

“Jesus and Politics”

May 31, 2015

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Matthew 22:15–22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.¹

I’ll begin by repeating something I said last week. If this is God’s world, and the Bible is God’s word, we should expect that God’s word will address important issues in God’s world. We should expect the Bible to talk about things like money and sex. (I talked about those issues during the last two weeks.) And we should expect the Bible to discuss politics. That’s what I’ll be talking about today. I realize this topic can cause tempers to flare, but to put your mind at ease, let me tell you this up front: today I’m not trying to make you a Democrat or a Republican. I’m trying to make you all Libertarians.

Actually, what I really want to do is see what Jesus has to say about the role of the government, or the state. And when I say, “what Jesus has to say,” I’m not limiting Jesus to the red letters in your Bibles. I do want to look at Jesus’ recorded words. But I also want to look at what Jesus’ apostles, the men he sent to write and preach on his behalf, say. After all, the whole Bible is Jesus’ word, because Jesus is God and the Bible is God’s word.² We will look at two passages in the Gospels, and then move on to other parts of the New Testament. Along the way, we’ll try to figure out how politics is related to the church, and what the role or purpose of government is.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

² For more on Jesus’ relationship to the Bible, see my sermon, “Jesus Believed the Old Testament is the Word of God” (March 1, 2015) at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

But before we open up our Bibles, let me make an observation: as a whole, I don't think we think well about the purpose of government. I think we all know that politics is a huge part of life. We know the government has a lot of power to shape the way we think and live. Yet I rarely hear or read discussions about what the nature of government is, or what the government should and should not have a right to do. It seems that we don't think through the foundational issues of politics very well.

Much of our thinking about politics is rather subconscious. We get certain ideas about politics from our families, our schools, our friends, and the media. Often times, we don't examine those ideas. They're just part of the air we breathe, and they become part of things we assume.

If we are going to think better about politics and government, we are going to have to ask some basic questions. The first question is, What is God's relationship to the government? To figure that out, let's look at the passage that was just read, Matthew 22:15-22.

In that passage, there are two parties who want to trap Jesus. The Pharisees were Jews who resented the Roman imperial forces who occupied Judea. After all, God had given the Jews this land, and now they were under the political authority of pagans. The Herodians were those who supported Herod and the Roman Empire. So, they come to Jesus and, after buttering him up, ask, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v. 17). If Jesus said simply, "It is lawful to pay taxes," he would have offended the Pharisees. Why? Because this tax, the poll tax, needed to be paid with a denarius, a coin that had the Roman Emperor's image on it. On one side, the coin said, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus," and on the other it said, "High Priest," referring to a pagan high priest. Romans used this coin to promote worship of the emperor, who was supposedly divine.³ For a Jew, this was blasphemy. If, on the other hand, Jesus said, "It is not lawful to pay taxes," then the Herodians would have thought that Jesus was a zealot, a radical who wanted to overthrow the Roman forces.

However, Jesus gives a different answer. He says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." In other words, he says, "Pay your taxes." But he reminds them that everything is God's. Caesar's image was on the coin, and the coin used to pay that tax should be

³ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 525.

paid back to him. Yet all human beings are made in the image of God, and it is to God that we belong.

Jesus indicates that government is legitimate, even godless governments. After all, he knew he would die at the hands of the Romans. In Matthew 20:18-19, Jesus says to his disciples, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.” The Gentiles in this case are the Roman rulers, namely Pontius Pilate and Roman soldiers. Jesus knew they would kill him, and yet they had a role to play in God’s sovereign ordering of the world.

Governments have a sphere of power. And the church has a sphere of power or influence. The state can’t do what Christianity does. The government doesn’t proclaim the gospel and make disciples. It can’t care for the souls of people. And the church doesn’t do what the government does. The church does not have the power to put criminals in jail, or assess fines to people who break laws. And it’s a good thing that the church and state are different entities. In theocratic nations, like in the Muslim world, the church is the state. But if you don’t believe in the reigning religion, you’re in trouble. And these governments tend to be very oppressive. In an atheistic nation, like in Communist nations, the state tries to be the church, deciding the values and vision of the nation. These nations are also oppressive. Yet in a nation where the state realizes its limitations and the church is free to practice its faith, there is a greater amount of liberty.⁴

Though the spheres of church and state are distinct, all governments and all political leaders are under God’s control. Consider what Daniel 2:21 says about God:

He changes times and seasons;
he sets up kings and deposes them.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.

