



Politics, Prayer, and Priorities

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Romans 12:17 – 13:10

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"^[d] says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

13 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,”^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

2024 is the year of elections. Are there biblical principles to guide Christians as they seek to discern which parties and candidates to support? What should Christians look for, hope for, and pray for?

Jesus and Politics

Jesus did his best to sidestep the big political divides of his day. When asked by Pilate whether He was in favour of the Roman Empire or violently opposed to it, his answer in John 18:36 was, ‘My kingdom is not of this world’. When asked, at an earlier point in His ministry, about whether He was prepared to pay taxes to Caesar, He pointed out that Caesar’s power was limited because all things belong to God (Matthew 22:21).

After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples the Great Commission. The Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28 begins with Jesus declaring that “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (verse 18). What then follows is not what I would have done if I were Jesus. If I were Jesus, I would have said something like “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore go and conquer kingdoms, become rulers, and impose my laws of love by force.” But that is not what Jesus does. Jesus says: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” As Christians we are commissioned not to seize political power or ownership of the

means of production, we are called to make disciples, to baptise people, and to teach them to obey Jesus's commands. The challenge for us to discern the implications of Jesus's teaching for politics, not to turn the Church into the religious wing of any political party.

Praying for Politicians

Writing to Timothy, Paul gives him a clear instruction and a clear reason for that instruction. Our first responsibility as Christians to pray for 'kings and all those in authority' (1 Timothy 2:2). We should be praying for our politicians. Specifically, Paul urges Christians to pray that our political leaders will take actions that enable us to live peaceful and quiet lives in godliness and holiness. In verse 3, Paul tells us why this should be our political priority: because God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. The number one political issue for Christians should be the gospel: our right to proclaim the gospel, the freedom of other people to hear the gospel, and our freedom to live out our Christian faith, not only in private but also in public.

Government was the response to wrongdoing

But is that all we should expect of politics? Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 7 are the main passage in the New Testament which addresses the question of politics. In order to understand those verses, however, we need to put them in their context. Romans chapter 12 is about what the Christian life looks like, about how Christian love is to be expressed. There are all sorts of positive actions listed in Romans chapter 12, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, showing mercy, honouring others, being joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer (verse 12), sharing with those in need, practising hospitality (verse 13), trying to live in harmony and peace with others (verses 16 and 18).

Alongside that long list of positive actions, there is one thing Christians are not to do. We are not to repay evil for evil (verse 17), we are not take revenge (verse 19). The context for Paul's reflections on politics in Romans 13 is the need for official action against evil. There is a task which political leaders are called to do. That task is set out

in verses 3 and 4 of Romans chapter 13. Good rulers punish wrong and commend the good. Bad rulers pay back evil for good (Psalm 35:12, Psalm 109:5; Jeremiah 18:20) or call evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20).

As Christians we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. Paul reminds us in Romans 13 verse 10 that “Love does not harm to a neighbour”. In a democracy, our politicians are supposed to represent us. During the Second World War, Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple wrote *Christianity and Social Order*, of the key foundation documents for the welfare state. In that work, he argued that justice is the way in which love is expressed in institutional form. Good rulers will fight violence and oppression by punishing wrong and will reward loving actions by commending the good.

The concern for justice is a constant theme running through the Old Testament. The biblical vision of justice is not primarily about growth in GDP, or about low inflation, or about regular bin collection, or repairs to potholes. It is not even about hospitals and schools, climate change, or military defence. The biblical vision of justice is about how a nation treats those who are suffering from disadvantage and who are vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. From Exodus to Zechariah, the Old Testament picks out three kinds of people as examples of those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. Now, it’s not that God’s concern is limited to those three kinds of people, it is just that it is easier to imagine these people than a generic description of a class. Picture the old woman, whose husband has died, whose family live far away, and who does not have enough money to live on. Picture the child whose parents have died or have abandoned them, who has no-one to protect and to guide them as they grow up. Picture the foreigner, who has moved into a new, strange town, who hasn’t yet learned how to speak English properly, who doesn’t know how to make friends, and who is baffled by the bureaucratic rules and the bizarre customs of this unfamiliar place. Can you see those people in your mind’s eye? These are just examples of the vulnerable. God is concerned for all those who are at risk of being oppressed or exploited because they don’t have enough money to make ends meet, they don’t have friends to help them when they are confused, overwhelmed or just baffled by technology, bureaucracy or other challenges, or they don’t have enough emotional, relational and social support.

The entire story of the Old Testament is an arc in which God's people are liberated from slavery in Egypt and called to live in a society in which the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and all others who are vulnerable and disadvantaged are protected. Time and time again, they fail to do so. Their political leaders, the judges and the kings, largely let them down. The tone from the top is one in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

At the end of that history, the prophet Zechariah is called by God to make sense of it all. Zechariah chapter 7 verses 8 to 14a:

⁸ And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ⁹ “This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’

¹¹ “But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears. ¹² They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry.

¹³ “‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the Lord Almighty. ¹⁴ ‘I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land they left behind them was so desolate that no one travelled through it.

Zechariah explains the tragedy of the Exile into Babylon in these terms. The Israelites were scattered among the nations because they did not act justly, they did not show mercy and compassion, and because they oppressed the widow and the fatherless, the foreigner and the poor.

Jesus demonstrated God's vision for justice. He raised from the dead the son of a widow (Luke 7), He was concerned for children, He cared for the Canaanite woman (Matthew

15:21-28), the Roman centurion (Matthew 8), the ill and the insane. Jesus lived out God's concern for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.

What should be our priorities as we vote? It's not about reintroducing national service or reducing the voting age to 16. We should vote for politicians and parties who will govern our country in a way which protects our freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to live out our faith. We should vote for politicians and parties who are committed to commending the good and to punishing wrong. Sedulius Scottus, writing for rulers over one thousand years ago, taught that we should look for godly and holy rulers, politicians who fear God, because those are the ones most likely to be committed to punishing evil and commending God.

Moving from the Bible's teaching to practicalities in the here and now involves all sorts of challenges. Working out which, if any, of the current political parties between which we have to choose most closely aligns with the Bible's agenda may be difficult. The values of the individuals who we are electing matter as well as the policy platforms of the parties. We need wisdom and discernment. We need to take the time to inform ourselves and we need to pray.

Conclusion

The Bible does not see politics as all-important but it does not fall into the trap of thinking of politics as unimportant. Politics is relatively important. As Christians, we have a responsibility and we have an opportunity. Our responsibility is to cast our votes conscientiously. Our opportunity is to engage with politicians, and to tell them what our priorities, that we are concerned about freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and that we want to know what their party is planning to do to protect those in our society who are vulnerable to oppression and exploitation.

- We should pray for our political leaders, for those who will form our next government
- We should pray for continued freedom to preach the Gospel and to live lives of faithful discipleship to Christ
- We should pray that the next government will be committed to punishing evil and commending good

- We should pray that the next government will be looking to address the oppression of the poor, the vulnerable elderly, children who do not live in a stable family, and immigrants
- These should be our priorities when we consider how we will vote

Let us Pray:

Lord God, maker of heaven and earth, from whom all authority flows, we pray for our politicians. We pray for those MPs who are standing down, that they may find new opportunities for public service. We pray for those seeking election, that they would not be seeking power for the sake of selfish ambition but for the sake of the common good. We ask that our new Parliament would be filled with men and women who are committed to justice, who are prepared to put the common good above selfish ambition and party spirit. We thank you for the freedoms we enjoy to live out our discipleship and to proclaim the gospel. We pray that under the next government those freedoms would be protected and enhanced. We ask for your mercy on our nation, Lord, and for your protection for your Church.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given.