

The Limits of Politics

Politics is not everything, and everything is not politics.

THE LIMITS OF POLITICS



A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T . M . M O O R E

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Limits of Politics
A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe
Copyright 2016 T. M. Moore

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| Welcome to <i>The Limits of Politics</i> | 4 |
| 1 Necessary, but not Necessarily Evil | 5 |
| 2 To Establish Order | 7 |
| 3 Not to Define Order | 9 |
| 4 To Promote Goodness | 11 |
| 5 Not to Make Us Good | 13 |
| 6 To Ensure Justice | 15 |
| 7 Not to Create Standards | 17 |

Welcome to *The Limits of Politics*

Welcome to *The Limits of Politics*, part 3 of a 5-part series on the Christian and civil government. Other titles in the series include:

Two Swords
God's Servant for Good
Christians and Public Service
When Not to Obey

Increasingly in our day, people look to government to solve their problems and meet their needs. Politicians, of course, delight in this, regardless of where they serve on the political spectrum, for it is in the nature of politics to accrue, employ, and increase power.

But while politics is inevitable, and government is certainly necessary, there are limits to what politics and government can and should do. In this series we will mark out the broad parameters of those limits, as we continue investigating the Biblical teaching about the role of government in human society. *The Limits of Politics* will review and expand on concepts of civil government introduced in our previous series. Our purpose is both to understand that God has prescribed limits for the right use of political power, and we as believers have roles to play in helping to ensure that those limits are understood and obeyed.

Like the other studies in this series, *The Limits of Politics* has been developed for individual or group use.

We are happy to provide this resource for your use at no charge. If you find these, or other resources of The Fellowship of Ailbe, helpful in your walk with and work for the Lord, please consider sending a gift to support this work and help us extend our outreach to others. You can donate at our website, www.ailbe.org, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

May the Lord bless you as you take up this study of the Lordship of Christ, and how He works to express that through the right working of civil government.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Necessary, but not Necessarily Evil

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Romans 13.3, 4

A dirty business?

Bring up politics in polite company and you might start a fight or, at least, ruin a pleasant evening. No topic of conversation has the potential for so much contention, confusion, and consternation than politics.

Most Americans, I suspect, are of the opinion that politics is a dirty business, a necessary evil that we'd much prefer not to have to engage. Politics is the black sheep of family America – a source of disappointment and disgust, who only comes around at certain times, but from whom we're never entirely separate.

Yet whom, alas, we can't seem to do without.

That may be somewhat hyperbolic, but it's not far off the mark. Americans are so used to politicians who are self-serving, disingenuous, and downright corrupt that we've come to connect the *practice* of politics, as we experience it in 21st century America, with *politics per se*. We sense that you can't have one without the other, so, if we must have politics, and we know we must, about the most we can hope for is that the dark side of the process won't completely spoil whatever good might be accomplished.

The science of government

But politics is simply the science of government. Politics describes the ways people in society organize their relationships and apportion the exercise of power in an effort to establish order and maintain justice and peace. What can be bad about that?

The Scriptures teach that governments are instituted by God for various reasons, and, wherever there are governments, there must be politics, which is the science of government. The problem is not with politics, as, doubtless, most of us realize, but with *politicians*. Politics is a noble science, and, unlikely as it may seem, the practice of politics can be a way to bring glory to God and much good to people.

That politics has come to be associated with corruption and contention is not the fault of politics but of those who practice it.

Since politics, as a social discipline, enjoys divine sanction, there must be ways of practicing politics that don't leave such a bad taste in our mouths. The challenge to the members of the Christian community is to try to understand politics, as the Scriptures – which are sufficient to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17) – guide and teach, and then to seek out politicians who are willing to work within, or at least close to, the parameters of political practice marked out in the Bible.

Understand the limits of politics

One of the most important Biblical teachings about politics is that there are limits to what it can do. These days we're accustomed to thinking that everything is politics and, therefore, politics must be just about everything.

Politics – and certainly politicians – must not be expected to do more than they are able. We wouldn't ask our auto mechanic to fill our teeth or our dentist to replace the carburetor in our car. In the same way, we must not expect of politics and politicians more than what God intends as legitimate for them, lest we end up seeking good social ends by the wrong means, and doing, in the end, more harm than good.

What are the limits of politics?

