

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.

MARK CROSTON

Mark is the national director of Black Church Partnerships for LifeWay Christian Resources. He also serves as the general editor for *YOU!*

RESP

The background of the page is a photograph of a voting station. It features a wooden structure with a sign that says "VOTE" and an American flag. In the foreground, there is a yellow sign with the text "LOOK HERE!" and "VOTER INSTRUCTIONS AND REGULATIONS". The word "RESP" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

1

How Should I Respond to Politics?



QUESTION 1:

What do you recall about your first experiences with an election?

THE POINT

Reflect Christ in how you interact with politics and government.



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 colleagues wanted to accomplish a goal that would've 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.

The phrase, "The end justifies the means," is often

associated with 16th century philosopher 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 are 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 that will be seen in how we respond to politics and government.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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 slavery, sexual exploitation, violence, cruelty, graft, and corruption were common in the first century. It was in the midst of all this that Paul wrote to admonish Roman believers: "Let everyone submit to the governing authorities" (v. 1).

I'd never heard the phrase "the rule of law" until I heard it used on the news during the 1990s. The phrase is a reminder that every society must have some form of governance that guides the people and processes so we can live in peace. Although the idea of the rule of law wasn't invented in the 1990s, it's at least as old as this ancient text.

QUESTION 2:

How have you seen government benefit you or your community?

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 it were slightly further away, it would be too cold. God ordered things just right.

THE POINT

Reflect Christ in how you interact with politics and government.

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 institutes governments to maintain order. As we live in submission to the government, we learn what it means to live in subjection to God Himself. “For it is God’s servant for your good” (v. 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). Unfortunately, governments are run by imperfect people. Imperfect people will do

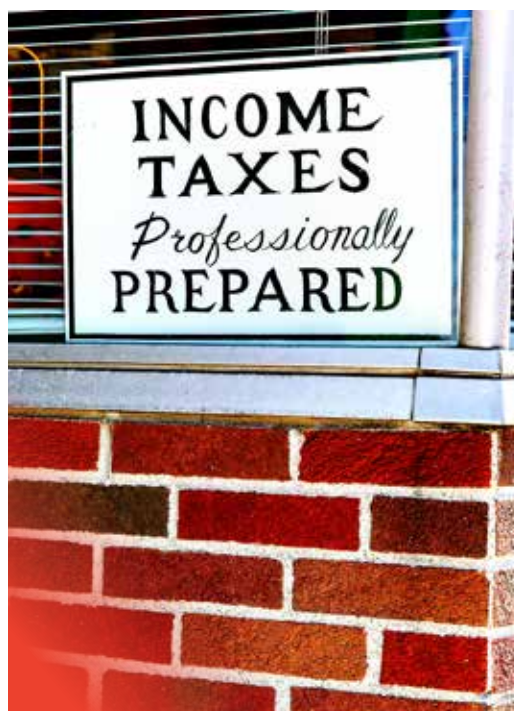
imperfect things. At times, these imperfect things will go against God’s will.

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 doesn’t cause us to sin against the will of God.

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” (v. 5).



QUESTION 3:

How do we view these verses through the lens of our form of government?

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” (v. 6). Our obedience to government is important because:

- 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, it’s apparent these believers were people whose lives declared they were living like Jesus! Some people may never read a Bible, so all they know about the character of God they learn by watching the lives of 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.
- 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” (Acts 17:26). We are sometimes so focused on our own lives and 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).



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 Paul changed subjects in verse 8 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.

QUESTION 4:

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

Politics must be practiced in the context of love. Most of us are likely not 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 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 driven by love always seeks to do the right thing. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (v. 10). 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 selfish 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.

This also means that as Christians we should never compromise our witness for a political agenda. It is right to support politicians when they support God’s plan, but at the same time we must be willing to call out those politicians when they are wrong. We must always serve God first.

QUESTION 5:

How can love overcome political division among Christians?

THE LAW OF LOVE

*We often do not think of the word love when discussing the government.
Answer the following questions:*

Considering today's text, explain how Christ's love helps us not only fulfill God's law, but the law of man.

Respond to these possible objections:

We should not have to pay taxes that support ungodly activities such as abortion.

Our elected leaders are corrupt, so we don't have to obey them.

Offer a prayer that God will grant you grace to express love in your attitude and relationships.

*“Remind them to submit to rulers and authorities,
to obey, to be ready for every good work.”*

TITUS 3:1

LIVE IT OUT

When it comes to politics, how will you reflect Christ's love? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **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 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 are not easy. Study Scripture to see how it speaks to 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 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!

