

'Nice' Is Not a Biblical Word; 'Kindness' Is

10/17/2021

Dear Teacher,

A recent article that we are not citing today (for reasons explained below) nonetheless led us to think about the differences between being *nice* (that word is not in the Bible) and being *kind* (the Bible uses that word many places) and, more importantly, to think about what all this suggests for us as we live as followers of Jesus. So that will be the topic of this installment of *The Wired Word*.

If you'd prefer a different topic, look at our second lesson, which wades into the ongoing national discussion regarding how to enforce needed public health and safety measures during a global pandemic while simultaneously safeguarding the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion. We examine the issue of how we can balance our responsibilities as members of a civil society with our allegiance to God.

You are welcome to email the student version of either lesson to your class members, depending on which lesson you prefer to use for your class time. To do so, click here (<http://www.thewiredword.com/subscriber/studentlist.aspx>).

May God bless you as you teach the scriptures this week.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



'Nice' Is Not a Biblical Word; 'Kindness' Is

The Wired Word for the Week of October 17, 2021

In the News

Editor's note: Our topic today was suggested by a recent opinion piece that referred disparagingly to Christians as "nice people." But the article, in our opinion, was more of a polemic than a helpful discussion starter. So we have chosen to address the topic suggested by the headline rather than detail the article's point of view.

The American humorist Mark Twain once wisecracked that the church is "a place where a nice, respectable person stands in front of other nice, respectable people and urges them to be nicer and more respectable."

That wasn't a compliment to the church, but it was, perhaps, a case of reductionism being carried to a ridiculous extreme: the majestic "Love your neighbor as yourself" being shrunk down to "Be nice to everyone" -- or, in the words of a Sunday school song, "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam."

David Sanford, a writer at *Crosswalk.com*, noted that in the Gospels, Jesus is seen as "the very definition of loving with all his heart, soul, strength and mind," but sometimes he also comes off as "anything but 'nice.'"

Sanford also noted that "nice" is not a biblical word. "I've checked every major English-language Bible published in the past five centuries," he said. "'Nice' doesn't appear once. Not even about Jesus. Especially not about Jesus." (For more on this, see #1 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.)

None of this should be taken to mean that niceness is a bad thing -- and many people, Christian and otherwise, are naturally nice. But when defined as being "pleasantly agreeable," it can mean going along with or excusing wrong things rather than standing for what is right and just.

In her book *Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to More*, Sharon Hodde Miller, a pastor's wife, writes about her own experience, saying, "I identify [niceness] as an idol in my life because I have served it tirelessly, and it has served me well in return. My devotion to it has won me a lot of acceptance and praise, but it has also inhibited my courage, fed my self-righteousness, encouraged my inauthenticity, and produced in me a flimsy sweetness that easily gives way to disdain."

Further on, Miller adds that after observing "the fruit of this false idol in my own life, here's what I have concluded: I cannot follow Jesus and be nice. Not equally. Because following Jesus means following someone who spoke hard and confusing truths, who was honest with his disciples -- even when it hurt -- who condemned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and turned over tables in the temple."

Miller notes that our world "swings between sweetness and outrage," but she says that while the two behaviors seem to be at odds with each other, in reality, "they are two sides of the same coin: a lack of spiritual formation."

So spiritual depth is needed, and if we are to go beyond mere niceness, what is a virtue with such depth? The Rev. Philip DeVaul, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Cincinnati, says that virtue is kindness. While to be nice is to be pleasant or pleasing -- a nice shirt, a nice compliment, a nice person -- to be kind is to be helpful and benevolent -- to do something that helps someone who is in distress or upset. There may be overlap between these, but they are not the same.

But before DeVaul gets to addressing the virtue of kindness, he asks whether Christians really think being nice is an issue for the church. "Do we really believe that the overwhelming reputation we've cultivated in this world is that we're too nice?" DeVaul asks. "When non-Christians think about Christians, is the first (or second or seventh) word that comes to mind 'nice'? For that matter, when Christians think of the other Christians we know, are we really worried they're just too nice? Can all (or any) of the church's great failings throughout history be traced back to relentless and unrepentant niceness?" he asks.