This is what I intend for us to consider in this series. But we must be convinced, as we begin, that politics *per se* is a *necessary* discipline, and that means that political activity and politicians are inevitable and even essential to the wellbeing of society.

If there is any part for us to play in the process – as, regardless of the polity by which we are governed, there surely is – we should do our best to understand and fulfill that part to the best of our ability.

Politics is necessary to a good society. And it's not necessarily evil. It falls to those whose senses are trained by the Word of God to differentiate between good and evil to do whatever they can to ensure that what God intends for the business of politics is actually what we in our society enjoy (Heb. 5.14).

Government can fulfill its calling as God's servant for good, but only when those who are entrusted with the science of government – politics – agree to live and serve within the limits God prescribes.

For reflection

1. In what ways are you a participant in the political process in this country? Is this a good work for you to do? Based on 2 Timothy 3.15-17, how should you expect Scripture to guide you in thinking about your involvement in politics?
2. Why is it true that politics is a “noble science”? What is it about politics that gives it such a bad name in the minds of many people?
3. Christians have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and we are being trained to discern good from evil (Heb. 5.14). What can we expect if Christians fail to participate in politics from the perspective of God's Word in Scripture?

Next steps: Talk with some friends – at church, work, or in your social media network. What do they understand to be the purpose of politics? What should we expect from politics, and what should we not expect? Download a copy of this week's ReVision series, and share it with your friends. Invite them to join you to discuss this series on the limits of politics.

2 To Establish Order

“All this,” said David, “*the Lord made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me, all the works of these plans.*” 1 Chronicles 28.19

A skilled politician

Perhaps the greatest politician in the Old Testament was King David. He demonstrated keen political skills very early on, serving faithfully within and honoring the reign of King Saul, even though his days were numbered and David had already been appointed to succeed him.

During that period of biding his time, David built strong friendships with men who looked to him for leadership in troubled times. He proved his prowess as a military leader and gained the respect, even the fear, of kings and generals from other nations.

When the time came for David to ascend the throne, he found himself in the midst of a fierce civil war. After seven years of patient and measured conflict, he warmly welcomed the rebelling tribes into the renewed federation of Israel, and served the people well for thirty-three years.

Certainly, David was a man with many faults, and who, from time to time, fell prey to the practice of corrupt politics when he felt like it was in his interest to do so. But God described David as having a heart for Him, and, through most of his reign as king, David seems to have served according to God’s good plan for the monarchy of Israel.

Toward the end of his reign David made careful preparation for the orderly succession of power to his son, Solomon. He organized as much as he could of the affairs of the nation, setting up local governors, appointing military leaders, defining the roles of various religious and civil servants, gathering the resources to build the Temple, and forging a strong alliance of leaders from every tribe of the nation. His last act, having put everything in order and in writing, was to call the leaders to Jerusalem and lead them in a solemn ceremony of devotion to God and the new king.

An example of political leadership

David provides an example of how politics can serve to establish and maintain order and justice in a society. People can’t be allowed to do what they want, whenever they like. The book of Judges is ample testimony to the chaos and misery that happens when there is no organizing center for society. In order to flourish, people need to be able to enjoy and develop their property, pursue their chosen vocation, marry and raise children, and live in peace with their neighbors. Given the inherent sin nature of human beings, such things don’t just happen. Someone, some institution, needs to establish and enforce whatever parameters may be necessary for people to enjoy orderly relations with their neighbors.

This is the role of government.

Solomon, following David’s example, demonstrated his wisdom for keeping order in society early on in his reign. The well-known story of the two women, quarreling over a baby, is an example of how government used its powers to bring an orderly resolution to a dispute between neighbors.

What governments do

This is what governments do. They set up boundaries, within which individuals understand what is good and true, and what they may and may not do in their relationships with one another. Then government enforces those boundaries to secure order for the members of society and the society as a whole.

This is a very good thing, I think you'll agree. Who would want to live in a society where there were no rules defining the way neighbors must relate to one another, where everyone felt free to do whatever he liked – or whatever he could get away with – and everyone's peace and prosperity were always subject to being infringed or destroyed by the next stronger person to come along?

So we expect politics to yield good government, government that brings justice and order to society. And we expect politicians to do nothing which threatens the stability of neighborly relations.

