

No, Governor Northam, It Does Matter Who We Pray To

I understand what Ralph Northam, Governor of Virginia was trying to say. After all, he is the governor of all Virginians and cannot cater to one faith group above another. But his tweet could easily be misunderstood, and it does call for a response.

On Monday night Gov. Northam tweeted, “Tonight, I held a call with faith leaders across Virginia. I’m grateful for their leadership in bringing people together spiritually, while remaining physically apart.

“This virus does not care who we pray to or how we worship—we must all work together in fighting against it.”

Mr. Governor, with all respect, it certainly does matter who we pray to. (I beg forgiveness of grammatically sensitive readers who will be distracted by the sentence-ending preposition. Please overlook this fault.)

Again, I understand what Gov. Northam was saying and doing. And I appreciate him reaching out to a wide coalition of faith leaders which would have included Christians, Jews, Muslims and others.

This is in harmony with the words of President Trump’s National Day of Prayer Proclamation, which said, “In our times of greatest need, Americans have always turned to prayer to help guide us through trials and periods of uncertainty. As we continue to face the unique challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, millions of Americans are unable to gather in their churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship.”

So, yes, I agree that these faith leaders have a

responsibility to their respective communities. And I agree that they should be encouraged in serving those communities during the present crisis.

I also agree that “we must all work together in fighting against” COVID-19, regardless of our particular religious beliefs or practices.

And, while the wording is odd, I understand the governor’s point about the virus: “it” doesn’t care whether we are Muslims who worship Allah, Hindus who worship Krishna, or atheists who do not worship a creator. It infects and kills indiscriminately.

In that sense, it is totally impartial and shows no favoritism.

Skin color doesn’t matter. Ethnicity doesn’t matter. Political affiliation doesn’t matter. Religious dogma doesn’t matter.

People from all backgrounds from around the world are dying. The virus doesn’t care.

With all that, I agree, affirming Gov. Northam’s desire to work with all the faith communities in his state.

At the same time, I categorically differ with the possible implication of his tweet, namely, that during a crisis of this magnitude, “who we pray to or how we worship” is irrelevant.

Of course this matters, quite deeply so, unless prayer and worship are just things we do. In other words, if prayer and worship are simply religious rites practiced by devout people to make them feel better, then who we pray to doesn’t really matter.

But if prayer and worship are meant to connect us to the one true God, then you better believe we need to get this right. As I tweeted in response, “With all respect, Governor, yes, we must all work together, but NO, it matters who we pray to.

There's an infinite difference between praying to THE God vs. a god." (See also my separate tweet [here](#).)

To underscore the point (albeit in exaggerated form), do you think it matters whether we pray to Satan or to the God of the Bible? Or whether we pray to Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god, or to the Lord? Do you think it matters if we pray to some nebulous, New Age spiritual force or to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe?

Only one has the power to save and deliver. Only one can calm the storm. Only one can intervene.

But there's another reason that it matters who we pray to. As I tweeted on Sunday, "We don't know that the coronavirus is a divine judgment, but we do know that we have many sins as a church & as a nation, & we also know that we need God's mercy. So now is a great time to search our hearts, repent, & cry out. God will accept our repentance & hear our cries."

The point is that we don't just need an end to the virus, we need a change of heart and mind. We need national (and international) repentance. We need soul searching and life transformation. We need moral guidance as much as we need divine mercy.

That can only come from the God of the Bible, as offensive as that may sound to practitioners of other faiths (or to the non-religious.) And so, while the virus does not care who we pray to or how we worship (seeing that the virus is not a sentient being), the one true God cares.

He cares about who we pray to. About how we worship. And about how we live. Let's be sure we get this right.

That's why President Trump's prayer proclamation did well to make frequent reference to "God," to quote several verses from the Bible (1 Peter 5:7; Luke 1:37; and Psalm 91), and to speak of our "Father."

Who we pray to really does matter, especially during times of crisis. It affects how we live as well.

The virus might not care, but the one true God certainly does.