

March 17, 2014

Fred Phelps, WBC, and "Being at Peace"

Romans 12:17-18 (NASB), *"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."*

Two days ago as I was reading the news from my home state of Kansas I ran across an article about the Reverend Fred Phelps and the fact that he is apparently in a hospice care facility very near death. Growing up as I did in Kansas and coming of age in that state as Fred Phelps became somewhat of a household name I was very familiar with who he was. He ran for the Democratic nomination for Governor of Kansas numerous times never approaching success in that pursuit. After I graduated from Kansas State University in the early 90's he and his church, Westboro Baptist Church, began protesting various issues. I didn't pay much attention to him other than the fact that at many of his protests he would wear a Kansas University jacket which as a K-Stater I found rather amusing.

The protest that catapulted him from a mere side show to completely offensive was his protest of Matthew Shepherds funeral in 1998. Matthew Shepherd you may remember was a young college student in Wyoming who was murdered by the side of a road and it was found that his murderers had killed him because he was gay. Phelps and his church protested the funeral which was at a minimum in very bad taste and what was anything but Christ-like behavior.

Fred Phelps was right about one thing and that was and is that homosexuality is wrong. If one holds to the inerrancy of Scripture and the Biblical view of sexuality and marriage then that is an inescapable truth. But he got almost everything else wrong. Scripture is very clear about something else as well: How we handle what is wrong or *"evil"* in our culture and in our own lives. Romans 12:17 says, *"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men."*

Paul uses the phrase here *"pay back"* which is translated to mean "give away, pay out." As Christ followers we are *"never"* to "give away" or "pay out" *"evil for evil."* The word *"evil"* is translated to mean "wrong." This means that as Christians that live in a fallen and yes an *"evil"* world we are not to repay what is wrong with what is wrong. My mother used to say that "two wrongs do not make a right." Homosexuality is wrong but that doesn't mean that protesting the funerals of servicemen or those who have died of AIDS is right. Protesting a funeral which is a families most private and personal time of grieving only makes matters worse and in no way is going to lead someone to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As Christians we are not to be the judges anyway. Proverbs 20:22 says, *"Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the LORD, and He will save you."* Sin, all sin will be judged by God which is why Romans 12:19 says, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord."

Our duty as Christians is to represent the gospel and to proclaim the gospel and its saving truth to sinners. I seriously doubt that protesting hurting family's funerals is going to do that. The second part of verse 17 says, *"Respect what is right, in the sight of all men."* Most people; most rational people agree that the actions of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church is not

“right in the sight of all men.” In 2 Corinthians 8:21 the apostle Paul wrote, ***“for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”***

Instead we are to be ***“counselors of peace”*** and verse 18 makes very clear: ***“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”*** As Christ followers we are to live in peace and be at peace with all people. Christians are not to be disruptive or confusing. 1 Corinthians 14:33 says, ***“for God is not a God of confusion but of peace...”*** The word ***“peace”*** that is used here in verse 18 is translated to mean ***“live in peace, keep the peace”*** and that is exactly what we are to do. All of this is aimed it says at the conclusion of verse 18 towards ***“all men.”*** That same phrase is used in verse 17 and it is translated to mean both believers and non-believers alike.

We are to live in peace Paul writes ***“if possible, as far as it depends on you.”*** This means that we as Christ followers are to be people of peace but we must understand that the gospel is offensive and even when we have the best of intentions peace will be absent. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”*** The message of the cross is nothing to be ashamed of but we must understand that it is indeed offensive to many. Let the message offend but let the messengers be men and women of peace.