In any society there must be boundaries, and people must understand and respect those boundaries, or society ceases to exist, and anarchy obtains. Government, at various levels, and politicians practicing the science of government, is the divinely-ordained instrument for ensuring order in society. The example of David and Solomon, among many others in Scripture, shows us that people who are entrusted with the workings of political power can learn to wield that power for good, establishing limits for all kinds of social activity and interaction that allow all members of the society to flourish and live in peace.

This is what we expect of government, and it's what politicians must pursue if they would fulfill their God-given mandate.

For reflection

1. In what ways is David a good person to study in order to learn about the right and wrong uses of political power?
2. Meditate on Deuteronomy 17.14-20. What limits did God impose on the civil government He envisioned for His people?
3. Meditate on 1 Timothy 2.1-7. What limits for political power did Paul seem to have in mind here?

Next steps: In your community, which branches of government are responsible for maintaining order and justice? How do they perform their work? Begin praying for those who serve in these branches of government. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper calling all the members of the Christian community to join you in praying for those who maintain order and justice in your community.

3 Not to Define Order

“Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity.” Daniel 4.27

A collision course with God

Nebuchadnezzar was on a collision course with God.

He had become the most powerful politician of his age, and he was feeling his oats about it all. As he had done with Israel, so he did with other nations, defeating them militarily, destroying their seat of power, humiliating and enslaving them, then carrying away their treasures and the best of their population, to resettle and re-educate them in the ways of Babylon, leaving the poorest and most miserable to fend for themselves back home under harsh native governors.

Nebuchadnezzar had established an order for his empire, and it was designed primarily to advantage himself, his family, and his inner circle.

He subdued nations and spoiled them of their wealth in order to enrich himself and his native subjects – buying their loyalty on the backs of oppressed peoples. Meanwhile, he worked to deprive those oppressed peoples of their culture and history through exile, thievery, and re-education, and by spreading them out from one another in distant cities throughout his empire.

This was an order that worked well for Nebuchadnezzar – until, that is, it became a stench to the God of heaven.

Politics and the terms of social order

What Nebuchadnezzar shows us about the limits of politics is that, while politicians have a duty to establish and maintain order, you cannot and must not trust them to *define* social order.

Politicians, as they acquire or experience power, can begin to think that *all* power – or at least, *more* power – is, or should be, flowing toward them. Given the opportunity to define the terms of social order, they will do so with such a vision in mind. It is the great temptation of political power, not to be satisfied with power lawfully given by God, but seek more power than what conduces to the public weal.

We’re all the same way, at least to some extent. We want to maximize our personal advantage and wellbeing, and if that means others don’t come off quite as well, well, that’s life.

But this is not what God intends for social order. The power to establish and maintain order must not become power to acquire more power. Politicians must be subject to some standard for defining social order that does not emanate from themselves.

Constitutional power

This is why in America we have a Constitution, and why, when the Constitution was being written, our Founding Fathers drew from the best thinkers and sources to forge a document that would ensure the creation of social standards and political boundaries that were clear, fair, and enforceable at local levels.

The men who prepared our nation’s Constitution were well aware of the human tendency toward corruption and self-service. This is why they created courts, to maintain right relationships between neighbors at the local level. It’s why they built a system of checks and balances into the Constitution itself, to guard against any of the branches of government misusing its power with impunity.

The idea that a society needs defined boundaries, checks and balances, and local means of enforcement of those boundaries was not a universal political sentiment in those days. At the same time the United States was putting together its orderly society, France was being savaged by a totally different view of social order, one without any sense of the idea of sin, except as something the elites should be able to define as they saw fit.

We take for granted the way our society is organized to ensure order, but ours was very much a “new order of the ages” when it first appeared in 1789. And the order, and the maintenance of order, which our Constitution defines is in many ways the product of an intellectual and political consensus that grew out of the soil of Biblical teaching, and not out of the soil of the human lust for power.

Politicians who seek to define order apart from divine revelation will find themselves, sooner or later, on a collision course with God. Government fulfills its proper calling when it listens to the voice of the prophet and secures order in society according to the revelation of God, and not the whims of men.

There are limits to what politics can achieve and government should do. But only when those limits align with the teaching of God’s Word can we expect the blessings of God on governments and those they govern.

