

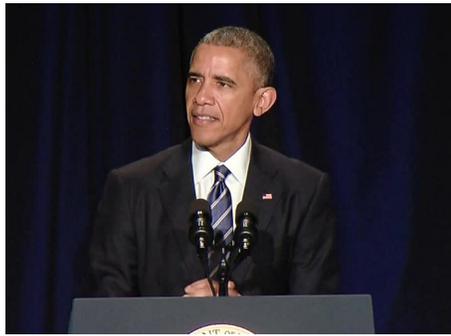


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Barack Obama

National Prayer Breakfast Address

Delivered 5 February 2015



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Thank you very much. Please, please. Thank you. Well, good morning. Giving all praise and honor to God. It is wonderful to be back with you here. I want to thank our co-chairs, Bob and Roger. These two don't always agree in the Senate, but in coming together and uniting us all in prayer, they embody the spirit of our gathering today.

I also want to thank everybody who helped organize this breakfast. It's wonderful to see so many friends and faith leaders and dignitaries. And Michelle and I are truly honored to be joining you here today.

I want to offer a special welcome to a good friend, His Holiness the Dalai Lama -- who is a powerful example of what it means to practice compassion, who inspires us to speak up for the freedom and dignity of all human beings. I've been pleased to welcome him to the White House on many occasions, and we're grateful that he's able to join us here today.

There aren't that many occasions that bring His Holiness under the same roof as NASCAR. This may be the first. But God works in mysterious ways. And so I want to thank Darrell [Waltrip] for that wonderful presentation. Darrell [Waltrip] knows that when you're going 200 miles an hour, a little prayer cannot hurt. I suspect that more than once, Darrell has had the same thought as many of us have in our own lives -- Jesus, take the wheel. Although I hope that you kept your hands on the wheel when you were thinking that.



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He and I obviously share something in having married up. And we are so grateful to Stevie for the incredible work that they've done together to build a ministry where the fastest drivers can slow down a little bit, and spend some time in prayer and reflection and thanks. And we certainly want to wish Darrell a happy birthday. Happy birthday.

I will note, though, Darrell, when you were reading that list of things folks were saying about you, I was thinking, well, you're a piker. I mean, that -- I mean, if you really want a list, come talk to me. Because that ain't nothing. That's the best they can do in NASCAR?

Slowing down and pausing for fellowship and prayer -- that's what this breakfast is about. I think it's fair to say Washington moves a lot slower than NASCAR. Certainly my agenda does sometimes. But still, it's easier to get caught up in the rush of our lives, and in the political back-and-forth that can take over this city. We get sidetracked with distractions, large and small. We can't go 10 minutes without checking our smartphones -- and for my staff, that's every 10 seconds. And so for 63 years, this prayer tradition has brought us together, giving us the opportunity to come together in humility before the Almighty and to be reminded of what it is that we share as children of God.

And certainly for me, this is always a chance to reflect on my own faith journey. Many times as President, I've been reminded of a line of prayer that Eleanor Roosevelt was fond of. She said, "Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength." Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength. I've wondered at times if maybe God was answering that prayer a little too literally. But no matter the challenge, He has been there for all of us. He's certainly strengthened me "with the power through his Spirit," as I've sought His guidance not just in my own life but in the life of our nation.

Now, over the last few months, we've seen a number of challenges -- certainly over the last six years. But part of what I want to touch on today is the degree to which we've seen professions of faith used both as an instrument of great good, but also twisted and misused in the name of evil.

As we speak, around the world, we see faith inspiring people to lift up one another -- to feed the hungry and care for the poor, and comfort the afflicted and make peace where there is strife. We heard the good work that Sister has done in Philadelphia, and the incredible work that Dr. [Kent] Brantly and his colleagues have done. We see faith driving us to do right.

But we also see faith being twisted and distorted, used as a wedge -- or, worse, sometimes used as a weapon. From a school in Pakistan to the streets of Paris, we have seen violence and terror perpetrated by those who profess to stand up for faith, their faith, professed to stand up for Islam, but, in fact, are betraying it. We see ISIL, a brutal, vicious death cult that, in the name of religion, carries out unspeakable acts of barbarism -- terrorizing religious minorities like the Yazidis, subjecting women to rape as a weapon of war, and claiming the mantle of religious authority for such actions.