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



EPHESIANS' UNIQUE MESSAGE

By Rodney Reeves

Ephesians reads like a collection of what Paul had written in his other letters. Every verse in Ephesians leads the reader to passages in Paul's other letters that deal with the same subject. This is especially true since Ephesians is so similar to Colossians—they share the same outline, they develop the same topics in much the same way, and they even have the same instructions regarding Tychicus. What makes Ephesians unique, however, is the way certain ideas Paul mentioned in other letters are developed more fully in this letter, which was written toward the end of his life.

Marketplace at Ephesus.



Although several topics in Ephesians could be explored, for the purposes of this article, I would like to feature what could be considered the main themes of the letter: the cosmic rule of Christ, how believers reign with Christ, and how believers can overcome evil.

PAUL'S MESSAGE

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ's resurrection for all creation in Romans 8:18-25. His main focus, however, was on believers. That Christ's resurrection would affect all creation. In particular, Paul wanted "the eyes" of the Ephesians' "heart to be enlightened" to realize the power of Christ's victory over death, over the malevolent powers "of the air," and over every named creature of this age and the age to come.¹ Paul used quite a bit of "power talk" wrapped in royal imagery as he tried to get his converts to see the implications of Christ's resurrection:

Christ ascended to God's throne, was seated at the right hand, having put all creation "under his feet," and was installed with the highest name. Therefore, no power can oppose the Ruler of all things.

On the heels of making these claims regarding Christ's resurrection power, Paul wrote about how believers share in Christ's reign. Paul made the connection when he described the church as the body of Christ. Before they were saved, Paul's converts were dead in sin—beholden to the ways of the world, to fleshly desires, and to the "spirit" that incites disobedience. But Christ's resurrection is a power that is realized by those who have been saved by grace through faith. Believers are coregents of Christ's kingdom, installed by God "in heavenly



Baths with stilted floor. At Ephesus, the Baths of Varius were located just off Curetes Street. The limited excavations have revealed a changing room, a frigidarium (for a cool bath), a tepidarium (for warm baths), a caldarium with its heated floors (shown), and a sudatorium (sweat room).

places in Christ Jesus" because we are His body. This explains how believers live transformed lives. For Paul the best evidence of transformed lives was the peace of Christ found in the church. Ethnic strife between Jews and Gentiles—a wall erected by the law—was abolished through the work of Christ because God has reconciled the whole world, turning enemies into friends.

If believers are seated in heavenly places with Christ, having authority over all powers, then what happens in the "real world"—for Christians who still face the reality of living on the earth "below" with the "ruler of the power of the air" above us? Paul encouraged his converts to put on "the new man," wearing Christ like a garment. In this way, they would make "no provision for the flesh." Paul expanded that idea in Ephesians 6, where he described the "whole armor of God." By wearing Christ like armor, the believer does battle against evil powers, both in heavenly places and on earth. Like a bullet-proof vest,

Christ defends His co-regents from the flaming darts of Satan. And Christ empowers believers to use God's Word like a sword through prayer and the proclamation of the gospel.

PAUL'S MOTIVATION

Why did Paul highlight these ideas in his Letter to the Ephesians? His reason had everything to do with what was going on in Ephesus at the time. Said one writer: Ephesus was the center of magic, astrology, and the mystery religions, and many converts to Christ in that city were once involved with these practices. They believed that their lives were under the influence of cosmic powers. Paul may have written to alleviate their fears by showing that Christ is sovereign in the cosmos.² One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was in Ephesus, the great Temple of Artemis. The temple had a reputation for trafficking in magic; priests who served sold magical amulets to protect devotees from malevolent powers. Sown into their clothes or worn around their necks and wrists, these charms protected parts of the body: head, heart, hands, loins, or feet. According to Luke, when the Ephesians believed Paul's gospel, they burned all of their magical items. Once Paul left the area, evidently the Ephesians began to question their impulsive response to the gospel. This makes Paul's argument regarding the power of Christ's resurrection even more poignant. Since Christ put all enemies under His feet, and since the church is His body, then all powers are—by the power and presence of Christ in us—under our feet. Believers reign with Him in their victory over every enemy of God: sin, death, flesh, and the devil. Raised with Christ, a believer wears Christ in His resurrection power like armor, protecting every part of the body: head, heart, hands, loins, and feet. So, no matter what happened, the Ephesian believers should have been inspired to proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus. More than for defense, Christ put into their hands His sword—the Word of God—to advance His reign against the forces of darkness. The Ephesians had everything they needed to stand because Christ was raised from the dead and His soldiers reigned with Him.



Doorway in the foreground. In the distance, columns of the Church of St. John. According to some early church traditions, after John completed his exile on Patmos, he made his home in Ephesus. Once a massive structure, the church was built over the supposed burial site of John.

RODNEY REEVES is professor of biblical studies and dean of Redford School of Theology at Southwest Baptist University, Boliver, Mo.

1. Scripture quotes are the writer's own translation.

2. John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 348.