



*On Christian
Citizenship*

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Introduction

Simply understanding our roles and responsibilities as citizens and taxpayers is challenging enough, but faithfully discharging them is all the more difficult. This challenge is greater still for Christians, as we have dual citizenships—to the civil society we call government as well as to God’s Kingdom (both present and eternal). This is underscored by the Bible’s clear teaching that Christians are subject to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1).

The Apostle Paul wrote that passage long before the revolution in government, birthed in America in 1776, that makes the citizenry ourselves the sovereign of civil society. This experiment in self-government has worked well. As the Christian consensus in culture erodes in the West, however, how do we preserve liberty and order by government of increasingly independent, affluent and Biblically-ignorant individuals?

Given such complexity, it is no wonder many Christians opt out of public life. Instead they watch the coarsening of culture with greater and greater alarm, while seeking to lead a pious life in this realm as they prepare for the life of perfection in the realm to come. But is that what the Bible teaches? Is the command to be salt and light applicable only to evangelism and life in the Body of Christ—or does it apply to civil society as well?

This brief devotional is designed to give church leaders (pastors, teachers and lay leaders alike) the key Biblical principles and passages for you to guide your congregation, Sunday School class, small group or public policy advocacy team toward understanding, as well as fulfilling, our responsibilities as Christian citizens. It will be presented in three areas of focus, which can easily be adapted to a three-sermon series or a three-message emphasis in a small-group setting or Sunday School class. It is suggested you share these messages close to an election, the time most Believers will most significantly interact with government.

The three areas of focus are:

- Government Is God’s Idea
- The Biblical Role of Government
- God’s Choice Servants Work In Government

Each of these three focus areas will have six additional elements or illustrations. Taken together, this booklet is a three-week, 21-day devotional to a deeper, more Biblical understanding of Christian

citizenship as you help others develop a fuller understanding of the Bible's teachings on government. It is designed to be a Bible-open, interactive teaching time for you personally and then serve as a guide to engage others in exploring this under-examined topic.

In so doing, this devotional will argue that the Bible calls us to influence government and its policies toward Biblical principles as part of our overall command to be stewards of God's creation and "seek the welfare of the city" (Jeremiah 29:7). It will also argue that as Christianity, the bedrock of Western-style democracies, erodes further, the church has a need to develop a fuller theology of government as the moral and political consensus.

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Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY ONE

Government is good. That is hard for many believers, especially those with a more conservative personal political philosophy, to accept. Many among the faithful respond to such a thought with the oft-quoted Isaiah 9:6, where we read “the government will rest on His shoulders” in reference to the coming Messiah (who was put to death by the Roman government, after all). The very next verse, however, tells us that there will be no end to His government. Hmm.

Or we quickly quote that well-know proverb, often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, but whose true author is lost to antiquity: “That government governs best which governs least.” Perhaps former President Ronald Reagan captured this reservation best in one of his heartiest laugh lines. The ten most feared words in the English language, he said, are: “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help you.”

But we will see in this devotional that government is God’s idea, as well as part of His remedy for the Fall. Because it is God’s creation, and because it has a role in advancing the Gospel and God’s Kingdom here on earth, we can say that government is, therefore, good. What we wisely fear and joke about with President Reagan is government acting well beyond its Biblical mandate.

The Divine purpose of government is to restrain evil and promote justice (Romans 13:3). But while its purpose is clear, its origins are more frequently debated by theologians and scholars alike. The six devotionals that follow this first focus will explore those origins. (For example, is it found in Genesis 9 or 1 Samuel 8?) They also amplify the Divine job description of government.

We conclude this introduction, however, by placing the God-ordained institution of government alongside its two other God-ordained partners in fashioning healthy, Godly culture. Those companion institutions are the family and the church.

The origin of the family is not murky at all. In Genesis One and Two, God creates the Universe, the Earth and all that inhabit both, including Adam and Eve. It is interesting to note everything God creates is “good” in the narrative until He creates Eve as Adam’s partner. Then creation, capped by the family that will propagate human life, is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The church, similarly, has clear origins in the Book of Acts, especially Acts 2.

We will develop these thoughts more later, but note for now that the family brings forth life. As the steward of the Gospel, the church redeems, even elevates life back to the Divine. Government protects and preserves life on this Earthly plane. Its focus is on preserving and protecting life, promoting that which leads to the good life and retraining that which harms life. When this works as designed, the Creator smiles at “Godly offspring” (Malachi 2:15).

This three-part approach to God’s creation is not taught at every seminary, nor is it as popular a topic among Christian authors as, say, the work of the Holy Spirit. But contemporary Christian ministries, such as Focus on the Family and Prison Fellowships, frequently cite these three primary institutions of the created order as they address issues, ranging from whether same-sex marriage reflects a Biblical value to whether our prison system promotes justice rather than retribution.

