

Introduction



HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO POLITICS?

Our country is deep into election season. All 435 seats in Congress, 34 seats in the Senate, and of course, the office of president are up for election. Add to that the state and local elections taking place, and we are overrun with campaign ads, signs, and slogans!

And then there are the endless political debates and discussions.

The United States is deeply divided over important issues. Each side in the political arena is convinced they are right; consequently, passions run high and, unfortunately, the rhetoric and debate is often less than civil. In Romans 13, the apostle Paul addressed our attitude and behavior toward government, and we definitely need his guidance in this election season. While Christians may not like certain politicians, God calls us to respond based not on emotion but with actions that honor government and its leaders. Love for Christ and for others is to permeate every way we engage in and express ourselves in the political arena.

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SPECIAL FOCUS

How Should I Respond to Politics?



QUESTION 1:

What do you recall about your initial experiences with a presidential election?

THE POINT

Reflect Christ in how you interact with politics and government.

THE PASSAGE

Romans 13:1-10

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 could not 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 16th century philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli. He wrote in one of his works: “For although the act condemns the doer, the end may justify him.”¹ Machiavelli apparently believed that, if our goal is good, then we are free to use whatever means needed to achieve it.

Unfortunately, many Christians 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 to Him that will be seen in how we respond to politics and government.

Romans 13:1-4

1 Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God.

2 So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves.

3 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.

4 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.

If you imagine life in the Roman Empire was relatively peaceful, pleasant, and prosperous, think again. The truth is that:

- ▶ The horrors of King Herod killing all the boys two years old and younger (Matt. 2:16) was not unique.
- ▶ The story of the man beaten and left half dead on the Jericho road (Luke 10:30) was a common scenario.
- ▶ Tax collectors like Zacchaeus (19:2) commonly cheated people to gain resources for the government and themselves.
- ▶ Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for healing a woman who was being exploited by her "owners" (Acts 16:16-24).

Slavery, sexual exploitation, 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."

I had never heard the phrase "the rule of law" until I heard it used over and over on the news during the 1990s. The phrase is a reminder that every civilized society must have some form of governance that guides the people and processes so that we can

live in peace. The idea of the rule of law was not invented in the 1990s; it is at least as old as this ancient text.

One thing we know about God is that He is a God of order, and order is held together under His authority. Just think about how He created the world. The earth orbits the sun from an average distance of 92.96 million miles, and it consistently orbits the sun every 365.256 days. If the earth were only slightly closer to the sun, it would be too hot to sustain life, and if the planet were slightly farther away, it would be too cold. God ordered things just right.

Paul told the Corinthian church: “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33). The orderliness of God applies when it comes to government too, since God has instituted 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.” 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.”

QUESTION 2:

How has the government been beneficial to you?

Unfortunately, governments are run by imperfect people. Imperfect people do imperfect things. At times, these imperfect things go against God’s expressed will for his creation. So, what do we do then? Then how does this command to submit to the governing authorities apply? 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 is not a loophole that allows us to disobey the government whenever it suits us. The apostles’ example is a reminder that we are to live in

obedience to the government as long as that obedience does not cause us to sin against the expressed word and will of God.

QUESTION 3:

What responsibility do believers have for promoting good government?

Romans 13:5-7

5 Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.

6 And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks.

7 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.

Our testimony shows up everywhere, so as much as possible, Christians should be model citizens. We are instructed to “submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.”

Verse 7 reminds us that this submission covers everything.

- ▶ We should strive to keep the laws of the land.
- ▶ We should pay our bills on time.
- ▶ We should pay our taxes.
- ▶ We should obey all laws—including traffic laws.
- ▶ 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.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus added an element of servanthood to our obedience: “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matt. 5:41). Jesus also said: “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (22:21). Many things may belong to the government, but *everything* belongs to God—including government authorities. “The authorities are God’s servants.” Let me suggest three big reasons behind our obedience and God’s work.

1. **God uses the government to build us up.** Road building and maintenance, water and sewage, 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.
2. **God uses our lives as a testimony of His faithful love and unselfish grace.** The world is watching how we live. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). While nonbelievers may have used this title in derision at first, it is apparent these believers were people whose lives and character declared they were living like Jesus Christ! Some people may never read a Bible, so that all they know about the character of God they learn by watching the lives of those who call themselves Christians. Others are watching us every day! When we live as good earthly citizens, people learn of the faithful love and unselfish grace of the Almighty God we love and serve.
3. **God uses the government for His purposes.** God is working out His providential plan. “From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live” (17:26). We are sometimes so focused on our own lives and personal concerns we forget that God is working all around us—even within the government. “A king’s heart is like

channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses" (Prov. 21:1). When I was young, the old saints would say, "Kings, presidents and potentates rule, but God super-rules!" It was their way of talking about the sovereignty of God. They were teaching us that He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, or as Colossians 1:17 says, "He is before all things, and by him all things hold together."

QUESTION 4:

How do these verses speak to our responsibilities as Christian citizens?

Romans 13:8-10

8 Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

9 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.

10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

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. Every system is made better when fueled by love, and no one has a greater obligation to love than the Christian.

Politics must be practiced in the context of love. Most of us are likely not politicians, but we do 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.” Love proves whose we really are. When people know we are Christians, our actions and attitudes put God’s name on the line. If love is not present in our political discussions, we will be mean, short sighted, 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).

Politics can’t solve our greatest problems. 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 is not focused on making better citizens but on helping sinners to become radically transformed believers saved by grace.

God’s law could not save us. “What the law could not do since it was weakened by the flesh, God did” (Rom. 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. The love of God moves us to focus on transformation and not just legislation. Politics and legislation can never bring our country closer to God. The power for transformation is not in Washington, DC, or in any state capital; rather, it is in the work of Jesus Christ and the Word of God that is preached from our pulpits and taught in our Bible study groups.

Politics driven by love always seeks to do the right thing. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor.” 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: “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” (Jas. 1:27).

This also means that as Christians we should never compromise our witness for a political agenda. It is 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 are 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. An old adage says, “Politics makes strange bedfellows.” This may be true for a secular society, but the saints of God are reminded to “stay away from every kind of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22). Political leaders and parties will come and go, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.

QUESTION 5:

How does loving others disarm an argument?

ENGAGE

Which quality or characteristic below best describes how you currently respond to politics?

Bystander

Wallflower

Concerned citizen

Active participant

Critic

Activist

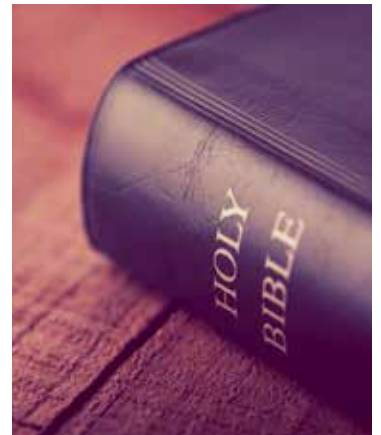
How can you demonstrate the love of Jesus with others who hold a different political viewpoint in conversation or social media?

LIVE IT OUT

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

- ▶ **Practice love.** We are in a season of elections, so politics is a common topic of discussion. At times, Christians may find themselves on opposite sides on an issue or debating with a candidate. Maintain love for others in your discussions.
- ▶ **Plunge into God's Word.** The political issues we face today are not easy. Study Scripture to see 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 is 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.

From my time on the School Board up to the present time, I have learned one important life lesson: we can disagree without being disagreeable. We may lose sometimes, but don't fret. God wins in the end!



END NOTES

1 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Chapter 9.