

THE MINISTER OF GOD

© Eddy D Field III

Three months ago, many state officials in the United States responded to the Coronavirus epidemic by declaring a state of emergency, and then ordering the closing of businesses they deemed not to be essential. They also forbade churches from meeting for worship, and they ordered people to remain at home, unless the state had deemed their business to be essential. They took these measures in order that they might slow the spread of the disease. Many people protested that the orders were unlawful, and they condemned as tyrants the state officials who issued them. Many law enforcers did not allow people peaceably to assemble, and there was no law so foolish and so petty but that many law enforcers would enforce it. Many Christians said that Christians ought to submit to the civil authorities, and do as they say, unless they say to disobey God. They said this is what the Scriptures teach. Two weeks ago, four officers of the Minneapolis Police Department arrested George Floyd on suspicion of passing counterfeit currency. Floyd died in their custody, and many blamed one of the officers, Derek Chauvin. In a preliminary report, the county medical examiner stated that there were “no physical findings that support a diagnosis of traumatic asphyxiation or strangulation,” and that the cause of death was “combined effects of Mr Floyd’s being restrained by police, underlying health conditions and any potential intoxicants in his system.” Two medical examiners working for the Floyd family independently of the office of the county medical examiner concluded that the cause of death was “asphyxiation from sustained pressure.” The county medical examiner, in his official report, stated that the cause of death was “cardiopulmonary arrest complicating law enforcement subdual, restraint, and neck compression.” Both the county medical examiner and the independent examiners identified the manner of death as homicide. A Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman charged officer Derek Chauvin with Murder in the Third Degree and Manslaughter in the Second Degree. A few days later, the County Attorney charged Officer Chauvin with second-degree unintentional murder while committing a felony. The three other officers have been charged with aiding and abetting Officer Chauvin. The four officers will be judged by juries of their peers. Because of the death of George Floyd in the custody of law enforcement officers, many peaceably assembled to protest police brutality. Many others, however, engaged in insurrection and rebellion. Still others used Floyd’s sad death as an excuse to steal, to kill, and to destroy. Because of the state response to the epidemic, and also because of the manner of the death of George Floyd, many have reconsidered the purpose of the state, and some have come to consider it for the first time.

Men are very often inhuman. They are “destitute of the kindness and tenderness that belong to a human being.” (Webster’s 1828 dictionary) They mistreat each other, and they do harm to each other. They have been this way since the beginning of the world. Cain, son of Adam, was a tiller of the ground, and he brought to the Lord as an offering the fruit of the ground. Abel, Cain’s brother, kept flocks, and he brought to the Lord as an offering the firstlings of his flock. God accepted Abel’s offering, but He did not accept Cain’s. Abel had God’s approval, but Cain did not. So, Cain killed his brother.

Why is any man violent? Why does one man harm another? A man is violent because his will is not done. Because of Adam’s sin, every man comes into this world with a sinful nature. Because he has a sinful nature, he is selfish. He wishes for his will to be done one earth, and he will do anything to accomplish that will. He will lie, he will cheat, he will steal, he will kill. Saint James wrote:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. (James 4:1-3)

The apostle asks why men have conflict with each other, and he answers that they fight because they do not have that which they desire. A man desires something he does not possess, and another man either possesses that thing, or he prevents the man from obtaining it. So, the man who desires the thing steals it, which is to say, although he has no right to it, he takes it for himself anyway. In this he violates three of the Ten Commandments God gave at Mount Sinai. He kills a man so that he might steal from him, and he steals from him because he covets something that the man possesses.

There is a tragic cycle of violence. One man wrongs another, and the one who was wronged is angry and desires justice. However, he, like the one who wronged him, is a sinner, and he would have, not justice, but revenge. So, he would commit an act of violence against his enemy. When Cain killed Abel, God banished him from his land, and said that he would be a fugitive and a vagabond. Cain worried that someone would find him, and take revenge upon him because he killed Abel. Therefore, God set a mark upon Cain, so that no one would kill him, and he vowed that if anyone killed him, God would avenge him sevenfold. God would break the cycle of violence. Cain was not the only violent man at that time. There were many others. Moses writes about those days, “Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence.” (Genesis 6:11)

God forbids violence, but men are violent nevertheless. So, God gave man the right to take the life of another man in the case of certain sinful acts. After the Great Flood, God said to Noah:

And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man. (Genesis 9:5, 6)

Whereas before the Great Flood, God protected the murderer Cain, after the Great Flood He demanded the lives of murderers. This is not only a matter of justice (for He said that Cain’s blood cried to Him from the ground), but also a measure to deter men from committing such crimes in the first place.

