

Everybody's Protesting

God's View of Citizen Agitation

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 14-Oct-17; Sermon #1401c

In Acts 19, Luke tells the story of a riot in Ephesus. A silversmith named Demetrius got together with his buddies in the craftsman's guilds silversmith guild and others who made shrines, trinkets, and idols in conjunction with the Temple of Diana there, began to agitate against Paul and Christianity, saying that they were taking away their business. A full-blown riot ensued, with pretty much the whole city coming out, with the protestors shouting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" for hours on end. City officials were terrified, and one of them came out to quiet the crowd because if Rome got wind of that riot, they would have to explain how they let their city get out of control and descend into disorder. The riot was not a lawful assembly under the laws of Rome, and it could have had grave consequences for the city and its people.

The passage does not necessarily say what God thinks about protests like this—it does not say, "And Jesus said, 'They are bad.'" But the whole city was in riot against Christianity, so you can guess what He thought about that. But clearly the Romans did not look on riots and protests fondly. Protests are a sign of societal breakdown and a lack of law and order. Rome, like many other governments, would usually respond to a riot with force, with violence, with great power.

But today, everybody is protesting. We hear about new protests every week, if not every day. There are protests against President Trump. There are protests about police brutality. There are protests about Civil War generals and their statues. There are protests about Columbus and his statues. There are protests about for abortion and against abortion. People march in the streets "bringing awareness" to homosexual rights, same-sex "marriage," and more recently transgender rights. People will protest over anything.

The major protest in the news these days is National Football League players (some of them) kneeling on the sidelines during the national anthem. They

say they are protesting police brutality against Blacks, inequality, injustice, and oppression in the country. But they are choosing to protest by disrespecting the flag, which is essentially saying they disrespect all of us in this nation and all that this nation stands for (if it stands for anything anymore).

Protesting government in particular is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution: People have the right to free speech, particularly against the government (that is what it is there before because the Founders did not want the government to be able to suppress people in any way). The First Amendment also gives the freedom to assemble and associate as we would like. So, it is OK to do that.

But what does God think about protesting? Let's go beyond the Constitution here. How should Christians approach it?

In most Bibles, the word “protest” is not found. Maybe it might be in some translations, but I don't believe it is in the King James or the New King James. It is not used in terms of what we are talking about today. A similar word that you can look up in a concordance that would be a lot like it would be the word “complaint,” because that is basically what a protest is. It is just complaining on a large scale.

This leads us to words like “grumble,” “groan,” and probably the one you are thinking of, “murmur,” which the Israelites did in the wilderness for about 40 years straight. They murmured against God; they murmured against Moses. Most of the time, they were not satisfied with what God was providing for them in terms of food and drink, and they would wax rhapsodic about the food they had once eaten in Egypt, and they would cry in their doors of their tents about it—really pitiful people. If it wasn't that, they were protesting Moses' leadership, or his lack thereof as they looked at it. Of course, they were murmuring against God's leadership ultimately.

And naturally, God and Moses were quite displeased with the people. Every so often, Moses would go to bat for them and say, "Don't wipe them all off the face of the earth," and God would listen. But usually, it ended up that after their protest, a great many of them ended up dead for their thoughtless and faithless protests against their very Creator.

If we were to go through the various “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21, we would find such sinful attitudes and behaviors as we see in the protests we are seeing on our streets. There Paul uses words like, “hatred,” “contentions,” “outbursts of wrath,” “selfish ambitions” (some of those protestors are trying to work their way up the protest ladder and become something more than they are; they probably want to get into politics), “dissensions” (which is obviously what happened in these protests), and the word “heresies.” Even though the word in Greek is *hairesis* (what underlies our word, *heresies*), in that time, the word did not necessarily mean what it means now. It simply means factions. There are factions out there in the protest movement, and everybody is against everyone else. Most or all of which are on display when people are protesting today on the street. Paul finishes that little section there by saying that these kind of people, and these kind of attitudes, definitely not in line with the Kingdom of God. Those who show these traits will not be in the Kingdom of God.

You've got your Bibles there; please turn to Proverbs 17, and we will get some wisdom from Solomon on this matter:

Proverbs 17:11 An evil man seeks only rebellion; therefore a cruel messenger will be sent against him.

That first part of the couplet could be rendered, “A rebel seeks only evil,” which is more apropos to what I am talking about here because that is what protestors essentially are. They are rebels against what is law in a particular nation or what the culture is putting forth.

Let's get a similar look at this sort of thing:

Proverbs 24:21-22 My son, fear the LORD and the king; do not associate with those given to change [that would be the protestors]; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two [that is, the LORD and the king] can bring?

This is in line with what we have seen so far in the other examples that these people who are protesting are going to get their due. Both of these two scriptures or passages warn against involving oneself in rebellion against

constituted government. Rebels, says Solomon, seek only evil, and they are only bringing violence and cruelty upon themselves. Remember, he said "a cruel messenger will be sent against "him." So, he advises in the second passage in Proverbs 24 to steer clear of those who are advocating change and agitating for it, whether it is against government or against some sort of social policy. In both places, the warning is that end will be calamitous—either the king or God Himself will bring ruin on them.

We won't turn there, but Proverbs 22:24-25 deals with the attitudes behind protesting, particularly anger, fury, and wrath against the state or a segment of the population, whether it is the police, an ethnic group, another religion, or whatever. There is a certain amount of anger that these people have against such groups. The warning there is not to associate with them, either—not to associate with angry people because being around angry and discontented people will teach a person to be angry and discontented, too. You will pick it up. You will become like them. Again, God predicts that that kind of person (who associates with angry people)—that person's life will end in tragedy. He will be caught in a trap like a bird, his freedom taken away. What happens when a hunter catches a bird in a trap? Not only has its freedom been taken away, but pretty soon the hunter wrings the bird's neck and it dies. So, a very dire warning here from Solomon.

At the end of Matthew 5 (we won't turn there; I'm sure you know it—you've read it many times), during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets for us a very high standard when it comes to these sorts of situations. His people, He says, are not to resist, not to protest, not to fight back, against even unjust things. Instead, we are to *take it*. He says, "Turn the other cheek." "Give him your cloak." "Walk the extra mile." Not only that, He goes onto say, "*Do good* to your oppressors and your enemies." God will hear our complaints if take them to Him in prayer, and He will handle them. He wants us to show the world a submissive attitude that turns the other cheek and expresses love toward our enemies. All this is extremely hard to do. It is a very, very high standard. But it is a worthy goal of Christian conduct.