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY TWO

The consequences of the Fall cannot be overestimated. Even the Earth itself is broken by the Fall (Romans 8:21), which explains destructive natural phenomenon such as tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes. We can look back longingly, wishing that the first sin (Satan's pride that led to perhaps a third of the angels joining him in rebellion against God) or the second sin (Eve's taking of the fruit) had not led to the third sin—Adam breaking God's one command.

It is an intriguing exercise to wonder if Adam understood the import of the decision he made by choosing to share a Fallen life with his perfect partner, Eve, rather than sustaining perfect fellowship with His Creator, God. The Biblical text does not answer this question, but we know his decision. He ate the fruit. And it is in that decision that the both church and government are rooted as God's remedial institutions arrayed against the effects of original sin.

As stated previously, the family provides the origin of life. As steward of the Gospel, the church provides the ultimate remedy for the Fall, a way back to the Garden of Eden, albeit after a journey battling with the flesh and the world. The church addresses the ultimate, transcendent issues arising from the Fall and the consequence of sin, namely death. But government addresses our practices during life, specifically public life or life lived in community, from our origin in family to our eternal end.

In so doing, it protects and preserves human life so that the Gospel can be proclaimed and grace can be made available. This notion, sometimes called "common grace," draws upon the teaching of Christ found at Matthew 5:45 (the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike).

We see government's first sighting in Genesis 9. After the Flood, God tells Noah that because man is made in God's image and likeness, anyone who kills a man is subject to capital punishment by the sword (Genesis 9:6). We need to read this verse in the light of Romans 13:4, where we are told that government wields the sword, and alone has the power of life and death. This is the basis of Biblical arguments for capital punishment, though many find this wielding of the sword insufficient to declare the birth of government.

What is clear is that government, and government alone, may take

life (through capital punishment and/or “just war”). Sharing these two key passages with your flock or students helps the faithful to understand that government is indeed God’s idea and He has ordained certain activities for governments alone. Our next devotional will center on 1 Samuel 8, where we will see a certified description of government—if not an official birth certificate.

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY THREE

From the beginning Israel was to be different. But the nation struggled with this “special” status, and the Old Testament is often a lament to this sad struggle. Of course, many observers would say we in the church do little better today. Israel started out differently, however, until it rejected God’s rule through the judges and sought a king “like all the other nations.” This sad chapter in the Hebrew Scriptures is recorded at 1 Samuel 8. Read this chapter as you prepare for this devotional topic.

In the chapter, Samuel carefully warns Israel what will become of it if the nation rejects God’s government for a traditional government with a king. It includes many cautions that address topics as fresh as today’s news. The government will tax you, it will raise armies and wage war and conscript your sons and daughters and it will draw others into a civil service (or bureaucracy, depending on your perspective). There will be an overall loss of liberty in the light of government actions (see v. 17).

Even though other nations had kings to rule them (or at least lead them in battle), this passage gives a clear birthing of civil government among God’s people and details the consequences. But Israel the nation does not pause. It runs headlong into appointing a king, picking the popular and handsome Saul. He becomes a bitter proof that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But before we are too harsh on the nation of Israel in that era (perhaps 930 B.C.), let us ask ourselves the same question Israel faced—in a more contemporary context. What responsibilities or roles do we seek to delegate to government that we should play in our relationship with God?

Do we honor our parents as is commanded in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), or do we push them off to Social Security and Medicare-funded caregivers?

Do we care for the poor, or do we say that we cannot afford to pay for government *and* the least fortunate among us because taxes are too high?

Do we raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, or do we ship them off to government schools where our values are vandalized and their minds are scandalized?

These are not easy questions. But if we are not challenged in our pursuit of God on at least some occasions, one should wonder if progress toward sanctification is being made.

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY FOUR

The prophet Jeremiah is often referred to as the “weeping prophet” because he lamented the failings of Israel. He authored the Old Testament Book bearing his name, and it includes a remarkable teaching to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jeremiah 29:7). What makes this teaching so remarkable is not the linkage between our welfare and the well-being of the polis or state (see 1 Timothy 2:2 on this teaching, for example). Rather, the command is to seek the welfare of King Nebuchadnezzar’s pagan capital city of Babylon.

Jeremiah directs the exiled Jews to seek the welfare of the oppressor state’s capital city, but he does so in order that it might go better for them in exile. Here we see a linkage between our well-being and the well-being of civil society that will be repeated and amplified elsewhere in Scripture. But how much more true this principle is for us. We not only live in the city, but are its sovereign (we select the ultimate leadership over government activities by voting or not voting!) and pay for its administration and improvement through taxes.

So, both the Old and New Testaments call us to honor and submit to government. This command comes in both cases (the Book of Jeremiah and Paul’s writings in 2 Timothy) toward non-Christian, oppressive, occupying forces. At the time of Jeremiah, King Nebuchadnezzar removed the Jewish elite leadership to Babylon after destroying Jerusalem, while in Paul’s case Rome held Palestine captive with occupying armies. But as is typical, God’s Word provides the reason the behavior is commanded—the practical benefit beyond appropriate submission to a holy and just God.