In the law of Moses, God told His people how they ought to treat each other. They must not gather the gleanings of their harvest, but rather leave them for the poor. They must not steal from each other, or have any dishonest dealings with each other, like lying, or defrauding. They must judge all matters impartially, favoring neither rich nor poor, and they must not make false claims about anyone. If a man is wronged, he must not hate the one who wronged him, nor carry a grudge against him, as Absalom did to Amnon, but rather rebuke him. (2 Samuel 13:22) Then the law gives this summary: “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18)

God is a God of justice. After the Exodus, when He revealed His glory to Moses, said:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that

will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

God, because He is just, takes vengeance upon them that do evil. Moses, shortly before his death, sang to the people a song about the greatness of God, and in that song he portrayed God as saying, "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence." (Deuteronomy 32:35) God created the world, and He is its sovereign. He it is that takes vengeance upon them that do evil, and He does so in various ways. In the time of Noah, He brought the Great Flood in the people of the world. (Genesis 6:17) He destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining upon them brimstone and fire. (Genesis 19:24, 25) He brought ten plagues upon Egypt, and afterward drowned Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea. (Exodus 14:27, 28) When at Peor the children of Israel worshipped Baal, God brought upon them a plague by which twenty-four thousand of them died. (Numbers 25:1-9) When the people journeyed by the land of Edom, they faithlessly complained against God, and against Moses, because they had no bread or water. So, God sent among them fiery serpents to bite them, causing a great number of the people to die. (Numbers 21:4-6) God suppressed Korah's rebellion by causing the ground to open up and swallow the ringleaders, and He sent fire to consume the rest. When the people complained about their deaths, God destroyed them with a plague. (Numbers 16) David understood that vengeance belongs to God, and not to man. When King Saul fell out of favor with God, God chose David to replace him. Saul sought to kill David, and David, when he had opportunity to kill Saul, did not, but spared his life, and said to him, "The LORD judge between me and thee, and the LORD avenge me of thee: but mine hand shall not be upon thee." (1 Samuel 24:12)

Moses, in his song sang of God's justice. He sang, "He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4) Because God is just, He made provision for justice by including in His law a law of retaliation. That law states:

And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death. And he that killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death. (Leviticus 24:17-21)

If a man does wrong, then he must make things right by restoring what he took. Of course, if a man is a murderer, he cannot restore the loss, and he must die.

God gave His law so that men might know how they ought to live. Men are sinful, however, and they pervert his law. Jesus gave His Sermon on the Mount to teach men the true meaning of the law of God. The law says, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." (Leviticus 24:20) The Jews took this to mean the very opposite of its true meaning. They took it to mean that a man who has been wronged should avenge himself. Jesus explained the true meaning of the law. He said:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give

to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. (Matthew 5:39-42)

Jesus here, as often, teaches in hyperbole, because it is difficult for sinful men to grasp simple truths. Jesus here teaches that a man must do what he can to be at peace with other men. He must not be one who is always ready to fight, but one who seeks peace, if he can do so righteously. He must go the extra mile. If he is wronged, he must not take his own revenge, but rather do good to the one who has wronged him. The law says, Love your neighbor, and the Jews took it to mean they were permitted to hate their enemies. Jesus corrected this error. He said, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) Jesus explained that they should love their enemies, just as God loves His, and is good to them.

Saint Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, explains Jesus's teaching on the law. He writes:

Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14-21)

If the Christian is maltreated, then he must not maltreat, but treat well. He must sympathize with his fellow man. He must treat all men fairly, and he must not think too highly of himself. He must have good will toward all men, and do what he can to be at peace with all men. If he is wronged, then he must not take his own revenge. He must never seek to pay back an enemy in kind. This does not mean, however, that a man who has been wronged can receive no justice. On the contrary, God says He will avenge him. But how will God avenge? In various ways, but one of those ways is the civil authorities He has established for this very purpose. Saint Paul continues:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. (Romans 13:1-4)

Saint Paul here calls upon Christians to submit to the civil authorities. They should submit to the authorities because God has delegated authority to them, and he has established them. Because God has given them authority, the Christian ought to be subject to them. If a man resists the civil authorities, then he resists God, and he will receive judgment for his rebellion. But why has God established these

authorities? For what purpose? Tragically, some do not understand how these verses relate to them that precede. Saint Paul tells the Christian not to take his own revenge, but to allow God to avenge him, to allow God to execute His wrath on the one that has wronged him. God has established the civil authority for this purpose. The civil authority is His servant who executes His wrath, who wreaks His vengeance upon one that has done wrong to another. This power should strike fear into every reasonable person, and so deter him from committing any crime against another man. In this way is the civil authority God's servant for the good of the people. So, although the Christian confesses Jesus as Lord, he must recognize the authority of the civil magistrate. The Christian, because He confesses Jesus as Lord, must never disobey the Lord. Moreover, if a civil magistrate abuses his authority and becomes tyrannical, the Christian may appeal to another civil authority for defense.

Of course, Jesus is the perfect example, and Saint Peter the counter-example. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and He is perfectly good, never having sinned. Yet, the rulers of Israel sent men to arrest Him, so that they might bring Him to trial. When they seized Him, Saint Peter drew his sword and, it seems, struck at the neck of one of the men, but only cut off the man's ear. Jesus said to Saint Peter, "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." (Matthew 26:52) Jesus did no evil, yet he submitted to the authorities. Saint Peter resisted the authorities, and Jesus told him that they who resist authority will be judged by that authority. Saint Peter learned well learned this lesson and wrote:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well... For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. (1 Peter 2:13, 14, 21-23)

Jesus submitted to the authorities, but He entrusted Himself to God.

Let us recognize that the civil authorities have been established by God. Let us understand what God has ordained them to do. Let us always entrust ourselves to God.

And now to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God, be ascribed by us, and by the whole Church, as is most due, the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.