. Not even the hollow words that people tweet.

True prayer – it seems to me – ought to also be opening one’s self up to God’s direction. When we pray, we are often asking God to show us the way forward when we can’t see it ourselves. I would argue – if U.S. politicians were actually looking for God’s direction – they might see the hundreds of thousands of people asking them to do something to be a kind of answer to that very prayer.

It’s like the modern parable of the guy who was trapped on his roof during a flood who asked God to save him. Three times a rowboat comes to him, and three times he tells his rescuers: “It’s okay, God will save me!” In heaven, the man asks God why God didn’t answer his prayer for salvation and God says: “Didn’t you get those rowboats I sent you?”

Prayer should – and can – lead people to take meaningful action.

Meaningful change

In 2006, I was one of many staffers – led by the amazing Alex Johnston – who worked on a \$3 million strategy to coordinate churches, police officers and social workers to curb gun violence in Toronto. The strategy was unveiled from the pulpit of a Toronto Church in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13. The speech – which I helped write – was all about having faith in God, hope for the community and love for kids – because that’s how you make change. That speech hangs above my desk, and I think about its message every day.

There are ways that bringing our thoughts and prayers to bear on important issues – like gun control – can meaningfully change public policy. I know, because I have been part of them.

But it's not enough to tweet. It's not enough, even, to pray and hope God will take action without you. Especially not for politicians. I would say to all today's leaders: God doesn't call you to stand there and look pious. He calls you to do something. As it says in Matthew 6:5: "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others."

By all means, politicians, send your thoughts and prayers. But right after you do that, you better get to work – and start changing things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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