

SPECIAL FOCUS

How Should I Respond to Politics?

GETTING STARTED

DISCUSS: What do you recall about your initial experiences with an election or government?

RECAP (PAGE 55): Politics can be a real minefield—especially for Christians. I learned this when I served on my local school board. While politicians are often only concerned with the outcome, Christians also must be concerned about the process. In one contentious moment some of my political colleagues wanted to accomplish a goal that would have been good, but they wanted to get there in a way that violated Christian principles. I couldn't support something good if I had to agree to an unbiblical path to get there.

The phrase, “The end justifies the means,” is often associated with sixteenth-century philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli. He wrote in one of his works: “For although the act condemns the doer, the end may justify him.”¹¹ Machiavelli apparently believed that if our goal is good, then we're free to use whatever means needed to achieve it.

Unfortunately, many people today seem to embrace that philosophy, but you won't find that idea in Scripture. In fact, God calls us to a wholly different standard: a standard of obedience and love for Him that will be seen in our actions.

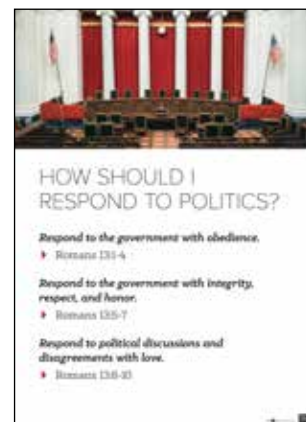
GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Point** on page 56. Invite group members to fill in the blanks.

THE POINT: Reflect CHRIST in how you INTERACT with politics and government.

LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item #6**, the “**Responding to Politics**” poster, and give a brief overview of this session.

STUDY THE BIBLE

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Use the following activity to introduce today's topic in a light-hearted way. We often divide people based on “hot button” topics—Republican or Democrat; pro-gun or anti-gun; private insurance or single-payer healthcare. For a few minutes, divide your group over more silly topics. Ask group members to go to the left side of the room if they like salsa, and to the right side of the room if they like queso. Repeat the same “division” for these topics: sports fans and non-sports fans; Coke® or Pepsi®; gluten or non-gluten. Explain that in today's study, we'll learn how to avoid divisions and seek to honor Christ in our responses to politics.



GIVE BIBLICAL CONTEXT: After explaining the theology of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 1–8) and addressing the issue of Israel’s rejection of the gospel (chs. 9–11), Paul wrote of the practical implications of the gospel for the lives of believers (12:1–15:13). One of those implications was how the gospel should affect a believer’s view of and relationship to governing authorities. This topic was particularly appropriate for the believers in Rome, who were living in the heart of the Roman Empire.

RECAP (PAGE 56): If you imagine life in the Roman Empire was relatively peaceful, pleasant, and prosperous, think again. Slavery, sexual exploitation, violence, cruelty, graft, and corruption were common in first-century Roman life. It was in the midst of all this and more that Paul wrote to admonish the Roman believers: “Let everyone submit to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1).

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Romans 13:1-4 on page 56.

GUIDE: Direct your group’s attention to the following heading on page 56: **Respond to the government with OBEDIENCE.**

RECAP (PAGE 56): Paul told the Corinthian church, “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). The orderliness of God applies when it comes to government too, since God institutes governments to maintain order. As we live in submission to and under the authority of the government, we learn what it means to live in subjection to God Himself. “For it is God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:4). Consequently, failure to submit to the authorities He has placed over our lives is rebellion. “So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God’s command” (v. 2).

DISCUSS: How have you seen government benefit you or your community? [*ALTERNATE: How would you summarize the teachings in these verses?*]

DISCUSS: What would it look like to obey Paul’s commands in these verses in today’s world?

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Romans 13:5-7 on page 56.

GUIDE: Direct your group’s attention to the following heading on page 56: **Respond to the government with INTEGRITY, respect, and honor.**

RECAP (PAGE 57): Our testimony shows up everywhere, so as much as possible, Christians should be model citizens. We’re instructed to “submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience” (v. 5). Verse 7 reminds us that this submission covers everything.

- ▶ We should obey all laws—including traffic laws.
- ▶ We should pay all of our taxes.
- ▶ We should respect every government office—from president to school board.
- ▶ We should honor those who serve in the government—regardless of their race, gender, political party, or region of the country.

DISCUSS: What responsibilities do Christ-followers have in relation to our government?
[ALTERNATE: *Why is it important for us to respect and honor those in authority, even when we don't agree?*]

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Romans 13:8-10 on page 57.

GUIDE: Direct your group's attention to the following heading on page 57: **Respond to political discussions and disagreements with LOVE.**

RECAP (PAGE 57): It might seem that, with verse 8, Paul changed subjects from our response to governing authorities to loving one another, but we should read verses 8-10 in the context of how we respond to governing authorities. Politics must be practiced in the context of love. Most of us likely aren't politicians, but we have political views—and we need to practice and express those views with love. The apostle Paul commanded the Romans—and us—to owe nothing to anyone except the debt of loving others. “Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another” (v. 8). Love proves whose we really are. When people know we're Christians, our actions and attitudes put God's name on the line. If love isn't present in our political discussions, we'll be mean, shortsighted, and selfish. Hate-filled name-calling and incivility have no place in the life of a believer. As Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

DO: Instruct group members to complete the activity, **Our Obedience Matters**, on page 57, on their own. If time allows, invite volunteers to share their responses.

