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A Healthy Relationship With Government

1 Timothy 2

People sometimes suggest that Paul was naïve in encouraging us to honour governments (*Romans 13*) and pray for them (*1 Timothy 2*), but really it shows his confidence in God who is sovereign over all – even the Emperor Nero who ruled when Paul was writing and was a terrible man

(<http://www.livius.org/sources/content/tacitus/tacitus-on-the-christians/>).

His view of government was determined by what God has said in His Word. (This is so important when the emotional stakes are high, as they so often seem to be in politics.) Paul believed that God is the ultimate authority in the universe because He made it, and it all belongs to Him. He's a God of order, not chaos, and so societies have always had some way of being ordered so that life can flourish. All authority comes from Him (*Daniel 2:21, John 19:11*) and is conditional on Him: kings of Israel and other nations are not autonomous but are stewards who will be held to account. (*See the stories of Shiphrah and Puah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Esther for examples of rulers being defied by righteous people.*)

More significantly, Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords (*isaiah 9:6-7*). Jesus lived, preached and demonstrated the Kingdom of God, God's will being done on Earth as it is in Heaven: a rule far above the Roman Empire, the Herodian kingdom, and the Jewish religious establishment He lived in. His resurrection proves this incontestably: all other claims of authority collapse before the One who has defeated sin and death

and lives with eternal life at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. He shuts the mouths of all rivals with His vastly superior claims of power, and He will return to judge them all by how well they governed.

Realising this, His followers learned to say that “Jesus is Lord.” For Jews, this meant equating Him with God, as He did Himself by saying things like, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” For Romans, this meant challenging Caesar, because “Lord” was a title belonging only to Caesar (*Acts 17:7*). So Christians have an allegiance far more profound than to any earthly government, and they have a commitment to love their neighbours and want their good, because this is what King Jesus commanded (and what governments are meant to enable, *Romans 13*). Christians are both a partner with government and a critic free from government control because their allegiance is to Another (*Acts 4:19, 5:29*). Christians have been working this out ever since, with varying degrees of success.

1 Timothy 2:4 tells us what matters most to God: He “*desires all people to be saved.*” This is what must set our agenda, more than political preferences – or anything else.

Here are three practical steps we can take.

1. Read the good news more than you read the news!

It’s really important to get God’s perspective on what’s going on – whether it relates directly to today’s headlines or not. If our mind is full of God’s truth, we’re able to remain steadfast whatever is going on live as we should (*Isaiah 26:3*). People need us to do this in order for them to see real hope.

You can read more about how to deal with the news here (<http://www.lukesblog.org/2017/01/this-is-news.html>).

2. Pray more than you complain

Because we’re assured by God’s Word that He is control, it makes complete sense to pray (*Proverbs 21:1*). Paul mentions different types of prayer, which implies that we’ll be happy about some things and less happy about others. We’re to give thanks for any and all benefits we can find. We’re to intercede for others, and not just pray about what we want for ourselves. And we’re to make supplication, to ask that wrong things would change.

When you've done all of that, then I think it's OK to complain, in an honourable way. If you never give thanks to or for anything, sooner or later people will come to the conclusion that you can't be pleased.

Focusing specifically on Donald Trump, John Piper has written an article with more detail on *"How to live under an unqualified president."*

(<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-live-under-an-unqualified-president>)

3. Get involved

Paul talks about living a dignified life, one which other people observe and respect. Believing what we do about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead will always be baffling to some people, let alone aspects of God's moral law which restrict personal autonomy, but doing good in our communities will impact people's opinions of us.

You might feel called to serve in another way, using your abilities to make opportunities for doing good on a bigger scale than the immediately personal – even politics. This must be motivated by love: ego is a powerful temptation in politics, it seems, so pray and get wise counsel. Remember that Jesus' power and authority came through sacrifice and obedience to God – the same will be true for us. And if we're opposed, we don't need the government to be on our side: God has brought us onto His side and will accomplish through us what He intends so long as we are faithful.

Remember what Jesus ultimately came to do. Government can make life better in important practical ways – jobs, security, the rule of law – but it can barely effect most of the factors which research suggests are vital to human wellbeing – love, inner peace and contentment, forgiveness and reconciliation... Only Jesus can do this, only He can save us – so we must tell people about Him.

Questions

- Why might God have directed our attention to Psalm 131 when we're thinking about politics?
- What is it about us that makes politics such an emotive subject?
- How can Christians disagree with each other and yet stay united?
- When have you experienced the tension Luke described between our obligation to

honour government (Romans 13) and our allegiance to God and His rule?

- In what ways can the experiences of the New Testament Christians teach us about all of this?
- What do you think will help you honour and pray for those in power more than you currently do? (E.g. Are you more aware of the news or the good news? Are you more likely to pray or complain?)
- Use the descriptions of different types of prayer (thanksgiving, intercession, supplication) to spend time praying for those in government.



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