

The Christian Fight For Justice

By:
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“...endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

-Ephesians 4:3-6

On Thursday of this week, a criminal trial involving the former president Donald Trump came to a verdict convicting him on 34 counts of felony. As a pastor I do take seriously that my role is a shepherd of the church and not a political figure. So I struggle with how to approach issues like this, and I even question if I should say anything specific. I also believe that a major part of my role is to maintain unity within the body of Christ and not to create any unnecessary division. However, I also recognize that in these tumultuous times, it is important for the church to seek out Godly guidance for our emotions, first so that we don't get swept away in the hysteria of the moment, but also, that we don't remain silent in times when we ought to speak up. As I wrestled with this particular issue, I came to the conclusion that no matter what someone's political position, the conviction of a former president and current presidential nominee in a highly fraught election cycle is not only unprecedented in U.S. history, but also has severe implications for our country moving forward.

Because of this, while my position as a pastor is to instruct those who come to our church how to have convictions towards God that are rooted in Scripture, I am also aware that those that I shepherd will be experiencing strong emotions about these events. I think that it would be helpful to walk through these reactions and to see if there is a way that God would want us to feel about our current situation. While I believe that within the faith, there is a wide amount of liberty concerning our political convictions, those individual convictions must be built on Scriptural considerations. Doing this is the only way that we will be able to maintain true unity in our faith and this will help us navigate these difficult times. In order to explore this topic, I want to look at a couple passages from my favorite book in the bible, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations."

-Jeremiah 1:4-5

In 2010 I had returned from my first tour to Afghanistan and I felt utterly defeated. I had always been a patriotic young man who loved my country, and this patriotism led me to want to fight in the marines. But after returning from my deployment, I realized that I wasn't fighting for what I thought, and that the war effort was doomed to failure because of political corruption, a lack of vision from our leaders, and a lack of conviction from the voters of this country. That is why when Afghanistan finally did fall to the Taliban in 2021, while I was grieved, I wasn't surprised. After witnessing the corruption and incompetence at the top, I was filled with anger and I didn't know what to do about it.

The book of Jeremiah gave me incredible hope and peace because it follows the career of a young optimistic prophet at the peak of institutional corruption within Israel. Jeremiah tries to call the nation to repent, but the more he pushes against the elites of his day, the more persecution he experiences. In the end, the government continues down their self-destructive path and the nation is brutally conquered by Babylon. Throughout his story though, Jeremiah learns to confess his honest emotions before God and to trust in God more and more. And even though his life ends tragically, there is a wonderful peace that Jeremiah achieves in seeking God above all else. What I want to do now is to pull out a couple insights from Jeremiah's life that might help us deal with our own current cultural moment.

God and Injustice

"For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, "if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, "then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever."

-Jeremiah 7:5-7

One of the more shocking things about the book of Jeremiah is how political it is. We tend to think of the prophets as those whose only concern was with the people of Israel's relationship with God. But what we see from passages like this, is that the prophets were not merely concerned with people professing God, but in serving Him in

every aspect of their lives. In this particular chapter, many of the elites in Israel thought that they were honoring God by going to the temple, Jeremiah shows them that this isn't enough to honor God. For our God is the God of all flesh, the One who created the heavens and the earth and fills the universe with His righteousness. This means that God cares deeply about the justice of a nation, and threatens to destroy Israel because they have ceased to practice justice.

Within a given society, the reason why we are able to dwell together in relative peace is because we trust in a justice system that can arbitrate between us. It is this confidence that allows for us to live in a society with strangers with a relative amount of trust. This trust doesn't descend from a trust in the individuals around us, since we don't really know anything about them, but from a trust in the rule of law that protects and avenges us.

“For look! The wicked bend their bow, They make ready their arrow on the string, That they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?”

-Psalm 11:2-3

The fear of the Psalmist is that, since there are always wicked people within a society, if the institutions that are supposed to protect us become corrupted, if the very foundations for the society lose their legitimacy, then the society collapses with it. The reason why Jeremiah was optimistic at the beginning of his ministry is because he had no idea how corrupt his nation really was. Once God shows him the depth of its corruption, he begins to slowly recognize why God needed to judge them.

For a Christian, even if you hate Donald Trump, the corruption of the justice system to attack him is not something that we can overlook. Even if someone can argue that Trump ought to be in prison for a different charge, getting him for a novel legal theory proposed by a DA who ran on the basis of “getting” Donald Trump in the midst of an election is not good for the overall trust in the legal system. Now, I don't claim to be an expert on legal theory, and I am willing to be convinced that this was a fair and unbiased trial, but I have yet to hear a good argument supporting this view.