When we serve the common good through public life (welfare of the city, public thanksgiving and private prayers for authorities over us), it goes better for us. In Jeremiah’s call to “seek the welfare of the city,” God demonstrates a powerful principle of political philosophy as true today as it was in circa 600 B.C. (when Jeremiah was used of God to write this inspired passage): The quality of our lives, in large measure, is influenced by the civil society in which we live.

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY FIVE

The Book of Romans is Paul's longest work and the closest of any Biblical writing to what scholars would call a systematic theology. This Book also imparts much wisdom on the roles and goals of government. Read Chapter 13 to prepare for this devotion.

Notice its rich respect for government. And recall this was written by the Apostle Paul about the Roman government of the First Century, long before the miraculous conversion of Emperor Constantine in the early Fourth Century and the resulting toleration of, and later support for, Christianity as the official state religion of Rome.

In these verses Paul clearly states the role of government: to restrain evil and promote good. Today we experience these twin assignments, principally, as both the law and government proclamations or pronouncements.

The law prescribes what we can and cannot do. Murder is illegal and may result in our own death; self-defense is legal and may well be lauded by government. Theft is wrong. Working hard and earning a profit is encouraged (if only so there is additional tax revenue for government).

Government proclamations go from the mundane (National Ice Cream Week) to the significant, such as the American holiday of Thanksgiving Day. The national has observed this time of reflection since Thanksgiving was first conceived by Abraham Lincoln as a day of fasting and penance at the height of the Civil War. The first proclamation, setting aside the last Thursday of November, called on all citizens to enter into the day with "with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience."

As the chapter also states, this important activity of government also includes recognizing those who deserve honor and respect (as in naming a U.S. post office for an honest lawmaker or a courthouse for a wise and just judge).

Romans 13 is worthy of extra study as it most clearly details the role of this third institution of the created order. Some argue that when government praises what is worthy, it helps establish social norms and guides the citizenry toward the good life sought by moral philosophers, political scientists and public theologians alike. Do you agree with that thought?

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY SIX

1 Timothy 2:2 calls us to pray for those in authority. It amplifies or underscores that specific act from among several reverential activities specified in the Romans 13 passage, which we just focused upon. The fact that prayer is underscored is worthy of reflection as we seek to understand our responsibilities as citizens of this realm and the heavenly realm.

In this passage Paul is sharing with his ministry student, Timothy. Much of his advice is personal and practical. But he also teaches him about being a pastor, a shepherd of the flock and a teacher of God's word. So, as pastors, this admonition is especially directed at us.

Again notice the passage details the benefit of praying for those in authority: "...so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." But the instruction occurs in the context of Paul helping his understudy lead worship and order life in the church. This is confirmed by closely following chapters with additional teaching on the role of women and the qualifications of elders. While the benefit of prayer for those in authority is in a private life of faith made more tranquil and godly, the call is for prayer in the church by its leaders.

One wonders how the life of the church—as well the attitude of the typical churchgoer toward government—might change if we regularly prayed for those in authority over us. And what if we lifted in prayer the issues before government (the mighty matters like abortion and capital punishment as well as the more mundane matters like traffic studies supporting zoning requests and the operation of the waste water treatment plant)?

But let's move a step beyond that. What if the church sent a card, note or an e-mail to a civil authority stating that it had prayed for a particular public servant before a visible vote or a difficult decision? If there is a consensus, the views of the congregation would be appropriate to express. But the purpose of the note is to indicate a fulfillment of this Biblical admonition, not to lobby on an issue (though we'll see later why both are essential).

As one who regularly interacts with elected officials and their staff, from the White House to the county courthouse, I can confidently report that few folks communicate they are praying for our leaders. The

President, especially in challenging times, will be a prayer focus of many congregations and pastors.

But day in and day out, we fail to lift up all our elected leaders and appointed officials, and so we realize less of the tranquility and godliness available to us through the power of prayer in the church.

Focus One:
Government is God's Idea

DAY SEVEN

In each case, the ideas or images inherent to each of the three created institutions of God's Divine order (family, church and government) are used by God to describe Himself. For example, He uses family images and words, for example, to tell us He is our Father and that Christ is our brother. Moreover, our relationship as believers with one another is described in family words like sisters and brothers. In describing salvation, Paul writes we have been adopted by God and as such are co-heirs with Christ of eternal life.

Similarly, we understand that Christ's Body is the church and that, as the Body of Christ, we are made up of different parts that must all work together (hands, feet, mind, etc.). In what Peter Drucker called the greatest business management teaching in history, 1 Cor. 12:14 uses the analogy of the body to describe the church and thereby explain her mysterious but beautiful workings.

So, too, God's descriptions of Himself and His reign—both today and in the future—are filled with notions and images of government.

