

## Special Focus

# How Should I Respond to Politics?



## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Politics can be a real minefield—especially for Christians. I learned this when I served on my local school board. While politicians are often only concerned with the outcome, Christians also must be concerned about the process. In one contentious moment some of my political colleagues wanted to accomplish a goal that would have been good, but they wanted to get there in a way that violated Christian principles. I couldn't support something good if I had to agree to an unbiblical path to get there.

The phrase, "The end justifies the means," is often associated with sixteenth-century philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli. He wrote in one of his works: "For although the act condemns the doer, the end may justify him."<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli apparently believed that if our goal is good, then we're free to use whatever means needed to achieve it.

Unfortunately, many people today seem to embrace that philosophy, but you won't find that idea in Scripture. In fact, God calls us to a wholly different standard: a standard of obedience and love for Him that will be seen in our actions.

# GROUP TIME

**THE POINT:** Reflect \_\_\_\_\_ in how you \_\_\_\_\_ with politics and government.

If you imagine life in the Roman Empire was relatively peaceful, pleasant, and prosperous, think again. Slavery, violence, cruelty, graft, and corruption were common in first-century Roman life. It was in the midst of all this and more that Paul wrote to admonish the Roman believers: “Let everyone submit to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1).

**Romans 13:1-4** <sup>1</sup> Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. <sup>4</sup> For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.

**Respond to the government with \_\_\_\_\_ .**

Paul told the Corinthian church, “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). The orderliness of God applies when it comes to government too, since God institutes governments to maintain order. As we live in submission to and under the authority of the government, we learn what it means to live in subjection to God Himself. “For it is God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:4). Consequently, failure to submit to the authorities He has placed over our lives is rebellion. “So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command” (v. 2).

**Romans 13:5-7** <sup>5</sup> Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. <sup>6</sup> And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God’s servants, continually attending to these tasks. <sup>7</sup> Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.

**Respond to the government with \_\_\_\_\_ , respect, and honor.**

Our testimony shows up everywhere, so as much as possible, Christians should be model citizens. We're instructed to "submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience" (v. 5). Verse 7 reminds us that this submission covers everything.

- ▶ We should obey all laws—including traffic laws.
- ▶ We should pay all of our taxes.
- ▶ We should respect every government office—from president to school board.
- ▶ We should honor those who serve in the government—regardless of their race, gender, political party, or region of the country.

**Romans 13:8-10** <sup>8</sup> Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

## Respond to political discussions and disagreements with \_\_\_\_\_ .

It might seem that, with verse 8, Paul changed subjects from our response to governing authorities to loving one another, but we should read verses 8-10 in the context of how we respond to governing authorities. Politics must be practiced in the context of love. Most of us likely aren't politicians, but we have political views—and we need to practice and express those views with love. The apostle Paul commanded the Romans—and us—to owe nothing to anyone except the debt of loving others. "Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another" (v. 8). Love proves whose we really are. When people know we're Christians, our actions and attitudes put God's name on the line. If love isn't present in our political discussions, we'll be mean, shortsighted, and selfish. Hate-filled name-calling and incivility have no place in the life of a believer. As Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

### OUR OBEDIENCE MATTERS

Which person best describes how you currently interact with politics? Circle one.

- A.** Critic    **B.** Viewer    **C.** Activist    **D.** Hermit    **E.** Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What is one way you can show the love of Christ when political conversations arise?

## LIVE IT OUT

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When it comes to politics, how will you reflect Christ's love?

▶ **Practice love.** We're in a season of elections, so politics is a common topic of discussion. At times, Christians may find themselves on opposite sides of an issue or debating with a candidate. Maintain love for others in your conversations and discussions.

▶ **Plunge into God's Word.** The political issues we face today aren't easy. Study Scripture to determine how it speaks into the issues. Continually seek to be aligned with God, and do so with love and humility.

▶ **Participate.** Are you an active participant or do you just complain from the sidelines? It's important for Christians to influence the discourse in the public square and the political processes. Get active, and let your love for Christ be an influence.

## TALK IT OUT

**Want to go a step further? Gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender. Read Romans 13:1-10, then use the following summary and questions for a deeper discussion.**

The United States is divided over important issues. Each side in the political arena is convinced they're right; consequently, passions run high and the rhetoric and debate is often less than civil. While Christians may not like certain politicians, God calls His people to respond not based on emotion but with actions that honor government and its leaders. A love for Christ and a love for others is to permeate every way we engage in and express ourselves in the political arena.

*What's your initial reaction to verses 1-4? Explain.*

*What steps can you take to "love" even those whose politics you disagree with?*

*How should your identity as a disciple of Jesus influence your involvement in politics?*

## DAY 1: We're to submit to governing authorities.

### Read Romans 13:1-4.

Paul's instruction in these verses is clear and succinct: we're to submit to authority. Paul made two statements to frame the discussion. First, he asserted there was "no authority except from God" (v. 1). Second, believers were to acknowledge that all existing authorities "are instituted by God" (v. 1). Because of this, submitting to the existing authorities was paramount to acknowledging God's sovereign role in establishing order over human society.