Many of the comments I have heard from the political left aren't supporting this verdict per se, just the conviction that Trump ought to be in prison. But to go after someone as popular as Trump in this way will cause large numbers of people to doubt the justice system, and if enough people doubt the legitimacy of the legal system, then its protective function in our society collapses.

In Martin Luther King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" he argues against other Christians who claimed that he had no business going to another state to protest an unjust law. In his letter he responds to that claim like this:

"Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

-Dr. Martin Luther King - Letter from Birmingham Jail

The fact of the matter is that corruption in the legal system at any level corrupts the whole thing, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." (1 Corinthians 5:6). Even if we like the results of a decision, if corruption is the way we achieve it, then it is no victory at all. Although Reverend. King had a personal stake in the segregation policies in the south, his argument to the complacent Christians who were condemning his actions was that a little allowable corruption in one place will permeate outwards if we don't do anything about it. If a system of justice can be weaponized against opponents, it is no longer something that protects, but is something to be feared.

Even the Chinese propagandistic outlet, the Global Times, criticized the Trump conviction by quoting many Chinese intellectuals like this:

"The Democrats have condemned Trump in the name of democracy, yet their own practices are also undemocratic, Li Haidong, a professor at the China Foreign Affairs University, told the Global Times. "The attitudes of both parties further reflect the rottenness of American politics, and that the law now seems to be used as a political weapon."

-"Trump convicted in hush money case, 'to exacerbate political extremism, social unrest'"

There are many Christians who don't feel comfortable speaking out about this kind of injustice because they find it too "political". But it was exactly this kind of behavior that Jeremiah was asked to speak out about. The fact of the matter is that corruption like this doesn't stop of its own accord, and if the church itself goes along with lies and corruption, then we have made a drastic error. This doesn't mean that every Christian must stand up and passionately protest, or that we should all donate to the Trump campaign or even vote for him in November, just that we must refuse to cooperate with lies. We must commit ourselves to not repeat things from the media that we are unsure about, and to never celebrate things that undermine justice.

The Danger Of Lies

“...and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

-2 Thessalonians 2:10-12

In order for true tyranny to rise, it must rise on the back of lies. The reason is that our consciences naturally cry out against injustice and this prevents us from knowingly participating with injustice. Because of this, a corrupt system must pretend that their injustice is really justice through a propagation of lies. The Nazi's couldn't target the Jews while believing that their persecution of them was unjust, they had to lie about the "evil" of the Jews to justify their brutality of them. And a lie like that can only receive power if the vast majority of people willingly participate with those lies in order to "keep peace." The person who understood this the best was Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Alexander Sozhenitsyn lived during the rise of the Soviet Union. He was someone who openly opposed their corrupt regime and right before he went to prison he wrote an essay trying to teach his fellow Russians how they might resist the tyranny of Russia entitled "Live Not By Lies". Here is a small excerpt from that essay:

“And therein we find, neglected by us, the simplest, the most accessible key to our liberation: a personal nonparticipation in lies! Even if all is covered by lies, even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way: Let their rule hold not through me! And this is the way to break out of the imaginary encirclement of our inertness, the easiest way for us and the most devastating for the lies. For when people renounce lies, lies simply cease to exist. Like parasites, they can only survive when attached to a person. We are not called upon to step out onto the square and shout out the truth, to say out loud what we think—this is scary, we are not ready. But let us at least refuse to say what we do not think!”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn - Live Not By Lies

Our current political moment is so contentious that lies are permeating both sides of the political discourse. The truth is, things are so chaotic right now that a totalitarian move could come from either side of the political aisle. But to be fair, the bigger threat is coming overtly from the political left right now and that is why I am focusing primarily on them in this paper. However, the threat could easily move to the right considering the anger over the current political corruption. Regardless, if we want to stand against a rise of tyranny, we have to commit ourselves to not participate with lies, no matter how

beneficial those lies might be to our political agenda. And the most damaging form of political deception is the corruption of the legal system to persecute political enemies.