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We see sectarian war in Syria, the murder of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, religious war in the Central African Republic, a rising tide of anti-Semitism and hate crimes in Europe, so often perpetrated in the name of religion.

So how do we, as people of faith, reconcile these realities -- the profound good, the strength, the tenacity, the compassion and love that can flow from all of our faiths, operating alongside those who seek to hijack religious for their own murderous ends?

Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history. And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ. Michelle and I returned from India -- an incredible, beautiful country, full of magnificent diversity -- but a place where, in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs -- acts of intolerance that would have shocked Gandhiji, the person who helped to liberate that nation.

So this is not unique to one group or one religion. There is a tendency in us, a sinful tendency that can pervert and distort our faith. In today's world, when hate groups have their own Twitter accounts and bigotry can fester in hidden places in cyberspace, it can be even harder to counteract such intolerance. But God compels us to try. And in this mission, I believe there are a few principles that can guide us, particularly those of us who profess to believe.

And, first, we should start with some basic humility. I believe that the starting point of faith is some doubt -- not being so full of yourself and so confident that you are right and that God speaks only to us, and doesn't speak to others, that God only cares about us and doesn't care about others, that somehow we alone are in possession of the truth.

Our job is not to ask that God respond to our notion of Truth -- our job is to be true to Him, His word, and His commandments. And we should assume humbly that we're confused and don't always know what we're doing and we're staggering and stumbling towards Him, and have some humility in that process. And that means we have to speak up against those who would misuse His name to justify oppression, or violence, or hatred with that fierce certainty. No God condones terror. No grievance justifies the taking of innocent lives, or the oppression of those who are weaker or fewer in number.

And so, as people of faith, we are summoned to push back against those who try to distort our religion -- any religion -- for their own nihilistic ends. And here at home and around the world, we will constantly reaffirm that fundamental freedom -- freedom of religion -- the right to practice our faith how we choose, to change our faith if we choose, to practice no faith at all if we choose, and to do so free of persecution and fear and discrimination.



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There's wisdom in our founders writing in those documents that help found this nation the notion of freedom of religion, because they understood the need for humility. They also understood the need to uphold freedom of speech, that there was a connection between freedom of speech and freedom of religion. For to infringe on one right under the pretext of protecting another is a betrayal of both.

But part of humility is also recognizing in modern, complicated, diverse societies, the functioning of these rights, the concern for the protection of these rights calls for each of us to exercise civility and restraint and judgment. And if, in fact, we defend the legal right of a person to insult another's religion, we're equally obligated to use our free speech to condemn such insults -- and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with religious communities, particularly religious minorities who are the targets of such attacks. Just because you have the right to say something doesn't mean the rest of us shouldn't question those who would insult others in the name of free speech. Because we know that our nations are stronger when people of all faiths feel that they are welcome, that they, too, are full and equal members of our countries.

So humility I think is needed. And the second thing we need is to uphold the distinction between our faith and our governments: between Church and between State. The United States is one of the most religious countries in the world -- far more religious than most Western developed countries. And one of the reasons is that our founders wisely embraced the separation of church and state. Our government does not sponsor a religion, nor does it pressure anyone to practice a particular faith, or any faith at all. And the result is a culture where people of all backgrounds and beliefs can freely and proudly worship, without fear, or coercion -- so that when you listen to Darrell talk about his faith journey you know it's real. You know he's not saying it because it helps him advance, or because somebody told him to. It's from the heart.

That's not the case in theocracies that restrict people's choice of faith. It's not the case in authoritarian governments that elevate an individual leader or a political party above the people, or in some cases, above the concept of God Himself. So the freedom of religion is a value we will continue to protect here at home and stand up for around the world, and is one that we guard vigilantly here in the United States.

Last year, we joined together to pray for the release of Christian missionary Kenneth Bae, held in North Korea for two years. And today, we give thanks that Kenneth is finally back where he belongs -- home, with his family.

