

# Gospel Perspectives on Politics Part 1

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to our first session in this class that we've called Gospel Perspectives on Politics. So this first class is going to be something of an introduction where we consider some principles and passages for political discipleship.

Now, what I mean by political discipleship is simply growing in our ability to think and act Christianly as we participate in whatever political context God has placed us in.

Growing in our ability to think and act Christianly as we participate and live in whatever political context God has placed us in. And by politics, what do I mean by that?

Well, I mean what I think is the kind of everyday use of the term. So in this class, we're going to use politics to mean that sphere of human activity that includes government and voting and laws and advocacy and public policy.

So how can we think and act Christianly in that political context that God has placed us in here and now? So today, by way of introduction to this whole topic, I want to put before us some biblical principles and biblical passages.

[ 1 : 11 ] And let me underscore, today is going to be introductory. Let me underscore that. We're going to have four more weeks to unpack this topic.

So if you feel like we just scratched the surface today, you're right. We just scratched the surface today. But hopefully we'll kind of get a good starting point, a good common starting point today from which we can go and explore deeper.

Also, this morning, I want to spend a good chunk of time hearing from you what your questions or concerns or difficulties or what topics come to your mind when you think about living Christianly in our political context.

So we're going to spend some time for that today. Much of this task of political discipleship, as I've called it, will be, you know, much of that work is going to be engaging in collective discernment so that we can engage wisely and in a way that honors Christ.

So practically then this morning, I'm going to spend about 25 to 30 minutes laying out some principles and passages. And then we'll spend the last maybe 15, 20 minutes just sharing those questions that you have, the things that are in your heart, that come to your mind.

[ 2 : 17 ] That way we can have those things kind of on our eye, those salient questions on our eye as we walk through the material over the next four weeks. Okay, sound like a plan? Sound good?

All right, let me pray and then we'll dive in. God, thank you for this morning. Thank you for waking us up. Thank you for giving us breath in our lungs. Thank you for the sun that rises, reminding us of your faithfulness and your goodness to us.

God, thank you for your sovereign care that orders and ordains all things. We pray for your spirit to be present now, as you promise, as we walk through, applying, we hope, biblical wisdom to our present context and day.

Lord, give us a spirit of charity and unity and grace and even joy, God, as we consider your word and your principles in this topic and this class today.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so we're just going to dive right in. For those of you who don't know, I'm Nick. I didn't introduce myself. Glad you're here. I want to lay out five principles for approaching politics as a Christian.

[ 3 : 18 ] So five principles for political discipleship. First one, first one, politics are important but not ultimate.

That's our first principle. Politics are important but not ultimate. Broadly speaking, I think as Christians, we want to avoid two extremes or rather be aware of kind of two tendencies that can often tempt us.

On the one hand, we can fall into a tendency of ignoring politics or thinking that politics maybe aren't a very Christian thing to be doing or to be concerned with. We think they're too messy or too complicated or too worldly or too ineffective.

So we can kind of just ignore them or distance ourselves from any real thought or engagement with them. On the other hand, we can fall into the tendency of feeling that politics are what will ultimately fix things or rescue us, right?

Now, we might not say that, right, especially as Christians, but sometimes we might feel that, right? We might feel that, man, if we just get this right, that will be the answer to the problem.

[ 4 : 22 ] And if only our human political structures were right, then everything would be better. Or only if that party or that candidate did or didn't win, then, then we'd really arrive, right?

So these are the two tendencies that we want to be aware of and to avoid. We don't want to ignore politics, but we also don't want to think that politics will rescue us.

Do you see either of those tendencies in your own heart? Are you kind of an ignorer or are you a, you know, do you feel like, yes, this is it. This is the most important thing.

You know, I'm more of the avoider. I just think, you know what, let's just get on with the work. A pox on both our houses. Let's just keep going. But that's not the right tendency, right? That's not the right tendency.

So this is where our first principle comes in. In a Christian perspective, politics are important, but not ultimately. So to that first tendency, to shy away from politics, we need to remember that politics are important.

[ 5 : 17 ] We can't just ignore them or think they don't matter. Why? Because the lives of many, many human beings are impacted by political decisions. By what the government does, by what laws we have, by what public policies are in place.

