

"Election Reflections"

Tuesday is Election Day. Are you thinking, "Hallelujah! Finally!" After months and months and months of campaigning, and candidates sparring and accusing one another, and demonizing those of the opposite party.

I've thought a lot about what to preach on this Sunday. Should I relate my message to the political situation that's just about on everyone's mind? Or are we so sick of it that I should preach on a more pleasant subject? Some years ago I preached a sermon on Christians and our relation to political issues. As I began my message, my wife Nancy was sitting near a lady in the congregation, who at that point leaned over to a family member, and in a rather loud voice said, "I hear about this all through the week. I don't need to hear this on Sunday, too!"

Well, even with that in mind, I decided to share some reflections on the political scene today, and how it relates to Scripture and to our faith. Our faith ought to relate to such important issues as the choice of our nation's leaders.

Much has been said about how hostile and divided our country is over political issues. But I believe there is a lot of unity and togetherness in our country! For instance, here's one thing I think most Americans agree on: that there are far too many political ads. And that the millions of dollars spent on campaign ads is insane, and wrong (money that could have been spent for more worthy causes). Kamala Harris has raised over a billion dollars. Trump hundreds of millions of dollars. Anyone think that the candidates ought to put more effort into bad mouthing one another? That there just isn't enough of that? I doubt anyone would agree to that. I think most Americans agree that if we're going to have debates the candidates need to answer the questions! Aren't we pretty much united over that issue?

I would guess that our country is pretty much in agreement that the Presidential campaigns are far too lengthy and drawn out! How long's this campaign been dragging on? A year a half? Two years? Ted Cruz announced he was running for President 596 days before Election Day. Prior to the 2020 election, a Democrat named John Delaney entered the race for President 1194 days before Election Day (well over 3 years before the election)!

Here are how some other countries run their elections for President or Prime Minister. In the *UK (Britain)* it's generally about a month. The current prime minister campaigned for 35 days. Ads on radio and TV are banned. In *Australia* the election campaign generally lasts 6 weeks. The current prime minister campaigned for 36 days. *Japan* has a 12-day limit. In *France* the presidential campaign generally lasts about 2 weeks. There are limits placed on the amounts of money that can be donated. *Sweden* has no laws limiting campaign length, but they generally last only 2 weeks. *Don't we wish!*

So, there is some unity in the country! But we realize, don't we, that in other ways *our nation is woefully divided*. For most of my years on this earth the divide between Republicans and Democrats has not been that great. Some presidential campaigns I could have felt comfortable voting for either candidate. This time around the difference between both parties is much more pronounced - even chasmic.

The reason is that both parties have been influenced by extremism. The far left, and the far right, politically. So, on important issues facing our country, there is a deep and often hateful divide: abortion, climate change, the fossil fuel industry, crime and the police, immigration, transgender identity and treatment, forgiveness of student loan debt, universal government run healthcare.

In addition to being poles apart on these, and other, important issues, what makes *this* election so critical to the future of our country is that *there are those who want to fundamentally reshape our country.* They believe the United States is essentially flawed - a mistake. It is, and has been from its founding, racist to the core. White people, especially white males, are the oppressors; minorities are the oppressed. The constitution is outdated, and needs to be changed. Capitalism is part of the oppressive system, and needs to be replaced by an economic system that provides more income equality.

I recently saw an interview with a noted author and film producer, who said that this election is no longer about whether we choose liberal or conservative, but whether or not we want to preserve traditional America, and what made this country great, or instead radically reshape it, because it is fundamentally flawed. Frankly, what worries me is that many Americans are totally unaware of this radical movement that is intent on tearing down and reshaping our fundamental way of life. *This is such an important election!*

Let's reflect for a moment on the candidates! *Breaking news! Breaking news! We have just learned that both candidates are sinners!* Well, come to think of it, it isn't breaking news at all! We know that, don't we? No matter who the candidates are - whether for President, Vice-President, Senator, or local government - they're human beings. They're sinners. I like to read about past presidents. About political figures. I read a book written by a former Secret Service agent, as he told of behind-the-scenes stories of the Presidents he helped protect. I've read a thousand page book on the life of Harry Truman. A book on George H.W. Bush. A book on George Washington. I'm now reading Bill O'reilly's new book, *Confronting the Presidents.* And they all have one thing in common: they are sinners like the rest of us. So no matter who gains office this week, they will not be perfect leaders, they will make mistakes. They in themselves will not be our saviors.

This is a lead in to the Bible passage I want to look at with you today. It's from Romans, chapter 13. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God's agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience" (Romans 13:1-5).

