

RIGHT or WRONG? Prudence vs Passion

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I've been told I just need the courage to act on my principles. My response is that sometimes prudence should be the driving force for doing the ethical thing. How can we balance these virtues?

In the middle of April, my Baptist principles and commitment to the gospel collided with American politics. On a Tuesday, the president of the United States drove to Andrews Air Force Base to welcome the pope to America. The pope was the first dignitary the president had greeted at the Air Force base in his seven years in office. Everyone else has been greeted at the White House, which symbolizes people come to the president. But the president went to the pope. This was a symbolic gesture that smacked of undue favoritism in my Baptist opinion. On Thursday of that week, the business of Congress was suspended so the 100 Catholic members could attend the Mass held in the Nationals ballpark. While no laws were made favoring or establishing a religion, this did feel like special treatment.

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Wednesday of that same week, the Democrats were holding a debate for

the Pennsylvania primary. Barack Obama said, “The point I was making was that when people feel like Washington’s not listening to them, when they’re promised year after year, decade after decade, that their economic situation is going to change, and it doesn’t, then politically they end up focusing on those things that are constant, like religion.”

My blood really began to boil. “Jesus is not fallback position for economic hard times,” I muttered to myself. By Thursday noon, I had put aside my planned sermon for Sunday morning and was ready to tackle the fickle beast of American politics.

On a drive Thursday afternoon, I told my wife of my outrage and my plans to put everything right on Sunday morning. She began talking me down from the ledge with the comment, “Will this sermon be helpful to our people, or are you just blowing off steam?”

I was like you, caught between the courage of my convictions and the prudence of doing the right thing in the right way. I did not have a solution to my anger. I would have been railing against an injustice I could not remedy, nor could the members of my church. I preached a sermon from John 7 asking the question, “Who is Jesus to you?”—a better and more important question.

You are right. We do need to balance prudence with courage, and courage with prudence. There are times when we are called upon to do the hard thing that changes the circumstances in our world. But in every case, we need to make sure our courage is tempered with helpful words and redeeming actions. Yet do not quiet your courage in the name of prudence. Let us do what is right with wisdom.

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Muleshoe

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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