God is the one who “sets up kings,” and he is the one who removes them. God is even in control of a king’s heart and decisions. Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

⁴ This thought occurred to me while I was reading Hunter Baker, *They System Has a Soul: Essays on Christianity, Liberty, and Political Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Liberty Press, 2014). On page 49, Baker writes, “In the Muslim world, the church *is* the state. In the French Revolution, and in those other secular revolutions to which I referred, the state is the church.”

Now, this does not mean that political leaders are always right. They are not. There have been many dictators and political regimes that have done things contrary to God's revealed will. There are times when God's people will have to disobey political leaders in order to obey God.⁵

Let's look at something else that Jesus said regarding his kingdom and the authority that the governments of earth have. Right before he died on the cross, Jesus was arrested. He stood trial before the Jewish religious leaders, but he also had to be brought before the Roman political leaders, since Jews didn't have the authority to kill anyone without Roman approval. So Jesus met Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman prefect, or governor, of Judea, the region that Jerusalem was in. We see this encounter between Jesus and Pilate in John 18:33-38.

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

³⁸ "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

⁵ That happened in the book of Daniel, when Daniel and his friends were living in Babylon, which was ruled by the evil King Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar makes a 90-foot high statue of gold and commands people to worship it. Whoever would not worship this idol would be thrown into a "blazing furnace" (Dan. 3:1-6). But Daniel's friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—would not bow down to this idol. Therefore, they were apprehended and thrown into the furnace. They said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (vv. 16-18). They are then thrown into the fire, but God supernaturally protects them from harm. Something very similar happens in Daniel 6, when Daniel is thrown into the lion's den.

In the New Testament, we have a similar occurrence. In the book of Acts, after Jesus died on the cross, rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven, the disciples start to preach about Jesus in Jerusalem. This upsets the Jewish leaders in the city. So they arrested Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples. They ordered them not to speak about Jesus. But Peter and John say, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). In the next chapter of Acts, Peter and the apostles say to the council of Jews, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). If we have placed in the position of having to obey God or the state, we must obey God and accept whatever consequences come our way.

Pilate wants to know if Jesus claims to be the king of the Jews. In the truest sense, Jesus is the king of the Jews. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. But he wasn't a king in the political sense that Pilate had in mind. Still, any claim to be the king of the Jews was a threatening one to the Romans. Pilate was wondering if Jesus was trying to overthrow the Roman government. So Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." If Jesus wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire, he would have raised an army. But that's not what Jesus had in mind. That's not God's plan for building his kingdom on earth.⁶

One of the striking things about Jesus is how little he talks about politics and the government. Jesus didn't come to create a political nation that would overthrow the Roman Empire and all other powers. He didn't tell his disciples that they needed to lobby Pontius Pilate and Caesar and the Roman senators. He didn't say, "If only we could get the right man in power in Rome, then God could really build his kingdom." When Jesus told his disciples to take care of the poor and to love their neighbors, he didn't say, "Get the government to do that for you." No, he told them that it was their duty.

Now, let's look at the next conversation that Jesus has with Pilate. This is at the beginning of John 19.

¹ Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe ³ and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.

⁴ Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." ⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

⁶ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."

⁷ The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

⁶ We might want to notice something else in that passage in John 18. Jesus was trying to communicate the truth to Pilate. Jesus wasn't concerned with political power. Instead, he came to testify to the truth regarding the things of God. (Of course, he also came to die for the sins of his people.) And those who are on the side of truth listen to Jesus. But Pilate doesn't care about truth. He asks, "What is truth?" He's saying, "What does truth have to do with anything? This is about power and control. I'm about to have a riot on my hands because of you, Jesus." Pilate only cared about power. That's what politics is all about. It cares about power and control, not necessarily the truth.