Our Obedience Matters: Which person best describes how you currently interact with politics? Circle one.

A. Critic **B.** Viewer **C.** Activist **D.** Hermit **E.** Other: _____

What is one way you can show the love of Christ when political conversations arise?

DISCUSS: What steps can you take to love even those whose politics you disagree with?
[ALTERNATE: *How can we keep political differences from being divisive?*]

LIVE IT OUT

SAY: “When it comes to politics, how will you reflect Christ's love?”

GUIDE: Direct group members to review the three bulleted statements under **Live It Out** on page 58. Call on volunteers to share (1) which of these statements is something they want to pursue further, or (2) ways this study will transform their prayer life this week.

▶ **Practice love.** We're in a season of elections, so politics is a common topic of discussion. At times, Christians may find themselves on opposite sides of an issue or debating with a candidate. Maintain love for others in your conversations and discussions.

- ▶ **Plunge into God’s Word.** The political issues we face today aren’t easy. Study Scripture to determine how it speaks into the issues. Continually seek to be aligned with God, and do so with love and humility.
- ▶ **Participate.** Are you an active participant or do you just complain from the sidelines? It’s important for Christians to influence the discourse in the public square and the political processes. Get active, and let your love for Christ be an influence.

GUIDE: Invite each person to gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender this week for a deeper discussion, using **Talk It Out** (page 58) to guide their discussion. Encourage group members to spend time each day in God’s Word with the devotions found in the **Daily Study** section (pages 59–62).

PRAY: Close your Bible study time with prayer.

DIG DEEPER

Use the commentary below as you prepare to lead the session.

[VERSE 1]: Christ-followers should reflect Christ in how they interact with politics and government. Clearly Paul drew upon the wider concepts of humility and submission that are to be characteristic of all Christian behavior. Paul asserted there was “no authority except from God.” Believers were to acknowledge that all existing authorities “are instituted by God.” Thus, submitting to the existing authorities was necessary to acknowledging God’s sovereign rule over all things.

[VERSE 2]: Since no authority exists apart from God and all authorities are instituted by God, anyone who “resists” authority is guilty of “opposing God’s command.” Resisting authority is parallel to being opposed to the ordinances of God. Those who “oppose” God’s command “will bring judgment on themselves.” Paul did not indicate precisely what the judgment was, how it would be administered, or what form it would take.

[VERSE 4]: Twice in this verse, Paul referred to the authority as “God’s servant.” The ruler or magistrate is a servant of God, without regard to a particular ruler’s belief in God or lack of such belief. Whether an authority figure was a Christian or not, that individual did serve with God’s authority. Paul further delineated that the servant’s role in governing was “for your good.” The authority is meant to serve society for the benefit or advantage of the people (the governed).

[VERSE 5]: Paul declared believers must “submit.” Christ-followers can be the Spirit-empowered witnesses Jesus wants them to be in part by abiding by the societal laws established by the governing authorities. Most likely, utmost in Paul’s mind was the need not to hamper the spread of the gospel with senseless run-ins with the authorities. By submitting to the governing authorities, believers are able to be useful instruments for

evangelism and discipleship. With the Holy Spirit guiding one's conscience, each believer should live a life of submission to God and to His ordained authorities.

[VERSE 6]: Paul supplied a concrete application of his theology of submission by telling his readers to “pay taxes.” These taxes were monies levied on houses, land, or people and were to be paid by all inhabitants of the provinces of Rome. The authorities who received and depended on taxes to carry out their responsibilities were God's servants.

[VERSE 7]: Paul next set out four all-encompassing areas of responsibility: taxes, tolls, respect, and honor. The first two areas required payment of money. The payment of respect and honor required a submissive and reverential attitude. Thus, the believer's outer resources (money) and inner feelings (attitude) are in play. As believers show respect to those whom they owe respect and honor to those whom they owe honor, they reveal their reverence toward God and their obedience to His command to be submissive to the governing authorities.

[VERSES 8-9]: Romans 13:8-10 focuses on loving others in general, yet the biblical principle applies to the preceding specific context of how we relate to governmental authorities, policies, and issues (politics). A love for Christ and a love for others is to permeate every way we engage in and express ourselves in the political arena.

To illustrate the importance of loving others, Paul cited four of the Ten Commandments: the commandments prohibiting adultery, murder, stealing, and coveting. Each of these four commandments protects people from the potential unrighteous conduct of their neighbors.

[VERSE 10]: Plainly stated, “love does no wrong to a neighbor.” Loving your neighbors as yourself means doing nothing to hurt them. “Neighbor,” in our context, would include the ruling authorities ordained to keep the peace. No one could state it any clearer or more succinctly: “Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.” Love was to characterize all the Roman believers were and all they did.

Certainly, this love ethic applies to modern Christ-followers too. Instead of seeking to gossip, bully, or harm others, we're to encourage and to build them up. We're to point to Jesus as our example and deliberately aim to reflect His love in our lives.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at
BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra