

Suffer the Little Children

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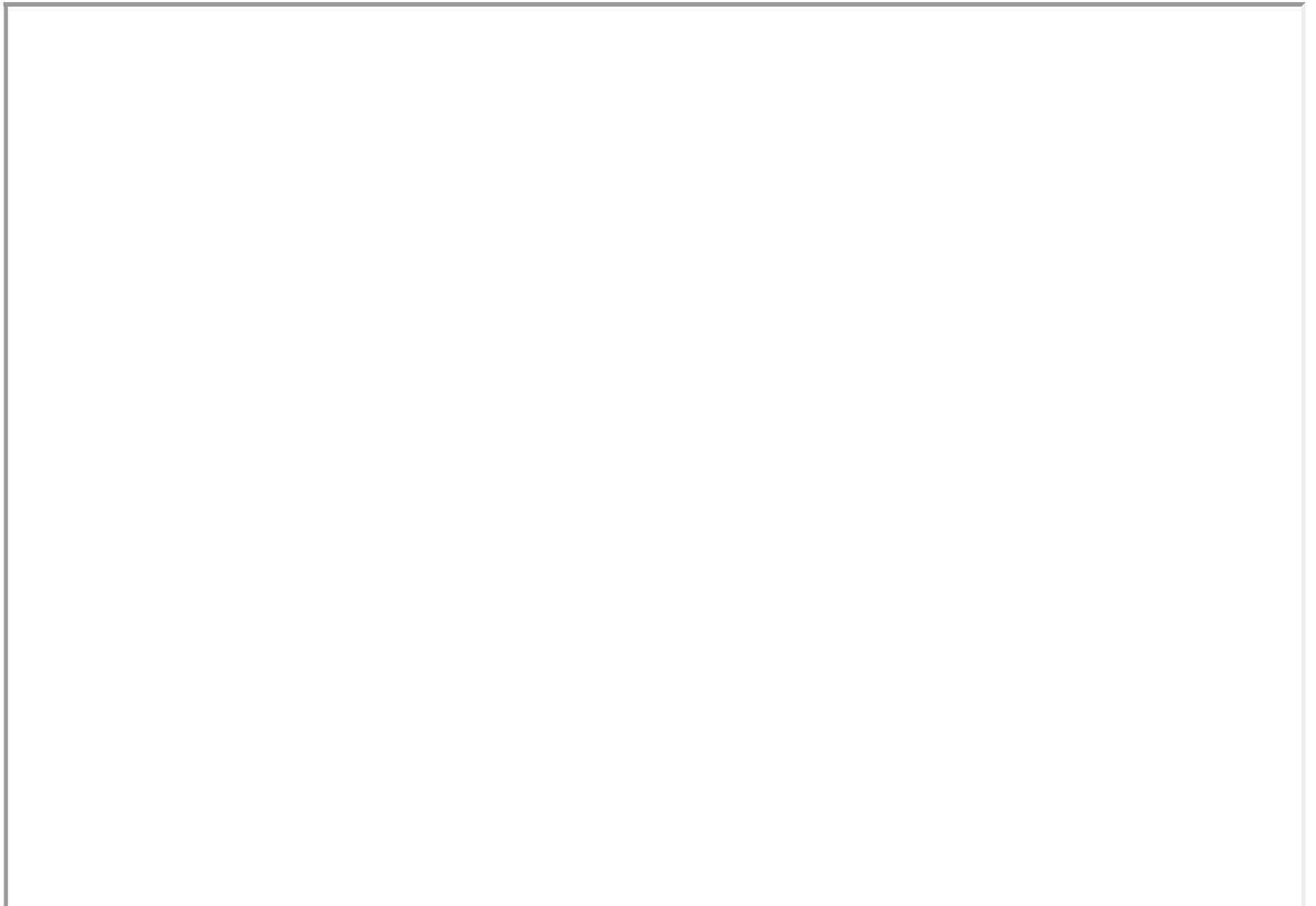


Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and wail. (Luke 6:25)

For Izumi and Aya.

The only good thing that can be said for Attorney General Jeff Sessions' recent use of the thirteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans to justify his policy of tearing away immigrant children from their mothers and fathers^[1] is that it affords an all too pointed example of the premise upon which **Whole Stones** is founded, namely that all Scripture interpretation (and therefore all theology) must be done within the framework of Jesus' teachings and story. Loosed from these moorings, biblical exegesis and theological speculation can spiral off in demented and destructive directions, as Sessions has so ably demonstrated.

