

## God & Government

David Emmert

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Hello! Welcome to another studio edition of our sermon time here at Celebration. So why are we doing this in studio? Well you may not realize it, but when we have a service on TV it has to be prerecorded. ##WHAT! IT'S NOT LIVE!##

No it's not live! By law we have to add closed captioning and that takes a little time. So normally when you see us on TV, you're seeing a sermon from a previous week. But over the next few weeks we want our live audience, our online audience and those of you watching on TV to all be on the same page, learning together. So we're videoing a special studio edition of this sermon for TV so the messages here can air at the same time as our other services.

Why are we doing this? Over the next few weeks, we're going to explore what it means for a Christ Follower to be a part of the political process. If you look around, you'll see a lot of people who are engaging politically, but many of them aren't necessarily doing so in a way that we'd want to copy! We've also got an election coming up and passions are high!

So let's set aside some time and think biblically about all of this. Let's examine the role of God in government. We're going to talk about politics and the church. We'll take a look at issues that should be a top priority for any Christ follower heading to the polls. Finally, we'll talk about the kind of influence a Christ Follower should have inside the political process.

Before we get started, I want you to think about your most recent conversations about all things political. Maybe it's a face to face conversation or even more likely, a comment you've posted or reposted on social media. As you think about those moments, ask yourself, *Is my speech about all things political God honoring? Is it encouraging to others? In a conversation, do I make my political points in a way that reflects well on the cause of Christ?* There's a lack of civility in the world of politics in part because there is a lack of civility in the church when it intersects with politics. I believe we can do a lot better! So make a decision now to engage in conversations about politics in a way that builds up rather than tears down.

So let's practice this together. I want to encourage you to join in and study what the Bible has to say to us about politics and government along with your friends who are worshipping live or live streaming. Most of us are going through the pandemic with a small group of family and friends. I call them your bubble. When you're with your bubble, you don't wear a mask, your kids are playing together and so on. It's this little island of normal in an otherwise different world.

We want you to invite your bubble to join in with us for this series. Get your bubble together, watch the sermon on Sunday or any time throughout the week, then go to our website or

church app and follow the links to this sermon series. Then engage in a civil, God honoring conversation about politics and government! Let's pray and get started. PRAY.

I have a confession to make: I hate politics! I know that many of you work in the political world. I admire you for it. I don't think I'd be very good at it! If there has ever been proof God has a sense of humor, it's that I pastor in the capitol city of the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest state in the country! This is a political town! Yet here I am, seeking to lead people who are involved in politics and government for a living!

My dislike for politics came in my early adulthood. One of my first jobs was serving in the training facility of a large ministry. There were hundreds of employees in this agency and anytime you get that many people together, there are going to be politics. My supervisor was a nice man, but he was out of his depth. He struggled to lead at the level required. A lot of other employees could see the way my boss struggled. In just a few weeks, I saw them form an alliance to take this man out. Soon enough, they swept me up in to it. I went along and spoke to my bosses' boss about the shortcomings in leadership I saw. A few days later, my boss was terminated. His family was without a provider and I had been intimately involved in that process. It was my first introduction to office politics, and it left me devastated.

Soon thereafter I attended a gathering of our denomination that was attended by tens of thousands of people. The politics in those days were rough. There was tremendous division surrounding who would be president of the denomination. De facto political parties sprang up. There was name calling and mudslinging from both sides of the newly created political structure. It was ugly. I couldn't believe this was all happening in the name of the church. It left me with a very bad taste in my mouth.

Then there were all things political on the national scene. Over the last 10-15 years, our nation has become incredibly divided and embittered toward one another. Social media has compounded the problem. Say the wrong thing and people will make it their mission in life to end you.

My take away from all of this was simple: Politics, no matter the scale, tend to divide people. For me the best way to handle politics was to simply avoid it all together. We're going to learn in the next few weeks that avoiding politics isn't necessarily the right thing to do, but that's the way I handled politics for a long time.