⁸ When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, ⁹ and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

¹¹ Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

¹² From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

¹³ When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). ¹⁴ It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

¹⁵ But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

¹⁶ Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

The Roman soldiers mock Jesus, who really is king, because they don’t think he is a royal figure. Pilate doesn’t think Jesus has committed any crime. But the Jewish leaders say that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. They think he was committing blasphemy. Therefore, he was breaking their law and had to die. This causes Pilate to be afraid. So he asks Jesus, “Where do you come from?” Jesus doesn’t answer. He has no obligation to answer Pilate. Pilate appeals to his own power: “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

Then Jesus says something stunning: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” Jesus is saying that God gave Pilate the power that he has. If God had not ordained that Pilate have a position of authority, he wouldn’t have it. Even though Pilate did not believe in Jesus and was not one of God’s children, he was serving in a position that God gave him. God is authority over all, and anyone who has political authority was given that authority by God. If Jesus wanted to be released, he could have been released, but he knew that he had to die to pay for the sins of his people.

What’s interesting is that Pilate wanted to release Jesus. Although we have no indication that he was a person of faith, he didn’t feel that Jesus deserved death. Yet the crowd kept shouting. They yelled, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” This shows that those who are opposed to Jesus perceive him as a threat.

One of the great confessions of Christianity is “Jesus is Lord.” This has political overtones, since Caesar, the Roman Empire, was known as Lord. In fact, the Emperor at the end of the first century, Domitian, wanted to be known as “our lord and god.”⁷ Christians realized that Jesus, not Caesar, was truly the king. And Christianity continues to threaten the state, because Christians claim that they will obey their Lord, even to death. The state wants the allegiance of its citizens, and Christians, while usually serving as model citizens, give their ultimate allegiance to God, not to the President, the King, or any other rulers.

To summarize what we’ve seen so far: God has ordained governments, even godless ones, to perform a role. Christians should obey those governments unless the government requires them to do something contrary to God’s commands. Jesus is the true King, yet he doesn’t establish his kingdom through a political movement. After all, no government can force people to turn to put their trust in Jesus and forsake their sins. Christianity can threaten governments because Christians realize who their true King is.

Now let’s move on to what two of Jesus’ apostles have to say about government. Their words, directed by the Holy Spirit, are ultimately Jesus’ words. We can’t pit Paul and Peter against Jesus, because they were simply writing what the Spirit guided them to write, and Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would only speak Jesus’ words (John 14:26;15:26; 16:13-15).

As we look at what Peter and Paul say about the issue, we want to ask a second question: What is unique about the government? In other words, what sets government apart from all other organizations or institutions? Let’s look at Romans 13:1-7 to find the answer. Before I read the passage, it’s worth noting the context. Paul spends the first eight chapters of Romans dealing with some weighty theological matters, about sin and salvation. Chapters 9 through 11 deal with Israel and the church. Beginning in chapter 12, Paul tells us how we are supposed to live as Christians. In Romans 12:17-19, Paul tells us not to repay evil for evil, but rather to leave judgment to God. Then he writes these verses at the beginning of chapter 13:

¹ Everyone must submit himself 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, he who rebels against the authority is

⁷ According to the Roman historian, Suetonius, “With equal arrogance, when he dictated the form of a letter to be used by his procurators, he began it thus: “ Our lord and god commands so and so;” whence it became a rule that no one should style him otherwise either in writing or speaking.” C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, ed. Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

rebellious 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 he will commend you. ⁴ For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent 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 because 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 everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

In verse 1, he tells us to be subject to the government, because government has been instituted by God. Anyone who resists the government resists God. Of course, Paul doesn't mean we should obey the government when it commands us to do things contrary to God's commands. But, generally, we should obey the government. I think he is presenting a picture of government as it should be. It's worth noting that the emperor of the Roman Empire at the time was Nero, who had his mother killed, and was responsible for killing two of his wives and for persecuting many Christians after a devastating fire in Rome in A.D. 64. Though Nero was wicked, Paul and the apostles didn't try to overthrow the Roman Empire. God never promised us political freedom. There have been many Christians who have suffered under totalitarian regimes.

