

The Benefits & Limits of Government

Well hey there church family, hope you're all doing well. If you have a bible, turn with me first to Romans 13. Today, we are planning to wrap up this three-week series we've been in called *Jesus & Politics*. And some of you will be happy to hear that beginning next week, we're actually going to move into a series that will be entirely *unrelated* to politics. It will be a series all about *work* and how we think about work as followers of Jesus, and will take us through the rest of the summer. It's a series I've been looking forward to for a while, so I hope you'll make plans to join us for that.

But today, before we get there, we do have our work cut out for us. Because **this morning, I want us to talk about the *purpose* of government in the first place.** That's what I want us to try and tackle today. I think **at the end of the day, a lot of our debate and disagreement about politics in America can be traced back to a lack of consensus about what government is actually for.** And that really comes down to two questions: what *can, or should, government do?* And *what can't, or shouldn't government do?* I think because we as a society often can't agree on the answers to those questions, we have a hard time agreeing on much else in the political realm.

To get a little more specific, here's what I mean by that. Generally speaking, people on the political *right* hear the question "what should government do?" and *their* answer is "...as little as possible." Right? Because most of them come from the perspective of "*limited*" government: that the government should do as little as they have to do in order to maintain a functioning society. Anything and everything beyond that, they should stay out of. And then *inversely*, when people on the *left* hear the same question—"what should government do?"—*their* answer is often that the government should do *anything it can* in order to alleviate the problems and issues of our society (and there are quite a few problems and issues, so that's a lot that the government will need to do). So at least on the surface, you can see why there's so much *disagreement* over politics in our country—because each side seems to be starting from a very different place about what the *purpose* of government is.

And then there are still *other* people who fall somewhere *between* those two perspectives I just mentioned. So maybe you're here today and *you* think government needs to do way *more* in some areas and do way *less* in *other* areas. That's yet another perspective on all this. But all of that just reinforces the need for us to have a conversation about what the purpose of government is in the first place. If we're going to get anywhere at all in regards to political discussions in our country, we have to first see if we can find some sort of common ground when it comes to all of this. **We need some sort of *consensus* about why government exists—what it's there for.** And we *could*

accomplish that by trying to win all progressives to the Right, or by trying to win all the conservatives to the left, or by winning everybody on both sides to the *middle*—but since none of *those* strategies are working all that great for our country so far, I figured we'd try an altogether different approach together. Does that sound like a plan?

So this morning, I want us to start, not with what the *right* says the purpose of government is, and not what the *left* says it is, but with what the *bible* says that it is. So we're going to spend the first half or so of our teaching talking about the *benefits* of government (what it can and *should* do), and the second half or so talking about the *limits* of government (what it can't and *shouldn't attempt* to do).

But quickly, before we do that: I think it's probably worth clarifying what we mean by the word "*government*." When I say *government*, I'm not just talking about government agencies or anything like that. I'm using the word *government* to refer to everything from politicians to government officials to legislation to law enforcement. **I'm calling all those things together "government," because all of them collectively contribute to how we are governed.** Does that make sense? So when I say "government," I want you to have in mind all of those things together.

So with that said, let's take a look at what Romans 13 says about the *purpose* of government. This is the Holy Spirit, speaking through the apostle Paul. He says this, starting in v. 1:

[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. [stay with me—we'll unpack all that in just a few minutes] [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. 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.

Okay, so obviously there's a lot in there. But **the backbone of this passage**—the main idea—is to unpack one **primary purpose of governments and of governing authorities**. To explain one main reason that they are put into place. And that reason, he says, is that **they are appointed by God to discourage evil behavior, by punishing and giving consequences to those who are guilty of it**. At the end of the day, that is one of the reasons governments *exist*: to reinforce what is good, and to discourage what is evil.

Now, that said, I do realize that for many, that might be a difficult concept to swallow just weeks after an event like the murder of George Floyd *by* governing authorities. It's a difficult idea because on *numerous* occasions, we've seen governing authorities *abuse* that power of "the sword" that they've been given. At times they have used their authority *not* just to punish what is *evil*, but to punish what is *innocent*—or at least to punish evil entirely *disproportionately*.

