

Racism Reflection November 9, 2020 NSMC Dan Graber

I invite you read and reflect carefully this Bible study focused on the New Testament like last's weeks reflection was focused on the Old Testament. I've always noticed how Christians talk about Romans 13, about "obey the authorities," from the position of privilege. And I can't help reflect on the times I've been stopped by the police, for speeding or for having a sticker out of date, and the way I've been treated as a white person, in contrast to the experience of blacks I've known. So please follow the logic this writer presents, read the scriptures cited, and consider his point of view.

Paul's Word to Police: Protect the Weak

As black Christians have long understood, the New Testament has a strong theology of law enforcement.

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I grew up in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Huntsville, Alabama. By the time I was 16, I was confident that football would be my path to college. The letters and phone calls from college coaches had just begun. All I had to do was perform on the field, keep up my grades, and stay out of trouble. By "trouble," I didn't mean my own behavior. I was afraid of being harassed by the police and afraid that I might find myself in an encounter that spun out of control.

I came of age in the aftermath of the Rodney King incident, which confirmed my fears of the police. But "driving while black" was not simply a problem I saw on the news. It was something I experienced.

One night my junior year, my friends and I had plans to go to the mall and, later, a party in the same part of town. We stopped at a gas station to grab some snacks and fuel before continuing on to the night's festivities. After I finished filling the tank, I climbed back into the car and got ready to leave. Then I noticed that a black SUV had pulled up close behind us. Another drove up to my left, and another parked in front of my car. I thought I was being carjacked, but who would carjack someone at a well-lit gas station?

When police came filing out of the SUVs, I realized what was going on. "Put your hands where we can see them," an officer said.

"I'm not putting my hands anywhere," one of my friends said.

Right then, my future flashed before my eyes. Had all my planning been for naught? Had I exchanged my dreams for a bag of chips and a few gallons of fuel?

I told my friend to be quiet and do as the officer said. When the officer ordered us to get out of the car, we complied. I asked him what was going on. He said that this particular gas station was a known drug hub and that he had seen us conducting a drug deal. I couldn't help but think that this location was also a known place to acquire gas. But what could we do?

The whole thing lasted less than 20 minutes. They found nothing in their search. I expected some apology, some further explanation for why they had detained us other than for being young and black. Instead, they gave us back our licenses and told us we were free to go.

But I didn't feel free. I felt powerless and angry. I had come too close to losing it all: the football scholarship, the path out of poverty, and the chance to help my family. I had been briefly terrorized.

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 wider framework. 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.

The dark silt of that history has been brought to the surface by recent events, most notably the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police. The many protesters who have marched in our nation's streets bear witness to the fact that Floyd is not the first. Black Americans have been “under the knee” for not days or weeks but centuries, and this cumulative oppression is once again front and center in our national consciousness.

As a country trying to come to terms with our view of policing, we turn to books, podcasts, conversations in the public square, and projects in our communities. That's all fine and good. But as believers, we must turn our eyes to Scripture, not in order to “proof-text” but in order to think theologically about how the state polices its residents. The New Testament, in particular, points toward a theology of policing that is often neglected by laity, clergy, and even scholars.

Surprisingly, this subject has seen very little reflection in the standard works on New Testament ethics. But the guild has missed something. The state's treatment of its citizens is not a subject foreign to the New Testament, and black folk looking to these texts will in fact find succor and hope. Taken as a whole, these passages are absolutely fundamental to how we think about the future of policing in America.

The New Testament provides the beginning of a Christian theology of policing in two places. The first is Romans 13:1–7, a much-maligned and misunderstood text. Paul's words on “the sword” bear directly on the question of how the state polices its residents.

At a glance, the first few verses of Romans 13 might not seem like a productive place to start. They read: 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. (Rom. 13:1–2, NRSV throughout)

The focus of this passage appears to be individuals, not the state. Furthermore, Paul tells individuals to submit to the authorities, because those in power have been placed there by God. Those who resist run the risk of opposing God's will.

Paul's lack of qualification here has been cause for concern among both lay readers and scholars. As Leander Keck writes in his commentary *Romans*, "It is not the opaqueness of this passage that has distressed and divided interpreters but its clarity."

Is Paul arguing that the proper Christian response to mistreatment is not revolution but obedience? And is our only hope the eschatological righting of wrongs on the other side of this life? Yes, that eschatological picture is important, but Paul has more in mind. His words about submission to authority must be read in light of a much larger context.