But the point I want to make is found in verse 4: The government has the power of the sword. Governments have the power of force and coercion. If you don't obey the law, you will go to jail or pay a fine. The government also has the power to make you pay taxes. This is different from the church and voluntary associations. We can't *make* you do anything. The most we can do, if you're caught in sin and don't repent, is to remove you from membership. But government can compel you to do things, or forcefully prevent you from doing other things. Since government has the power of force, we should carefully consider what government is and is not supposed to do. We should be careful to limit the size and scope of government.

And that leads me to a third question: What is the purpose of government? When people talk about the government, they don't think much about its purpose. I think that's why we often talk past one another in our debates. But this is a huge issue, one that we can't assume.

According to this passage, civil authorities are a terror to bad conduct. They are avengers who carry out God's wrath. One of the ways that God restrains evil and judges people, at least in

this life, is through the government. The reason we pay taxes is because these rulers are ministers of God who attend to punishment of evil.

Let's look at a very similar passage. This one is 1 Peter 2:13-17.

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

Once again, we are told to be subject to the emperor and governors for the Lord's sake. They are sent by God to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good. Those are the two functions of government, according to the Bible. We can imagine various ways of punishing evil, everything from fines to incarceration to capital punishment. What would it look like for the government to praise those who do good? This is what New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner says, "Modern people are not familiar with governments praising those who do what is right. The Romans, however, would erect statues, grant privileges, or commend in other ways those who helped the community."⁸

There's something important I have to point out here. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a concept of a government providing what are called positive rights. Instead, we see that the government is supposed to provide negative rights. J. P. Moreland, a Christian philosopher, explains the difference between positive and negative rights. "A positive right is a right to have something given to the right-holder. If Smith has a positive right to X, say to health care, then the state has an obligation to give X to Smith. . . . A negative right to X is a right to be protected from harm while one seeks to get X on one's own. If Smith has a negative right to X, say to health care, then the state has an obligation to protect Smith from discrimination and unfair treatment in his attempt to get X on his own."⁹ The Bible doesn't say that the government gives us free stuff. Paul doesn't say that the civil authorities bake the bread. No, they bear the sword.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 129.

⁹ J. P. Moreland, "A Biblical Case for Limited Government," Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics, <http://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JP-Moreland-Limited-Govt.pdf>, 5, accessed January 15, 2014.

Some people assume that Christians should support a government that does what Jesus did, or what Jesus told his disciples to do, like feeding people and healing people. And if Christians prefer a smaller government that doesn't do these things, they are criticized as hypocrites. For example, I once heard this, "[I]f you don't want your tax dollars to help the poor, to help the sick, to avoid violence, to take better care of those in prison, to help the needy, fine. Don't vote that way. But don't ever say you want a government based on Christian values, because you don't."¹⁰

There are some problems with that kind of attitude and the assumptions behind it. One, just because Jesus did something or told his disciples to do certain things doesn't mean it's the government's job to do it. I don't see anyone saying the government should carry out the Great Commission to make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). Jesus told his disciples to take care of the poor and do good works and make disciples. Nothing in the Bible suggests that it's the government's job. Two, this line of thought ignores what the Bible says about the purpose and role of government, which is to punish evil, not provide all kinds of goods and services. Three, I think experience shows that the government doesn't do an efficient job of addressing poverty.¹¹ That's because the government isn't as efficient as many other institutions. Also, the government can't address the underlying issues that create poverty, like broken homes, generational patterns of sin, laziness, and so on. The government can punish vice, but it does a bad job of instilling virtue. Four, we should be wary of having a large government because it has power and force. When a government grows in size, it rarely shrinks. And the Bible describes large, evil governments as beasts (Daniel 7; Revelation 13). Five, letting the government do all the work doesn't require individual responsibility and individual virtue. It takes away from charity, which isn't just about giving, but about the heart and intent behind giving. When charity is forced, it is no longer charitable.