"No" is the right answer to all of those rhetorical questions, we think.

Thus, DeVaul concludes, "it's overwhelmingly clear at this point that Christians know we can't always be nice. It seems like well-documented territory. ... But do you know what Christians are supposed to be? We're supposed to be kind."

Making his case, DeVaul writes, "Paul's letters to churches in the New Testament consistently emphasize the need for these new Christians to put kindness and consideration of the other at their core. He tells them that kindness will abound like fruit from the heart of a real Christian community. ... The comparison is clear: Paul is saying that to be kind is to know who Jesus is -- to be kind is to be like God himself."

More on this story can be found at these links:

11 Reasons Christianity Is More Than Just Being 'Nice.' *Crosswalk.com*

(<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/reasons-christianity-is-more-than-just-being-nice.html>)

Why Niceness Weakens Our Witness. *Christianity Today* (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/august-web-only/virtue-vice-why-niceness-weakens-our-witness.html>)

Being Christian Doesn't Always Mean Being Nice, but Being Kind Is Another Story. *The Orange County Register* (<https://www.ocregister.com/2015/03/19/being-christian-doesnt-always-mean-being-nice-but-being-kind-is-another-story/>)

Applying the News Story

DeVaul is right about the prominence of kindness in the scriptures. Consider these verses:

- Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? --Isaiah 58:6-7
- He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? --Micah 6:8
- Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. --Zechariah 7:9-10
- Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." -- Matthew 25:34-36
- Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful ... --1 Corinthians 13:4-5
- By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. --Galatians 5:22-23
- Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. --Ephesians 4:31-32

What's more, the Bible cites kindness as an attribute of God:

- Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness is good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies. --Psalm 69:16 (KJV)
- ... But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love [Hebrew *chesed* = "lovingkindness" in older Bible translations], and you did not forsake them. -- Nehemiah 9:17
- [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. --Ephesians 2:6-7
- But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior ... --Titus 3:4-6

The Big Questions

1. What are the similarities between niceness and kindness? What are the differences? What is the essential character of kindness?

2. In what ways ought the example of Jesus serve as a model for how we interact with others?
3. When have you seen niceness get in the way of doing the constructive thing?
4. Do you agree with Sharon Hodde Miller when she says that our world "swings between sweetness and outrage," but that the two behaviors are, in reality, "two sides of the same coin: a lack of spiritual formation"? How might spiritual formation affect a tendency to be easily outraged? to be "sweet"?
5. What personal call from God might be perceived in the ways the Gospels show Jesus responding to opponents? to people in need? to children? to those who mourn? to those who have plenty?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

John 8:7, 10-11

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ... 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (For context, read John 8:1-11

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+8%3A1-11&version=NRSV>.)

These verses are excerpts from the gospel account of Jesus being asked by scribes and Pharisees to render a judgment about a woman caught in adultery. Verse 7 contains Jesus' response to the scribes and Pharisees, and it wasn't nice -- Jesus wasn't being "agreeably pleasant." But his words were direct, to the point and what needed to be said.

Questions: Verses 10-11 contain Jesus' response to the woman. How would you characterize it? Was it nice? Was it kind? Or something else? Explain.

Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (No further context necessary.)

In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is talking about how his followers should relate to the society in which they live. They should be "salt" and "light."

While in common speech today, "salty" is usually a euphemism for profane language, Jesus was likely referring to the way salt preserves food and changes its flavor. Salt may even have been a catalyst for dung to burn as fuel for a household's earthen oven. In that time, as in ours, salt was critically important to daily life. In fact, so valuable was it that the Roman legions sometimes received part of their wages in salt, and they were happy to get it. These salt-wages were called the "salarium," and our word "salary" comes from the same root. Thus, when a soldier shirked his work, his comrades said he was "not worth his salt."

Jesus warns about salt losing its "saltiness." Actually, salt does not lose its taste by some chemical breakdown, but only by becoming impure, being so intermixed with other elements that its salty potency is overpowered. Thus, Christians need to avoid being so like the society of which they are a part that their example and witness

are diluted and have no impact.