And another issue some of us might have is this idea of governing authorities being "*instituted* by God." That can be a difficult thing to stomach in an age where a lot of white evangelicals are attempting to justify everything President Trump does by saying that he was "put there by God." So a lot of us read this passage and might find it rather dangerous to say that "all authorities are instituted by God" or to call them "God's servants."

So given those sorts of pushbacks, **let's take just a minute or two to unpack what this passage *truly* means, and what it doesn't.** When a lot of us read a passage like this, we tend to zero in on those phrases "[all governing authorities are] instituted by God," and that they are "God's servants." And we tend to *read that* as saying that *God endorses anything and everything that governing authorities do*, since after all, he put them there. But upon a closer read, that's not actually what Paul means.

Rather, Paul's statement here ties into a bigger *theme* in the bible: that **God sometimes works through secular governments and secular leaders to accomplish aspects—**that word is very important—*aspects, of his will*. So honestly, God actually calls a lot of *wicked* leaders in the bible his "servants." And when it says that, it obviously doesn't mean that *everything they did* was okay—it simply means that he *used* them at times to accomplish *aspects* of his will.¹ One example of this would be how God used the nation of Babylon at one point to carry off the Israelites off into exile. What's interesting is that God makes it very clear *throughout* the Scriptures that he is very against *most everything* Babylon stands for, but in *that instance*, he *used* the nation of Babylon to accomplish *an aspect* of his will.

And, just to add to that: governments being "instituted by God" certainly doesn't mean they are *exempt* from God's wrath *themselves*. Often in the bible, those who are "*instruments* of God's wrath," subsequently become *objects* of God's wrath *themselves*,

¹ Examples of this would be Cyrus in Isaiah 44-45, Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah 27:6, 43:10, and the nation of Assyria in Isaiah 10:5.

because they went about what they did in unjust or evil ways.² So **when this passage says that the government and governing authorities are “God’s servants,” and “instituted by God,” that’s not a blanket endorsement of everything government leaders or police officers do.** Not by a long shot. **Rather, it’s meant to communicate that the government *sometimes* accomplishes *justice* in God’s stead.**

And ***one way they do that is by being, in Paul’s words from Romans 13, “an avenger that carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”*** And even *that* part has to be read in *context*. You see, back at the end of Romans 12, right before this passage we’re reading, Paul is telling followers of Jesus that when people commit evil against them, they shouldn’t *retaliate*. They shouldn’t respond to evil with *evil*. He puts it like this in Romans 12, v. 19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

So Paul tells these followers of Jesus that they don’t have to take revenge, because *God* can be trusted to settle the score. *He* will see to it that justice is served. And *then* in Romans 13, he talks about one *specific* way that God sometimes accomplishes justice, and that’s through even secular governments. He calls them “*avengers*,” which is actually the same language from chapter 12. So when read **in its original context, this is not a passage about how governing authorities are always good or are always right, but rather about how God uses *even the worst* of governments, at times, to bring about true justice.**

So while a passage like this one might indeed be difficult for us in light of recent events, it is simultaneously so important that we grasp what it’s saying. Because according to Romans 12 and 13, one of the things that discourages us from taking revenge into our own hands, is the reality of a government that has *justice* as its aim.

Now, some of what is being *protested* right now in our country are ways that our institutions *aren’t* doing that—ways that they *aren’t fulfilling that purpose* well. **But that doesn’t mean that the *concept of government itself* is wrong. It means that we need to reimagine, reform and revise our government to be more reflective of its *intended purpose*.** Because according to the Scriptures, those institutions were put there to name, discourage, and deal with evil, so that we can have a more functional, more flourishing society as a result.

² See, for example, Isaiah 10 and large portions of the book of Revelation.

And that in itself is a good and needed thing to have. **For cities to function and societies to work, there has to be some form of government in place there.** There *have* to be laws. There *has* to be legislation. There has to be some means of *enforcing* that legislation. There has to be a system for rewarding good and curbing the effects of evil. Otherwise society can't *function*, much less *flourish* and *thrive*.