One pastor who learned this lesson too late was a man named Martin Niemöller. He was a pastor in Germany when the Nazi's rose to power, but was unwilling to speak out against them because they were persecuting people that he also found objectionable. He later learned from his own mistake and finally did oppose the Nazi's. He was thrown into prison where he spoke this infamous phrase:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

The Fall Of A Society

As Christians we don't have to agree about Trump, but we do need to agree that the rule of law is more important than our political priorities, and this principle applies across the political aisles. There are many republicans that have become so angered by the corruption in the institutions that they are wanting to tear them all down to their roots. They even welcome a more dictatorial ruler to be able to clean out the corruption top down. While such a thing might become necessary, like in Jeremiah's time, we should not long for this.

“How lonely sits the city That was full of people! How like a widow is she, Who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces Has become a slave! She weeps bitterly in the night, Her tears are on her cheeks; Among all her lovers She has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies.”

-Lamentations 1:1-2

As stated before, eventually Jeremiah learns that Israel had become too corrupt to be saved. As a result God sends the Babylonians to conquer Israel to cleanse them of their corruption. Jeremiah witnesses the destruction of Jerusalem firsthand and writes about it in his book Lamentations. If the institutions of a country have become thoroughly corrupted, and the vast majority of the population can't even agree about which parts are corrupt, then the only solution is a bloody and violent destructive process. This is not something that any of us should long for, it is the worst case scenario that we must fight against at all costs.

To put it another way, if a dictatorial figure arises on the right or the left and tries to normalize everything through top down force, this will not happen bloodlessly. Frustration might cause us to want something like this to happen, but it should not be pursued. Jeremiah was such an amazing man because his heart was genuinely for the people of Israel. Even after he was ignored and persecuted for years, he still wrote of Israel's destruction with woe and grief that are almost unmatched. Throughout his ministry he battled his feelings of despair and wrath, because his heart was ultimately for God and for his people. He faithfully spoke out against corruption even though it cost him everything because he had a conviction that it was what he was meant to do before God and this is why we look up to him to this day.

The Danger of Wrath

"Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still."

-Psalm 4:4

While anger is not a sin in the Bible, and is often the correct emotional response to injustice, when we give in to our own grievances and become governed by our bitterness we are failing to function with the heart of God. We have sunk down to the wrath of our hearts and will not accomplish anything that honors God in this state.

... "for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

-James 1:20

When we act out of wrath, we are no longer acting to preserve justice, but instead we are acting out of vengeance, and vengeance is an unquenchable flame. All revolutions begin with noble aspirations, but they always descend into rivers of bloodshed, because the wrath of man can never be satisfied, it always craves more.

*"In Christ alone! – who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save:
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live."*

-Stuart Townsend - "In Christ Alone"

The only blood that is holy enough to satisfy the wrath caused by genuine injustice is that blood of Christ. The cross of Christ communicates to us God's infinite commitment to justice. He couldn't let even one sin go unaccounted for and so He needed an infinite sacrifice to forgive the sins of man. And since His life was the only one that had infinite value, He willingly offered Himself up to satisfy the wrath produced by sin. The Christian who understands this is one that can fight strenuously for justice without becoming corrupted by their wrath, because we believe that all injustice will ultimately be answered by God, either on this earth or in the one to come.

The church ought to stand strong in these times and not give in to either wrath or despair. In order to be a force for good and not for ill, we must stand firmly together. But in order to do this, we must stand for truth and justice and we have to speak out against injustice, no matter what side of the political aisle it is coming from. It is on this basis that we should be able to remain in unity, regardless of our political persuasion. If we are only willing to do this when it benefits our political ideals, this shows that we have made an idol of politics within our hearts.

And above all else, we must remember that total justice will only be achieved through the return of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. We can, and should, fight for a better political situation, but we should never believe that we can achieve utopia on this earth. We must fight within reasonable expectations, and with supreme attention on God's justice and not our own. This will hopefully keep us humble enough to recognize problems within our own political side, and to not be consumed with anxiety over what will come next. Jeremiah teaches us that strong emotion is good in political turmoil, but despair and unchecked anxiety and wrath are not.

"We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

-2 Corinthians 4:8-11

I want to end this paper with a quote from a man who understood the hope that comes from God's future justice better than anyone else, Martin Luther King. Even though he was passionate about his cause, he always had a hope, not in the actions of man, but the faithfulness of God. But this faith didn't make him complacent, it made him more diligent because he knew that God's heart was for justice and he wanted to participate with God's justice, and not with the indifference or the corruption of those around him. It was his hope in God that allowed him to love, even the enemies of his cause, and to not

give in to the revolutionary fervor of others that surrounded him. That is why he ended his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream", like this:

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

-Martin Luther King - "I Have A Dream"