That's even clearer in Jesus' words about being the light of the world, where he says directly that we should let our light shine so that others may see our good works and give glory to God.

Together, salt and light can be shorthand for the cultural relevance of Christianity. Mark Twain described the job of preachers as standing before a congregation of nice people and exhorting them to be nicer, but it's more important that we be urged to be salt and light.

Questions: What is it that makes us salt and light? Is it avoidance of profanity coupled with good deeds? Is it good deeds alone? Is it giving our faith testimony? Is it all of the above and more? Is it something else, and if so, what? How, if at all, is niceness related to being salt and light? How, if at all, is kindness related to being salt and light?

Acts 17:6

When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ... " (For context, read Acts 17:1-9 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+17%3A1-9&version=NRSV>)).

This passage reminds us of how potent Christianity can be. The apostle Paul, on his second mission tour through Asia Minor, is traveling with fellow Christian Silas. They come to Thessalonica, where they stay as guests in the home of a man named Jason. They spend three consecutive Sabbath days in the synagogues explaining that Jesus is the Messiah, and telling how the Hebrew scriptures point to him. As a result, some of the Jews, as well as some Gentiles in the community, become believers.

But some others get jealous of the following that Paul and Silas have, and instigate a mob to go search for them. They cannot find them, so they drag Jason and some of these new believers before the city magistrates, charging, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ..."

Hmmm. Turning the world upside down. Do you get the feeling that these early Christians were doing more than being sunbeams for Jesus? Paul was urging the people to be something greater than nice and respectable.

Those making this charge that Christians were turning the world upside down were wrong in the way they meant it. They meant that the Christians were a political threat, "acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor," which is what they said, but that wasn't the case. Their charge, however, was correct in ways they couldn't envision. When these Christians said, "There is another king named Jesus," they weren't intending to knock the emperor off his throne; they were intending to change the whole world.

And they did. The subsequent tale of Christianity is about the gradual spread of the gospel.

Questions: What sort of turning the world upside down today is needed, and how can Christians participate in that? What qualities and virtues do we need?

Isaiah 42:1-3

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a

bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. (For context, read Isaiah 42:1-4 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+42%3A1-4&version=NRSV>)).

In Isaiah, these words refer to an unidentified servant God would send to the troubled Israelites. But in the New Testament, these words are quoted to refer to Jesus (see Matthew 12:15-21 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+12%3A15-21&version=NRSV>)). Note how the references to not breaking a "bruised reed" and not quenching a "dimly burning wick" are metaphors for kindness.

Questions: Where have you seen the "mending" activity of Jesus in life? Why do you suppose so many hospitals were originally founded by churches?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this excerpt from TWW team member Stan Purdum's sermon, "The Divisive Jesus," based on Luke 12:49-56 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+12%3A49-56&version=NRSV>):

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child ..." (At this point, people who have actually read the Gospels should be either *cringing* or *gagging*.)

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child ..." is the opening line of one of Charles Wesley's well-known hymns, but for painting a word-picture of Jesus, he could hardly have chosen a less applicable word than "mild," especially in light of today's gospel reading.

How about this instead: "*Divisive* Jesus, strong and *riled* ..."?

Okay, maybe "riled" isn't quite the right word for this particular passage either -- we'd be better to rework the phrasing of Charles' lyrics so that we don't have to rhyme with "child" -- but *riled* is closer to the truth than *mild*.

Actually though, we're more concerned about a word Jesus himself used in this passage as a descriptor of his ministry: *division*. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" he asked. "No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Division is a troubling word, and as it happens, divisive talk and actions from Jesus or about him keep cropping up in the Gospels. Consider:

- When John the Baptist was announcing Jesus' coming, he said, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17).
- In the early days of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus visited the Nazareth synagogue with his reputation as a preacher and healer preceding him, the congregation initially "spoke well of him" (Luke 4:22). But Jesus wasn't content to leave it at that, and intentionally provoked them with his "hometown" comments to the point that they wanted to dispatch him over a cliff (Luke 4:16-30).
- When Jesus spoke to a crowd at the festival of booths in Jerusalem about rivers of living water, some hearers decided he was the Messiah. Others doubted it, however, and the gospel narrator says, "So there was a division in the crowd because of him" (John 7:43).
- When a would-be follower told Jesus he first wanted to bury his father, the sense of Jesus' response was essentially that the man should leave his family obligations behind, which, if the man had done so, would have effectively divided him from his family (Luke 9:57-60).