For reflection

1. Was Daniel out of line trying to apply God’s standards to a pagan king like Nebuchadnezzar? Why or why not?
2. How does the system of checks and balances, written into the American Constitution, demonstrate an awareness of the temptations of political power?
3. Besides Deuteronomy 17 and Daniel 4, what are some other places in Scripture you might look to gain a better understanding of the limits of political power?

Next steps: How do your church leaders work to equip church members for responsible citizenship? Ask a few of your leaders. Is your church doing all it should be in order to help ensure an orderly society according to the teaching of God’s Word?

4 To Promote Goodness

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. Genesis 1.31

“Good” God’s way

We recall from previous installments in this series that God intends government to be a servant to the governed for *good*. That word, “good,” is an extremely important word, particularly as it relates to our understanding of the divine economy and what God intends for people on earth.

During the period of God’s creating the heavens and the earth, we read over and over, throughout Genesis 1, that God pronounced His work “good,” and then, at the end “exceedingly good,” as the Hebrew has it. The text of Genesis 1 blares the word at us repeatedly: good, good, good, exceedingly good. It’s as if God is saying, “Hey, pay attention here! What I want for human beings and all creation is goodness!”

Goodness elaborated

The idea of goodness can be further understood by a few related terms. The first is the term, “upright.” In Ecclesiastes 7.29 we’re told that God created people “upright.” As we observe Adam, listening to God, taking up the work God had appointed for him, enjoying his wife, and living within the framework of God’s presence and instruction, we get a sense of what “upright” means. People are upright when they are rightly related to God and obedient to His divine purposes.

Unhappily, as Ecclesiastes 7.29 reports, and as is all too evident on every hand, when people turn away from God to their own schemes and ideas, that uprightness is compromised and corrupted.

Where goodness obtains in a society, therefore, people are free to pursue being upright in the eyes of God. No one must be allowed to prevent or obstruct their seeking to “get right with God” as it were, or to aid and encourage others in doing so. And all should be encouraged to follow an order in human conduct and affairs that comports with ideas of goodness and uprightness as God defines them.

An orderly society will erect boundaries and privileges, therefore, that allow for the free exercise of whatever religion actually facilitates a return to uprightness.

A second idea has to do with development. This involves a cluster of related ideas.

God pronounced the creation to be “exceedingly good” only after He had instructed the man and the woman to exercise dominion over the creation and to serve and guard it so that it could become fruitful, productive, abundant, and increasing in all its own inherent goodness.

Development therefore entails the ideas of education – we must learn about the scope of our developmental duties – vocation, conservation and cultivation, innovation and invention, and more. A good society is one in which the order of society encourages maximum potential for development, both human and cultural, as well as of the environment itself. This is good and upright in the eyes of God, and therefore conduces to an orderly and just society.

Good government promotes human responsibility and stewardship. Governments serve their people for good when they promote an environment conducive to development, to allow people to realize their maximize potential for fulfilling their divinely-appointed purpose and calling.

Goodness in community

The idea of goodness also implies communities grounded in love. God Himself exists in community – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and He created men and women for marriage, families, and communities in

which order and goodness could flourish for all. God said it was not good for a man to be alone. Communities of mutual respect, edification, and love are thus part of the divine purpose of goodness for which governments have been instituted. Divine Law was given to people in order to guide and bind them to practices that would ensure justice and promote love for their neighbors.

God has established governments and politics, which is the science of government, as ways of serving people for good – so that they can pursue becoming upright; are free to grow, develop, learn, work, and produce; can create families after the divinely-established model; and can enjoy community life that reflects the life of mutual love and assistance existing within the divine Trinity.

Government must work to maximize the possibilities for goodness and to resist and remove any barriers to people growing in God’s goodness, as He defines it for us in His Word. And all those entrusted with the exercise of political power, from the electorate to the chief executive, must pursue the science of politics within the parameters of goodness God has defined within His Word.

For reflection

1. Paul says the Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). Jesus said that keeping and teaching the Law is the way to greatness in His Kingdom (Matt. 5.17-19). Should Christians be seeking to integrate the teaching of God’s Law into the political process of their nation? Explain.
2. Use the terms provided in this lesson – uprightness, development, community – to offer a definition of a “good” society. Then, using that definition, reflect on the state of our society today in relation to that definition.
3. How can the example of the Trinity serve as a model for the kind of “good” society we seek?