You know, perhaps the first biblical passage to remind ourselves as we think about this is Leviticus 19.18, right? Jesus quotes this verse in Matthew 23.9. What is it? Do you know? What is it?

You shall love your neighbor as yourself, right? In an effort to love our neighbors, we should be appropriately engaged in the political processes of our particular context.

By way of illustration, think of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. I came across this example in the book by Justin Giboney and others called Compassion and Conviction.

This is a really good book, a really good sort of starting book, starting place on this whole topic of Christians and politics. Now, before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, children with disabilities were systematically excluded from public schools.

[ 6 : 23 ] Public transportation was almost totally inaccessible to those with mobility or visual impairments. Many were institutionalized and crowded in unsanitary facilities. Some people with mental and physical conditions even faced involuntary sterilization and were denied life-saving medical treatment, right?

And all of that motivated the writing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public services, public accommodations, etc.

Who here has heard of Johnny Erickson Tata? Yeah, right? Yeah, she's a kind of well-known Christian writer and speaker. She was part of the National Council that worked on the draft of that legislation.

She was actually there when President Bush, the first President Bush, signed it into law, right? So because politics affects the lives of so many, and because we're called to love our neighbors, politics are important.

We can't ignore them. Another passage that tells us that politics are important is 1 Timothy 2, 1-4. So in this passage, 1 Timothy 2, 1-4, Paul urges the church to pray for kings and those who are in positions of authority, he says.

[ 7 : 29 ] Let me read that passage for us. Paul says, Notice the progression in that passage, right?

Pray for what we would now call political leaders, so that we may live in peace, so that the gospel may advance and people may be saved. When government's functioning well, it can be a blessing to the life of the church to gather and worship freely and peacefully, and therefore for the advance of the gospel.

Now, of course, the health of the church and the advance of the gospel are not dependent on the well-functioning of the government, right? Historically, the church thrives and grows in seasons of

trial and persecution, as well as in times of peace.

But Paul still says, pray for the kings and those who are in high positions, that we can lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way, right? They are important, so Christians should care about them. But, but, but, to the second extreme, we need to remember that politics are not ultimate, right?

The next election is not the most important thing in the world, right? Despite what the news media wants you to think about it, so that you can watch their shows and they can get money from advertising, right?

[ 9 : 05 ] It's not. Christ is king and he is our ultimate redeemer. The tools of politics will not usher in the kingdom of God. They won't.

In fact, the gospel can advance in any culture under any political sphere. Moreover, what can politics not do? Politics cannot change the human heart, right?

Just laws are a great blessing, a great blessing. But they cannot change a human heart to want to love God and love our neighbor. Only God, through the gospel, can do that. Now, that sort of raises the question, what's the purpose of government?

Now, we're only going to touch on this this morning. Maybe we'll come back to this in a later session if you want to go deeper in that. What's the purpose of government? Well, consider one key passage in Romans 13, 1 through 7. Romans 13, 1 through 7.

That's where Paul gives one window into the purpose of government. We're not going to unpack that whole passage today. But we see there, among some other passages, that God at least instituted governments to establish a kind of basic platform of justice for everyone created in God's image, right?

[ 10 : 10 ] In that passage, Paul says, governments are God's servants for our good. He even goes so far to say that they're instituted by God. And he says that they're there to punish evil and promote good. And all of that means, according to Paul, that as Christians, we should appropriately submit to the ruling authorities.

Right? Of course, the caveat is, we obey God rather than man in all things. But, as possible, we submit to the governing authorities. That's Paul's line of thinking. But it's interesting, nowhere in that passage does Paul give any indication that human governments or human politics will advance the ultimate healing of creation or usher in God's kingdom.

Only the message of the gospel can truly save. Only the risen Christ will consummate God's kingdom. You see, as Christians, there's a bigger and longer story that we're a part of, stretching all the way from creation to new creation.

Right? When will the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God, as Revelation 11 puts it? When is that going to happen? When Jesus returns, right?

So, politics are important in this in-between time, but they're not ultimate. So, that means, maybe to just sum up this first principle, Christians should be engaged, but not enraged by politics.

[ 11 : 23 ] Yeah? Good. Okay. I'm going to keep going. We're going to have time for questions at the end, or time for engagement or other things. That's our first principle. Second principle is this. God and the gospel are neither Republican nor Democrat.