For those who have not heard the Attorney General's comments, or for those who need a reminder of what he said, a video of his statement provided by the Associated Press can be viewed below:



Does the fit of giggles into which the Attorney General breaks as he launches into his Bible recitation indicate that he believes that he has caught Jesus' followers on the back foot? Does he think that his cunning and subtle interpretation of Scripture is irrefutable, and that in the face of incontrovertible proof we, who are appalled by his monstrous immigration policies, are forced to wave the white flag? If so, then in the essay below I intend to disabuse him of his misapprehension and to wipe the wicked smile from his face. Or does the Attorney General simply find something amusing about the State-sponsored abduction of children? If so, then I too shall quote Scripture: *In the last days scoffers shall come scoffing, walking according to their own passions* (2 Peter 3:3; cf. Jude 18). There is nothing funny about wrenching an infant away from its mother's loving bosom or a child out its

father's protective arms.

Before turning to the interpretation of Romans 13, we must first recall that Jesus was born as an enemy of the State, that as a consequence his family was forced to flee with him to Egypt where they received political asylum,^[2] and that as an adult the Roman governor Pontius Pilate ratified King Herod's prior verdict by crucifying Jesus as an enemy of the Roman Empire. In the eyes of the State, Jesus was no law-abiding citizen. He was no citizen at all. To the governing authorities Jesus was a criminal condemned to a non-citizen's execution—death on a cross.^[3] Followers of Jesus, however, believe that the God of Israel and the Creator of the universe rejected the State's verdict. God exonerated Jesus by reversing the Empire's sentence, raising Jesus from the dead, and proclaiming Jesus—not Caesar—to be true and rightful Lord of the earth and judge of humankind. For these reasons, loyalty to the State and obedience to the whims of the heirs of Caesar rank low on the scale of Christian priorities.^[4] From the beginning of Jesus' story in Bethlehem unto the day the Son of Man comes to judge the nations, the governing authorities who rule by the threat of the sword and the followers of the LORD's anointed whose law is love have been at odds. Our loyalty is rather to Jesus and his teachings, our citizenship is in heaven, and when the dictates of government officials conflict with the biblical commandments (foremost among them being charity toward our neighbors), then with the apostles we have said and will continue to say, *We must obey God rather than human beings* (Acts 5:29).

That the Attorney General's inference that Romans 13 demands unconditional obedience to the State in all circumstances is proved false by the biblical tradition in its totality. Or would Sessions have us conclude that the midwives Shiphrah and Puah (May their names be eternally remembered and Pharaoh's name forgot!) ought to have carried out the State's decree that every boy born to a Hebrew slave was to be slaughtered?^[5] Would Sessions have us believe that the magi ought to have obeyed Herod's command to tell him where the Christ-child was to be found instead of listening to the dream

which told them to go home by another route?^[6] In both these cases biblical heroes risked their lives in defiance of the law to rescue children from the clutches of the State. And within living memory, under the Nazi regime, righteous Gentiles again risked their lives by hiding Jewish children, women, and men from the Gestapo. Would Sessions recite Romans 13 to them, chastising them for not paying heed to the Apostle Paul? But away with Sessions' opinions! We will not be schooled in civics by a man who lied to the Senate about his contact with the Russians as a member of the Trump campaign during the 2016 presidential race.^[7] Nor will I be lectured to on Scripture by a man who snickers and sneers while justifying the severing of the sacred bond between mother and father and child.

How, then, are we to interpret Paul's instructions to the Roman Christians that they must be subject to the governing authorities and that by rebelling against the State they would withstand a power that God has instituted (Rom. 13:1-7)? The answer is that Paul's counsel must be placed within its historical context. Paul's Epistle to the Romans was written in the decades leading up to the Jewish revolt against Rome, as political tensions between Jews in Judea and the Roman Empire were mounting.^[8] Many of the early Christians, whose sympathies were with the religion and people who gave them birth, felt drawn into conflict, believing that the injustices of the Roman Empire toward the people of Israel could no longer be tolerated. Action was called for, and if the Jewish people revolted against the Empire, the Christians, too, should take up arms against Caesar. After all, Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed king of Israel. Fighting for Israel's freedom seemed like fighting on behalf of Jesus' reign.

Despite the identification the early believers felt with the Jews of Judea, Paul called upon the early believers in Rome to resist the pull toward rebellion. Their response to the rising tensions between the Jewish people and the Roman Empire, Paul reasoned, must be determined by Jesus' teachings and Jesus' story. Jesus had taught that redemption could never be achieved through bloodshed. Taking up arms against the Empire would only unleash

the hellish powers of violence and hatred. War with Rome would only result in the destruction of the Temple and the deaths of countless people, the innocent along with the guilty. Jesus taught that redemption could only be accomplished through the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, and the floodgates of the Spirit were thrown open through acts of mercy and human kindness, through forgiveness and peacemaking, by means of faithfully obeying the commandments to love God by loving one's neighbor. Through these divine acts of humanity the Holy Spirit could transform hatred into understanding, enmity into brotherhood, oppressors into repentant sinners, the oppressed into free persons, and strangers into friends.^[9] Paul urged the Roman Christians not to be seduced by nationalistic calls to violent insurgency, but to remain true to the teachings for which Jesus died and because of which God raised Jesus from the dead. Paul never intended his instructions to the Roman believers to be used as a blanket endorsement of every decree of any State down through the ages. Otherwise Paul himself would never have found himself in trouble with the Roman authorities, "an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:20). Nor would the apostle to the Gentiles have been executed at Caesar's command. Paul desired his first readers to interpret his instructions regarding the governing authorities within the framework of Jesus' life and his teachings, and he would have wished for us to do the same.