Just to help illustrate why: imagine, if you will, that we decide, as a society, that we no longer want any “*governance*” to interfere with our road and highway traffic. Let's say we all start thinking about it, and we determine that all the traffic laws and traffic signals and rules of the road—that all those things are too stifling to our freedom. That they're unnecessary: they put too many restrictions on how we drive and how fast we can drive. So we decide to get rid of all “*governance*” when it comes to our roads and highways. (Ironically, we'd have to have *government* set up in order to rid ourselves of *that* type of government—but that's neither here nor there, let's say we figure it out somehow).

So we do that, and now none of our roads have dotted lines, no solid lines, no speed limits, no stop signs, no traffic lights—just unlimited, unmarked stretches of pavement with a sign every so often that says “good luck, everybody.” And, there would be no system for who does and doesn't get a driver's license. After all, if nine year olds out there want to drive a car, who are we to limit their freedom!? There would be no one out there to handle traffic accidents, because there are no laws in place about who would be in the right or the wrong anyway. So let me ask you...does that sound like a recipe for functional roads and highways to you? (And just in case you're still thinking “I don't know—I think we could figure it out.” Right. Because I think we all know that we are all on our best behavior is when we're in heavy, over-congested traffic. That's when human beings really shine the brightest.)

But all that to say, can you see why government is a *helpful thing*, at least in its original design? Because the reality is that day-to-day life is actually a lot more like driving in traffic than we realize. You and I are constantly moving around our society at high speeds, making hundreds of decisions that all affect the other people and structures around us, often in more ways than we realize. And for a society like that to function and thrive, there has to be at least some sort of *structure* in place to govern and guide those decisions and actions. Otherwise, the world would be a much worse place to live than it is. For our society to function, we *need* governments and laws and enforcers of those laws, at least in *some form*.

Now, we need all of those institutions to function in *just ways*, to be sure. And we need to continually re-evaluate how we allocate resources *within* our government. So we need to not just spend money on things like politicians' salaries and law enforcement, but also on

things like mental health and education and resources for the disadvantaged. Yes and amen to all of that. But we do *need government*. Government, in its original, intended form is a helpful, beneficial thing for humanity to have. We'll talk about this a lot more when we start our Work series next week, but one of the first things God does in the bible is puts Adam and Eve in a garden, and then tells them to "rule and reign" over creation. He tells them, in essence, to *govern*—to create order and structure upon which the rest of creation can thrive. And God does that before sin ever enters the picture. So government in its intended form is a good thing.

So here's my point with all of this: if you're the type of person who says things like "well, if we could just get the government out of the way and get them to stop *interfering* with people's lives, we'd all be better off," I would invite you to think a little more critically about that statement. Is that really what would happen? For those of you that read through Judges with us just a couple months ago in our reading plan, there's a refrain in that book that comes up several times; it says "in those days there was no king in Israel, and *each man did what was right in his own eyes*." Meaning, **when there is no government—no leadership, no laws, no enforcement of those laws—it does not lead to a peaceful, conflict-free existence. It usually leads to everyone defining good and evil for themselves.** And if you know much about your bible, that never ends well for humanity.

So listen: **let's debate and sort through what and *how much* government should do in our society, let's *absolutely* have those conversations. But let's not settle for overly simplistic answers like "we don't need government" or even "the less government, the better (in every scenario)."** I think the Scriptures would teach us to be a little more nuanced than that. Governments in their original design **help create a functional, flourishing society.** That's the *benefit* of government. Does that make sense?

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Okay. But all that said, there is a very important *limit* to government we need to talk about as well. For what *that* is, turn to the left in your bibles just a few pages to Romans 8. We're going to read just a few verses from *this* chapter, about what Paul calls "the Law." Now, just for clarity, in this passage Paul is talking about specifically the *Old Testament* law—*God's* laws and regulations—he's not the laws of our modern government. But the *reason* I want at this passage is because **I think the point he's making still stands. I think his *logic* would apply to *all* laws and governance—whether they are from the bible or not.** Because he's simply trying to make a point about something very important that laws *cannot* accomplish.