Last year, we prayed together for Pastor Saeed Abedini, detained in Iran since 2012. And I was recently in Boise, Idaho, and had the opportunity to meet with Pastor Abedini's beautiful wife and wonderful children and to convey to them that our country has not forgotten brother Saeed and that we're doing everything we can to bring him home. And then, I received an extraordinary letter from Pastor Abedini. And in it, he describes his captivity, and expressed his gratitude for my visit with his family, and thanked us all for standing in solidarity with him during his captivity.



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And Pastor Abedini wrote,

Nothing is more valuable to the Body of Christ than to see how the Lord is in control, and moves ahead of countries and leadership through united prayer.

And he closed his letter by describing himself as [a]

prisoner for Christ, who is proud to be part of this great nation of the United States of America that cares for religious freedom around the world.

We're going to keep up this work -- for Pastor Abedini and all those around the world who are unjustly held or persecuted because of their faith. And we're grateful to our new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Rabbi David Saperstein -- who has hit the ground running, and is heading to Iraq in a few days to help religious communities there address some of those challenges. Where's David? I know he's here somewhere. Thank you, David, for the great work you're doing.

Humility; a suspicion of government getting between us and our faiths, or trying to dictate our faiths, or elevate one faith over another. And, finally, let's remember that if there is one law that we can all be most certain of that seems to bind people of all faiths, and people who are still finding their way towards faith but have a sense of ethics and morality in them -- that one law, that Golden Rule that we should treat one another as we wish to be treated. The Torah says "Love thy neighbor as yourself." In Islam, there is a Hadith that states: "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." The Holy Bible tells us to "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Put on love.

Whatever our beliefs, whatever our traditions, we must seek to be instruments of peace, and bringing light where there is darkness, and sowing love where there is hatred. And this is the loving message of His Holiness, Pope Francis. And like so many people around the world, I've been touched by his call to relieve suffering, and to show justice and mercy and compassion to the most vulnerable; to walk with The Lord and ask "Who am I to judge?" He challenges us to press on in what he calls our "march of living hope." And like millions of Americans, I am very much looking forward to welcoming Pope Francis to the United States later this year.

His Holiness expresses that basic law: Treat thy neighbor as yourself. The Dalai Lama -- anybody who's had an opportunity to be with him senses that same spirit. Kent Brantly expresses that same spirit. Kent was with Samaritan's Purse, treating Ebola patients in Liberia, when he contracted the virus himself. And with world-class medical care and a deep reliance on faith -- with God's help, Kent survived.

And then by donating his plasma, he helped others survive as well. And he continues to advocate for a global response in West Africa, reminding us that "our efforts needs to be on loving the people there." And I could not have been prouder to welcome Kent and his wonderful wife Amber to the Oval Office.



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We are blessed to have him here today -- because he reminds us of what it means to really "love thy neighbor as thyself." Not just words, but deeds.

Each of us has a role in fulfilling our common, greater purpose -- not merely to seek high position, but to plumb greater depths so that we may find the strength to love more fully. And this is perhaps our greatest challenge -- to see our own reflection in each other; to be our brother's keepers and sister's keepers, and to keep faith with one another. As children of God, let's make that our work, together.

As children of God, let's work to end injustice -- injustice of poverty and hunger. No one should ever suffer from such want amidst such plenty. As children of God, let's work to eliminate the scourge of homelessness, because, as Sister Mary [Scullion] says, "None of us are home until all of us are home." None of us are home until all of us are home.

As children of God, let's stand up for the dignity and value of every woman, and man, and child, because we are all equal in His eyes, and work to send the scourge and the sin of modern-day slavery and human trafficking, and "set the oppressed free."

If we are properly humble, if we drop to our knees on occasion, we will acknowledge that we never fully know God's purpose. We can never fully fathom His amazing grace. "We see through a glass, darkly" -- grappling with the expanse of His awesome love. But even with our limits, we can heed that which is required: "To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

I pray that we will. And as we journey together on this "march of living hope," I pray that, in His Name, we will run and not be weary, and walk and not be faint, and we'll heed those words and "put on love."

May the Lord bless you and keep you, and may He bless this precious country that we love.

Thank you all very much.