

SPECIAL SESSION

CHRISTIAN CITIZENS

Since the beginning of the church, Christians have attempted to make sense of the relationship between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God. How do we remain faithful as people holding dual citizenship? We are, after all, citizens of both heaven and earth. How does this look as it is lived out in the world day by day? Where are the lines of obedience and disobedience to earthly rulers? How do we honor God in submission to earthly rulers? “It is ‘as free people’ who are ‘slaves of God’ that Christians...are able to subordinate themselves. Subordination is thus an expression of freedom, not of coercion.”¹

History has shown us many forms of government. Some of these are present even in Scripture, though the Bible never endorses one form of human government over another, aside from perhaps the theocracy of ancient Israel. People’s perceptions of government are also varied. One extreme sees government as the answer to all problems and fundamentally necessary for human welfare. The opposite extreme see all government as tyrannical and to be overthrown. Some view government as a blessing to its people; for others, government is a necessary evil.

Where is the line, the path that Christians should follow when navigating the realms of faith and politics, the kingdoms of heaven and earth? How should we live in earthly kingdoms in light of the gospel? God’s Word does address how Christians are to respond to governments of all kinds. Looking at government through a biblical lens will help us avoid extremes that dishonor God and harm our witness.

God Created Government...



To Represent His Authority

It may be easy to view government as a human invention to consolidate power over others. Cynicism over politics could lead one to believe all politicians are only in it for control. But despite the oft-broken nature of human government, Scripture tells us God was the originating factor in its institution. The governments of the world are ruled by civil authorities expected by God to steward their power in specific ways:

1. To punish evildoers who are within.
2. To protect from evildoers who are without.
3. To promote what is good.

Romans 13:1-2

Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves.

► **God created the institutions of marriage, family, and government. What similarities exist between these institutions? What are differences between them?**

- **What are some benefits for citizens when a government faithfully stewards its delegated authority? What are some limitations that prohibit a government from rightly carrying out its role?**

When Kingdoms Collide

Most Christians would agree we are members of two kingdoms: that of God and that of man. It is within the kingdom of God that we find His purposes and His peace. It is within the kingdom of man that we find principalities and powers ever striving to oppose God, whether knowingly or unknowingly. It is not the structure of government that necessarily causes our problem—God ordained government, after all—it is too often the spirit of a government that is at issue.

Unless we give in to every extreme demand of any government, no matter how ungodly and demonic, we must admit the need, at times, to call kings, queens, princes, presidents, representatives, senators, or members of parliament to account.

Consider the locust-eating prophet John the Baptist. Matthew 14:3-5 relates an issue with an Israelite tetrarch, Herod. John rebuked Herod for immorality and found himself in jail: “For Herod had arrested John, chained him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, since John had been telling him, ‘It’s not lawful for you to have her!’ Though he wanted to kill him, he feared the crowd, since they regarded him as a prophet.” And Jesus, Himself subject to the governing authorities (paying taxes, showing respect to Pilate), also spoke against Herod, calling him “that fox” (Luke 13:32).

We should not lay aside our discipleship or ignore our sonship when it comes to petitioning or protesting our governments in the present day. When protest is necessary, as much as possible, it should be legal, non-violent, and respectful. It is unbecoming for followers of the Prince of Peace to rush to arms or violence when faced with belligerent king, president, or country. We should not rush to judgment in a misguided bid to secure earthly power.



For His People To Live Under

What are the expectations of Christians who live under the rule of human government? According to Paul, one of the primary principles guiding the Christian citizen must be the commandment to honor the governmental authority under which he or she lives. In our obedience to the government under which we live, we obey the commandment of God, thus honoring and glorifying Him.

The Bible is clear that God is the ultimate Sovereign to whom we all owe allegiance. In His infinite wisdom, He has chosen to delegate authority over the rule of humankind to civil governments, though He still maintains His supreme authority (Dan. 4:32).

God also has expectations for His people who live under these governments. They are to honor their authorities, obey their laws, and do what is good. In this, we follow the example of our Savior. When a government's law conflicts with a clear commandment of Scripture, however, we must look to our Savior as the highest authority and follow the decision of the apostles—to obey God rather than men.

► How can honorable submission to government testify to your faith in Christ, especially when the government oversteps its bounds?

Romans 13:5-7

Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks. 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.

[illegible]

Criticizing politicians is the great American pastime, or so it would seem, and followers of Jesus are not immune. Men and women who claim to have been redeemed by the same Savior often cross swords over political agendas. One wonders how often those outside the faith are confused by the political antics of those within it.

Scripture expects at least one thing of Christians as they relate to government officials—we are to pray for them. In my experience, prayer for those in authority is really low on the personal citizenship agenda. We rarely pray corporately for our government leaders (unless we are in a 4th of July service), and we rarely pray privately for them (unless we are mad at them and want God to make them vote our way).

The young disciple Timothy was admonished: “First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Here are a few practical ways to pray for those in political office:

- Praise God for leaders who preserve religious freedoms.
- Pray for God to give wisdom to those making decisions.
- Pray for cooperation and peace among government officials who disagree, both inside and outside one's own country.
- Pray for the salvation of those who are not believers.

GOD'S STORY, YOUR STORY

Whether you realize it or not, each of us interacts with government nearly each day of our lives. For instance, when you turn sixteen and get your license, everything from the license exam to the traffic laws are dictated and governed by the local government. If you don't meet the expectations of the exam or fail the driving test, you simply won't pass. If you decide to ignore traffic laws, chances are you will eventually be stopped and cited with a ticket.

What are some other examples of government touching our lives?

Living under and participating within government is a fabric of our reality. From casting a ballot to paying taxes, we participate in government on a regular basis. And since that is the case, it is important to think biblically about how we are to relate to government as Christians. After all, we are sojourners in this land, residents of another city. But as citizens of the kingdom of God, we currently live in what may be described as the city of man. This makes it all the more important to learn how to relate biblically to the government around us.

Do you live your life here on earth like a foreigner in a strange land? Are you living in such a way that shows others you are homesick for the heavenly kingdom? Explain.

There are obviously a lot of examples that we could give to illustrate why it is important to have a biblical understanding over this topic—examples like paying taxes, the government's role in social issues like abortion and marriage, or whether we should support military action. This is why it is important to get the big principles that Scripture gives us when it comes to relating to government—principles that can apply in a host of situations. This not only makes us good citizens of God's heavenly kingdom as we work to represent Him on earth, but it also makes us good citizens of this world as we seek to show the love of God to others.

Why should knowing and living what the Bible says make you a better citizen in your city, state, and country?