Consider that God is described as “a King,” and that Christ came and will return to advance “His Kingdom.” The Isaiah 9:7 verse in the introduction comes to mind again as the prophet tells us, “There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace....” Again, government is the image, and peace or order is the by product.

The Book of Revelation is especially focused on describing heaven and God's eternal city-state as a perfect government. Read Revelation 21 as it describes this eternal place that will be called the New Jerusalem. How ironic that many devout, pious religious conservatives who eschew earthly government yearn for the heaven that God describes as a state or city. Of course, it will have no sin or imperfections, and thus will be unlike any worldly realm. In that sense we all eschew earthly government and yearn for the perfect government to come.

But God calls us to seek the welfare of the city in the here and now even as He leads us toward the eternal city where we will worship and praise Him forever.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY ONE

Our second focus examines what the Bible says regarding government's role in promoting what moral philosophers and political scientists call the good life, or what Christ calls "the abundant life" (John 10:10). In exploring this little-examined area of Biblical doctrine, we will quickly see that governments across time and cultures share several defining attributes noted in Scripture, but that modern Western democratic governments far exceed these Biblical descriptions of "limited government."

To introduce this theme, we begin with Christ's words found at John 10:10. In the New American Standard Version of the Bible, the verse reads ..."I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

This powerful truth is often overlooked as we share God's love with others. He calls us to the best possible life today, not just perfect life to come in eternity. Christians are not second-class citizens in this realm while we await our heavenly reward in the realm to come. The abundant life begins the day we accept Christ as our personal Lord and Savior.

But this verse also describes what political scientists and statesmen pursue at the communal or state level, known as the good life. The good life, or the abundant life, is about ordering public life to promote healthy culture. The health described here is the health that comes from living in harmony with the way our Creator (to use the term of the Declaration of Independence for God) has fashioned us. Recall God's view in Genesis 2:18 that it is not good for man to be alone; we are social creatures made to live in community. But because of the Fall, government is instituted to provide order by restraining evil and promoting justice, thereby minimizing chaos and calamity.

The six additional themes of this focus will explore how the Bible indicates government is to fulfill this Divine mission of retarding evil.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY TWO

One of the clearest ways government provides order is through the responsibility of providing courts to resolve disputes. The Apostle Paul frequently avails himself of the civil courts, using them to avoid riots and religious persecution in city after city.

“So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are available; let them bring charges against one another,” we read at Acts 19:38.

This entire passage in Acts regarding Paul’s teaching in Ephesus reveals how a government official, called a town clerk in one translation, averts a religious riot and tells the factions they must bring their dispute into a lawful assembly. The official takes no position in the dispute—he simply demands that it not be handled by mob justice on the street.

In 1 Samuel 8:15, we read, “And he will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards, and give to his officers and to his servants.” “Officers” in that sentence means court officials, or judges (Hebrew word *Oyro*, Strong Word No. 5631).

In fact, the nation of Israel is told in the Book of Deuteronomy to maintain a system of judges and courts as the nation prepares for government after Moses dies. Deuteronomy 17:2-13 describes the jurisdiction or cases the court system was to adjudicate in ancient Israel.

Government then helps foster order by providing a mechanism to resolve disputes that threaten public peace and civility. The courts also provide a way to purge the community of evil. Both tasks are essential to creating the good life Christ describes and philosophers pursue. In so doing, government prescribes and proscribes various practices.

After nearly seven decades of study and writing that produced a remarkable 11-volume series called *The History of Civilization*, the great historian Wil Durant unearthed this truth quite apart from Scripture. In a 1975 interview published by the Associated Press, Durant declared on the eve of his 90th birthday that his writing days were over and that his study had led him to one iron-clad conclusion. “The general theme of my life (work),” he said, “is the discovery that order is the mother of liberty, and liberty is the mother of chaos.” In his final work, *The Lessons of History*, he adds that if societies must choose only one, they will choose order

over liberty to avoid chaos.

Scripture foretells the truth that the 20th Century's greatest historian found after a lifelong search. Order is essential to public welfare, and courts are indispensable to that process.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY THREE

In understanding government's role to foster the conditions that promote human flourishing for the proclamation of the Gospel, another key passage is found at 1 Peter 2:14-15. Both this day's devotional and the following one are drawn from this passage.

Carefully read the passage. The Apostle Peter—impetuous, son-of-thunder Peter—writes precisely what Paul wrote about submitting to government. But along with the “what” we are to do, God also provides the “why” in relation to government, denoted by both kings and governors in this passage. As we submit, government can punish evildoers and praise well-doers (as we'll discuss later).

As noted earlier, one way government punishes evildoers is by taking their lives for the shedding of innocent blood. One of the two thieves who perish with Christ on the day of His crucifixion acknowledges the justness of the death penalty even as he undergoes it (Luke 23:41). Government is clearly empowered to do this in Scripture.