Maybe your feelings about politics are not that different from my own. Maybe you dislike politics even though you work for a government agency. Maybe you've been on the receiving end of one too many negative comments because of the position you hold. Or maybe you've gone the other direction. Instead of avoiding politics, you've become obsessed with it. If you were to take a look at your social media, you'd see a trail of provocative posts and reposts. You're struggling with a compulsion to constantly have your point of view heard above all of the noise that's out there. It's a digital shouting match, and you're determined to win!

Now, here's what I had to learn as I've struggled with my own dislike of politics. It's not good to avoid politics any more than it's good to obsess over politics. Both avoiding politics and obsessing over them deny what God would have us do as we interact with the people and processes that govern our day to day lives.

God has placed me in to this time and this place to be an influence for what He declares is good. I'm not in Tallahassee by accident. I'm not alive at this time in history by accident. God has a purpose for me in this time and place. I can't ignore that nor should I abuse that. Even when every topic is so emotionally charged and everyone is so angry and distrustful. I still have to walk in obedience to God even when it comes to politics and government and so do you.

To help us handle our politics and our interactions with government rightly, I want us to come to a biblical understanding of what God expects from our government, our politics and our involvement in them.

We're going to focus on 4 core biblical principles that teach us about the relationship between God and government.

### **Principle 1: God is the ultimate source of authority in the world.**

Think for a moment about the opening statement of the Bible: **Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

The first idea the Bible wants to get across to us is that God himself is the source of life. Simply put, without God, there wouldn't be anything to govern!

And if you keep reading Genesis 1, you quickly realize that not only did God create, he was very detailed and organized as he went about it. God is not just creating, he's governing through the creative process. You can see the leadership, the grand plan as he moved meticulously from one thing to the next. God created with a plan, with incredible order, and he followed that plan perfectly.

Years ago, I was on a mission trip with our church. We were working with a group called Mountain Outreach, a ministry of the University of the Cumberland. Over the years, Mountain Outreach has constructed more than 150 homes for those in need. A group from Celebration traveled there to help out. Now, I'm not a carpenter by any stretch of the imagination. I can swing a hammer and turn a screw driver, I can make basic repairs around my home, but nobody is going to call me a craftsman!

This must have been obvious to the people in charge, because one day I was assigned to help a true craftsman from our group build an access door for the crawlspace beneath the house. This guy set out with great precision and skill to make this door. He spent an hour just getting ready to work. First he took measurements of the opening. Then he drew a detailed drawing of what it would look like when it was done. He thought about how much the door would weigh

so we had the right kind hinges holding it up. He thought about how it would latch shut. There was not a detail this guy didn't think of. Then he built a near perfect door that I'm sure is still doing its job today.

Do you see the connection with the way God set about to create the universe? Unlike any human contractor, God creates out of nothing, but from day one, God demonstrates a passion for good and for order my friend demonstrated when he built that door. God's attention. To detail and order should be a model for any human government.

Not only did God create everything in a way that reflects order, He also established right and wrong. After God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden. As he does so, He establishes the first law: **Genesis 2:16–17 <sup>16</sup> And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die."**

As the ultimate authority, God decides what is right and wrong. He defines right as that which brings more abundant life and wrong as that which takes life away.

After God establishes right and wrong, He then gives humanity the responsibility of deciding whether we will obey or disobey.

This is really important. God defines what is right and wrong. We decide to obey or disobey. This division of responsibilities between God and humanity is still in effect today. Throughout Scripture, we see God giving legal principles and specific laws that separate right from wrong.

If you look at the OT, you will encounter a variety of different kinds of law. You'll see civil laws that regulated life in OT Israel regarding things like property rights or agricultural disputes. You'll see ceremonial laws that govern the Jewish religion. They talk about how sacrifices were to be made or which festivals and holidays needed to be observed. Then you also see moral laws that govern our sexual conduct or outlaw murder for example. These moral laws still stand and still apply to people around the world no matter their background.

But regardless of the type, any law given by God was intended to bring a blessing to the life of the one who obeyed.

