

How do we respond to the difficult times we live in?

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I was saddened last weekend as the reports of the terrorist attacks in Paris began to roll in through the different news sources. I had the opportunity to speak to a group of young people on Saturday afternoon (more on that next week) and talked about the darkness we see in our world and how overwhelming it sometimes feels when evil is exhibited in such dramatic fashion. I'm saddened by the fact that we often take notice of the dramatic displays (such as last week's terrorist attacks) but the fact that countless thousands have been slaughtered in the civil war in Syria largely goes unnoticed by most of our western culture. I'm saddened by much of what I see playing out on social media as friends and brothers and sisters too often offer trite responses and simplistic answers to what are incredibly difficult and complex problems.

I was moved deeply on Sunday morning when one of the pastors of the congregation encouraged us to pray for the people of Paris but also encouraged us to pray for those who carried out these terrible acts. It was a wonderful challenge to put into practice the truth of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:44 "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." These are difficult words to hear and obey but I believe they are the right response of those who claim to follow King Jesus!

Of course much of the news this week is centered on the question of what to do with thousands of refugees who are seeking entry into our own country. I'd like to offer several thoughts to help guide us in our consideration of how to respond in a manner that honors Jesus.

1. Let's speak from our position as disciples of Jesus first rather than from our political position or sense of patriotism or nationalism on issues such as this. Scripture is very clear about how God expects His people to treat those from other cultures. Leviticus 19:33-34 says "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." Let's give the direction we receive from scripture more weight in our lives than we do to our political or patriotic leanings.
2. Let's respect the difficult complexity of this issue. While some have responded with calls "to keep them all out" others have responded with "welcome all the aliens". There are no easy answers here. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (and he defines neighbor broadly – anyone you might happen to meet on your way). How do we love all of our neighbors – those who are fellow citizens as well as those coming from war torn lands? If I have a homeless friend who is also a sex offender (and therefore, poses a potential danger to society) and I open my home to my friend, that certainly demonstrates love to him. That being the case, I'm not sure that same act demonstrates love to Brenda and Carter, Molly and Connor, for it puts them in danger. To welcome thousands from a war torn land certainly does demonstrate the kind of love that we're supposed to demonstrate. But we have reason to understand that some of these individuals come here with malicious intent and purposes. How do we demonstrate love to our fellow citizens in a manner that doesn't place them in undue danger? Let's respect the difficult complexities as we seek answers and solutions.
3. Let's do our best to move beyond the theoretical discussion to something more personal and practical. One of my pastor friends asked a very poignant question this week: "how many of us

have invited a refugee to live with us?" It's one thing to address this on a philosophical level but quite another to address it on a personal level; may we move beyond ideas and theories to practical expressions of love. There may be opportunities in the weeks and months to come to welcome refugees into our own communities and even into our homes. May we become people who would be willing to open our lives to others in a real way (beyond words and ideas) in order to be obedient to Jesus and to love others the way He has loved us.

4. Let's reject our idols of comfort and security. Our culture is built upon the ideas of comfort and security. Remember that Jesus said "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Comfort and security weren't high on His list of core values. When comfort and security become our ultimate concern, they have become idols that need to be removed from our lives. Most of our work as followers of Jesus requires risk and discomfort. Our ultimate desire and concern should be to give glory to God through the lives that we live by giving ourselves fully to His kingdom agenda. If God is at work to bring the world to us so that they might know Him and be redeemed by Him, let's not miss that opportunity because it threatens our comfort and security.

These aren't easy times to live in but they are the times in which the Father appointed for us. Let's continue to seek Jesus, His kingdom and His righteousness my dear brothers and sisters.

Christ's Peace,

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