Now, for those who do not favor capital punishment, we agree it is a wholly different question whether government should do that in modern times with secure prisons and sufficient resources to house prisoners during their natural lives. And it is a still vastly different question whether the justice system in a particular nation or jurisdiction is competent to find guilt or innocence and carry out this ultimate sanction without mistake.

On a broad scale, this power—the taking of life for shedding innocent blood—is also the basis of the “just war” theory pioneered by St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, in circa 400 A.D. Believed by many to be the most influential theologian outside of Bible writers, Augustine developed a doctrine that said that when justice is lacking in extreme measure, war is the path best able to establish it. This makes war the lesser of two evils. Augustine's thinking remains very influential, and is cited 1,600 years later in contemporary debates as nations discuss and vote on military actions against other nations.

Government's power to imprison wrongdoers and impose fines is acknowledged throughout Scripture as well. Potiphar imprisons Joseph for sexually assaulting his wife (a false allegation, we know), just as Pharaoh had imprisoned the cup bearer and the baker in the same prison.

Paul is routinely imprisoned for various offenses, and other Apostles suffer imprisonment or exile as well. In 1 Kings 20:39, a fine of a talent of silver or the soldier's life is demanded if the prisoner he guards escapes. In the Book of Philemon, Paul offers to pay the penalty (or fine) for the runaway slave Onesimus to his master, Philemon.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY FOUR

The reverse of punishing wrongdoers is praising well-doers as one way to promote well-being. This concept is found in 1 Peter 2:14-15 as well. But this passage goes beyond issuing a proclamation praising a war hero, congratulating a victorious sports team or thanking a community's patron for a great work of public benefit—as important as official statements are in those settings. The very idea indicates establishing the norms and standards of a society, and is at the heart of what is so often called the “culture wars” of public life in the 21st Century.

The portion of the verse we address in this day's devotional states simply: “praise of those who do right” (1 Peter 2:14). This power of government extends to defining appropriate or praiseworthy behavior, and it is a key area of government failure today. Many, for example, want to redefine basic notions such as life (America has experienced more than 50 million abortions since a court ruled life inside the mother's womb not protected by law in 1973) or marriage (the same-sex marriage push in some states and reaction against in many others).

Our purpose here is not to debate these topics, but rather to equip you to lead others in an exploration of the Biblical role of government to legitimize behaviors that adhere to Biblical standards and are positive for the community. This power is sometimes referred to as the placing or removing of social stigmas on certain behaviors.

To illustrate the point, polygamy (one man with multiple wives) is an example of a Biblical behavior that is not embraced in contemporary American public life. (It's illegal, in fact.) Many Old Testament figures, however, had multiple wives despite the example of Adam and Eve, and the New Testament does not expressly forbid polygamy. It does say church leaders may only be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:12).

However, we are also told to submit to the governing authorities, who have outlawed polygamy in all 50 states in America. There are sound public policy reasons to outlaw polygamy, but the Bible does not proscribe multiple marriage partners. It does, of course, condemn all sex outside of marriage. Lawmakers in contemporary public life prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors within the context of marriage and family life as beneficial and helpful to the larger community. In so doing, governments help regulate the sexual drive and channel it into healthy, constructive actions that move us closer to the good life.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY FIVE

We need not be surprised that perhaps the most important principle of all in understanding the role and goal of government comes from the teaching our Lord Jesus Himself. In Matthew 22:17-21, Christ is asked about paying taxes. He asks to see a coin, called a denarius. He notes there is a likeness of Caesar on the coin. (Caesar was Rome's ruler, and hence the leader of the governmental authority over Jerusalem where this conversation occurs.) He then dismisses the question with a simple, "Then render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

The lesson is that government has its realm and God has His. God transcends or is, in popular terminology, *above* the work and role of government. This teaching refutes a key concept of Islamic theology as well—the so-called *sharia* law that has God at the center of all aspects of life, including community laws and standards. This is also known as theocracy.

As embodied in the teachings of Jesus Christ, the God of the New Testament declares government and its work—including coinage used for storing labor, transferring wealth and collecting taxes—as separate. God is sovereign. He is over all. But He is not *in* all (pantheism) nor infused in every aspect of community life (theocracy).

Christ's clear teaching is that we are to submit to government while giving our ultimate allegiance to God. The Pharisees questioning Christ in this passage had no conception that one could faithfully worship God while also paying taxes to the state. Their materialism and devotion to money compelled them to see the issue as simple and one-sided: If we pay tax, we are giving allegiance to a human master rather than our Divine creator.

But Christ affirms government and its work by saying our relationship with God transcends the realm of government which, while a creation of God, does not contain God.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY SIX

Our sixth theme under the focus of the Biblical role of government is the larger task of restraining evil, as distinguished from punishing specific wrongdoing or wrongdoers. This thought is expressed in the verses we read earlier in Romans 13, particularly verse 3, where we are told government is to be feared by evil. This is a very important work of government. Government is a restraint upon evil, which in a fallen world could run amok easily (and too often does) without constraint.