Next steps: Get a copy of the Bill of Rights – the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution. How many different forms of “goodness” do these amendments ensure? Share your findings with a Christian friend.

5 Not to Make Us Good

And Samuel said, "What have you done?" Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, 'The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.' Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering." And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever." 1 Samuel 13:11-13

Good, and not good

Israel was about to engage a major battle with her arch-enemy, the Philistines. Samuel had instructed Saul that, before the people should go into battle, they should make an offering to the Lord. Samuel explained that he would come to Gilgal to make that offering, and Saul should wait for him there.

But Saul became nervous, watching the clock for Samuel to arrive. Finally, he could bear it no more, and he "forced" himself to make the offering Samuel had promised to make, contrary to what God had revealed to him.

It was *good* for the offering to be made; it was *not good* for the king to make it. Here is a lesson for us concerning the limits of political power: It is *beyond* the scope of politics for government to try to make its people good by overstepping the bounds of their legitimate responsibility, according to God's Word.

Allowing the conditions of goodness

Is it good for people to work? Indeed it is. But it is not good for government to force people to work or to sustain them if they refuse to work.

Is it good for people to be upright before the Lord? Indeed it is. But it is not good for government to require people to go to church, give to charities, or share their possessions with others.

Is it good for people to develop and conserve the environment around them? Surely it is. But it is not good for politicians to require that people do so in any particular manner, or to assume primary responsibility for "saving" the environment.

Government and politicians must ensure a social order that allows the *conditions of goodness* to emerge as people take up their responsibilities to God and one another. But government must not presume to make people good.

Encroachments

Consider some ways that our own government encroaches on this area of individual responsibility: Our government tries to force the wealthy to be good by requiring them to pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes than others pay.

Politicians try to make us good by requiring that we attend school up to a certain age, and then requiring people to pay for those schools, rather than allowing communities and parents to construct and manage schools as they freely choose.

Politicians require us to support government-created jobs for people who cannot find or create them on their own. Politicians, trying to make other nations into good nations like ours, force us to be good to dictators by giving them billions of dollars in foreign aid, large chunks of which end up in the pockets of the dictators, their families, and their cronies. Or they impose tariffs on other governments whom they regard as not being good to American consumers.

Governments try to make us be good by requiring that we recycle certain waste products. Politicians require us to be good by limiting the places we might smoke a cigar or the size of a soft drink we might purchase. And the list goes on.

The only way politicians can make us be good is when they usurp our individual responsibility to be good and force us to conform, by law, to their definitions of what makes for a good society. This is beyond the scope of what politics can do. Certain laws, of course, make us *act* in ways that are good because God understands such laws to be essential to basic social order. Beyond those laws – which mark out the Biblical parameters of justice – government runs the risk of usurping rather than enforcing divine standards.

Politicians can make us conform to certain codes of behavior beyond what God requires, but in doing so they undermine our ability to act in a good manner as free and responsible individuals. Instead of making us good, government makes us angry by trying to force us into a mold of “goodness” with which many do not agree, or which they prefer to adopt on their own initiative and in their own freely-chosen manner.

The contributions that people make to goodness in a society must arise freely, from within themselves, from their sense of upright responsibility to God and their neighbor. Government must so order society as to allow for and even encourage the attainment of goodness. But it is beyond the power – or the privilege – of government and politicians to compel their people to conform to standards of goodness that encroach on their freedoms and negate their responsibilities before the Lord.

For reflection

1. Government must enforce standards of goodness as these relate to the basic requirements of justice. Where shall governments look to find such standards?
2. How can we know when a government has gone beyond its divine mandate to promote goodness to trying to make its citizens good?
3. But what if people choose not to show love for their neighbors, or to do what is good? Is it a crime *not* to be charitable, or to care about the needs of the poor? What is the role of the Church in a situation where many people choose not to love their neighbors as themselves?

Next steps: What do your friends or co-workers think? Is it government's responsibility to make us good, or simply to encourage goodness? Ask a few of the people in your life sphere.

6 To Ensure Justice

“You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God is giving you.”
Deuteronomy 16.20

Justice

The exercise of justice involves securing the parameters of order within which goodness may flourish in a society. Terms like “justice” and “goodness” can only be properly understood when they are pegged to unchanging standards, such as those found within the pages of Scripture, beginning in the Law of God.