- In elaborating on his "I have come to bring ... division" comments in today's reading, Jesus talked about setting father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and vice versa in all three cases.
- And let's not forget that in the Matthean parallel to today's reading, Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a *sword*" (Matthew 10:34, italics added).

Is this the sort of Jesus we want? We already have enough things that divide us -- politics, nationalism, ethnicity, economic status, social standing, educational level, religion, denominations, cultural issues and more -- without also having a divisive Savior.

And consider what we're saying when we label someone as having a "divisive" personality. The denotative meaning is "disruptive, unsettling, alienating, troublesome, controversial, contentious, causing or tending to cause disagreement or dissension." Wow! Even the Bible itself says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10 NIV).

So do we want a Jesus whose stated purpose for coming to earth is to bring division?! Not peace. *Division*. No wonder some have glossed him over with "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" pabulum.

But wait. Before deciding whether we want that sort of Jesus, it's helpful to think about the nature of *caricature*. A caricature, after all, is an exaggeration of certain characteristics. No doubt Jesus did respond mildly occasionally -- we think, for example, of when he took a little child into his arms and said to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me ..." (Mark 9:37). Certainly, he was gentle with the child, and while Mark doesn't describe his demeanor toward the disciples, Jesus probably spoke to them in such a way as not to frighten the child. But to brand Jesus "mild" from a few incidents like that is to caricature him.

Is it possible that we are doing the same when we focus on Jesus' words and actions about division? Is the divisive Jesus also a caricature? There is a danger from portraying Jesus in distortion. In his now classic Christian work *Your God Is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips points out "the impossibility of a mature adult's feeling constrained to worship a god whose emotional equipment is less developed than his [or her] own." He goes on to say that a "second danger is that since it is axiomatic with Christians that God is love, this most terrible and beautiful of all the virtues becomes debased and cheapened."...

So, yes, "the divisive Jesus" is a caricature, but the divisive *call* of Jesus is a reality. ...

He still calls us to divide ourselves from those who urge us to morally stray, to put family loyalty above doing his will, to believe or follow those who act as if peace and happiness lie in possessions, to go along with societal voices that build up the self at the expense of others. In our individual case, the divisive part of Jesus' call may be quite specific and personally tailored to our life. ...

2. Share this lighter moment: It seems that Johnny came home from Sunday school one day looking very unhappy, so his mother asked him what was wrong. Johnny explained, "My Sunday school teacher said Jesus wants me to be a sunbeam, but I want to be a truck driver!"

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about your own interactions with others, especially those that are troubled, and to consider whether some kindness on your part might change the tone of those interactions.

Prayer

Lord, help us to be inspired and called by all that the Gospels show us about Jesus, rather than just by our created image or caricature of him. In his name. Amen.

Other News This Week

National Debate Continues on How to Balance Religious Liberty With Public Health and Safety

The Wired Word for the Week of October 17, 2021

In the News

Last month, President Joe Biden announced a vaccine requirement for health care workers, employees of federal contractors and businesses with more than 100 employees, allowing exemptions for religious and medical reasons.

During the course of the pandemic, various public health measures (such as face masks, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, limits on social gatherings and travel restrictions) have been implemented in efforts to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Public support for and opposition to these measures has varied, depending on the circumstances. Of particular concern to many has been the desire to protect the constitutional right to free exercise of religion during a global health emergency.

The government can temporarily limit in-person communal worship and religious exercise if truly necessary to protect public safety, as long as it does not discriminate against religious entities or treat secular organizations, businesses and activities, such as mass protests or gatherings, more favorably. Courts have also ruled that there must be a compelling state interest that cannot be satisfied by lesser restrictions.

When Nevada created indoor attendance limits that treated churches and casinos differently, some churches objected that the policies were not being applied consistently. They were not asking for a special accommodation, but only for non-discriminatory, even-handed treatment.

