

In 1955, Milton Mayer published his book “They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933-45,” and from that tome comes an extraordinary quote worth our daily attention. It’s a long one, so get comfortable. He said,

If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked—if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in ’43 had come immediately after the ‘German Firm’ stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in ’33. But of course this isn’t the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D. And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying ‘Jewish swine,’ collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything, has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in—your nation, your people—is not the world you were born in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays. But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to God.

When Jesus ascends and leaves his Apostles with the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide them, two figures appear and say, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” To their credit, they did just see the guy who came back from the dead they’d just gotten used to having around again float away; I can’t imagine I’d respond any differently. But as Judas lamented in Jesus Christ Superstar, they had too much heaven on their minds, so they got a gentle reminder to get to it. Or, as we’ve been hearing from Jesus over the past few weeks, “if you love me, you will follow my commandments.” So, go on and follow his commandments. We’ve covered what that looks like a lot over the years, but I figure just about every day with a roaring lion on the loose could use a refresher. That psalm provides a crash course in God’s priorities: children, the elderly, the lonely and homeless, prisoners, and the poor. Other parts of scripture add foreigners, women, and judges; condemnations against the wealthy, the corrupt, and self-serving leaders; honor for prostitutes, prioritization of gender minorities, and an overall care for those who are crushed by governments, and not much care for the government itself.

This should go without saying, but not once does the Bible mention America, the United States of America, Democrats or Republicans, or any promise unique to this country or its people. We are not the Promised Land, and the Bible isn’t our nation’s legal framework, though it is being deployed with cherry-picked passages to justify great suffering in place of the vast majority of scripture that promotes human thriving. The potential for the misuse of scripture’s been a religion problem for a long time, but as the government and Christianity become progressively more intermingled, it’s become a government problem, too. As I stand here, at this exact moment, the Rededicate 250 event is beginning at the National Mall in Washington DC, an event meant to honor and highlight the role of religion, especially Christianity, in America’s founding and continued

existence. Now, the words of the Founders are complicated but on the whole, they landed on a clear desire to keep the government and religions separated, recognizing that such a separation is good for both entities. But what concerns me here is not just a prayer service that some leaders happen to be involved with. This event as described on its own is not an abuse of the First Amendment. But taken in the greater context, this is yet another moment convoluting the current government and a particular brand of religion that has appropriated the name and, to put it crassly, brand recognition of Christianity. This should concern us greatly as a different brand of Christianity very much at odds with what Christian Nationalism is promoting. Historically speaking, when nation and religion intermingle, what the nation allows of all religions shrinks, and when it does, faithful practitioners outside the one religion the government embraces suffer.

And we find ourselves in a situation where our own participation in day-to-day life can feel like a series of small endorsements of fundamentally anti-Christian behavior. I don't want, for example, my work to contribute to the alleged 17 healthcare facilities and 22 schools bombed in Iran. I say "alleged" because the Pentagon closed the legally-required program to prevent civilian deaths at the hands of our military, and the senior officer overseeing operations in Iran said that it's just not possible to corroborate those accounts. And I say "my work" because it is my work that allows me to pay taxes; a large portion of my time and energy serving you wonderful people will go to funding whatever this government gets up to. Now, admittedly, some of my taxes go to good things, of course, and it would be much easier to imagine all that I render unto Caesar, Caesar uses for good. But that's not how this works. A non-insignificant-to-me portion of my work funds genocide, targeting trans people, deepening the suffering of immigrants, and the political strong-arming of other religions and denominations. Secular political groups, Antifa, and transgender advocacy are now primary targets according to the White House's published counterterrorism agenda in which they say "we will find you and we will kill you." St. Thomas' is not a secular group, so I'd say we're safe there. But as someone who opposes fascism and wants trans people to be left alone ... y'all I did not cross the line to become a radical or a terrorist, but that line threatens to cross me, not by some inevitable passive drift but by the coordinated and intentional attacks against the freedoms and personal liberties Americans claim to hold dear.

Meanwhile, with those taxes of mine, I'm funding ICE detention centers described by a congressional oversight visit as intended "to break people" with abysmal healthcare that's allowed for an otherwise healthy Afghan war veteran to die within a day of his arrest, for pregnant women to be shackled around their bellies, for miscarrying women to be met with disdain from guards who've responded to such prisoners' distress saying, and I quote, "drink some water," for nursing mothers to be separated from their babies, even for an asylum seeker to die from an untreated toothache. I'm funding ICE in New York City, who went after a man over a case of mistaken identity with guns drawn and no identification. He said, "they didn't want to talk to me. They want to kill me. They didn't identify themselves as ICE. They grabbed me and threw me on the floor and started hurting me." They gave him a concussion and he had to get stitches, and I paid for that. I'm paying for ICE to be so bad at their jobs that judges have ruled against them 10,000 times while only securing 1,200 convictions. A federal judge appointed by the current president said, "This isn't how things are supposed to work in America... Unquestionably, the laws of human decency condemn such villainy." For what it's worth, I'm also funding their indiscriminate (or highly discriminate) hunts that're resulting in a nationwide difficulty for prosecutors to secure convictions in actual criminal cases because they're deporting witnesses and victims, too. I'm funding a Department of Health that now requires certain health providers to report the suspected immigration status of their patients. I'm funding evidence-slim searches for fraud that've frozen medicare enrollments for hospice and home health agencies in every state. I'm funding the DOJ's threat of issuing criminal subpoenas to hospitals that provide gender affirming care for young people. I'm funding all that while my God says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Peter says “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you.” Now, I don’t love the idea of God testing us, but my God do these days feel like one opportunity after another to live clearly into the ideals we stand for. One opportunity after another to meet the challenge the world sets before us with faith, hope, and reason. I know this is a hard world. It’s especially hard if you pay attention to what’s happening or if you’re unlucky enough to be born as something this administration despises. I know it’s hard to imagine how things get better or wonder what you can do to change things or worry for what fearful thing will change tomorrow. Peter says we should cast all our anxiety on Christ; he can handle it. And for now, resist and be steadfast in faith. Even if you’re not feeling it right now, even if you’re not sure where God is in all this mess, hold onto what you *can* do. We’ve got the people we’re supposed to prioritize. We’ve got ways to stand when standing is a frightening proposition. We’ve got angels telling us to stop staring and get to work. So, let’s get to it and follow Jesus’-- not anyone else’s -- get to it and follow Jesus’ commandments: in all things, love God, and love your neighbor.