Many Christians may find it difficult to believe that government can function within the parameters of goodness and justice marked out in Scripture. The alternative to this, however, is *Lawlessness*, under which regime, Jesus warned, people’s love for one another grows cold (Matt. 24.12).

It is the duty of government to ensure justice, to maintain the boundaries of justice clear and firm, and to afford ample opportunity for each member of the society to prosper in goodness. Government must act for justice when a boundary has been infringed, a liberty violated, and, thus, the cause of goodness interrupted.

It is the duty of Christians to insist that *Biblical* ideas of justice and goodness guide the thinking and practice of politicians at all levels and in all arenas of politics and government. According to Scripture, in particular the Law of God, the practice of justice takes five forms.

Biblical justice

First, there is what we might refer to as *obligatory* justice. This is what people are required to do with respect to one another, according to the Ten Commandments. We are obliged, therefore, to honor one another, not to harm or murder, not to be involved in unlawful sexual activities, not to steal, not to lie or deceive, and not to covet. Where people are instructed in and learn to practice this basic level of justice, obligatory justice, much evil is avoided and much goodness is encouraged.

The second facet of justice we might call *preventive* justice. People must learn to think about the possible consequences of any action they are anticipating, so as to prevent the violation of a boundary of order or any infringement on the liberties of others. In ancient Israel, for example, it would have been my duty to build a railing around my roof, to prevent guests from falling off. Today I must put a fence around my pool, if I have one, to prevent unattended children from falling in.

A third form of justice is *retributive* in nature. That is, if I have harmed someone else or his property, it is quite possible that justice could require my being harmed in just the same manner, or, at least, to the same degree. If I bring a frivolous lawsuit, for example, seeking so much in damages, and lose, I will be responsible to pay the amount of the damages I sought to the person I wrongly sued. Think how that might reform our increasingly litigious legal system.

The fourth form of justice is *restorative* justice. If I am careless – or, for that matter, intentional – in causing harm to someone, so that he cannot work, it is my responsibility to pay for his healing *and* the opportunity costs he might have incurred during his rehabilitation. The Good Samaritan shows us the true spirit of this law by going beyond the mere letter of it to care for, out of his own funds, one injured not by him, but by others. Here was a true neighbor, indeed, as Jesus explained.

The final kind of justice that we find in the Law of God is a form of *distributive* justice. People in communities show love to their needy neighbors by making it possible for them to find meaningful work and by providing offerings to meet their temporary needs. This is what the gleaning laws were about, as well as the law governing the three-year tithe. God instructed His people to use their resources to help those in need. In the

period of the New Testament, the first believers understood that in spades, as they would frequently bring from their accounts or their goods to meet the needs of those who were without.

Promoting justice

A government serves its people for good when it ensures a social order that encourages goodness and the practice of justice in all these ways. The specific laws and applications will change from generation to generation, but the principles of justice remain the same, and good governments abide by them.

But no government will act for justice and goodness that is not guided and led to do so by people who understand that justice and goodness are not terms which can be shaped and redefined according to the temper of the times or the whims of politicians. Politicians and the governments they create must serve the cause of justice and goodness as *God* defines these in His Word.

And those who believe in God and His Word must work to ensure that government and politicians fulfill their callings within the limits prescribed for them by God.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose most Christians don't feel like they should try to persuade politicians or work for a political order that refracts the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of God's Law?
2. In many ways, our society already acknowledges the reliability and goodness of the Law of God. Can you cite some examples?
3. It's when obedience to the Law becomes inconvenient, or conflicts with the ever-changing temper of the times, that the Law of God is set aside and new standards of goodness and justice are promoted. Can you give some examples of this? How does such a practice cause people's love for their neighbors to grow cold?

Next steps: Can you cite some examples of each of the five forms of justice as we see them in our society today? How can you see these forms of justice at work in your own community? What is the Christian's responsibility in seeking justice? Share your thoughts with some Christian friends.

7 Not to Create Standards

Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Judah, and for four,
I will not turn away its punishment,
Because they have despised the law of the LORD,
And have not kept His commandments.
Their lies lead them astray,
Lies which their fathers followed.” Amos 2.4*

Let’s review

We recall that politics is the science of government, and government has been instituted by God for the good of the governed. Politicians do well when they govern according to the divine plan, as revealed in Scripture, which is able to equip us for every good work.