First, we have to look at Paul's study of Pharaoh. His use of the Pharaoh narrative is almost universally ignored in studies of Romans 13, but it provides essential groundwork for a biblically informed theology of policing. Paul writes: For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." (Rom. 9:17)

According to the apostle, God is glorified through his judgment of wicked kings. Pharaoh was involved in the economic exploitation, enslavement, and harsh treatment of Israel, and God removed him because of his unjust and tyrannical rule.

As Paul notes, God's destruction of Pharaoh is enacted partly through Moses. The story of Pharaoh, then, gives us an example of God removing authorities through human agents. More to the point, Paul's interest in that story shows that his prohibition against resistance is not absolute.

Second, we have to understand Paul's view of the state. Although Paul's words to individuals have received the bulk of attention for exegetes, his comments about the state provide a fuller picture. Paul's call for submission to the state is grounded in a description of what the state itself should do:

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. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! (Rom. 13:3-4)

In order to make sense of these words about the sword, we need to understand that in Paul's time, soldiers performed a policing role. They were an "organized unit of men under official command whose duties involved maintaining public order and state control in a civilian setting," writes Christopher J. Fuhrmann in *Policing the Roman Empire*. Although soldiers didn't function exactly like modern police officers, they were in effect the closest thing to a police force.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul focuses on the authorities, not the officers themselves. He seems to recognize that a soldier's attitude toward city residents will be determined in large part by those who give the orders. The problem, if there is one, does not reside solely with those who bear the sword but with those who direct it. In other words, Paul's focus here is not on individual actions but rather on power structures.

A careful student of Paul might object to this interpretation by pointing to verse 3, where Paul says that rulers (who control the police) are not a terror to those who engage in good conduct. He states this as a fact. However, given God's ability to judge nations and rulers for corrupt practices, it's evident that Paul is talking about an ideal. His mandate to "do what is good" presupposes that rulers themselves are discerning the difference between right conduct and wrong conduct. That presupposition is key.

Clearly, Paul knows that some rulers are a terror to those who are good. His study of Pharaoh in chapter 9 makes that manifest. In chapter 13, Paul goes on to outline rulers' responsibilities without directly addressing the problem of evil rulers. In this larger context, we are free to fill in the gap with his reference to Egypt and the wider biblical account.

What, then, does Paul's focus on power structures mean for today? The application seems pretty apparent. In America, we have to face the fact that racism has been founded on corporate, institutional sin and fueled by the policing power of the state. Over the course of centuries, not decades, our government has crafted laws that were designed to disenfranchise black people. These laws were then enforced by the state's sword.

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 Christian citizens have a civic duty to hold these rulers or elected officials responsible for the actions of their agents or officers.

Paul's view of policing grows too out of a Christian theology of persons. This theology reminds us that God is our maker, and the state is only a steward or caretaker. It did not create us, and it does not own or define us. With that in mind, we are being the Christians God calls us to be when we remind the state of the limits of its power.

Taken together in the larger narrative of the Old and New Testaments, Paul's words point in a clear direction. Yes, he does speak to the Christian's responsibility to obey the government. That's fine. We don't want anarchy. And yes, he invites us to recognize the potential goods of government. But these words on submission come in the context of his broader exhortation, calling governments to justly steward their power.

What about the police officers themselves? Is there a scriptural model for the individuals who represent the state? If the soldier is the closest thing to a modern police officer, then encounters with soldiers in the New Testament can provide us with important insights. In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist's ministry gives us a clear and forceful vision of ideal police behavior.

First, it's important to remember how John the Baptist functions in the wider Christian narrative. According to the Gospel writers, God appointed John as a herald of the coming Messiah and the messianic age. All of them associate him with the figure described in Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Luke 3:4–6). John's call to repentance is a command to prepare for God's arrival. Those who heed it have one question: *What must we do to participate in the coming kingdom?*

John responds with practical suggestions for different groups. One of those groups is soldiers—or for our purposes, police officers. He tells them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (Luke 3:14).

If Romans 13:3–4 focuses on the state's collective responsibilities, this verse in Luke gives us a picture of a law enforcement officer's individual responsibilities. John condemns extortion, but the weight of this critique goes well beyond mere bribes. Extortion involves using power to prey on the weak and is only possible when the extorted have no recourse. Clearly, then, John is concerned with a form of policing in which people with station use their power to exploit people without station.

For this reason, his criticism of false accusations shouldn't be separated from his criticism of extortion, since the two often go together. If a person being extorted refuses to comply, he might find himself accused of crimes that he didn't commit.

Here, John might have in mind a soldier who offers up a person for a crime in order to satisfy the whim of a ruler or to achieve some political end. The story of Jesus' crucifixion is the paradigmatic example. He is the truly innocent one who was nonetheless murdered by the state.