Look at how the Bible affirms this reality: **Psalms 119:1–2 <sup>1</sup> How happy are those whose way is blameless, who live according to the Lord's instruction! <sup>2</sup> Happy are those who keep His decrees and seek Him with all their heart.**

One more idea about this principle: Because God is the one who is the ultimate law giver, he is also the ultimate judge who brings justice when his law is disobeyed.

**James 4:12 There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy . . .**

If you keep reading the story of Adam and Eve, you know that when they disobeyed God's law, God handled the consequences. Because God is the one who has decided what is right and what is wrong and he is also the one who brings judgement.

Now we tend to think that God brings judgement after someone dies. That's true, but it's not the only way that God can bring justice into a situation.

This sets up our second principle.

**Principle 2: God has established government to help us do what is right and reject what is wrong.**

We see this principle in: **Romans 13:1–4** <sup>1</sup> Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For government 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 government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.

Let's break this passage down: First, it tells us government is established and instituted by God. It's his desire that government serve its citizens by bringing good into their lives.

How do you know when you have good government? You have good government when it is focused on bringing good to its people.

Bad government seeks to bring good to itself. A dictator who steals the wealth of a country and spends it on himself is what bad government looks like.

But a good government is there to benefit the people it serves. You can think about our own governments: local, state or federal. Ask yourself, does our government work largely for the good of the people? That's its primary purpose.

Next we learn from this passage that good government works to discourage what is wrong. Literally the Bible says it is a "terror" to bad conduct because it punishes what is wrong. If you want to stay in the good graces of a good government, do what is right! You won't have anything to worry about. But if you do what is wrong, then a good government will bring punishment for that wrongdoing. The government then has a role to play in restraining evil in this world. It doesn't let its citizens run unchecked.

We're going to talk about this more in the weeks to come, but this is one of the reasons that the idea of defunding the police is so problematic. Policing is fulfilling a key part in the biblical

role of government. You can discuss the tactics that the police should or shouldn't use for days. There's nothing wrong with a respectful and healthy debate on the topic. But the idea that we can simply eliminate the police all together doesn't make any biblical sense. Resisting wrongdoing is a primary function of government and it is intended to be a way in which the weak are protected and the vulnerable find relief.

One more idea for today from this text: we see that Government not only discourages wrongdoing, it actively PROMOTES good behavior.

For example, a good government would use its tax codes to encourage an employer to hire additional employees so that more people will be able to feed their families.

The government can streamline the process for a family to purchase a first home.

A government might also help families who would like to send their kids to college with a scholarship program that makes education more affordable.

In each of these examples, the government has promoted good things, and promoting good is part of what government should do!

A government may be completely secular, but it can still work for the benefit of its citizens in a way that God's purposes are affirmed.

But what happens if government fails in this responsibility? That leads us to our next principle.

### **Principle 3: God judges the nations. He raises governments up and he tears them down.**

History tells us that governments often fail to live up to the purpose for which they were created. They don't do what is good for their own citizens, they don't discourage wrongdoing. They don't encourage what is good.

God speaks out against this kind of failed leadership. Listen to what Isaiah has to say to the leaders of Judah when they failed to lead as God intended:

Isaiah 1:16–20 <sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. <sup>17</sup> Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows. <sup>18</sup> "Come now, let's settle this," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool. <sup>19</sup> If you will only obey me, you will have plenty to eat. <sup>20</sup> But if you turn away and refuse to listen, you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies. I, the Lord, have spoken!"

Do you see how God comes after the government of his chosen people because it has failed to promote what is right and restrain evil? God makes it very clear that if the government doesn't get this turned around, they'll be overthrown by the sword.

Now, God didn't just talk like this to His own people. He speaks the same way to foreign rulers who didn't believe in him at all.

Listen to what God says to the king of Egypt when he refused to free Israel from slavery, thereby refusing to promote what was good and discourage what was evil:

Exodus 9:13–16 <sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, “Get up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh. Tell him: This is what Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews says: Let My people go, so that they may worship Me. <sup>14</sup> Otherwise, I am going to send all My plagues against you, your officials, and your people. Then you will know there is no one like Me in all the earth. <sup>15</sup> By now I could have stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with a plague, and you would have been obliterated from the earth. <sup>16</sup> However, I have let you live for this purpose: to show you My power and to make My name known in all the earth.