Neither conservative nor progressive. Christians can belong to a particular political party for strategic reasons, but our allegiance is to Christ alone.

As Christians, our allegiance is ultimately to Christ as king, not the platform of any one political party. Now, this does not mean that Christians cannot or should not be affiliated with a political party.

Right? Nor does it mean that political parties don't serve their purpose. You know, part of the reality of our current political context is that we live in a two-party system, and that's how things get done. And there's pros and cons to that. Christians, for the time being, will have to work within that system. Right? But we must never let the platform of any one political party determine what we believe or what we desire as Christians.

[ 12 : 35 ] Right? We need a healthy sense of differentiation from whichever political party we happen to align with in order to remain faithful to Christ. Now, practically speaking, that means a Christian should be able to critique their own political party, whatever it is, and readily acknowledge the strengths of the opposing party.

Right? After all, isn't this what Jesus is talking about when he says, we need to consider the log in our own eye before pointing out the speck in our neighbor's eye? Yeah? In fact, I would go so far as to say if we aren't able to critique our own political party and acknowledge the strengths of the opposing party, we're probably not.

We probably have not been shaped enough by the biblical witness. We've probably been shaped too much by the context if we're not able to do that. Think of Romans 12, 1 through 2.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Right? Don't be conformed to this world. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you can test what's acceptable and what's good. And I think the implication here is that no political party is the default Christian party.

[14:08] Think about the end of Joshua chapter 5. I'm using this passage a little bit by way of analogy. This is not like perfect biblical exegesis, right? Right? Joshua chapter 5. Joshua and the Israelites have just entered the Promised Land.

They're approaching Jericho. Joshua has an encounter with this sort of majestic person-being angel who comes to him. Right? And then Joshua chapter 5, verses 13 and 14 read, When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked.

And behold, a man was standing before him with his sword drawn in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said, Are you for us or for our adversaries? And he said, What did he say?

No. No. But I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I've come. And what does Joshua do? He falls on his face to the earth and worships.

Now that's a shocking answer that the commander of the Lord's army gives to Joshua, isn't it? You know, are you for us or for our adversaries? And he says, No. I wonder if God would give us a similar answer today if we asked, God, are you for this or that political party?

[15:16] This or that candidate? I wonder if he might say, No. Wrong question. Our allegiance is to Christ. He must always supersede our political partnerships.

And we must never, ever give unyielding, unthinking, unqualified support or allegiance to a particular party or candidate, even if we have to work within that system.

Right? Not only is that how we keep our integrity as Christians, but it's also just strategic politically. Right? If during an election season, Christians just go unyieldingly for a candidate, if that candidate actually wins the election, what authority or power do we have to actually influence that person to do what we think is just and right?

They already know that we're in their pocket. Right? So it's not just about preserving our Christian integrity. It's about actually being effective in the public square. Okay.

That's the end of the second principle. Third. Third principle. The ends never justify the means. Character is more important than political victory.

[16:22] Or as they say it in this book, Compassion and Conviction, that I referenced earlier, as Christians, we want to put our witness before the wind. Look, politics is a form of power.

Right? And as Christians, we need to steward power wisely and humbly under God's ultimate sovereignty. We should not think that it's justifiable to use this power that we have in an ungodly manner in order to achieve what we believe to be a godly end.

In order the character of our participation in the public square is as important as the ends that we achieve. Dishonesty, slander, uncharitable speech towards those with whom we disagree, etc., etc. Those things might be commonplace in political discourse. But it's not how Christ compels us to act. In other words, it's better to lose on a particular political issue or vote than to dishonor Christ by winning in an un-Christlike manner.

Now, we've just studied the Beatitudes this summer. Some of us have memorized the Beatitudes this summer. That sort of character should be evident as Christians engage in politics.

[17:39] Whether it's on the debate stage, or on your social media posts, or in your conversations with your neighbors. Alright, for the sake of time, I'm going to quickly move through the last two.

Because I know we'll come back to a lot of this stuff in future sessions. Fourth, Christians must model charitable disagreement within the local church. We have to model charitable disagreement within the local church.

No two church members will agree on every political issue. Right? Why? Why is that? Why don't we all just have the exact same view on all these issues? We believe in the Bible, right?

Shouldn't it just be simple? We read the Bible, we come up with our ideas, we all agree. Why do no two church members agree on every political issue? Because so many political topics are wisdom issues.