Consistency works both ways. Applicants for religious exemptions are usually expected to be able to demonstrate consistency in order to prevail in their requests for relief. If parents have no problem with mask requirements when their children participate in sports or other activities such as trick-or-treating on Halloween, their objections to wearing masks to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 would be deemed inconsistent, for example. Or an applicant who has been vaccinated for other diseases would have a hard time proving that they have a genuine religious conviction preventing them from being inoculated against Covid-19.

Alana Genderson (<https://www.npr.org/2021/10/04/1042577608/religious-exemptions-against-the-covid-19-vaccine-are-complicated-to-get>), an attorney specializing in labor and employment law, said that employers who require that their workers be vaccinated also receive requests for religious exemptions. To assess whether a worker's religious belief is "sincerely held" is no easy matter. Some factors employers may consider include "whether the employee's behavior is inconsistent with the professed belief; the accommodation constitutes a desirable benefit likely to be sought for secular reasons; the timing of the request renders it suspect; or the employer has an objective reason to believe the accommodation is not sought for religious reasons," Genderson explained.

According to John R. Vile, professor of political science at Middle Tennessee State University and the author of *A Companion to the United States Constitution and Its Amendments*, as long as laws serve "a compelling state interest," such as public health; are neutral and generally applicable; and provide "the least restrictive means of achieving the state interest," individuals and institutions are not exempt from the obligation to obey them.

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld told NPR's Michel Martin, "I believe that what ... gets people really upset is the inconsistency of seeing bars open and restaurants open and then synagogues closed because for many people I know who I spend time with, it's much more essential to be able to go and pray every day than to be able to go to a bar or to a restaurant."

The Rev. Thomas McKenzie, an Anglican priest, remarked that some activities in houses of worship may be safer than analogous activities in other locations, because of health protocols religious leaders have established that are not necessarily standard elsewhere. "It is a very safe environment -- much more safe, in my opinion, than going into a restaurant where, by definition, everyone has to take their masks off," McKenzie said.

Imam Rizwan Ali, the religious director at the Islamic Center of Naperville in Naperville, Illinois, indicated that they normally would stand shoulder to shoulder during worship, but they now do what is essential -- praying -- by adapting their methods so they are wearing masks and staying at greater distances while praying. "The overall teachings of the religion take precedence over some of the practices that we used to think were essential," Ali said, adding, "but the essential aspects are even more important, which includes keeping everybody safe within the community."

Legal experts and advocates for religious liberty seem to agree on one thing: the need for consistency, both in the way governmental authorities craft and apply laws and orders, and in the way citizens seek redress or exemptions from such regulations.

Caroline Mala Corbin, a law professor at the University of Miami School of Law, wrote, "Our constitutional rights are precious, but none of them are absolute. Even the right to religious liberty is not absolute, especially if exercising it endangers others. After all, without life, there can be no liberty or pursuit of happiness."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Don't Let Religious Liberty Claims Mask Bad Faith Arguments. *Christianity Today*

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/october-web-only/covid-mask-mandates-faith-inconsistent-liberty.html>)Balancing Coronavirus Limitations With Religious Liberty. *NPR*

(<https://www.npr.org/2020/12/06/943695925/balancing-coronavirus-limitations-with-religious-liberty>)Religious Liberty in a Pandemic. *Duke Law Journal*

(<https://dlij.law.duke.edu/2020/09/religiouspandemic/>)Religious Liberty in a Time of Crisis. *Adventist Liberty*

(<https://www.adventistliberty.org/religious-liberty-in-a-time-of-crisis>)What Does the Supreme Court's Midnight Covid Ruling Really Mean for Religious Liberty? *Baptist News*

(<https://baptistnews.com/article/what-does-the-supreme-courts-midnight-covid-ruling-really-mean-for-religious-liberty/#.YWQ9WRpJFPY>)

The Big Questions

1. Under what circumstances, if any, should people be permitted to be exempt from following a law they don't like for some reason?

