

Romans 13:1-2 NRSV
Policing: Part II, A New Testament View
11.8.2020

Today, we look at Part II

Of our series on policing from a biblical perspective.

We look to the New Testament.

Following my sermon two weeks

I visited someone who sharply differed from me.

He raised a couple of points that I will share today.

First, he got the impression from my sermon

I was blaming America's entire problem of racism
On our policing system.

If that was the message I gave, I apologize.

It was not my intention.

My intention was to address

What is prompting our current protests . . .
Police brutality against the African American.

We talked a lot about that.

Being a retired police officer

He shared his views on some of this.

Let me share some of them with you.

I told him about a friend of mine, a black woman
Who said the Richmond police stopped her
Four times in two months
For no obvious reason.

She considered it harassment.

My friend, the retired police officer said
In 30 years of policing
He had never witnessed racial profiling.

In this day and age with tinted windows
A police officer stopping someone
Has very little idea what the driver's race is.

He speculated the reason the officer stopped her
Was either due to a moving violation
Or faulty equipment on the vehicle.

He said the majority of time
When things escalate and get out of hand
It is because of unruliness
On the part of the person in violation.

I asked him about some of the recent events
That are labeled police brutality.

His response was that the police officer
Was either threatened or felt threatened.

In regards to the George Floyd incident in Minnesota
He said it was a case of downright murder.

He wanted me to know, in his opinion
That 99.9% of police officers are good cops

They put themselves at risk daily
To protect citizens, regardless of color.

He said good cops hate bad cops.

The few bad ones make them all look bad.

And as long as you obey a police officer's instructions
And respect their authority
Whether you're white or a person of color
You will be treated fairly.

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This brings us to our primary passage, Romans 13.

Paul addresses how citizens are to respond
To governing authorities

This, of course, means agencies within government
Namely the police force.

In Jesus' day
That would include the Roman policing system
And the Jewish religion's policing system.

Citizens are to submit to them
For, Paul says, their authority comes from God.

Whoever resists this kind of authority
Incurs God's judgment.

This is a tough passage for many of us.

Do you submit to governing authorities
When they ask of you what you cannot do?

In the early church
The governing authorities
In this case, the Jewish legal system

Forbade the early church leaders
To preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

They threatened the apostles with imprisonment.

In response . . .

**Acts 5:29 NRSV But Peter and the apostles answered,
“We must obey God rather than any human authority”.**

Another example . . . during the American Revolution
Brethren quietly paid their taxes
But refused to enter military service
Due to their pacifistic views.

For this, the American patriots
Stripped the Brethren of their wealth
And accused them of being British sympathizers.

Brethren allowed themselves to submit to the authorities
As long as it didn't force them to do something
Their faith wouldn't allow.

Another question,

How are we to respond to corrupt governments?

Is Paul suggesting we submit to governing authorities

When they abuse their power?

I don't believe so.

Do not our rights as American citizens

Frees us to question authority?

I believe it does.

So this is the way I see this passage.

Paul, in Romans 13:1-2, presumes or idealizes

That governing authorities are fair and equitable.

According to Esau McCauley,

Author of the book,

Reading While Black: African American Biblical
Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope

“By the logic of Paul’s theology, the same government that creates civic structures has a responsibility to discern what is just, undo any injustices and right the wrongs of the system.”

“It also follows that we as Christians citizens have a civic duty to hold these rulers or elected officials responsible for the actions of their agents or officers.”

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Since our greatest allegiance is to God
And secondarily to the state

It is the duty of citizens to remind the state
Both, of their limits of power
And the potential abuse of that power.

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In a fair and just system
When the agencies of government

Perform their duties in an ethical manner
Our responsibilities as good citizens
Are to be subject to them.

Romans 13:3-4 NLT

³ For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.

⁴ The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.

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I think this is where my friend
The retired police officer is coming from.

But what I don't get is this.

Why is there such a huge disconnect
Between what my friend is saying
And what the Black community is saying?

Esau McCauley the aforementioned author
Also wrote an article in Christianity Today
Entitled, “Paul and the Police.”

He shares, over the years I have been stopped between seven and ten times, on the road or in public spaces, for no crime other than being black. The people I love have also been stopped, searched, accused, and humiliated with little to no legal justification.

These disclosures might give the impression that I don't like police officers. On the contrary, I have known many good ones. I recognize the dangers they face and the difficulties inherent in the vocation they choose.

But having a difficult job does not absolve one of criticism; it simply puts the criticism in a larger framework.

He continues, That wider framework has to include the history of the police in this country—their legal enforcement of racial discrimination and the terror they have visited on black bodies.

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I have two sons.

I have never had to sit them down
To discuss the dangers
Of being stopped by police.

However, I do know, Black parents
Have had to give their sons and daughters “the talk”.

From Terence Lester: *“The Talk’ is a rite of passage for Black children. Essentially, we’re taught how to behave in the presence of police officers to mitigate potential harm. It’s a discussion that many Black parents consider a necessary evil, dreading the day when their children kind of go from their innocence to being considered threats.”*

From Esau McCauley, *when I am pulled over for a traffic stop, I am afraid precisely because the police have been a source of terror in my own life, my ancestors’ lives, and the lives of my people.*

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Do I think there is systemic racism in America?

Yes, I do.

What do I mean when I say this?

Wikipedia describes it as *“a form of racism that is embedded as normal practice within society or an organization. It can lead to such issues as discrimination in criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other issues.”*

Do I believe there is systemic racism in our policing system?

There is evidence pointing in that direction.

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So what do we do about it?

First, we need to listen to the black community.

We need to hear their stories.

We need to be open to the possibility

That in particular policing systems in America

There is a prejudice towards the Black community.

In regards to systemic racism in our policing system

I want you to hear this, from the website, *The Factual*.

Perhaps one of the most challenging parts of tackling the issue is setting the right conceptual framework. The terminology is commonly misinterpreted to mean that all police are racist, a label that seemingly paints the diverse police community with broad strokes. Rather, the term is meant to convey that the system, rather than specifically the people within it, is prone to produce inherently unjust outcomes.

The Washington Post's Radley Balko says the same.

"Of particular concern to some on the right is the term 'systemic racism,' often wrongly interpreted as an accusation that everyone in the system is racist. In fact, systemic racism means almost the opposite. It means that we have systems and institutions that produce racially disparate outcomes, regardless of the intentions of the people who work within them."

I believe the Black community has a legitimate concern.

As people of faith who believe
In a God who favors the oppressed and marginalized.

We are to stand in solidarity with the Black community.

We also need to support the hardworking police officers
Doing the very best they can.

In fair and equitable ways, they try to enforce the law

To ensure the safety of its citizens
And prevent crime and civil disorder.

And finally, all of us need to immerse it in prayer.

From the Apostle Paul.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 NLT I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them.

² Pray this way [also] for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.

Amen.

May it be so.