I think there's a reason why this matters. If we help the poor, that means we need to love them, we need to get to know them, and we need to get our hands dirty. It also means that we are

¹⁰ John Thomason, "A Conversation with John Fugelsang," *Boca*, May 16, 2012, <http://www.bocamag.com/blog/2012/05/16/a-conversation-with-john-fugelsang/>, accessed May 30, 2015. The words above are Fugelsang's.

¹¹ Some statistics regarding the "War on Poverty" that has been waged by the US over the last fifty years suggest that the percentage of Americans living in poverty has decreased slightly, but at a massive cost to the government. See Joe Carter, "Five Facts about the 'War on Poverty,'" The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, January 7, 2014, <https://erlc.com/article/5-facts-about-the-war-on-poverty>, accessed May 30, 2015.

going to have to cut back on our spending in order to give to those in need. But if the government takes care of it all, there's no personal involvement, beyond paying taxes. There's no love. There's no compassion. Instead, it is a redistribution of wealth by means of force.¹²

Let's move on to the next question: Should Christians influence the government? Some people make the error of associating Christianity with a political party. Others think Christians shouldn't be political at all. So what is the right stance? I think there are three key things to consider. The first is that in the Bible, God's people spoke prophetically against evil governments. Moses, Daniel, John the Baptist, and Paul did this.¹³

The second thing we should consider is that part of loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39) is seeking just laws and a just government. There are many examples of Christians who have done this.¹⁴

The third thing we should consider is that we can use whatever political rights we have for the sake of the gospel. There were times when the apostle Paul used his rights as a Roman citizen to advance the gospel.¹⁵ In our context, in America, we have certain liberties that we can use to influence the government. We have the right to vote. We have freedom to practice our religion and we have freedom of speech and petition. We can make our voice heard. God does not promise us we will always have these liberties. Many Christians have lived in totalitarian

¹² Another issue is health care. While I believe all people in a civilized society should have access to health care, it is debatable whether it is the government's job to provide such care. Furthermore, how do we decide what constitutes real health care? Christians are opposed to abortion. Should abortive services be paid for by the government? What about abortifacient drugs, such as "the pill"? How about hormone treatments for transgender individuals?

¹³ Moses confronted Pharaoh. Daniel spoke bold words to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity" (Dan. 4:27). John the Baptist was put in prison because he told Herod that it wasn't lawful for him to have Herodias, his brother's wife (see Matt. 14:1-4). In Acts 24 (vv. 24-25), Paul told Felix, the governor of Judea, about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment, and Felix grew alarmed, which means Paul probably rubbed him the wrong way.

¹⁴ William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is a famous example. He was a Member of Parliament and fought for decades to end the British Empire's slave trade (which was abolished in 1807) and the institution of slavery altogether (in 1833, shortly before his death). A contemporary of Wilberforce, William Carey (1761-1834), was a British Baptist missionary to India. He had a long career as a missionary and a professor of languages in India. He translated the Bible into multiple languages. Clearly, he was committed to the gospel. But he also cared about justice. While in India, he noticed that babies were left to die from exposure. Some were thrown into a river to be eaten by alligators. So Carey fought against this and he helped persuade the authorities in Calcutta to ban infanticide. He also helped ban *sati*, a Hindu ritual in which widows cast themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, so that they were burned to death. See Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1991), 149-52.

¹⁵ In Acts 22, Paul was about to be flogged in Jerusalem. Paul asked the centurion who was about to punish him, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" (Acts 22:25). The answer was no. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to a proper trial. Later, in Acts 25, Paul appeals to a trial before Caesar.

countries ruled by dictators. But while we still have these freedoms, we should use them for the welfare of others.

