

Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

It was very moving and gratifying this week to see the turnout in our town of so many people objecting to the brutal death of George Floyd and demanding an end to all the ways certain police officers have been abusing their authority. All across our nation, in big cities and small towns, people continue to rally and insist on change. I was just a little boy 50 years ago when the civil rights movement first ignited a widespread desire for genuine change in our laws. There is no doubt what happened back then directly inspired additional civil rights movements to change unjust laws and policies affecting women, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, the impoverished, children, and many others.

Fifty years ago, America was exposed for being what we knew but did not admit: a society in which a privileged minority of white, protestant, males claimed for themselves the positions of wealth and power. Have there been changes since then? Of course. Laws have been changed. Court decisions have been trending toward genuine equality. But as the events of three weeks ago remind us, there is still a lot of work to be done.

And that's the problem with laws. The premise of the Old Testament was about a group of people, called the Jews, singled out by God to live under the fairest and most rational set of laws in the world. The Ten Commandments are still the foundation of most the world's legal systems. Why? Because there is truly no alternative. Since the Ten Commandments were given well over 3000 years ago, humanity has had the opportunity to create something better. Needless to say, we haven't.

Nonetheless, the problem with the Ten Commandments, like any system of laws, is that they are external. While we may agree that laws in general are necessary to insure a properly ordered society, we still resent them — especially when they require us to do things like pay taxes and keep to the speed limit.

At issue is this: God wants us to see the Ten Commandments not just as a list of rules, but as an attitude toward life and living.

Here's the problem: when we look at the many laws we have to follow in order to keep society going, we follow them without necessarily understanding them. It has been wonderful to see the protestors and the hundreds and signs and the chanting and speeches. When Sen. Mitt Romney uttered the words, "Black Lives Matter," there is no question that the hard work of raising awareness and getting people out of their houses was worth it.

However, what I don't see going on is addressing the real questions. Why do Black Lives Matter? Why should women have equal pay for equal work? Why should two people who love each other be allowed to be married — regardless of gender, race, or creed? The protests and rallies have been very good at mobilizing thousands and millions to point a finger at the problems facing our society and demanding changes. However, it is by no means obvious as why what the protestors call problems are problems.

Many people in this world very much believe the races are and should be unequal and whites are superior to blacks and should control the wealth and power. There are many men and women who believe that males are the superior gender and should be in control. There are many who regard homosexuality as a sin which should be punished and others who have declared that the possession of certain drugs in any quantity requires imprisonment for years.

The question that is definitely not being asked is “Why?” Where do these ideas about equality come from? Where do these views about gender, race, sexual orientation come from? It is not sufficient to say that “Black Lives Matter,” unless we can explain why they matter. And so it is with every other issue that is dividing our society. Whether we are for or against an idea, it is not enough to express an opinion on it, we have to be able to explain where that opinion comes from.

There are opinions of every kind out there, but much too often there is no foundation or “root supply” on which those opinions rest. Way too often, we hold our opinions only because someone we like or respect has that opinion. In other words, we are not doing the thinking for ourselves, we are letting others do it for us.

Do we think much about the laws and rules we have to follow — whether we agree with them or not? Or do we just follow them blindly because they are there?

Jesus said from the cross, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” But isn’t that what is happening in our world right now? Whether you are for or against the protests going on right now, can you explain your ideas to others, or even to yourself? And if you are for the protests going on, then the next question is: why have you waited until now to get involved and make your voice heard? The attitudes and beliefs that resulted in the death of George Floyd have been around for thousands of years. How many millions of people have died over the centuries because of them?

My fear with all this protesting going on now, as much as I applaud it, is that someday soon it will come to an end and all we’ll have are nice stories to tell our friends and families. It is currently fashionable to go along with your friends, make your sign, and kneel for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. But if we don’t know, don’t know, don’t know to the core of our beings why we’re doing it, then we will likely be in the same situation we are currently in sooner rather than later. We can pass new laws, we can defund police — whatever that means — we can insist on better procedures in our workplaces, but if we don’t know the reasons behind the changes and fully embrace them, then nothing will significantly change going forward.

There was a lot of hope that after the Civil Rights Laws of the 1960s were enacted, we finally would start having the kind of just and equitable society we claim to have been making since the beginning of this country. It hasn’t happened yet.