So take a look with me starting in v. 2:

[2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For **God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.**

So for all the good that comes from legislation and laws and governance and government—even from *God's own* law and governance—there is one thing that laws can't do: **they cannot change the human heart. Laws, legislation, and government—no matter who thinks them up and no matter who enforces them—cannot actually change people.** A law that says “do not murder” can't keep a person from *desiring* to murder—it can only discourage them from going through with it. A law that says “do not steal” can't keep a person from *wanting* to take someone's stuff—it can only give negative *consequences* that deter them from doing it. **Legislation, whether it comes from God or man—can not change a person's heart.**

But there is someone who can. Take a look with me at the rest of v. 3 and 4:

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Paul says here that **Jesus came to do what no law could ever do, to generate in us what no government or legislation could generate: a new heart.** For that, we need a savior. You see, by sending Jesus, God provided not only a standard for us to *live up* to, not only a morality to *aim* for—but a *rescuer* from our sin. See, **the reason injustice exists in our world is not because we've got a bunch of good people who sometimes do bad things. Injustice exists because we all have a tendency towards doing bad things.** As one philosopher once said, “the line between good and evil runs straight through every human heart.³ **And evil exists because some people have allowed that tendency in them to go completely unchecked.** *That's* where evil and injustice come from. So if things are going to get better, what we *all* ultimately need is for Jesus to rescue *us all* from that tendency.

The problem underneath all the other problems is actually *sin* in the human heart. Our *ultimate* problem is that we have all been alienated from God, and therefore don't see *things* the way we should, don't *relate* to people like we should, and don't approach things in our world the way we should. The reason for *injustice* is sin. The reason for

³ This is from a quote by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyns, available [here](#).

racism is sin. The reason for *police brutality* is sin. And until the *sin* in human hearts is addressed, we will continue to have some version of all of those things.

And in Jesus, God has done precisely that: he has provided a way to deal with the *sin* in the human heart. He has provided a way for each and every person who trusts him, to be *rescued out of* the sin and injustice that so pervades our hearts. Jesus came to planet earth, lived a life free from all of that, and when he was put to death on the cross, he gave us a way to put to death all of that in us. In Paul's words, "Jesus *condemned* sin in the flesh." Meaning that **when you and I decide to trust in Jesus, what we're doing is latching onto the hand that pulls us out of our sin and injustice.** What we're doing is following the one that makes us a part of the *solution*, instead of part of the *problem*. And that happens by being given a new heart. A heart that longs for justice over *injustice*, *selflessness* over *selfishness*. Laws and legislation and governance can't do that in a person, but the good news of Jesus can. And it *does*.

So, here's my point: if you're the type of person that thinks if we could just get the right person in office, and the right people *out* of office, and the right legislation passed, and the right systems and structures in place, our country would finally be where it needs to be...if that's your perspective, I have bad news for you. If every politician you like were elected, and every law you wanted passed were passed, people would still be sinful and injustice would still exist.

And listen: **one of the reasons many of us have a continual *frustration* and *dissatisfaction* with government is that we are waiting for it to accomplish something that it can never accomplish.** No matter *how many laws* we pass against murder, murder will still happen. No matter *how many laws* we pass against theft, theft will still happen. No matter *how many laws* we pass against racism and discrimination, those things will still happen. Because government doesn't have the ability to *change people*.

Now, it is very important that you hear what I'm about to say: *none* of that means we *shouldn't* support legislation *against* those things. None of this is a cop-out. When I say "only Jesus can fix our country's problems," that's not me saying "so let's just all stay out of politics, and just pray for people, and invite them to church." That's not what I'm saying at all. **We don't pass laws because laws *eliminate* problems—we pass laws because laws often *curb the negative impact* of the problems.** Martin Luther King, Jr. once said it this way:

*It may be true that the law cannot make a man **love** me, but it can keep him from **lynching** me, and I think that's pretty important.*

So none of this is me saying that laws and government are *purposeless*. They *still serve* a very important purpose: they are meant to help to curb, discourage and minimize the *effect* of evil on our world. And often they are very effective at doing that. But at the same time, **we shouldn't operate under the *illusion* that if we get the right person in office and the right legislation passed, it will fix all our country's problems.** It will *not*. It may *help*, but it won't fix. Because politics and government don't have that ability. Only the good news of Jesus does.

So instead of government and politics being what we look to for hope, here's what I would suggest we do instead. **We, as followers of Jesus, equipped with *his* vision of human flourishing, *his* vision of justice and peace and equality, should bring all that with us *into* our politics, rather than trying to *find it in* politics.** That's it. That's what we're going for. And that posture comes from knowing that while government is helpful, it is also not ultimate. Though the government has benefits, it also has limits. It helps us create a functioning, thriving society, but it cannot solve the problem underneath all the other problems.