I realize, of course, that my response to the Attorney General has been from the perspective of a citizen who enjoys the privileges and protections of the laws of the country in which I live, not that of an immigrant fleeing home with his daughters and sons. This is because I am not an asylum seeker, and neither, I suspect, are most of my readers. But let us remember that while we may have the luxury to ponder our obligations to the State,^[10] immigrants who are under duress—attempting to escape from political persecution or domestic abuse or gang violence or for a multitude of other reasons—enjoy no such luxury. Time is not on their side. They cannot be expected to wait for forms to be filed or official approvals to be granted before crossing borders, as Sessions demands, because their lives and the safety of their children is on

the line. One does not wait for permission to run from a burning building; neither can asylum seekers wait for permission to escape from the dangers that compel them from home. That is why it has been the long-standing practice for immigrants to request asylum *after* entering the countries in which they seek refuge.

But Jesus does offer a warning to those who wield power over the distraught and the defenseless: *It is better for him if a millstone were tied about his neck and he was cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble* (Luke 17:2). Let the Attorney General contemplate this clear teaching of the one to whom we all must be answerable for our actions if he wishes to bandy about words from the Sacred Writ!

Notes

[1] Let us not be fooled by government officials who have begun to deny that such a policy exists. See Bill Chappell, “[‘We Do Not Have A Policy’ Of Separating Families, DHS Head Says, Contradicting Policy](#), *NPR: Morning Edition* (June 18, 2018).

[2] Matthew 2:13-18. See also, “[Why We Love the Refugee.](#)”

[3] On crucifixion as the punishment of slaves, non-citizens, and enemies of the state, see Jean-Jacques Aubert, “A Double Standard in Roman Criminal Law? The Death Penalty and Social Structure in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome,” in *Speculum Iuris: Roman Law as a Reflection of Social and Economic Life in Antiquity* (ed. Jean-Jacques Aubert and Boudewijn Sirks; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 94-133; John Granger Cook, “Roman Crucifixions: From the Second Punic War to Constantine,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (2013): 1-32.

[4] See our discussion in “[Contextualizing Prayer for Caesar.](#)”

[5] See Exod. 1:15-22.

[6] See Matt. 2:12.

[7] See Matt Apuzzo and Nicholas Fandos, “Jeff Sessions Denies Lying to Congress on Contacts With Russia,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 14, 2017).

[8] On the political tensions between Judea and Rome as the necessary background for interpreting the Epistle to the Romans, see Peter J. Tomson, “The Wars Against Rome, the Rise of Rabbinic Judaism and of Apostolic Gentile Christianity, and the Judaeo-Christians: Elements for a Synthesis,” in *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish And Christian Literature* (ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers Petry; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1-31; idem, “Transformations of Post-70 Judaism: Scholarly Reconstructions and their Implications for Our Perception of Matthew, Didache, and James,” in *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in their Jewish and Christian Setting* (ed. Huub van de Sandt and Jürgen K. Zangenberg; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 91-121.

[9] On Jesus’ politically subversive concept of redeeming love, see our discussion in [“A Mile on the Road of Peace.”](#)

[10] As a starting point for considering our obligations to the State versus its victims, I recommend Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1933 essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question.” Despite his problematic acceptance of the then current Lutheran doctrine that the Jewish people were under God’s curse for their collective guilt in the death of the Messiah, Bonhoeffer overcame the limitations of his theology to outline three courses of action the Church can take when the State becomes an abuser of the human beings it was instituted to protect: “...in the first place...it [i.e., the Church—JNT] can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e. it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. ‘Do good to all men.’ In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are

changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks. The third possibility is not merely to bind up the victims under the wheel, but to jam the wheel itself in the spokes. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and demanded when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e. when it sees the state unrestrainedly bringing about too much or too little law and order. In both these cases it must see the existence of the state, and with it its own existence, threatened....” (Translation adapted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* [ed. Edwin H. Robertson; London: Collins; New York: Harper & Row, 1965], 221). To what extent the Trump administration (and the Attorney General in particular) is enforcing too much law and order, to what extent the Church is threatened when the Attorney General arrogates to himself the right to expound Scripture, and what types of direct political action are consistent with Jesus’ subversive ethic of non-violent transformation are questions well worth pondering in the present crisis.