This thought was explored in some detail by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, who called this idea “common grace.” The more one leans toward free will or Armenianism, the more acceptable this doctrine is. The more one leans toward reformed theology or predestination, the harder it is for this doctrine to be embraced. But whatever terms we use, it is clear from this passage that government restrains evil to some degree.

Of course, as an institution populated with fallen humans, governments, like every family or the church, do not always live up to their high Biblical calling. In fact, governments are often co-opted to foster evil, which opens up a separate discussion of the necessity of putting our allegiance to God first over ungodly requirements of the state. But setting that aside, the Scriptures teach that government restrains evil, and this benefits all, the saved and the unsaved.

This act is critically important to creating an environment in which the Gospel can be proclaimed and taught by the church. And we see that the church is often among the first institutions to be attacked and persecuted when the ungodly rule. “When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, people groan,” states Proverbs 29:2. This act—restraining evil—is also essential to the ability of the family to rear the next generation.

Imagine that the pure, unadulterated evil loosed in the world was unchecked in any fashion. Whether through governments,—which Scripture clearly teaches God uses for this purpose—or through direct intervention of God in raising some civilizations and toppling others, we realize some restraining mechanism is in place. All we need to do to see what life would be like without this restraint is to read the final Book of the Bible—Revelation. Here, in the final throes of Earth’s existence, there is no restraint upon evil until God’s perfect timing brings about his government without end.

Focus Two:
The Biblical Role of Government

DAY SEVEN

If government is good, is God's idea, and is essential to creating an environment for families to bring forth the next generation and for the church to proclaim the Gospel, how come government was used to kill Jesus? How can we embrace government as good when it was the instrument of Christ's death?

There are several answers to such a question, but we cannot lose sight of the concept that Christ needed to come, suffer and die for our sins so that we might be saved. There is no other route to heaven revealed in the Scriptures. Given the necessity of Christ's death, and given the clear teaching that only the state can take life, we should not be surprised that the Roman Empire was employed to execute Christ.

And those of us who study the Bible and seek to follow its teachings should be mindful that the "religious conservatives" of Christ's day enlisted government to carry out their dirty work. This fact we learn from John 18:31: "So Pilate said to them, 'Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law.' The Jews said to him, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.'"

The use of the Roman occupiers to carry out the wishes of the religious rulers of the Sanhedrin not only fulfilled prophecy, but it affirms—in a perverse but yet telling way—that government, and government alone, is authorized by God to take life. As we see throughout Scripture, God follows His own patterns and pronouncements as He unfolds His perfect will and human history.

But what about that verse in Isaiah 9:6, where we are told the government will be upon Christ's shoulders? Isn't that, too, a sweeping indictment of government, showing that it is at enmity with the church and the people of God across time—not just at the crucifixion of Christ at a particular moment in time?

No, we argue. We see a distinction between Biblical government and unbiblical government. But that brings us to our third focus, where we will see that many choice servants lauded and honored in both the Old and New Testaments are associated with government—frequently in pagan cultures that are hostile to God on the surface, but are used to achieve His might purposes.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY ONE

The Bible confirms the truth of its teachings and the Divine authority of its words in many convincing ways. Our faith in the Bible's veracity is encouraged by its unflattering details about its main authors and the major players in God's unfolding drama. For example, two of the primary figures and main authors of the Bible, Moses and Paul, are murderers. King David, too, kills a man to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba. And Peter indeed thrice denies Christ in our Lord's deepest time of need. Given these obvious public imperfections, there's hope for the rest of us. But it also is convincing proof that the Bible is not a history book or political manifesto designed to make the people of God look good. It is the pure, unvarnished truth.

That fact makes the often positive roles government officials play throughout the Scriptures all the more intriguing. This third focus will examine the worthy work of, and the Bible's praise for, leaders such as Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Joseph and the Roman centurion, all of whom have significant government roles. They are used by God to advance His purposes in remarkable ways.

Their character, commitment and callings will shed important light on the esteem in which God holds government—as well as give us important insights into the qualities we should look for when we vote for leaders for government today. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 provides the best summary passage for those of us who have the right—nay, the responsibility to vote—and help set the priorities of a government that takes a significant portion of the income we earn:

“You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.

You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial; and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.”

As we look in greater depth at some of the most approved figures in the Bible, we will see that they embody the characteristics Israel is commanded to look for in its judges. (We note here they also served

as magistrates, military generals, spiritual leaders and community organizers.) We must look for these same qualities in those we would support for public office, whether with public praise or financial support, or in the privacy of the voting booth.

And if you don't find these qualities in your choices, please consider running for public office yourself.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY TWO

The prophet Daniel is best known for his faith in the face of ravenous lions when the king threw him in the pit. He is perhaps the only major Old Testament figure about whom not one negative thing is said (see Daniel 6:4). The Biblical text records no criticism of his character or conduct. His faithfulness as a government official in the heathen courts of Babylonian kings after Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's exile includes recognition from the Lord Jesus himself as a prophet. His competence as an administrator and wisdom as a counselor prompted King Darius to name him one of three "presidents" or "commissioners" of the vast empire that included the lands of modern-day Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon and beyond.

