

After the United States had united to break free from English rule, the country was in its infancy. The Founding Fathers realized that some guidelines and rules needed to be set down. As a result, the U.S. Constitution was penned. However, not everyone was in agreement on the document. Back then, it was democrats and republicans, it was more federalists and anti-federalists. The anti-federalists believed in small government and state's rights, as well as individual rights. These anti-federalists believed that the Constitution did not go far enough to protect those rights and ratification of the Constitution was in danger. As a result, the Founders agreed to offer a "follow-up" document that would amend the Constitution and protect those rights. The result was called the Bill of Rights.

It is the Bill of Rights, not the actual Constitution that protects the rights of free speech, freedom of religion, and peaceful assembly. It is the Bill of Rights that guarantees our right to bear and keep arms, not the Constitution. It is the Bill of Rights that guards us against unlawful search and seizure, forced quartering of soldiers, excessive bail. It is the Bill of Rights that grants us the right to a speedy trial, a trial by a jury of our peers, and to not incriminate ourselves. It is the Bill of Rights that protects our rights and limits the power of the federal government.

Unfortunately, just as misinterpretation of the Bible leads to misapplication of its precepts so too, misinterpretation of the Constitution and Bill of Rights leads to misapplication of its protections and freedoms.

As Americans we treasure these rights, whether they be properly or improperly interpreted and applied. So much so, that we often place our rights before our pursuit of righteousness. That's one reason the American church is seeing a lack of influence and growth.

As hard as it must have been for Jesus audience to hear and take to heart today's passage, I believe it may be even harder for the American Christian. We are now over 240 years removed from the writing of those documents that we hold dear. No American alive today, Christian or non-Christian, has ever lived without those freedoms and protections. They are ingrained in us.

But Jesus calls us to live first and foremost as citizens of the kingdom of God and not as Americans. And for the benefit of the kingdom and the one true God who created it and reigns over it, we are called to put righteousness ahead of our rights. John MacArthur wrote: "When rights are first, righteousness suffers." So this morning, as Christians in general and as American Christians in particular, let's see what Jesus has to say about . . .

Scripture: Matt. 5:38-42

I. Pursuing Righteousness at the Cost of Personal Rights

A. **Reminder**

1. It's important to remember what Jesus is outlining here
 - a) A righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees (5:20)
 - b) A righteousness that is the end result of being a disciple of Christ
 - c) A righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven
2. Righteousness in return for wrong doing (39a)
 - a) This is not a command to let evil abound unchecked but to meet wrong with right
 - (1) Two wrongs don't make a right
 - (2) Do not return evil for evil (Rom. 12:17)

B. **Rights**

1. Justice (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21)
 - a) Deterrent
 - (1) Of increasing wrong behavior (Deut. 19:20)
 - (2) Of excessive punishment
2. Dignity
 - a) Slapping or striking the face was a sign of disrespect and a matter of honor
 - b) All humans deserve dignity and respect because they are created in the image of God
3. Personal property
 - a) One's coat or robe was considered an inalienable possession (Ex. 22:26-27)
 - b) What a person rightfully and legally earns whether wages or possessions is theirs
4. Liberty
 - a) Roman soldiers could force citizens to carry their load for a Roman mile

C. **Wrongs**

1. Personal Vengeance
 - a) Excessive retribution
 - (1) We want a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense
 - (2) Vengeance belongs to the Lord (Rom. 12:19)
 - (3) Instead of heaping out vengeance we are called to heap coals in the form of mercy
2. Retaliation
 - a) Repaying evil with evil

- (1) Doing unto others as they have done unto us (Prov. 24:29)
 - (2) Jesus' persecution and death serve as an example of how we should respond
3. Litigiousness
- a) Quarreling and taking to court
 - (1) We take our offense to others (non-Christian courts) to seek recompense
 - (2) We are to forgive offenses or take our offenses to fellow Christians to seek reconciliation (1 Cor. 6:1-8)
4. Rebellion/Revolution
- a) Violent response to affronted freedoms
 - b) Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil protests were much more effective in the advancement of civil rights than those of other groups who sought change "by any means necessary"

In the south we have a saying, "American by birth, southern by the grace of God." A better and more accurate saying would be, "American by birth, saved by the grace of God." As undeserving members of God's kingdom we must respond to the grace that has been shown to us with gratitude. There is no better way to show our gratitude than to be joyfully and willfully obedient to Christ's commands. Those commands are difficult to follow and many times they seem counterintuitive. But we need to remember that our all wise, all knowing Provider has made a way for us to be capable of keeping his commands. To every Christian he has given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides us in truth and gives us wisdom on how to live.

As an American citizen, I value my rights. As a former member of our armed services, I served to defend those rights. And while I became a Christian after I became an American, my allegiance is first and foremost to God, his glory, and his kingdom's growth. If that means I must sacrifice my rights as an American citizen so that others may become Kingdom citizens then so be it.

This morning, I encourage you to pursue righteousness at all costs; even the cost of your personal rights. Will you make that commitment this morning? Will you show the Lord where your allegiance truly lies? Will you surrender your rights to the Lord in pursuit of righteousness?