2. How can a business or government agency determine the legitimacy of a person's request for a religious exemption from following a law, public health directive or mandate?
3. When one person's right to life and desire to protect life conflicts with another person's right to freely exercise their religion, which right takes priority? Explain.
4. How, if at all, might face masks, vaccination, social distancing or limitations on gatherings for public worship infringe on a person's free exercise of religion? When, if ever, might such measures be warranted?
5. How might the basis for a request for a religious exemption differ, depending on which public health measure a person found objectionable?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 4:5-7

Then the devil took [Jesus] to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (For context, read Matthew 4:1-11 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+4%3A1-11&version=NRSV>)).

This is the second of three temptations Jesus faced during his 40-day fast in the wilderness. In this test, the devil quoted a passage from Psalm 91 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+91%3A9-15&version=NRSV>), perhaps assuming that by using a respected text, his challenge would be more palatable to Jesus.

But Jesus recognized two things: First, we do not have license to twist a biblical text to make it say what we want to hear so that we can do whatever we please. And second, we are not to intentionally defy the laws of nature God has put in place for our protection, to prove that those laws don't apply to us or that we are somehow above those laws. To do so would be to misapply the promises of God.

Questions: How might people misuse texts such as Psalm 91 when facing a time of pestilence? How might well-meaning Christians "put the Lord [our] God to the test" during a pandemic?

Matthew 22:17, 19-21

[The Pharisees asked Jesus,] "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ... [Jesus said,] "Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (For context, read Matthew 22:15-22 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+22%3A15-22&version=NRSV>)).

Psalm 24:1

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it ...* (For context, read Psalm 24:1-10 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2024&version=NRSV>)).

The Pharisees, together with the Herodians, sought to trip Jesus up with a "Gotcha!" question, thinking that no matter how Jesus answered them, he would be in trouble with somebody. If Jesus said yes, the common people would reject him, since they resented having to pay taxes to the colonizing conqueror. If he said no, he could be brought up on charges of sedition by that same ruler.

First, the questioners tried to butter Jesus up with insincere flattery. "Teacher, we know you are sincere, honest, and fair," they said. Then they acted as though they had a serious concern that only he could resolve for them. "So give us your best advice. Should we pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malicious intent, saw through their ruse and called them on it, accusing them of hypocrisy (v. 18).

Questions: What do we owe to the civil authorities, and what do we owe to God, during a global pandemic? If, as Psalm 24:1 declares, everything belongs to God, then does that mean we are not obligated to give anything to "the emperor"? If so, then why does Jesus say, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's"? If not, what belongs to "the emperor," and what is "the emperor" supposed to do with the things we give to him?

Romans 13:1-4, 8

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. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. ... Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (For context, read Romans 13:1-10 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+13%3A1-10&version=NRSV>)).

In this passage, Paul advises followers of Jesus to submit to governing authorities under the principle of the sovereignty of God; those in authority are in place because God allowed and appointed them. Here Paul presents an ideal of government as always supportive of good conduct, never corrupt, never approving of bad actors, never punishing the upright.

In 1527, during an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther wrote (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>) to Johann Hess, pastor at Breslau, that public officials "such as city physicians, city clerks and constables" were "under obligation to remain" at their posts unless they had made provision for their responsibilities to be covered by other "capable substitutes."

"This, too, is God's word, which institutes secular authority and commands that town and country be ruled, protected, and preserved," Luther wrote, referencing "Romans 13:4, 'The governing authorities are God's ministers for your own good.' To abandon an entire community which one has been called to govern and to leave it without official or government, exposed to all kinds of danger such as fires, murder, riots, and every imaginable disaster is a great sin. ... We are bound to each other in such a way that no one may forsake the other in his distress but is obliged to assist and help him as he himself would like to be helped."

Luther's words also present an ideal view of the proper role of civil authorities. Of course, we all recognize that no earthly government is perfect, and some fail miserably to rise to the challenge of working for the common good. Yet both Paul and Luther call for followers of Jesus to respect, honor and encourage officials to perform their responsibilities faithfully.

Daniel Bennett, president of Christians in Political Science, wrote: "Religious liberty is ... not a waiver to avoid all inconveniences in life or, worse, a tool to make political statements." About the Romans 13 passage, Bennett added, "We must guard against the temptation to use our faith as a kind of hall pass to avoid the burdens of dealing with new and emerging cultural challenges."