When the apostle John recounts Pilate's words "Behold the man" (John 19:5, ESV), he is in part affirming Christ's humanity. Jesus is a person who deserves to be treated with dignity. Today, blacks make this same claim of conscience on those who police us: See us as persons worthy of respect in every instance.

Jesus' treatment by the soldiers strikes us as egregious because he was innocent of the charges, but even the guilty don't deserve mockery and beatings. As recorded in Luke, John is calling soldiers in all circumstances to rise above the temptation to dehumanize. His exhortation to individual officers reinforces Paul's exhortation to the state: Use your power to uphold the inherent dignity of all residents, and never use the sword for your own ends.

While Paul calls rulers to wield their power well, John calls individual soldiers not to heroic acts of physical bravery but to heroic virtue. Taken together, this New Testament theology of policing calls both the state and its officers to use their influence to protect the weak.

These scriptural and theological principles are easy enough to affirm in the abstract, but their application is often more fraught. Some people are of the mind that pews and politics ought not to mix. The sphere of faith should overlap only modestly (if at all) with the affairs of state.

Civil rights history gives us a vivid example of this mentality.

On January 16, 1963, eight clergy—two Methodist bishops, two Episcopal bishops, one Roman Catholic bishop, a rabbi, a Presbyterian, and a Baptist—wrote a letter to the citizens of Alabama titled "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense." It called for an end to the violence surrounding civil rights protests and implored those on both sides to trust the court system. It failed to make a strong stand against segregation.

Three months later, on April 12, 1963, this group of eight composed another letter. This one contained a not-so-veiled criticism of Martin Luther King Jr. and participants in the Southern Christian Leadership Council, whom they characterized as "outsider agitators."

They questioned the political witness of King and others. They argued that "such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham."

This criticism of King's work—and of the black, Christian, protesting tradition that undergirded it—came from something of a white, Southern, ecumenical consensus. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Episcopalian, and Jewish leaders opposed him. King's response, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," was aimed not just at eight clergy but at a certain approach to faith that focused more on law and order than on the demands of the gospel.

In his reply, King writes: I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Nearly 60 years after the publication of this letter, Americans are still debating the role of the church in the public square. Was King’s pursuit of a just society in fact analogous to the work of Paul and the prophets, or was it merely partisan politics? Was his public criticism of power structures a key element of his pastoral ministry or a distraction from it? For many black Christians, the answer is self-evident: We have never had the luxury of separating our faith from political action.

The New Testament letters give support for this tight integration of spiritual and political realms. According to New Testament scholar J. Louis Martyn, Paul believed the world was under the domain of evil spiritual powers before the coming of the Messiah. As Paul writes in Galatians, Christ “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:3–4, NIV). In Ephesians, Paul suggests that these same powers hold sway over earthly leaders and rulers (Eph. 1:21). The social, political, and economic policies of unredeemed rulers, then, are a manifestation of evil forces opposed by God. These forces—along with the problem of human sin—are the enemies that God sent his Son to defeat.

For this reason, our modern delineation between spiritual and political evil, when read back into Paul’s thought, is an anachronism. The “present evil age” can be understood to mean the demonic evil of slavery in Rome and also rulers’ economic exploitation of the populace. Both were driven by the policies of corrupt Roman leadership, and both were ultimately dictated by spiritual forces.

The takeaway is unmistakable: Calling a system evil is a political assessment as well as a theological one. When black Christians today look upon the actions of police officers, political leaders, and governments and declare them wicked, we are making a theological claim in the same way that Paul was. We are compelled, in King’s words, “to carry the gospel of freedom.” Our protesting is not unbiblical. It is essential to our analysis of the human condition in light of God’s own vision for the future. His vision may await an appointed time, but it is coming (Hab. 2:1–4).

For me and many others, the application of these truths is profoundly personal. My hope for policing is not that complicated. I want to live free of fear. 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.

As a father, I worry that my sons and daughters might experience the same terror. This dread trickles down from a national government that has often viewed our skin as dangerous.

To some, my fear might seem unwarranted. I am tempted to list statistics about black folk and our treatment at the hands of police. But I am skeptical that statistics will convince those hostile to our cause. Furthermore, statistics are unnecessary for those of us who carry in our hearts the experience of being black in this country.

The United States, historically and in the present, has failed to protect us. It has used the sword to instill a fear that has been passed down from generation to generation in black homes and churches. That dread, however, has never had the final word. Instead, black Christians have reminded themselves

not to fear those who can only kill the body. At our best and most Christian moments, we have demanded our birthrights as children of God. But those rights should not be purchased at the price of our blood or our terror. A Christian theology of policing, then, is fundamentally a theology of freedom.

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