Daniel, whose very name means "God is my judge," distinguished himself from the outset as a pious and prudent leader. Read especially Daniel 1:8-16, where he wisely pursues God while growing in favor and stature among the king's court. This pattern is available to us as well, in whatever professional or ministry endeavor we have been called to pursue.

See also how Daniel maintains allegiance to the civil authority while refusing, literally, to bow down to false idols. Note that when the anxious King Darius comes to the lions' den, he calls out to Daniel asking if "your God, whom you constantly serve" has spared him. Daniel responds: "O king, live forever" (Daniel 6:21).

This reminds us of the teaching of Christ regarding rendering to the state its due and to God His due. Daniel has a clear grasp on serving his God while also respecting and honoring the civil authority who, by the way, had just put him in the lions' den to uphold its honor and save face.

We can take heart that God calls His choice servants to serve in public life. For those called to that form of ministry, there is no better role model than Daniel.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY THREE

There is another exemplary Old Testament figure who excels in government service. His name is Joseph. If there is a criticism of Joseph in the text, it is his pride in his favored place in his father's heart. But as we will see, Joseph had much to be proud about.

Joseph's father is Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, whom the Bible calls the father of our faith. Jacob's twelve sons form the twelve tribes of Israel. The family's obvious dysfunction gives heart to all of us who recognize the effects of the Fall in our own families and flawed parenting. The fighting and squabbling leads to the brothers selling Joseph into slavery while compounding that crime by reporting back to their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The false story comes complete with a bloody coat, faked evidence to seemingly confirm his death.

Joseph's life as a slave is well known to Sunday School students. So is his fateful encounter with his master's wife, who tries to entice him into a sexual liaison. When Joseph flees, leaving behind his coat (there's something about Joseph and coats), she levels a sexual harassment charge and Joseph is imprisoned. There again, like Daniel, his management and leadership skills, along with his faith, impress all.

His gifts of discernment soon bring him face-to-face with Pharaoh, the total, unquestioned ruler of Egypt, the lone superpower of that day. Joseph explains for Pharaoh what a dream means. In so doing, he is appointed prime minister, second only to Pharaoh in all matters of state. He wisely leads the nation, helping it avoid mass death by famine, and is unexpectedly reunited with his family in one of the most remarkable stories of the Bible (read the narrative beginning at Genesis 41).

When he reveals his identity to his awe-struck brothers, he wisely explains the situation thusly: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance" (Genesis 45:7).

Notice that God used government—a pagan empire no less, led by the young Jewish son of Jacob—to provide this deliverance. He could have used a great man like Job to provide the same circumstances, or fashioned any scenario He might choose as the Sovereign of history. But God worked through the Prime Minister of Egypt to save humankind,

including the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, whose progeny would become an object of God's special affection as His chosen people. And a government official—some might say bureaucrat or politician—was the key to that miracle unfolding.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY FOUR

A little known Old Testament prophet, Nehemiah, is rightly considered the first Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. His public works project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem during the reign of King Artaxerxes (circa 450 B.C.) shows again that God's choicest servants often served in government posts. It also teaches us a magnificent leadership lesson.

Nehemiah was a cupbearer or wine taster for the king, again the sole sovereign of the superpower of that day. It sounds like a kitchen job but, to be allowed so close and entrusted with preventing poisoning, he was a trusted servant. Some have likened the position to an officeholder's chief of staff. Perhaps that's a bit of a stretch, but chief of security he certainly was!

In fact, King Artaxerxes knew and liked Nehemiah so much that when he noticed his trusted servant was downcast one day, he asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah responded that he wanted to help rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and restore order to his ancestral capital. The king offered to not only let him do so, but to pay the bill for the large public works project and to provide security and political capital to make sure the project was accomplished (Nehemiah 2:7-8).

What follows is literally a miraculous rebuilding of the walls in an amazing 52 days. Nehemiah accomplishes this feat by appealing to people's self-interest, getting them to rebuild a portion of the wall in front of their home or adjacent to their business or entrance to the ancient city. Political leaders today often follow this pattern as well; they call citizens of a community or a country to collective action to benefit the common good by explaining how they will benefit personally. Human nature has changed little since Nehemiah's day.

Along with the spiritual revival sparked by Ezra as detailed in the book bearing his name (the two books were once combined into one), this work marks the restoration of the Jewish remnant from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. It is achieved by Nehemiah, the man named governor of Judah by King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah's exemplary service to God through government was also used for spiritual revival in the land as well.