The Apostle Paul is talking about our relationship to the governing authorities, and he says that these authorities have been appointed by God, for our own good! "There is no authority except

from God" (vs. 1). "(He or she) is God's agent (or "servant") for our good (vs. 4). "Therefore one must be subject" (or "submit") to them (vs. 5). So.....if Donald Trump wins the election, it's because God chose him as His agent. If Kamala Harris wins the election, it's because God chose her as His agent for our good. Like that?

Needless to say, these verses of Scripture raise a whole lot of questions! Even for those who love and honor God's Word, it's like, "Jeeez.....I don't know!" Does that mean God has placed Vladimir Putin in place, and Putin is God's servant or agent for good? Or that Adolph Hitler was God's agent for the good of the German people? Or Joseph Stalin in Russia? Estimates are that Stalin was responsible for the deaths of anywhere from 9 to 20 million human beings. Does Romans 13 mean that Christians are under obligation to support whatever policies the governing authorities deem appropriate - whether those laws benefit and protect the average citizen or not? When Hitler came to power, some German Christians referred to these verses in Romans 13 that advocated submission to the authorities, and the German Church by and large lent a blind eye to the mass murder of millions of Jews. If a radical group through violence takes over a government, do these verses mean that God sanctions that bloody takeover and they are His servants for good? Does every government, however established and maintained, have an equal claim to the divine approval these verses describe?

First of all, these verses remind us that *God has established governments and human authorities to bring order into His world*. Imagine life without any kind of civil laws or government structure. It would be chaos. Part of God's good creation, and the overcoming of the primeval chaos, is the ordering of human affairs through civil law. It helps to bring order in a sinful, fallen world. As one theologian put it, the corruption of human nature makes civil order *necessary*!

We all benefit from good government, whether it's on the national, state, or local level. Good government promotes our wellbeing. The Apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, and at times he had to rely on Rome to provide safety for him. We see in the Book of Acts that he appealed to his Roman citizenship to avoid being flogged; he called on Roman officials to protect him when his fellow Jewish countrymen arrested him and conspired how they might put him to death.

Therefore, *Christians have an obligation to the civil authorities*. Paul preached a gospel of grace, that believers in Christ are free from the demands of the law for salvation, but that doesn't mean we are free from *civil law*. The believer is just as obligated to obey traffic lights as the unbeliever! Governing authorities who promote the good and punish evil are instituted by God. It also says in verse 7 that they are to be supported by the payment of taxes. As Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17).

However, *when the government claims for itself the total and absolute devotion that are only to be given to God our Creator; or when a government no longer protects those who do good and punishes those who do evil, those authorities are no longer the divine servants or agents that Paul refers to in these verses*. When totalitarian governments and authoritarian rulers demand obedience from their citizens, no matter what, they take the place of God, and this becomes

idolatry. In the story of Moses, when the king of Egypt ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all male Hebrew babies born, it says, "The midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them" (Exodus 1:17). When the early apostles were ordered to stop preaching the gospel, they disobeyed the authorities. In Acts 4:19-20 Peter and John said to the authorities: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." In Acts 5:29 Peter and the apostles answer, "We must obey God rather than men."

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament was written near the end of the first century, in a time of persecution, when Christians under the Roman government were required once a year to appear before a Roman authority, burn a pinch of incense, and say, "Caesar is Lord". But many Christians defied government orders. They believed only Jesus is Lord. As a result, many believers were persecuted, and even executed. And in Romans, chapter 13, the Roman government is referred to as the beast. Revelation 13 is quite different from Romans 13 in how it views political leaders and the government.

So, it's a matter of Christian conscience as to if, and when, civil disobedience is in order - when saying "yes" to God means saying "no" to the demands of government. An illustration of this, in our country, of course, would be the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. As one Bible scholar put it: "Obedience to civil authority is a Christian duty, but it is to be exercised within the framework of the Christian's more far-reaching commitment or obedience to God."

What Romans 13 says about God putting leaders and authorities in place doesn't negate the fact that *God is the ultimate authority and ruler of creation*. Psalm 22:28 says, "For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." When Jesus was on trial before Pilate, Pilate said to Him, "Don't you know that I have power to release you or to crucify you?" Jesus responded: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). God allows all kinds of rulers to rule, for a while. But each one of those authorities will have to give an account of themselves to the Almighty!

One brief closing thought: With election day just around the corner, it's a good reminder that we are urged in the Bible to pray for our leaders. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 says, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

Whether Donald Trump wins, or Kamala Harris wins, they - and our nation - need our prayers. All of those elected to the U. S. Senate need our prayers. And who knows, maybe when we pray for the politicians we don't like, we might even begin to feel differently about them.