Daniel did not shy away from insisting that the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar should turn from the lies he was practicing to follow the Law of God. John the Baptist held the pagan king Herod accountable for transgressing God’s plan for marriage. And the prophets, all of them, routinely indicted the nations of the world for acting in a manner inconsistent and at odds with the divine plan for human flourishing.

Good government is government God’s way; good politics is the science of government carried out in accordance with what God has revealed in His Word.

Thus it is good for politicians to create and maintain an order to society in which goodness and justice might flourish. But it is *not* good for politicians to presume to be able to *define the terms* of justice and goodness. Governments must be pegged to unchanging standards, such as are outlined in the moral law of God, and politicians should not feel as though changing times or extraordinary needs or circumstances somehow empower them to define new standards of order, goodness, and justice, conveniently ignoring existing standards, or tried and proven standards, in the process.

Courts out of control

In our day the courts are the fountainhead for generating arbitrary standards of justice, standards created to *reflect* the social and cultural mood of the day rather than to *refract* the justice of God.

To be sure, courts can act to restore justice in a society where this has been corrupted, as in the civil rights rulings of the 1950s and 60s. Court rulings, such as *Brown v Board of Education*, which overturned the unjust *Plessy v Ferguson* ruling, made it possible for other branches of government to create laws redressing long-standing social evils.

On the other hand, courts become the source of new standards of justice when, to accommodate pressures for social change, they ignore long-standing and fixed moral standards by judicial fiat, as in *Roe v Wade* and the infamous “mystery clause” of *Planned Parenthood v Casey*.

It is not the province of the courts, or of government in any of its branches to reshape society in ways that can be shown to be contrary to the divine purpose.

Calling out politicians

Now, I’m fully aware that the vast majority of contemporary politicians feel no compulsion whatsoever to consider the form God might like their actions or policies to take. And since that is the case, and I think that’s easy enough to demonstrate, then we as believers in Jesus Christ should hold politicians’ feet to the fire, demanding they be consistent in *all* their governmental duties.

For instance, we should remind politicians that they have taken a public oath to seek the help of God in all their public duties. We should insist that politicians who choose to set aside the Law of God desist from any and all public attempts to invoke God on behalf of their plans or programs. We should denounce them when they call for the Lord to bless this nation, since what they really mean is that they want God to get with the program and keep us safe while we do whatever it is *we* want to do, apart from any meaningful input from Him.

At the same time, Christians should begin to make it clear that they will only support politicians who take seriously the teaching of Scripture concerning good government. For this we can appeal, not merely to Scripture, but to the long heritage of British common law and the explicit teachings of the Founding Fathers of our nation. Good government is good when it governs God's way. Political practice is illegitimate and out of bounds when it ignores, forsakes, or transgresses the clearly revealed standards of order, goodness, and justice which may be consulted in the Word of God.

This is not a call for theocracy. This is a call for *good* government and for politics that function within the limits of order, goodness, and justice that are defined in the Scriptures.

And it is a call for Christians to wake up to their responsibility for making government God's servant and politicians God's agents for order, justice, goodness, and peace in our society.

For reflection

1. What are some ways politicians can be seen to have set aside the Law of God in recent years?
2. What standards do politicians put in place of the Law of God when they do such things? Why do such actions endanger the long-term stability of social order?
3. How can you, as a Christian, become more active in holding politicians accountable for practicing their calling within the limits marked out for them in Scripture?

Next steps: Meet with a few friends and share what you have learned about the limits of politics from this series. How should this help you to think about the kind of government we need in our nation?

Questions for discussion

1. What do we mean by saying that politicians must act within certain “limits”? What “limits” tend to guide the work of politicians and government in our day?
2. Outline some of the ideas that Scripture provides for defining a good society:
3. What’s the difference between a government that enforces standards of goodness and one that tries to make people good?
4. Summarize each of the ideas of justice found in the Law of God. How well understood do you think these ideas are in our society today?
5. How will you become more responsible in helping politicians understand and operate within the limits of political practice outlined in the Word of God?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship to help us extend our ministry and resources to others. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.