Unfortunately, governments are run by imperfect people. Imperfect people will do imperfect things. At times, these imperfect things will go against God's expressed will for His creation. So, what do we do then? How does this command to submit to the governing authorities apply then? Or to put it differently, should we ever disobey God to stay aligned with the government?

A challenge like this confronted the apostles. The authorities arrested the apostles and instructed them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:18-28), but the apostles told the authorities: "We must obey God rather than people" (v. 29). Now this isn't a loophole that allows us to disobey the government whenever it suits us. The apostles' example is a reminder that we're to live in obedience to the government as long as that obedience doesn't cause us to sin against the expressed Word and will of God.

*Read through Romans 13:1-10, using these verses to prompt prayer. Pause after every verse or two to pray for the government and country based on God's Word.*

*"For this is what the LORD says—  
the Creator of the heavens,  
the God who formed the earth and made it ...  
he says, 'I am the LORD, and there is no other.'"*

ISAIAH 45:18

## DAY 2: Our actions impact our witness for Christ.

### Read Romans 13:5-7.

Many things may belong to the government, but everything belongs to God—including government authorities. “The authorities are God’s servants” (Romans 13:6). Let me suggest two big reasons behind our obedience when it comes to politics and government. First, God uses the government to build us up. Road building and maintenance; police and emergency services; and provisions for the poor, the sick, and the elderly are just a few of the myriad ways the government helps us. The government’s ultimate role is to look after the nation as a whole and make provisions that support the well-being and prosperity of its citizens.

Second, God uses our lives as a testimony of His faithful love and grace. Some people may never read a Bible, so all they know about the character of God they learn by watching the lives of those who call themselves Christians. When we live as good earthly citizens, people learn of the faithful love and unselfish grace of the Almighty God we love and serve.

*When it comes to political discussions, are your words and actions honoring to Christ? If they aren't, ask God to help you surrender this area to Him.*

## DAY 3: Love is to be a Christian’s defining characteristic.

### Read Romans 13:8.

Our Christian witness will be strengthened or hindered by our actions and words. We’re called to be salt and light in our society and culture (Matthew 5:13-16). In political discussions, we’re to honor Christ in how we talk. Therefore, we’re to display common courtesy and the ability to disagree civilly.

In verse 8, Paul connected the ideas of paying our obligations to the call in verse 9 to love one another: “Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The single exception to the rule of paying off all debts is the love debt, which is never paid off and is always in need of being addressed. The Greek verb form stresses the unending nature of the command. There will never be a time when Christians do not need to love one another. Jesus identified this mutual love as the defining characteristic by which others would know they were His disciples (John 13:35).

*Consider your news sources and social media accounts. Are the people you listen to showing respect and love or inciting anger and hatred? Unfollow sources that are doing the latter.*

## DAY 4: Only Jesus offers us salvation from our sins.

### Read Romans 8:1-4.

It's important to remember that politics can't solve our greatest problem: our sin problem. Politics may be able to accomplish the goals of our community or country but not the goals of Christ's church. The focus of the church is to live and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church isn't focused on making better citizens but on helping sinners to become radically transformed believers who are saved by grace.

God's law couldn't save us. "What the law could not do since it was weakened by the flesh, God did" (Romans 8:3). The apostle Paul was referring to the Old Testament Law, but the principle applies to our local and federal laws as well. In our fallen nature, we're drawn to sin; we're enslaved to it. We can create all sorts of laws to "legislate righteousness," but those laws will never make us righteous. Laws make us aware of our sin, but they can't stop us from sinning. God's love moves us to focus on transformation and not just legislation. The power for transformation isn't in Washington, D.C., or in any state capital; rather, it's in the work of Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

*Spend a few minutes praising God for sending Jesus to pay the price for our sins. Reflect on the ways God's grace has changed you and your life. Be ready to share this brief testimony with someone who needs to hear it.*



## DAY 5: Lift up Jesus in your political actions.

### Read Romans 13:9-10.

Politics driven by love always seeks to do the right thing. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (v. 10). Instead, love seeks to do what is right by our neighbors. When our political action is driven by love for God and love for others, we will lose the shortsighted, selfish, and mean-spirited attitudes. Our political actions must lift up Jesus. Our votes must bring glory to God. We do this when we care about all the things God cares about. For example, James said, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27).

This also means that as Christians we should never compromise our witness for a political agenda. It’s right to support politicians and issues when we believe they support God’s plan, but at the same time we must be willing to call out those politicians when they’re wrong. We can never just serve a political party or ideology; we must always serve God first.

If we wallow in the muddy side of politics, we weaken our witness. There’s an old adage that says, “Politics makes strange bedfellows.” This may be true for a secular society, but Christians are reminded to “stay away from every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Political leaders and parties will come and go, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.

*A believer’s identity is in Christ, not in a political party or particular issue. Invite a fellow Christian who has differing political views to get coffee or come over for dinner. Look for common ground in how you both strive to love Christ and others.*

*“Our political actions must lift up Jesus.”*

MARK CROSTON