

# SILENCE IS NOT ALWAYS GOLDEN

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2018**

**Romans 8:12-17**

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In America's deep-south, Mildred Hayes is grieving the rape and murder of her teenage daughter seven months earlier. Angry over the lack of progress in the investigation, Mildred goes on the warpath against the authorities.

The movie, Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri, is a thought-provoking, often brutal yet profoundly moving story of a mother who takes on a system that is compromising, complicit, dispassionate and seemingly ineffective.

Here the local police appear to have walked away from an extensive investigation into the teenager's tragic death. Or perhaps they have conveniently looked the other way or evenly deliberately suppressed the process because its more than likely one of this small town's young men are involved.

Mildred is incensed. She takes on Bill Willoughby, the local police chief as she rents three abandoned billboards on a road leading into town. On these billboards, Mildred posts – 'Raped while dying', 'Still no arrests?' and 'How come, Chief Willoughby?'

Then, in one particularly confronting scene, the local priest tries to both console and restrain Mildred. But Mildred fires back. What right has this priest to intrude into her life when he represents an institution, in this case the church - that has not only stayed silent over serious abuses - but has also proceeded to cover them up?

I remember back in 1967 when I was a teenager the English band, The Tremeloes, released a single, "Silence is Golden". It was on the Australian Top 40 charts for a number of weeks and, at the time, there seemed to be some wisdom in these lyrics.

Indeed, I grew up with the idea that it's better to remain silent and be thought of as a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt! But staying silent can be foolish. Looking the other way can be a failing. Burying one's head in the sand can be a real flaw.

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That strange bird, the ostrich, is said to be a culprit here. Ostriches are believed to foolishly look the other way or naively close their eyes when danger looms or when a predator starts to menace them. Ostriches do so in the belief that a problem unseen or a problem denied is no problem at all.



But, off course, things are not like that. Reality is quite different.

It's important that when we see a problem, when we are confronted with a challenge or when we are snared by an injustice, we do not look the other way.

Saint Paul has some things to say here. In the eighth chapter of his remarkable Letter to the Romans, Paul addresses the flock with these words: *"For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption."* (Romans 8:15)

Here Paul is giving instructions on what it means to live the Christian life as he highlights two things. Firstly there is the matter of 'fear' and then there is the matter of 'adoption'.

'Fear' is expressed in the Greek word, 'phobos' which has its origins in the field of Greek mythology. Phobos, together with his brother, Deimos, were gods of war. With their father, Ares, Phobos and Deimos would go into battle spreading fear in their gruesome wake. Deimos created terror while Phobos sparked panic and flight. Indeed, in the presence of Phobos, enemies would quiver and flee. They would avoid, at all costs, an encounter with this all-powerful entourage.

And so the Greek, 'phobos', the term Paul uses here in speaking about fear, means to avoid, to flee or to withdraw.

Friends, Paul, in using this term, effectively says those who live according to their own means, those who put their trust in their own efforts are bound up, are literally enslaved by the kind of fear that leads them to avoid the challenges of life. Here, those who live for themselves are inclined to look the other way, deny the real issues and remain mute about the things that actually matter.

I think Paul has a point here. In that small town of Ebbing, the community's response to the rape and murder of a teenage girl was to clearly look the other way and to hope the issue would go away. And this is exactly the kind of 'head in the sand' approach that Paul refers to when using the term 'phobos' in the text of his letter.

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In small-town Ebbing, fears centered around what one might find if a full investigation took place. In that isolated, conservative Missouri community people dreaded what might be the consequences if the issue was properly and correctly addressed.



This approach is not what Paul advocates when it comes to being a follower of Jesus Christ. Staying silent, looking the other way, choosing to suppress or ignore the reality that is knocking at one's door, accommodating ourselves to unjust systems or simply living with processes and practices that we know are not right, puts us all in the camp of what we call 'phobos' – the kind of fear that is expressed in accommodation, avoidance, silence or retreat.

Now, in his Letter to the Romans, Paul goes on to say those who follow Jesus receive a "spirit of adoption". This stands in complete contrast to a spirit that causes one to retreat into fear. Adoption is a powerful thing. It refers to each one of us becoming a child of God, of being claimed, loved and sustained by God just as a parent receives a child through the process of adoption to become one with them in a close knit, supportive, nurturing, caring family.

To be adopted by God is to be received into a profound, loving, intimate relationship that is for keeps. And this kind of relationship is one that opens our hearts and our minds to everything that challenges, confronts or comes menacingly knocking at our door. This kind of relationship serves to equip and encourage us to stand our ground, seek the truth and face the realities of life that are constantly before us.

Friends, to be adopted by God is to be claimed by God, it is to be received by God and to be lovingly cherished, nurtured and sustained by God. And because of this we do not have to retreat. We do not have to withdraw or lay down. We no longer need to compromise or keep quiet. For, we have nothing to fear. I repeat, we have absolutely nothing to fear!

Fear, the urge to look the other way, the impulse to ignore the realities of life and remain silent about the things that matter most, have no place in the life of those who belong to God.

The civil rights advocate, Martin Luther King Jr, said: *"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."* Think about this for a moment. *"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter"*.

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I must admit that I have issues here. One of the things I wrestle with in my life is procrastination. And because of this, I feel there have been a number of opportunities missed. I'm also aware that I am sometimes over cautious. Here I tend to tread carefully, not wanting to offend others or hurt their feelings.

What about you? What are the things you tend to retreat from, that you prefer to remain silent about? What are the things you choose to suppress, overlook or put up with?

It is a fear of failure? Is it a fear of taking on something you feel you may not be up to or won't be able to do well enough? Is it a fear of what others may say or do even though the situation you are in may be a dangerous or even a potentially toxic one?

Is it a fear of intimacy, of entering into relationships that might reveal your true self to others? It is a fear of dying, of having to deal with the end of life and the suffering, the grief and the loneliness that goes with it? Or is it a fear of others, having to adjust to the newcomer who is different and often threatening?

On the broader front, there are scenarios where truths have been long concealed and voices have been long silenced. But things are changing as the 'MeToo' movement breaks the ceiling on sexual harassment and violence against women.

Then there is a 7-Eleven employee who, in August 2015, spoke out about the systemic wage fraud that the convenience store giant was carrying out here in Australia. This whistleblower exposed a secretive system where employees, most of whom were international students, were regularly paid half the award rate and were threatened with deportation if they complained.



And there are those who have been bold enough to lift the lid on a culture of silence, complicity and even collusion as the truth of those terrible abuses in institutions including the church, the financial services sector, the unions, the world of diplomacy and even the military come to light.

As Christians, no longer are we to retreat into a state of 'phobos' or fear. Rather, as God's adopted children, we are called out of a culture of silence. We are summoned to move beyond the practice of collusion and accommodation to bear witness to the truth.

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**Brothers and sisters in Christ, life is skewered, life is trivialized, life is cheapened when we deny reality, when we compromise what is true, when we allow the voices of those who need to speak to be silenced.**

**As God's adopted people, as a people loved, cherished and claimed for all time, let us engage with the reality around us. Let us break the silence of whatever needs to be said and done. Let us be bold enough to work for change and to name the inconsistencies, the wrongs and the injustices, our world, in our country, in our community and, indeed, in our very lives.**

**For, we are sons and daughters of God. God has claimed us. We belong to God.**

**And, friends, this means there is no need to fear, there is no need to retreat, there is no need to remain silent.**

**Silence is not always golden!**

**Let us rise above our fears and our uncertainties. And in doing so, let us speak all that which is true - today and always.**

**Amen.**