Let us challenge our public officials today to discharge their duties in such a way that they call the people to repentance and holiness.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY FIVE

In addition to men, God used many women in public roles in Scripture. Perhaps the best example is Queen Esther, who saved the Jewish people from genocide threatened by royal court intrigue during the reign of King Xerxes I of Persia (modern-day Iran).

This short book bearing the queen's name comes right after the Book of Nehemiah. It presents a story as gripping and compelling as has ever been presented on Broadway or movie screens. It is also the only book in the Bible not to directly mention any of the many Biblical names for God. But from the outset it is clear that Queen Esther, a Jewish woman, serves her God first. This faithfulness saves God's chosen people from certain slaughter.

The best known verse of this short writing, Esther 4:14, captures the sense with which we all should live and review our responsibilities—whether to self, God, family, employer or nation. They come from her trusted relative, Mordecai, who raised her after she was orphaned and counseled her after she became Queen of Persia:

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty *for such a time as this?*”

This insight from her trusted father-figure emboldens her to approach the king with her concerns about the decree he had been deceived into issuing allowing the wholesale slaughter of her people, the Jews. The king had every right to put her to death for approaching him. Instead, her boldness is rewarded with royal favor (or should we say Divine favor) and the king is convinced to issue a second, separate decree and assists in its rapid dissemination so that the Jewish people are spared.

For the purposes of this study, the significance is that God again works through the agency of government. He calls a beautiful young woman to be queen to a pagan ruler, whose office is used to imperil but then save the Jewish remnant. Queen Esther, by faithfully serving her God, saved her people and gave significant service to the Kingdom. Her presence prevented a miscarriage of justice through governing authorities, God's creation.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY SIX

Tax collectors were among the most loathed New Testament public officials. They not only cooperated with the occupying armies to collect onerous taxes for Rome, but their job essentially gave them a license to collect far more tax than Rome demanded. The short story about the chief tax collector named Zacchaeus fits quite nicely the stereotypes many have of government officials. But we see his true heart after he meets Jesus, as detailed in Luke 19.

Christ's love knows no bounds. But we have to admit Jesus makes an especially active effort to reach Zacchaeus, even inviting Himself to dinner in his home. The usual politically-correct crowd grumbled when they heard Christ was going to have dinner with Zacchaeus, a known sinner (see Luke 19:7). But hear the convert's words after encountering Christ:

Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Christ made no exception for government officials. Indeed, He went out of His way to engage and evangelize this chief tax collector. We, too, would do well to consider government officials—especially those with a tender and open heart for the things of God like Zacchaeus—as an evangelism field. What if we went out of our way to encourage and evangelize civil servants, public safety officers, class room teachers and others involved in public life as an intentional ministry? Christ certainly did.

Focus Three:
God's Choice Servants Work in Government

DAY SEVEN

The story of the Roman centurion (commander of 100 soldiers) is both encouraging and disquieting at the same time. As we read the narrative found in Matthew 8:5-13, it is unmistakable that this officer of the occupying pagan army is a faith-filled man who receives, perhaps, Christ's highest compliment aside from John the Baptist. But the contrast our Lord draws with those who are "supposed" to be spiritually discerning and faith-filled and those in whom he actually finds true faith is a caution for all of us.

This short story centers on the soldier who approaches Christ seeking healing for his servant. The officer's concern for his servant is certainly laudable, and coming to Christ shows that he knows where to go for help. But then, after Christ asks where the servant is so He can go to Him, the centurion says he is unworthy for Christ to be in his home. He encourages Christ merely to command that he be healed, believing that is sufficient to bring about healing. Hear Christ's response, beginning at Matthew 8:10:

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.

"I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven;

"but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Again, a significant government official from the occupying power is not only commended by Christ for his faith, but he is lifted above the entire nation of Israel as an exemplar of spiritual devotion and maturity. God, of course, could use any number of figures from that time—or any number of occupations, for that matter—to create this teachable moment in Christ's ministry. But the Bible captures forever that it was a government employee, a soldier no less, and one serving the pagan government of Caesar.

Conclusion

We trust this short devotional has led you to a deeper understanding that government is good because it is God's creation, it has specific roles and goals described in Scripture necessary to life after the Fall, and that many of God's choice servants in the Scriptures are engaged in government.

We trust as well that this devotional has enriched your theology of government and given you a greater understanding that as the sovereign and funders (taxpayers) of modern government, we have a charge to be engaged. That engagement includes casting informed, wise votes consistent with the counsel of Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

Finally, we trust this devotional has opened you to some of the challenges the church faces. The moral consensus rooted in a common culture of Christianity erodes under greater economic and social integration across the world, as well as a wrong-headed but widespread view that faiths making ultimate truth claims must be silenced so that we can "all get along."

The Indiana Family Institute stands ready to assist you with additional materials, speakers, sermon notes and outlines, and more as you bring a fully-orbed, Biblical worldview to all the pressing challenges of our day. That includes the role of this unique, God-given institution we call government.

*All Scripture references are drawn from
The New American Standard Bible,
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