The Egyptian government didn't believe in God. They embraced an entirely different worldview. But they were still accountable to God to promote what was good and restrain an evil like slavery. So at the appropriate time, God came against them, tearing them down from their position as a global superpower.

The point is this, no government on earth can refuse to fulfill their God-given role indefinitely. If they refuse to serve for the benefit of their people, if they refuse to promote good and restrain evil, God will bring them to an end.

That leads us to our last principle:

**Principle 4: Because God is the source of all authority, has established government and is the judge of government, He alone is worthy of our worship and allegiance.**

Government can do a lot of great things. It can promote the economy by building infrastructure like roads and bridges. It can ensure its people have access to education and health care so that they can build a better life. It can use its military and its policing powers to protect the vulnerable.

But even under the best of circumstances, government must always be relegated to a second place behind God himself. God is our ultimate creator, lawgiver and judge.

He alone, and not government, is ultimately worthy of all our worship.  
God alone, and not government, is ultimately worthy of all our trust.  
God alone, and not government, is ultimately worthy of all our affections.

God alone, and not government, is ultimately worthy of all our allegiance.

There's a fantastic story in the OT about 3 men who understood the importance of this principle. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were exiled as teenagers from Judah to Babylon under the rule of a king named Nebuchadnezzar. Can you imagine being ripped from your home after your country has lost a war when you were just a teenager? That's what happened to these 3 young men.

But God is good to them. He's blessed them with skill and intelligence and soon, they're serving inside the court of the king. Their success skyrockets. Eventually these three men find themselves at the top of the organizational chart.

But then one day Nebuchadnezzar builds a 90-foot tall golden statue and commanded his key leadership to come worship it. As these leaders stood before the statue the king's messenger said, **Daniel 3:5–6** <sup>5</sup> When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, drum, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. <sup>6</sup> But whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire."

This was a crystal-clear choice. Would they obey government or would they obey God? You probably know the story. The music started and people all around them fell to their knees in worship. But not these three.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow. Instead they said, **Daniel 3:16–18** <sup>16</sup> . . . "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. <sup>17</sup> If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. <sup>18</sup> But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."

Their allegiance was clear. Everyone else might be willing to bow to the government in power, but they reserved that allegiance for God himself. He alone is worthy of that kind of worship and affection.

Do you understand that we have the freedom to worship together today because throughout history hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women, most of who are long since forgotten, said they were willing to go to the furnace if that's what it took to give their ultimate allegiance to God alone?

Men like Roger Williams, the pastor of the first Baptist church here in America. In 1636 police attempted to arrest Williams but he fled into the wilderness where he lived among the Indians. His crime? Being Baptist!



Persecution was so severe against Roger Williams that he started the colony of Rhode Island and in its charter he guaranteed religious freedom. Not just for people who believed as he did, but for people from every religion, even for those who chose to have no religion at all.

How about Obadiah Holmes? In 1651 he was whipped for preaching Baptist doctrine. For weeks after the beating the only way he could be comfortable was on all fours. His back remained a mass of scars the rest of his life.

For 100 years persecution of Baptists was a staple in America. Between 1768 and 1777 alone, at least 30 Baptist preachers in Virginia were imprisoned, whipped, or stoned.

Were they in the furnace? Yes. But they knew that even in the furnace, God would meet them there. They knew no matter the outcome, the ultimate authority, the one who raises up and tears down governments, the one who judges the nations, would be faithful. He alone is worthy of our worship and allegiance.

So what do you do with all of this? How does god's relationship with government have anything to do with how I live my life?

First, Encourage government to do what is right. That's the main reason God established government in the first place! So I'm going to promote the kind of leaders who will do what is right. I'm going to encourage legislation that will advance what is right.

Remember, God is the one who decides what is right and what is wrong, we decide if we will obey or disobey. We said that good can be defined as that which is what promotes abundant life. So I'm going to encourage my government to promote the quality of life and freedom for its citizens.