Paul wrote in today’s scripture, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Friends, the suffering we see out there is very clear and it is good that so many are witnessing to it now, just as some did fifty years ago. However, the failure of the civil rights laws back then to prevent what is going on now stems from our jumping from suffering straight to hope, without first building the endurance and the character we need to keep us strong. We need to have a level of hope that lasts not just for a few days or a few weeks, but a level of hope that will carry us through the very rough times that are coming our way. Is there going to be pushback for the demonstrations? You better believe it. The haters are just waiting for their chance.

Suffering, Paul wrote, produces endurance. Well, what do we have in our lives that can help us endure the sufferings of the present age? For Christians, the answer should be obvious. What we have to help us through the suffering is our faith in God. Our endurance in our sufferings is possible because throughout the Bible, God is continually calling humanity to a higher standard and better way of being human. In other words, we can endure the suffering when we know that we are in the right. We are on God's side. Anything less is being against God and against the world God planned for us from the beginning of the world.

We need that faith in order to endure. I'm sad that when I see discussions on the protests, nobody, not even clergy people, explains that they are out there protesting because God wants the world to be a place of love, justice, and equality. Without God's plan in the mix, all these ideas about race and gender and justice and equality are simply that: just interesting ideas. Without God's plan in the mix, on what basis can we say definitively that Black Lives Matter? It is easy to say that that races are equal and nobody should be discriminated against. But clearly, because so many believe the opposite, saying it is not enough. The only way we can endure and keep promoting the ideals George Floyd died for is to say with all faith and truth that, "I march, and protest, and choose to get involved because the God that made me made every human being on this planet my equal." In the first chapter of Genesis, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Everyone is equal. That was and remains God's plan. We can endure, we can overcome, because we are on God's side!

Paul went on to write, "endurance produces character." We can endure because we know we are on the right side. But endurance without action is just as bad as having opinions without knowing why we have them. Our character consists of the mental and moral qualities inside of us which make us who we are, think what we think, do what we do. In other words, our behavior in this world is dictated by our character which in turn rests on our endurance which in turn rests on God.

Without the ability to endure suffering because our ability to rely on God, how can we possibly hope to act and continue to take action on God's behalf to make the world God wants? The Old Testament project created laws, wise laws, just laws. But laws by themselves cannot produce endurance. Laws cannot shape our character. Do we obey the law because we have to or because we want to?

Having the power to endure because we know that God's plan is the only way forward for humanity will lead us to our having the strength of character we need to make the hard choices we sometimes have to make for the sake of building up each other.

Who are the memorable people in our lives and in our history? Without exception the women and men on whom we model our lives were people of extraordinary character, whose words, values, and actions made the world a better place. Make no mistake that the people whose characters we applaud endured so they could make the hard choices in life because 1) they knew suffering first hand, and 2) they found strength outside themselves with faith in God to hold on to during the bad times.

Only when we possess a character that has endured and triumphed over the sufferings of life can we have genuine, deep down, unshakable hope. Paul wrote, "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

In other words, we can have true hope in our lives because our endurance and thus our character rest on our faith in God and God's plan for the way the world is supposed to be. When we possess that level of hope, that level of peace, that level of fearlessness, the only place it can come from is God's spirit living not outside, but inside our beings.

Hope, in other words, is the permanent gift God gives to us once we accept and actually internalize God's Laws and God's plan for ourselves. Dr. King knew almost from the beginning of his ministry that he would suffer and probably die promoting God's plan. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany knew he would die for trying to assassinate Hitler. Nelson Mandela suffered, endured, and triumphed to lead post-apartheid South Africa because he clung to his faith that God would never abandon him. They all drew their inspiration from Jesus, who continually reminded his followers that he would be killed for what he was saying and doing.

Now friends, few of us can be like King or Bonhoeffer or Mandela. No one can be Jesus. God calls only a few to that totally self-sacrificing work. But what all of us can do, right now, is think and pray about our individual suffering — no matter what it is — and empower ourselves to endure our suffering through our faith in God. When we have faith, we will know why things are the way they are. We will know that we are part of a much larger cause as we fight for human rights and human dignity. We will be able to prepare ourselves for the road ahead.

We can endure, we can act, we can overcome all obstacles because of what God in us enables us to be by the power of the Holy Spirit living inside of us. It is there. We can endure our sufferings, we can have the character to act because of our endurance, and we can have everlasting hope because God is on our side. How do we know? Because while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.