They're wisdom issues. Taxes, immigration policy, healthcare, foreign policy, fiscal policy, environmental policy. These are all areas where Christians need to apply biblical thinking and principles.

[ 18 : 45 ] But they're not areas where the Bible gives a clear playbook for how to do so. Right? There's not a straight line between love your neighbor as yourself and adjust an equitable tax code.

Right? These are wisdom issues and different Christians come to different conclusions. Now at times, these disagreements will touch on deeply emotional and sensitive topics for particular church members.

Right? That's to be expected. However, we have to remember that first and foremost in the church, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, purchased with his blood.

Political disagreement does not warrant treating my brother or sister in Christ as an enemy. And even if it did, what are the rules of the house?

Love your enemies. In fact, what is the church? What is the local church? I love how D.A. Carson, I think it was, who described the church. I'm paraphrasing, but he said, you know, the church is where natural enemies have been made brothers and sisters through the blood of Christ.

[ 19 : 59 ] Right? There are Republican-leaning Christians at Trinity. There are Democrat-leaning Christians at Trinity. But we are all under the obligation to love one another.

That does not rule out hearty conversation. That doesn't rule out disagreement. You and I may never agree on tax policy or immigration policy or gun control.

We might never disagree. We might never agree on those things. We might never come to the same position. Right? But I'm still called and you're still called to listen, to love, and to serve. And if Christians can do that in the local church, imagine what a witness it would be to our neighbors.

Right? Few people look at the current state of political discourse and conclude it's healthy. Right? It's divisive. It's partisan. It's full of name-calling.

Seems like Congress can never get anything done. It's a mess. Right? But what if it were different in the church? What if we modeled how to do it better? And the gospel gives us the resources to do that.

[ 21 : 09 ] Jonathan Lehman, in his little booklet, How Can I Love Church Members With Different Politics? That's this one. You know, these both came out around the same time. I don't know why red and black was like the publishing color this year.

It's a little harsh, but, you know, ignore the colors. You can take the dust jacket off. But this little booklet, we're going to have more of these in the coming weeks. I ordered some for us. And it's an easy read.

If you read kind of one thing, I would read this. But anyway, he does a good job of kind of laying this out about how the gospel starts to get into the cracks and into the working out of these things.

He says, on the one hand, right, justified people care about justice. Right? Right? Justified people care about justice. As Martin Luther famously said, I think it was Martin Luther, he said, we're saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.

Right? It always gives birth to love and good deeds. The converse of that would be what James says in the epistle to James. Faith without works is dead. Right? A living faith, a living union with the risen Christ will care about doing good and seeking righteousness.

[ 22 : 14 ] It makes us hunger and thirst for righteousness. Right? Justified people care about justice. So the gospel propels us to think about these things and to act on these things. We sometimes get excited about them.

Right? Now at the same time, as our justification pushes us to think about justice and doing righteousness, at the same time, what does the gospel tell us?

We're all prone to self-justification. Right? We are, again, as Luther maybe more famously said, and he actually said this, I'm sure. We're simuliusus e peccator.

Right? What does that mean? We're at the same time just and sinful. Even as Christians, we're still prone to think in our flesh that our ideas are the best ideas. We will naturally come to the

conclusion, or we'll sort of naturally think initially that how I approach a wisdom issue is how all Christians should approach that issue.

Right? That's our natural event as self-justifiers. But if the gospel tells me that I'm a justified sinner, then I'm aware, right?

[ 23 : 20 ] I'm aware in the gospel that I don't always put the pieces together exactly right. I need others to help me just as I can help others.

I need to listen. I need to question. I need to learn. Right? So out of those twin things of the gospel comes a model then of charitable disagreement. We have our ideas. We care.

We both care about many of the same things, but we also realize that we're not going to always get it right. We have to be humble. We have to be charitable. We have to listen. Okay. That's the fourth principle.

We should model charitable disagreement within the local church. Fifth, last principle. It's helpful to distinguish the institutional church and the organic church.

It's helpful to distinguish what's sometimes been called the institutional church and the organic church. Now, this is a distinction made by the Dutch reform theologian in the 19th century, Abraham Kuyper.

