

“Be Still”

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As I said, there are a number of storms going on at any given time and any given moment, and one of those storms, that I remember quite clearly in my own life, was back when I was in seminary.

A friend of mine was the editor of Religious Index One. Now, if you were a scholar, that was a big deal. For the rest of us, who cares? But he was a religious editor and that is someone who gathers all of the periodicals, all of the written material, from all of the religious scholars around the world. He gathers them together and prints them out in such a way that other scholars and students could read all of the works - and they are all found in that one place.

So, he brings scholars in from all over the world. I went to seminary in Chicago, at McCormick Seminary in Hyde Park. So, he had the University of Chicago Divinity School; the Chicago Theological Seminary; Garrett Theological Seminary on the north side - there were at least six or seven seminaries in that small geographic area. So, when scholars would come to that Religious Index, they would gather for dinner and then, they would often preach or teach what they were working on to other scholars in the room.

Well, that is fine, except one of the scholars who was invited on this particular occasion, in fall of 1984, or the winter of 1985 (within a couple of months here or there), was an Old Testament scholar from the University of South Africa in Cape Town. Now, this was in 1984 or 1985. He argued from a religious standpoint for apartheid.

No one would go to his talk. So, the religious editor knew that he had to have someone, so he called up his friend who was a lowly young seminarian and said, “Would you meet with him?”

Now, I had been protesting against apartheid downtown at the government building in Chicago just weeks - maybe a month or so - before that, and I said, “Should I go to this thing? If I go, will it make me look as if I’m affirming him in some way?” I thought, “It’s always good to know what other people are saying and why they are saying it.” So, I went.

I was the only one, along with the editor and this man, and he came over thinking he was going to teach a whole bunch of scholars in the room, and boy, with me there he certainly didn’t have a scholar!

He sat down and stubbornly shared his argument for why, from a religious point of view, apartheid was acceptable. He explained it, and he quoted Scriptures, and I wished I had taken notes. But, one of the Scriptures I remember very clearly that he posed for why apartheid was acceptable, came from Romans 13:1 - *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.* In other words, according to the Apostle Paul, God ordained these leaders to this office and, therefore, you must listen to them even when, and

follow them even when, they are not doing that which is ethical or moral, because God will work it all out.

I wish I had been old enough and had enough experience, and as much learning, that I could sit down and argue why this argument was a misquote in Paul's letter to the Romans. Why it was so inappropriate to argue that way. I couldn't sit down and argue the expression that Paul was talking mainly to the early Church, trying to get the Church instituted without the Church going into anarchy against the government everywhere they were, or at that moment, the Roman Empire and Nero started out being decent to the Christians - that they hadn't started becoming horrible yet. That, ironically, Paul didn't even follow his own example from Romans 13:1, because he was killed by the Roman authorities for speaking out against them. So, it didn't hold water, but I didn't know enough to argue back. I wish I had said those things to him then, that I'm going to share with you now.

Another example of where Romans 13:1 was used - and abused - was at another point, when there was a storm brewing in 1859 right on the verge of the Civil War, when Market Street Church in Zanesville, Ohio, dragged one of their most influential members before their Session, or their governing board, to determine if they were going to throw him out of that Church. That influential member was named Ezekiel Cox. Ezekiel Cox was a United States Marshall. This United States Marshall had been accused of taking a slave and dragging him back to his slave owner, which thankfully that Church viewed as a sin.

So, Ezekiel Cox stood in a room - not unlike where we go down to the Seminary Center when we have our Session meeting - and sat down at that board and argued why it was right for a U S Marshall to take that slave and return him to the slave owner. He said, "That slave - Charley was his name - should be taken back to his slave owner because he committed a criminal act. He stole the slave owner's horse, saddle and bridle to escape. Theft can never be acceptable."

Now, even the Bible is understanding of slaves. He quoted from Colossians 3:22 and it says, "*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything - in everything - not only while being watched over and in order to please them but wholeheartedly, in fearing God only.*" And, he argued again, quoting not just Colossians, but Romans 13:1, "*Let every person be subject to the governing of authorities.*" And, he said, it is law that it is acceptable to those who have slaves. "*For there is no authority except from God, and those authorities have been instituted by God.*" He thought he had it won - and they said those are misinterpretations of Scripture. Not everything that is legal is moral, ethical or righteous, and by a vote of 22-12 that Church excommunicated Ezekiel Cox.

The same argument from Romans chapter 13:1 was used to tell Rosa Parks, was used to tell the Freedom Riders, as another storm raged in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s to tell the children's marchers that what they were doing was sinning, because God had a right and an obligation - we had an obligation to follow government authority. Time and time again, Roman's has been misused - misinterpreted - to hurt, deny and impede people's human rights, and to allow the indignities of the world to prevail.

I don't have time to give examples of the number of times the German Reich Church read and preached Romans 13:1 as a rationale for why it was alright to exterminate almost 13 million people, including over 6 million Jews in gas chambers, in another horrific storm.

I bring this up and cite those examples, because we are going through another storm right now. It was Romans 13:1 that this past week was quoted by Jeff Sessions, in communicating his rationale for why we should be quiet and not speak out against children being separated from their parents and why they are placed in cages without explanation. I try not to preach on politics every week. Sometimes it feels like I am. But the reason I'm stuck doing this all of the time, is that when you don't explain - especially when they are quoting Scriptures so badly - then it appears that you are accepting their interpretation as right.

Over 600 clergy and lay leaders have posted their concerns and their desires to have Jeff Sessions removed from the United Methodist Church, because of that mistranslation of sacred Scripture from Romans 13:1, and for the indignity and the permanent scarring that is being done to children being separated from their parents.

There are so many other Scriptures that can be used to show that that is immoral and unethical and against the will of God. The very foundation of what it means to have the Great Commandment that unites both the Old and the New Testament that: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. And the second is like it: You love your neighbor as yourself. Upon these two commandments depends all the law and the prophet."*

Love your neighbor as yourself.

You know when something is immoral or unethical by asking yourself, would you want this done to you? Would you want this done to your family? To your children? And, then you can ask yourself whether it is immoral.

Thankfully, on both sides of the aisle - Republican and Democrat, for the most part; liberals and conservatives, on any number of issues - are finally saying that this is not moral or ethical.

My reason to bring this up today, is that they brought the sacred Bible into the rationale for why this is acceptable, forcing me to get up here today and talk to you about the interpretation of Scripture. Scripture needs to be interpreted using other Scripture. You can't just read one little part of it as a rationale, that allows you to do anything you want, no matter how immoral. There are other Scriptures - like the Great Commandment - that say, "Whoa. We had better look at this." Even within Paul's own writing, you go back one chapter - the same page - to chapter 12 verse 2, where it says, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

There is nothing good and acceptable and perfect about separating children from their parents. Paul never meant for chapter 13 verse 1 to take children away from their parents. There are too many other parts of Scripture that would deny that as being ethical and moral.

That is why Scripture is so dangerous, and we need to respect it and honor it and question it, so that we never fall into a trap that can hurt and deny the dignity of men, women and children.

I pray that as this storm continues, that we can continue to look at how we use Scripture and how we treat one another, so that when our children and our grandchildren look back on the decisions that this generation has made, that they will see that they are good and acceptable and perfect; and not immoral - handcuffed like so many Germans in World War II - who thought it was acceptable, and that God told us that we can't do anything about it.

We need to rise above. We need to speak out so that justice and moral ethics prevail in God's name. Amen.