

“Jesus and Politics”

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Brian Watson

This saying may be true: never before has a generation talked more about politics and thought less about politics. Discussion about political issues is everywhere, and it feels like we’re constantly in the midst of an election cycle. Yet rarely do we hear talk 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, we need to read the Bible. And we’ll start with Mathew 22:15–22:

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.
¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.
¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?
¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.¹

Here, there are two parties who want to trap Jesus. The Pharisees were Jews who resented the Roman imperial forces that 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

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 17). They’re concerned about Jewish law. In other words, they’re asking if God wants them to pay these taxes or not. 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.² 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, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are 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 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. He had already made that point in Matthew 20. (Matt. 20:18–19).

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.³

² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 525.

³ This thought occurred to me while I was reading Hunter Baker, *The System Has a Soul: Essays on Christianity, Liberty, and Political Life* (Grand Rapids: 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.”

Though the spheres of church and state are distinct, all governments and all political leaders are under God's control. Daniel 2:21 says that God "removes kings and sets up kings." God is even in control of a king's heart and decisions. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."

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.⁴

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 So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear

⁴ 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 "fiery 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 have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that 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 arrest Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples. They order them not to speak about Jesus. But Peter and John say, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of 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 are given the choice to obey God or the state, we must obey God and accept whatever consequences come our way.

witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

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, the anointed king that God promised to send to Israel to make everything right. 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.⁵

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 flogged him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³ They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” ⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.” ⁷ The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” ⁸ When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. ⁹ He entered his headquarters

⁵ 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.

again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” ¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” ¹⁵ They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”

¹⁶ So he delivered 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. On their view, 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 authority over me at all unless it had been given 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 think that Jesus deserved death. Yet the crowd kept shouting. They yelled, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself 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.”⁶ 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. They wrote 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 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.
² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God’s servant for your good.

⁶ 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).

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

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 the 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 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

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."⁷

There's something important I have to point out here. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the 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."⁸ 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.

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,

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 129.

⁸ 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.

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."⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 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.¹¹

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Some statistics regarding the "War on Poverty" that has been waged by the US over the last fifty-plus 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.

¹¹ 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

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. 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.¹²

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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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 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:

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 and surgeries for transgender individuals?

¹² Moses confronted Pharaoh. Daniel spoke bold words to King Nebuchadnezzar (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.

¹³ 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. 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.

¹⁴ In Acts 22, Paul was about to be flogged in Jerusalem. Paul asked the centurion who was about to punish him, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" (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.

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the 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 pray 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 lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." 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."¹⁵ 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 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.

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

¹⁵ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 117.

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.

Psalm 146:3 says,

Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

The President can't save you from condemnation, and even if he could, he wouldn't. Put your trust in the only one who can save you, and has already laid down his life to pay the price for your sin. The true King, Jesus, is worthy of all our trust. And unlike all the political rulers of today, his kingdom is eternal.