[ 24 : 19 ] 19th century, right? Those of you who really love your reform. In the early 20th century. In the early 20th century? Yeah. It's a distinction he made, or at least popularized. It's helpful when thinking about how the church should engage in culture or in politics.

The question is, well, what do we mean by the church? Do we mean the local church as an institution, right? With elders and deacons that preaches the word and serves the sacraments?

Do we mean the institution of the church? Or do we mean individual Christians living out their allegiance to Christ in the world? Both of those are the church, right? But, and there's overlap between the two, but that distinction is helpful between the institutional church and the organic church, right?

Here's where it's helpful. There are certain things that an individual Christian can do. For example, campaign for a particular political candidate.

That's a perfectly legitimate thing for a Christian to do. But that would be inappropriate for a local church as an institution to do, right? Now, some individual Christians will be called to engage in politics vocationally.

[ 25 : 22 ] Some will be more engaged in politics due to personal interest. But the church institutional must keep its mission of making disciples first and foremost. Now, of course, that doesn't absolve church leadership from making disciples who know how to engage faithfully in politics, right?

But it means that the institutional church will often be more keen to explicate biblical principles than to advocate for particular policies.

For example, the church institution will teach the dignity of human life from conception to resurrection. But it will probably not necessarily get into the weeds of which specific policies are best to care for unwanted pregnancies and to prevent abortion, right?

Of course, we want those things, right? We want to care for those who are in the midst of unwanted pregnancies. We want abortions to go way down, to be no more, right?

But individual Christians, the organic church, will need to discern how to best live out those principles in the public sphere. Now, I say all that, but we need to be very careful, actually.

[ 26 : 33 ] I'm not saying that the church is spiritual and has nothing to say on these topics. That was actually a grave error in the American church. If you know the history of racism and slavery in the United States, you know that some Christians historically justified not speaking out against slavery because of the so-called spirituality of the church, right?

That was something out in the world. That's not what the church does. We just make disciples. We don't have anything to say about that. That was an utter failure of the church to think that way.

That's not what we're saying here. There are some things that the Bible is very, very clear about. Abortion, same-sex marriage, caring for the poor and oppressed, the danger of greed and wealth. And we certainly don't want to back down from teaching what the Bible teaches clearly, what Scripture teaches clearly.

We want to teach. But we also recognize that on many political issues, health care reform, immigration policies, etc., the Bible's not so clear. And faithful, Bible-believing Christians can hold

different views.

The church can't bind your conscience on those things. And we also realize that implementing good policies, even on the clear biblical topics, is not always something faithful Christians agree on.

[ 27 : 44 ] We might agree on a very clear topic, but not have the same priorities or approach for how to implement that through laws and policies. Does that make sense?

Thus, in the local church, we want to teach clearly what the Bible teaches, and then empower individual Christians to make Scripture-informed decisions when it comes to applying those things. For example, in choosing who to vote for. Now, some of you might be disappointed. Maybe you were hoping this class would tell you who to vote for in November.

The elders of this class, the elders of this church, excuse me, are not going to tell you who to vote for. It wouldn't be right, actually, for us to bind your conscience in that way. We can tell you with all authority that Jesus is God, that murder is wrong, that Christians should care for the poor, that God shows particular kindness to the refugee and the outcast.

But we can't bind your conscience as to the wisdom-based application of those passages and principles in the sphere of politics. We can converse. We can warn.

[ 28 : 55 ] We can engage. And there may be a time when things get so clear that we can do that. If the straight line gets really straight, I'm not saying we can never speak about those things, right?

But most of the time, it's not going to be a conscience-binding issue. Okay, to wrap up, I want to share some wisdom again from this little booklet about voting in particular.

This is what Lehman writes. He says, In other words, Don't see your vote as the litmus test of your identity.

Certainly not your identity in Christ. No candidate is perfect. All of us have to weigh many factors as we decide who to vote for. But as you do your best to weigh all the wisdom issues and then translate that into a vote, recognize that different Christians will make different wisdom-based calculations.

And perhaps it's good to remember at this point our first principle, right? Politics are important, but they're not ultimate. Do you know what's going to last longer than the next presidency?

[ 30 : 26 ] Do you know what's going to last longer and have more impact than even the United States of America? The Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus' kingdom really is forever. So how you love the Church and how you love your fellow Church members is vastly more important than how you vote in the next election.