

The Christian's Response to Government

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In the preamble of the Declaration of Independence, we read, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

These words are known as “The American Dream.” The American Dream also includes the idea that anyone, regardless of race, religion, or background, can be successful if they work hard and sacrifice. In the American dream, all citizens can achieve the same success by working hard. The free enterprise economic system in the United States makes it possible for anyone to achieve whatever they regard as possible. There are rules of law in the United States that guarantee the things we work for cannot be taken away forcefully.

Henry David Thoreau describes the Dream this way: “I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”¹ In theory, then, the American dream is completely fair and just to all. Because the American dream is expected to be fair and just to all, it is reasonable to assume Americans expect fair and just treatment by others in all aspects of their lives.

Unfortunately, the American Dream is simply that, a dream. It is more of a fantasy than reality. This story, or some version of it, is the mighty engine that propels the American experiment. Greatness is within all of our grasp, and there are no problems, just “opportunities.” (The filthy bathroom in my local supermarket actually displays a sign saying: “If this restroom fails to meet your expectations, please inform us of the opportunity”—as if reeking puddles of urine are merely an inspirational occasion for personal growth.) It’s the basic trope of every inspirational meme, every graduation speech. Reach for the stars. Never give up. Be the hero of your own life. Little by little, the American Dream has become the American Basic Expectation.²

The American Dream proves that in the minds of American’s, perception is reality. It sets an expectation of success that, statistically in America, is far from true.

Life is tough for many right now. Jobs have been lost, hours have been cut, all around us there is fear and uncertainty. Some say stay home, others have “had enough.” Some preach social distancing and tough it out while others herald “liberate” and “open up” because our liberty is being taken away.

Has the government gone too far? Has the president, Congress, and 50 governors overstepped their bounds? Are they really working in the best interest of the people?

As Christians we either react or respond to pressures of life.

We react when we are guided by emotion. We often don’t stop to think any more than the reflex when a small rubber hammer hits our knee. Reactions are often simply habitual – it’s how we have always acted. Responding has to do with a well thought out, biblical reply. We know what we desire, but our response is in line with the truth of Scripture. We make a conscious decision to submit our thinking to the truth by taking reactionary thoughts captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

¹ Henry David Thoreau. *Walden: Life in the Woods*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

² Ruth Whippman, “Why the American Dream is Making You Unhappy”, *time.com*, August 11, 2016, <http://time.com/4446915/american-dream-making-you-unhappy> (Accessed December 11, 2017).

Romans 13:1 is clear, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." That's the principle. We looked at that last week in detail.

But how do we live it out in practice?

First of all, the Bible teaches very clearly that we have a responsibility.

"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" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). God wants us to live a life that is peaceable. We should make peace; we should not make trouble or protest. We should live quiet, peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty. We affect the society from the inside by changing the hearts of the people, not the structure of society.

"Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ^{to} speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people..." (Titus 3:1-2). It bothers me to see Christians--supposedly in the name of Christ—publicly speak against the leaders of our nation, no matter if those leaders are adequate or inadequate, just or unjust, fair or unfair.

With that in mind, I encourage you to be careful how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise. In a situation similar to what we are facing right now, Paul wrote to the Philippian church, giving them instructions on how they should respond biblically and not simply react.

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. (Philippians 2:12-16)

Paul was unjustly in prison by the government. Paul wrote Philippians at a time when he was suffering greatly, at a time when he wondered if he might soon be killed by the government. Paul's friends are deeply concerned knowing he is imprisoned awaiting trial. How is he faring? Would this imprisonment have an adverse effect on the progress of the gospel? Paul responds elsewhere in Philippians that he is confident and that, surprisingly, his imprisonment has led to the advance of the gospel.

And, the Philippian church were themselves facing persecution from those outside the church.

Paul is exhorting the Philippians to be blameless and innocent during their trials. He admits that they are in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. And he hopes that they will be lights in the world around them. How will the world see them as lights?

The evidence of that would be a lack of grumbling and complaining.

They, and we, understand that our "salvation" from the virus, or racism is not government. It is interesting that Paul is not calling for insurrection, rebellion or protest (he never does anywhere in Scripture). ***Paul is asking us to check our hearts and to mimic Jesus.***

Those who perceive government and racial injustice must be on constant alert to not become bitter. Through all the hardships and suffering God either brings or allows into their lives, all meant to purify and transform them, they become bitter. My experience with these people is that they lose sleep thinking about it before bed and wake up in the morning with it on their mind. They become angry. They become hard-hearted. They become dissatisfied with the circumstances of their life and are ready to do whatever it takes to stand up to this oppressive government. Bitterness is a defiling sin that affects their entire being, staining the heart.

