

Liberate Pennsylvania? 4/26/20

By my reckoning, we've been under various degrees of restrictions related to the Coronavirus for 6-7 weeks. That's a long time, and most of us are growing tired of feeling like we're in some weird version of the Groundhog's Day movie! All over the country, and around the world, people are asking, "When we can return to normal living?" There have been protests in several states, including the "Liberate Pennsylvania!" protest this week in Harrisburg. The motivations of those protesting range from those who are simply tired of the stay-at-home orders, to those who believe our government has no right to impose such restrictions, to those who desperately need to return to work so they can be paid, as well as those who believe the orders have served their purpose but should now be lifted.

Some states, including Georgia, are moving rapidly toward re-opening their economies by opening many businesses and removing many restrictions. And that strikes close to home for me, since my son is living in Columbus, GA as I speak. Are these folks right? Is it time to lift the restrictions and move on? How do we decide? It seems to me that Christians have something to contribute to this discussion.

Let's look at the issue in two different ways. First, what might Christian faith say to individual Christians regarding this debate? And

second, what might Christian faith say about the role of government in a situation like the one we're in?

My premise is that the restrictions are designed to keep the virus from spreading. This protects our health care capacity from becoming overwhelmed (which could be disastrous for all of us), and it also protects the members of our society who are most vulnerable to serious effects of the virus- the elderly and those with certain pre-existing conditions that put them at greater risk.

From beginning to end, the Bible portrays God as someone who has a heart for the weak and vulnerable. Proverbs 14:31 says, "*Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.*" (Prov. 14:31) Here, God clearly identifies with the poor, with vulnerable people- if you mess with them, you are messing with God! And you may recall the famous parable in Matt. 25, where Jesus says that anyone who cares for those who are hungry or thirsty or naked are really caring for him! And those who ignore such people are ignoring him. In Ps. 82, we read, "*Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*" (Ps. 82:3,4) Finally, in Luke 4, when Jesus launched his ministry, he did so proclaiming these words from Isaiah, (SLIDE #3) "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed*

me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Lk. 4:18,19)

Clearly, God is concerned about the plight of those who are vulnerable- widows, orphans, captives, the blind, the poor- and today- those who are most susceptible to the serious effects of the Coronavirus. God cares about them, and calls us to care for them too! So, for Christians who are simply tired of the restrictions and want to throw them off, remember that doing so will endanger others who are vulnerable- people God cares deeply about- and ask for the Spirit to build those virtues of patience and perseverance into you during this time! As Paul writes in Phil. 2, *“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 2:4,5) We look to the interests of others in spite of our boredom, loneliness, and feeling trapped.

I'm guessing that most of you would agree with me that individual Christians have a responsibility to protect vulnerable people in our society by following the guidelines of our public health officials during this time. But what about the role of government in requiring these things of us? Is the government engaged in tyranny by demanding that we do these things?

Shouldn't the government just give us the information and let us make our own decisions? That's what many of the protesters are saying.

So, what does Christian faith say about the role of government? The Bible talks about the God-given role of government both indirectly- by the way the laws of ancient Israel were structured- and directly, through the comments of Jesus, Peter, and Paul.

Let's start with Israel's laws in the Old Testament. In several places, the concern of God for those who are vulnerable finds its way into actual laws- like the laws about gleaning, which required land owners to allow the poor to harvest grain from the edges of their field and to pick up grain that was left behind by the harvesters. No one was allowed to charge interest on loans to the poor. Widows and orphans had to be taken in by the family of a deceased man.

Protections for the weak and vulnerable were built into the governing laws that God gave his people. And the prophets called the people to account for these laws, thundering against injustice, oppression, and neglect of the poor and needy. Protecting the weak was a hallmark of ancient Israel's government, reflecting God's concern for vulnerable people.

In the New Testament, Paul writes about government in Romans 13. *"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. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For 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; ⁴for 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! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them- taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." (Rom. 13:1-7)

These are surprising words, for the government of Paul's time was the pagan Roman government, an occupying force that could be brutal towards Jews and Christians- a government that eventually beheaded Paul! Yet Paul sees that government fulfills a divine role in the world, keeping order by administering justice. Our world does not function well when everyone just does whatever they want! Some kind of government is needed, although no government is perfect.

In our present situation, federal and state governments are making decisions that are in keeping with their biblical mandate to protect the vulnerable. In order to do that, almost all states have restricted the rights of individuals to one degree or another. Governments routinely do this! For example, I am not allowed to blow through Gettysburg in my car at 70 m.p.h. That's a restriction on my individual freedom, but it's a legitimate restriction that exists to protect others. In this unprecedented time- facing a virus for whom no one has immunity- the government has chosen to implement unprecedented rules that restrict commerce and individual movement in an effort to prevent the spread of the disease.

The good news is that the restrictions appear to be working. The curve is flattening and even declining in many places, and for that we can all be grateful. The concern, of course, is that loosening the restrictions too soon could lead to another surge of infections, causing us to have to start all over again. On the other side is the very real economic cost to people whose businesses are now at risk, or workers who have lost jobs and their income. That is placing a great deal of stress on many people, including some of you watching today. No one wants to see these restrictions remain any longer than absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, I would say this to the members of "Liberate Pennsylvania!" and other similar protest movements. Government has a

legitimate, God-given right and responsibility to protect the vulnerable among us, and these restrictions, extraordinary as they are, are serving that purpose. And, Christians should support these actions of government with their voices and with their actions.

However, the timing regarding re-opening society and the question of “Which businesses should re-open when?” are legitimate matters for debate. The decisions must be based, however, not on our impatience or inconvenience, but on the best information we can get regarding the long and short-term safety of all our citizens. For that information, we must rely on our scientists and medical professionals, who are using their God-given talents to study these things and look critically at the current data. They should be encouraged to do so without political interference. And, we should pray for them daily, and pray that God would protect the vulnerable among us and deliver us from this pandemic!