Which means that followers of Jesus should carry a sort of "both/and" approach to politics and government. On the one hand, we don't *withdraw* from all things political, because we realize that politics are one very important way to work towards the common good in our society. But on the other hand, we don't *place all our hope in* politics, because we realize that at the end of the day, government and legislation cannot fix what is broken in the human heart. So **we respond by seeking the common good through politics, but not *only* seeking it through politics.** We advocate for policies and candidates that we think best create a thriving, flourishing society—but we also work towards a thriving and flourishing society in our *personal* lives too, because we aren't assuming that good government alone will do the trick. This is the dynamic that all of this produces in us.

So as an example of this, I personally know several families who lean very *conservative*, politically speaking. They feel like the conservative platform does a better job capturing the heart of Jesus for the world. And like we said the past two weeks, that's *fine* for them to think that way. As long as they don't think the conservative platform does a *complete* job of capturing the heart of Jesus, it's fine for them to have a political leaning.

But these same people, these same families, that lean *right* politically speaking, will often give their money and their time to plenty of organizations that lean *left*, because they want to do their part *personally* to make up for what they see as some shortcomings in their party. Many of these families that lean *right* politically have fostered multiple

children from the poorest neighborhoods in their area, because that *matters* to them, even if it doesn't seem to matter all that much to their political party at times.

And then on the flip side, I know people who lean *left* politically, because they think the systems and structures that the Left does a better job capturing the heart of Jesus for the poor and the disadvantaged. And that's a fine perspective for *them* to take. But at the same time, they realize that systems and structures do not ultimately fix what is broken.

So these same people will give their money to pro-life organizations that help women with unplanned pregnancies—the types of organizations that other progressives would likely criticize. These same people spend time mentoring at-risk youth in their spare time, coaching sports teams in poor neighborhoods. Because they know that at the end of the day, even the best government systems and structures can't lead a boy or a girl to Jesus. But investing relationally in those kids *can*. Do you see the nuance there, the “both/and” there?

My point is that when we understand the benefits and limits of government from the Scriptures, it creates this beautiful, nuanced, *kaleidoscopic* approach to the world around us. **It gives us the ability, as followers of Jesus, to *allow* the government to do what it can do, while never *expecting* it to do things that it can't.** It creates a both/and approach to the issues in our society, where we refuse to see through the tunnel vision of the Left *or* the Right. And where we instead, work towards the common good of our world with both our *political* and *personal* resources.

So as we wrap up both today's teaching and this entire series, let me just ask you: *does this describe your perspective on government and politics?* So first, as we mentioned in week 1 of the series, do you even *care* about all of this in the first place? Do you even consider the role that politics plays in working towards the common good of our society? Then, as we mentioned in week 2, have you refused to give your *allegiance* to *either* political party? Have you refused to let them claim *all of your life and frame how you see everything else?* And then from today, as a follower of Jesus, do you have a functional understanding of the *benefits* of government, as well as its *limits*? Do you support government's efforts to help us establish a fair, just society, while not *expecting* it to fix problems it can't fix? As followers of Jesus, I think these are the types of questions we need to be asking when it comes to our involvement with and posture towards politics in our world.

So as we close out our series, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit would work in and through the things we've discussed these three weeks. That through that, he would make us into a *counter-cultural presence* in our world. What we want is that more and

more people would encounter the person of Jesus, and that *through that*, the world around us would become more reflective of the kingdom of God. And I just want to remind you, as we close out this series, that *politics* is *included* in all of that. I hope we know that **at the end of human history—in the new heavens and the new earth—government won't be just some thing of the past. We will still have a “king” and we will still have a government—it's just that our *king* will be Jesus and his *government* will have no end.**

Which is all a way of saying that **there is *no part of our world* that God doesn't want to rescue, redeem and renew.** Every square inch of creation is his, and one day he will remake all of it as he intended it to be—including politics and government. So let's not write off what God hasn't written off. Let's not give up on what God hasn't given up on. Let's not bail on our world, because God didn't bail on us. But instead, let's join him as he makes all of it new.

May it be so. Let's pray.