Look with me at 1 Peter 2:11-25

1 Peter is a New Testament case study on what it looks like to live godly while suffering injustice at the hands of government. This text is an example of suffering well in an obedient way in response to evil and insults. As we look at this text, we do so remembering that it is in the context of chapter 1 verses 6-7 where Peter writes, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Their faith is proven out in the midst of affliction as they rejoice. They rejoice in all that Peter has talked about in verses 3-5 even though there is distress, racial injustice and trial. It is a matter of faith, and focus, in their present hardship.

Peter encourages a submission to the authority that may even be the oppressor. Peter talks about this in chapter 2 in the context of being in submission to government authority and in being submission to a master or an employer. Peter is not simply talking about a simple submission to governments laws like do not steal and do not speed. Peter is referencing back to the Emperor Nero who burnt down 70% of the homes around his palace to build a more spacious one, and then blamed the Christians. This created an intense unjust persecution for the Christians at the hands of others. Nero ordered that many Christians be rounded up and killed. At his worst, Nero would dip Christians in tar put them on posts and light them on fire while they were still alive to light his gardens and paths. This is the perspective that Paul brings to the idea of suffering rightly at the hands of an unjust government.

When he reaches verses 21-25 he gives us Christ’s example in suffering and our encouragement. He writes,

“For 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. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Here is a theology of unjust suffering that will give meaning and purpose to the humbling submission of those suffering, even at the hands those who hate you and of government.

In verses 21 – 23 we see Jesus’ conduct while suffering at the unjust hand of his oppressors. Peter reminds us that Jesus always suffered unjust treatment in a righteous way. Jesus understood that he had come to do the will of the Father and through this suffering God’s will would be done and so Christ is submissive to the suffering as a mark of his biblical sacrifice to the Father. As Christians, we have also been called to do this by following Jesus’ example of suffering humbly under God’s sovereign will and providential care. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return but entrusted himself to the Father. While we often want vindication and revenge, Jesus trusted the rightness of God’s provision and God’s long-term justice. Notice how Jesus rejected any expression of sin as a result of his inward orientation of

the heart. Jesus believes God will deal justly and Jesus wants to be pleasing to God. So, Jesus entrusts himself to the justice of the father. The truth of the gospel through the cross enables the Christian to suffer in this way. We have died and been raised again to live a righteous life by the power that mortifies our sin.

This mortification is Paul's point in Colossians 3:1-17,

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Peter concludes his point in verses 8-9 of 1 Peter 3, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 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."

A certain conduct is expected for the Christian who is suffering injustice. Peter has listed heart attitudes that affect our behavior and care for even the government. Our lives are to promote harmony. We are working toward a mindset that makes our submission to the Word and to the Lord a joy. And all the while we sympathize with a heart that identifies the suffering and struggles for those who are responsible for our own suffering.

When is the last time you dropped to your knees and prayed earnestly for our government?

We submit with brotherly love. We are to be tenderhearted. A calloused hard heart will be unwilling to submit to the Holy Spirit's leading and will be hostile toward the government. And we do this with all humility.

Peter warns us about how we are to respond when our freedoms are being taken away. We are to follow the example of Christ. We do not repay in-kind. Other people's sins do not excuse our responses. We are not permitted to respond sinfully no matter what the aggravation. The Christian does not revile or return insults to the one who is personally attacking him. Godly submission must put away all forms of the ungodly talk and behavior, even when we feel it is justified. Rather, the Christian is to respond positively, and bless. This is a very frustrating teaching for those who feel their rights are being taken away. Yet in what we do and what we say our goal is always the good of the other. Even in the midst of being sinned against, we point them, through our actions and our words, to the good God who has promised, and the glory he has assured. We do all of this so that we may inherit a blessing. And so, we will live together, as much as is up to us, in a godly humble way, with a heart for others. Therefore, this will require us to have

careful, measured responses to the unjust treatment from others and it may well require a Christlike sacrifice of self in submission to the will of God. When sinned against and afflicted by others, we must respond with grace to evil and insults.

Finally, Peter says consider this:

“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

(1 Peter 3:13-17)

To not be afraid is a significant battle for us when we see and imagine the logical conclusion of what our government may be doing.

It seems like Peter is asking too much. And where is the relief? What if it doesn't come? Peter reminds the believer that he will be blessed. Our actions and words represent to others our humble submission to Christ. And this humble submission to Christ puts to shame the oppressor.

We may summarize Peter's text by reminding ourselves that our suffering is designed to deliver us from sin and to set us free to live in a way that pleases God. We may not be driven by our desires and affections for justice, relief, revenge, and understanding. Instead we must be determined to see and obey God's will. In this way, our suffering has power to set our minds on Christ and keep us from sin. We must respond wisely and well in suffering that sets apart Christ as Lord, acknowledging him as our master, which gives us future hope.

And we always remember that all of life is to bring praise and glory to God.