I'm going to advocate for religious liberty of people of all faiths because if they're freedom increases, my freedom increases. I'm going to be all about encoring my government to have compassion for the most vulnerable.

We're going to get into more specifics in the weeks to come. But your first step in affirming god's relationship with government is to be about helping government promote good.

How do you do this?

1) Vote for the most good. Study the candidates and know the party platforms so that you can work to elect the people who will best fulfill the God given purpose of government - to do the most good! It's not always easy to do. You may not like the personality of a candidate. You may disagree with him or her on many things. You may not agree with every element of the party platform. But get registered to vote and then prayerfully discern which candidates will do the best job of promoting good and discouraging wrongdoing. Do your research. Lean as much as you can about the candidates and their parties and then prayerfully vote.

2) Exercise your influence. We live in the capitol city of the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest state in America. We have a level of access to decision makers that most people across our state don't enjoy. There is nothing that would prevent you from becoming a person of influence. You can go to the capitol as often as you would like. You can encourage lawmakers to pass laws that promote religious liberty, encourage the family and protect the weak and vulnerable. The decision makers are in our backyard! So don't miss your providential opportunity to influence.

Here at celebration we have a ministry called Salt and Light. It exists to help you live out your responsibility to influence our government for good. We've had members of Celebration give testimony before committees in the state house and senate. We've had members of Celebration in the offices of representatives from around the state praying with them and asking them to consider specific legislation that promotes good.

You can connect with salt and light through our App. Don't fail to act on the level of providential access you've been given to those in government.

3) Give your ultimate allegiance to God. We are seeing a lot of pushback against government today. We see protests in the streets, some of which have brought horrific violence from people on all sides of the political spectrum. We see churches reacting against Corona Virus restrictions by defying government and meeting without masks or social distancing. Are all these displays of defiance pointed toward our government right? Are some of them right? When should we stand up and defy our government? When should we seek other, less disruptive forms of dissent? Should we ever disagree with our government? These are critically important questions at this time in our history.

In the weeks to come we'll learn that a Christ Follower is expected to be a good citizen and submit to government authorities, even if our government is off course. Because the Bible is so explicit about the responsibility Christ Followers have to be good citizens, we don't need cast aside government authority too quickly.

BUT, there may be times my government forces me to choose between allegiance to it and my allegiance to God.

Fortunately, we live in a country where such moments are infrequent. Our government is designed to give those who disagree with it a voice and many such crises of conscience can be avoided.

However, if I am forced to choose between obeying God or my country, I need to be willing to choose God.

When I prayerfully discern that I have arrived at such a moment, I need to be willing to pay the price for my decision. Just ask Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They fully understood the consequences for standing their ground when everyone around them was bowing. They chose to pay that cost. They chose a fiery furnace over compromising their allegiance to God.

I would submit this is the path of the Christ Follower. If we are forced to choose between obeying government and obeying God, we have to be willing to suffer the consequences. We don't force others to suffer. We don't destroy the property of others. We don't sacrifice the lives of others. We have to be willing to pay the price ourselves.

So because the cost to us is so great, we should pray for our government. Pray that we are not placed into the position to have to choose between God and government. Pray that our leaders will make choices that are for our good and that respect life and liberty. Pray that we will be able to be good citizens and obey our leaders. Pray that we will rightly exercise our right to vote and then to use our influence for maximum benefit.

As Christ followers we should celebrate God's authority, we should celebrate his wisdom in creating government and we should work to encourage our government to do what is right. Imagine what happens if we fulfill these responsibilities? Our country becomes a better place for all of her citizens. I do this because I'm a new creation by the grace of God. The old in my life has passed away and he is my new ruler and king. He calls on me to reflect my citizenship in this world.

Will you join in this today? Will you commit to voting first and foremost as a citizen of heaven then secondly as a citizen of the United States? Will you use your influence and encourage our government to do good as God has intended them to do? Will you decide now that your first allegiance will be to God even if that brings to you a great personal cost. Let's pray and ask that God give us that kind of resolve today. Pray.