

# News Provides Christians Reasons to Consider Responsible Use of Power

## In the News

Kenneth L. Storey was an adjunct professor of sociology at the University of Tampa when, last week, on his private Twitter account, he fired off an ill-considered tweet that stated that Hurricane Harvey "kinda feels like karma" for Texas supporting Republicans.

Although the tweet was soon deleted, it was up long enough for critics to take screenshots and circulate them on Twitter. Soon #FireKenStorey started trending on Twitter and the UT Facebook page was filled with demands for his firing, which the school soon did, despite Storey issuing an apology tweet.

In another incident Houston's Lakewood Church, where celebrity televangelist Joel Osteen is the pastor, was heavily criticized on social media for their response to the hurricane, with some claiming that the church locked its doors. A spokesperson for the church, however, said the church was never closed, but had not been designated as a shelter. Instead it was being used as a distribution center for donated items and supplies.

In Storey's apology tweet, he said, "I deeply regret a statement I posted yesterday. I never meant to wish ill will upon any group. I hope all affected by Harvey recover quickly." He also sent a longer apology to ABC Action News, where he explained that he was referring to Republicans who deny climate change science and are pushing to decrease funding to agencies like NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Writing for *The Washington Post*, Kate Bowler, who is the author of *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, says that some of the criticism of the Lakewood Church is because critics saw a disconnect between Osteen's preaching of the Prosperity Gospel (the teaching that God always blesses the righteous with health, wealth and happiness), and the perceived inaction of the Houston church during the flooding.

**It is arguable that Christians shouldn't be in the business of spreading shame to anyone. However, it becomes particularly problematic when Christians shame other Christians. What should we say, and what shouldn't we say? Whatever it is, our words have the power to affect those around us.**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Matthew 7:1-5**

*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.*

In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly explains that our role in judgment begins first with looking at ourselves. Beyond that, he seems to intimate that we should always look inside ourselves before making any snap judgments of others.

**Questions:** Why is our vision supposedly clearer about the speck in the neighbor's eye than the log in our own? Is Jesus calling for no judgment, fair judgment, self-judgment, or is he saying we should rely only on divine judgment? How can a snap judgement lead to disaster in our social media age?

**Matthew 18:28-30**

*But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. (For context, read 18:21-35.)*

This is from Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. A servant owed a tremendous sum of money to a king which he could not pay. At first the king ordered him, along with all that he had, sold to pay the debt. But the servant pleaded for mercy and for an extension of time. The king took pity on him and *forgave* the debt outright. This same servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a very small sum but was unable to pay, so the first servant had him thrown in prison. When the king heard of this, he was so incensed that he reinstated the huge debt and had the ungrateful servant imprisoned.

We notice that despite all his power, the king had been graciously willing to forgive the huge debt owed to him, whereas the servant abused the slight power he had over his fellow servant.

**Questions:** Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question about how many times he should forgive another person (vv.21-22). How does Peter's question relate to judgment and shaming? In what ways is the parable an appropriate response to that?

### **1 Corinthians 1:18**

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (For context, read 1:18-25.)*

It should be instructive to us that the central symbol of Christianity, the cross, is a symbol both of powerlessness and of power. As an instrument of execution, the place where Jesus himself accepted death, it symbolizes his powerlessness. But as an *empty* cross, one that could not keep Christ dead, it also reminds us of his power.

Often times we have to be rendered 'powerless' before we turn to God who uses these opportunities for great transformation. When we feel powerful, we are less likely to remain close to Christ and deceive ourselves about our need for him.

**Questions:** How do the “crosses” that we bear symbolize both power and powerlessness in our lives. How does passing judgment on others render us foolish and in disregard of the reminder of the empty cross?

### **Prayer for Guidance (BCP p.832)**

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*