So, Christians are able to influence government. The next question is: How can Christians influence the government? Here is the first and most important thing we can do: pray. Look at 1 Timothy 2:1-4:

¹ I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Let's look at this carefully. Paul says that we should pray for all kinds of people, including kings and others in high positions. He uses four different words, which indicate that we should prayer for specific needs, we should lift them in prayer before the Lord, we should boldly intercede for them, and we should thank God for them. Why? "That we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." I think that means we should pray that rulers would govern our country with justice, so that we can live free from government interference, and free from evil that others might do to us. One commentator writes, "An evaluation of Paul's own life leads one to realize that this 'quiet' does not mean a sheltered life but rather freedom from the turmoil that threatened to thwart his ministry."¹⁶ We see in Acts that there were times when government officials stopped riots or protected Paul. Surely he has this in mind.

I also think Paul wants us to pray for the salvation of those in government. God wants all kinds of people to be saved: Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, men, women, and even politicians. How often do we pray for our president? For our governor? For our senators and representatives? For the Supreme Court justices? We need to pray that they would make wise and just decisions, and we need to pray for their salvation.

While we have the freedom, we should also vote. It's easy to get cynical about voting, to think that it doesn't change anything. But every vote matters and voting is a way of seeking the welfare of our country. But this means that we need to be informed.

¹⁶ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 117.

Beyond voting, we can sign petitions. We can write letters and emails to our political leaders. We can call their offices. This is remarkably easy to do, especially via the Internet. We should let our elected officials know which issues are important to us.

Another way to influence our government is to talk to people about policy issues. We need to engage people in debates about these issues. This is rarely easy or fun, but it gives us a chance to tell people what God thinks about various issues. It gives us an opportunity to talk about what the Bible says about the role of government. And it can give us an opportunity to share the gospel.

Truly, proclaiming the gospel is the best way to influence the government. The more that we share the gospel, the more likely it is that more people will become Christians. The more Christians there are, the more our culture will change. The more our culture changes, the more our government will change. The only significant and lasting changes in culture and in government come when people turn to Christ.

But above all, keep in mind that the true kingdom is the kingdom of God. It is the only government that is eternal. The government is not the source of all evil, nor is it the solution to every problem. Government is important, but it isn't the most important thing. We can't let it be the thing we think about and talk about most. We can't let politics become an idol. No government can take spiritually dead people and make them alive. No government can save souls. No president, no governor, no senator, no representative, and no judge will die for your sins. They won't sacrifice their lives for you. They may not deal graciously with you. But Jesus did die for our sins when he laid down his life on the cross. Jesus does deal graciously with us. No earthly government can give us lasting peace and hope. But Jesus can.

Remember Isaiah 9:7:

Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

Let's move on to the next question: How big should government be? Well, given the previous point about the role of government, it seems pretty clear that the government should be limited in size. Also, in the Bible, whenever we see a large government, it is never good. Think about Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and the Roman Empire. These large governments were generally evil. And this trend is not limited to the Bible. Throughout history, governments that grew larger in size tended to take away more freedom and become more evil. [*Black Book of Communism?*] That should be a warning to us all.

There's another reason why government should be limited in size. One's view of government has everything to do with how one views people. If you assume that people are basically good and will generally make good decisions, then you can have a large government, because that government would consist of good people making good decisions. But, ironically, if people were generally good, we wouldn't need to have a large government. On the other hand, if people are born sinful and have the capacity for evil, then you don't want a large government, because that large government would consist of individuals who can be tempted by pride and greed, so they might not make good decisions and, on top of that, these people bear the sword. That is, they have the power to force others to do things. So, you don't want a group of people like that forming a large government. Hunter Baker, a Christian and a political science professor, writes, "If we accept the truth about the sinfulness of human beings—and it is the better part of wisdom and experience to do so—then we should perhaps consider revising our expectations of what can be achieved through the institution of government."¹⁷ And that's an important comment. The Bible doesn't teach that government will bring about a utopia. The government will not eradicate all sin and all problems. It was never intended to do that. Only the return of Jesus will bring about a new creation.

¹⁷ Hunter Baker, *Political Thought: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 85.