Questions: How should followers of Jesus demonstrate love for government officials and other authority figures with whose policies they may disagree? When, if ever, might love for government officials require something other than submission to their decrees, such as a request for a religious exemption? On what basis should we determine whether it is appropriate to submit or to decline to obey an authority's edict?

Acts 5:29, 42

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." ... And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. (For context, read Acts 5:17-42 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+5%3A17-42&version=NRSV>)).

After Jesus' resurrection, his apostles taught about him publicly, which angered the high priest and the sect of the Sadducees, who did not believe in the concept of a resurrection. These religious scholars had the apostles arrested and imprisoned, but in the night, an angel of the Lord freed them and sent them back to the temple to continue proclaiming the message of life.

The next day, when the high priest sent the temple police to bring the apostles before the council of the elders, they were startled by the news that the prison cells were empty and that the apostles were back in the temple teaching the people.

So the temple police brought the apostles before the council to be questioned. The high priest wanted to know why the apostles hadn't obeyed their orders not to teach in the name of Jesus.

Peter and the apostles responded that they answered to a higher authority than any on earth. They again asserted that God had raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him at his right hand.

The religious authorities had them flogged, ordered them not to speak in Jesus' name, and released them, but that didn't stop them from proclaiming Jesus as the one God had sent.

Question: How do the motives and actions of the apostles in this passage compare and contrast with the actions of people who defy human authorities who are calling for the use of face masks, vaccinations, limits on public gatherings including worship services, etc. in efforts to bring Covid-19 under control?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from Martin Luther's 1527 letter (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-plague-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-flee-letter.html>) to a pastor about how to behave during a pandemic: "God's punishment has come upon us, not only to chastise us for our sins but also to test our faith and love -- our faith in that we may see and experience how we should act toward God; our love in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor. I am of the opinion that all the epidemics, like any plague, are spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestilential breath which puts a deadly poison into the flesh. Nevertheless, this is God's decree and punishment to which we must patiently submit and serve our neighbor, risking our lives in this manner as St. John teaches, 'If Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (1 John 3:16)."

2. Think about this: One of the claims Luther encountered during the bubonic plague of 1527 was the idea that one should not do anything to fight disease and death, since if those came, it would be God's will and punishment, which should not be resisted. As the saying went, if God wanted to spare people, he could do it "without medicines or our carefulness."

Luther found this argument "rash and reckless." He countered: "This is not trusting God but tempting him. ... If one makes no use of intelligence [that God gave us] or medicine [that God created] when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. ..."

"It is even more shameful," Luther continued, "for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over."

3. Discuss this, from TWW team member Jim Berger: "One of the views I hear repeatedly is 'I don't need the vaccination or a mask because I'm covered in the blood of Jesus.' I find that to be a gross misuse of the scripture. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from every unrighteousness, but it won't protect me if I step off the edge of my roof or walk into traffic. Confusing theology with magic can have fatal consequences."

4. A consultant for TWW wrote: "Although our lesson has focussed on the issue of how to protect the right to free exercise of religion, the broader discussion involves how to balance personal liberty (i.e., the right of an individual to make decisions about his or her own person based upon personal judgment) and government authority (the right of government officials to tell other people what to do). In the extreme, the former is called 'anarchism' and the latter is called 'fascism,' 'authoritarianism' or 'totalitarianism.'

"In the United States, the founding Declaration is that government exists to protect the rights of individuals to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"

What is the purpose of government? Do you lean more toward the "anarchist" or "fascist / authoritarian / totalitarian" tendency? How does your Christian faith inform the way you think about and relate to our government?

Responding to the News

Consult with your local and denominational church leaders about ways you can demonstrate the love of Christ to the community most effectively during the pandemic. How can you act in ways to keep people safe, while helping to preserve religious liberty for all?

Prayer

Grant us wisdom, O God, in our dealings with human authorities, so that we might not give offense needlessly or cause harm to others. Grant us courage to stand for truth, even when it may be costly to do so. Most of all, grant us love, the fulfillment of your law. Amen.

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