

Thinking Biblically About Politics  
GC 10.30.16 Philippians 3:20

## INTRO

Hey, Grace Chapel. Good to be with you all today. Before we begin I want to give a shout out to our partner church, Christ's Church of Amherst, NH, as they welcome their new pastor, John Nuxoll, and his wife, Amy. CCA has been following our sermon teaching on Sundays for a year or so now, and will continue to do so, but Pastor John will be leading the congregation there as they discern and pursue God's vision for their church and their region. Welcome, John and Amy, we look forward to partnering with you!

And while we're at it, greetings as well to the folks gathering in Foxboro, including some Grace Chapel folks who live down that way. We're happy to have you with us each week, and look forward to launching a campus there in the days to come!

Today we're **taking a break** from our Thrive series to *Think Biblically About Politics*. This is actually part of an **ongoing series** we've curated over the years, **pausing** from time to time to Think Biblically about a topic or event of current interest – Terrorism, Sexuality, Natural Disaster, and the Economy. For **obvious reasons**, today we are going to *Think Biblically About Politics*.

Our **bumper video** captures the tension, anxiety, and bewilderment many of us are feeling about **stepping into the voting booth** on November 8 – just over a week from now. On the one hand we'll be **glad** to put this election season **behind us**, on the other hand, we're a little bit **afraid** about what we'll **wake up to** on November 9.

This is my **10<sup>th</sup>** presidential election as a voter, and I can't remember one as **contentious** and **disheartening** as this one. **Mental health professionals** across the country are

reporting **unprecedented levels** of activity in their practices – panic attacks, anxiety, depression, and family conflict. The American Psychological Association tells us that **52%** of Americans are coping with **high levels of stress** brought on by the election.

But you don't have to be a professional to get it. You can **see** the **weariness** in people's eyes. You can **hear** the **strain** in their voices. How many **conversations** have you been part of this fall that have begun with, "*Can you believe this election?*" And how many of those conversations have **gone badly**, as different points of view emerged and emotions heated up.

It's not just the behavior and comments of the candidates, it's **the issues** that have us **on edge**: national security, hacked servers, gun rights, racial tension, sexual assault. "*People are wondering, **How can I feel safe? Who will take care of us?***" says a **psychiatrist** at the Mayo Clinic. One **counselor** advises his clients to, "*Watch the news for 20 minutes, then turn on Netflix!?*"

We **don't typically** wade into the **political arena** here at Grace, but at a certain point it seemed to me we all needed something **better than Netflix** and *Saturday Night Live* to **help us process** what's happening. We need some **guidance** as to how we ought to **think about** and **engage with** this election as **followers** of Jesus Christ. I **wasn't sure** what I was going to say when I announced this message, but I've been **glad** for the opportunity to **search** the Scriptures and offer some **reflection**.

My purpose isn't to **speak** for Grace Chapel, because our congregation is **too diverse** to be represented by one voice, and that's a **good thing**. And my purpose today isn't to tell you how to vote. I think **pastors** need to **refrain** from publicly endorsing candidates or parties. We are stridently **non-partisan** here at Grace, and I'm going to **do my best** to remain

so for this message. My purpose is simply to **provide** us with a **framework** for thinking biblically about politics and this election.

You might **think** of it like **framing a house**. When you frame a house, you **define the space** – the footprint, the layout. But the **homeowner** will have to decide how to **occupy** that space. And every homeowner will occupy that space **differently**. \* So I'm going to **throw some lumber** at you today – 5 **biblical truths**, and a few applications. Think of them as **2x4's** to "frame" your thinking about **this election**. Chances are we'll **all do** something a **little bit different** in that framework, and **that's OK**, as we're going to find out.

And understand that as I do that, I am **more concerned** with our **fitness** and **witness** as **Christian people** than I am with the **outcome** of this particular election. Because **what we do** on the **other side** of Election Day will be far **more important** to God's purposes than what we do on **Nov 8**. If that's not clear yet, I hope it will be by the end of the message. So **here we go**: 5 biblical truths that provide a **framework** for **thinking about** and **engaging in** politics.

### **Government, and politics, are ordained by God and worthy of our engagement.**

In his letter to **Christians** living in Rome, the **capital** city of a **pagan** empire, the apostle Paul writes these words: *Let everyone be subject to governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established....For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. Romans 13:1-4*

Paul is telling us that **government** is a **good idea**, and part of God's plan for **human flourishing**. He goes on to say that government exists to **preserve order** and **promote the common good**. He's **not saying** that God **approves** of every **ruler** or **regime**; simply that government **exists** for **good**

purposes. I think most of us would **agree** that government, even an **imperfect** one, is **better than anarchy**.

But Paul **doesn't stop** there. He not only **affirms government**. He goes on to **affirm politics**. *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honor, then honor. Romans 13:6-7*

**Most** of us are **OK** with **government**, but we **struggle** with **politics**. For a long time, politics was considered an **ignoble profession**, and it may be on it's way to **becoming that** again!? I found an **Urban Dictionary** online that suggests the word politics is a **compound word** – "poly" meaning "many" and "tics" meaning "blood-sucking parasites!?" (**Just kidding** – I actually like politics.) It's **not uncommon** to hear people, and even Christians, say they want **nothing to do with** politics. But Paul **doesn't allow** us that **option**.

Politics is simply the **activity** of governing. Specifically it's **interactivity** of **leaders** and **citizens** with one another for the **common good**. When Paul tells us to **pay taxes** and **honor our leaders**, he's telling us to **be engaged** with government; to **participate**; to be **stewards** of the political **freedoms** and **resources** and **relationships** we've been given.

Now there are **varying levels** of political engagement. The **minimum** would seem to be **obeying** the laws of the land, **paying** taxes, and **voting**. While voting wasn't an option for Paul's readers, it is for us. And would seem to be **one of the ways** we honor our governmental leaders and institutions.

So while I'm **not going to tell you how** to vote on November 8, I am going to encourage you **to vote** on November 8, or sooner. As **disenchanted** as you may be with the **candidates**, as **disillusioned** as you may be with the **process**, it's important to remember that people **laid down**

**their lives** to secure us the **right** to vote, and we **honor them** when we **exercise** it. It's also important to remember that there are **other offices** and **issues** on the ballot that should **concern us**. There are **four** on the **ballot** in MA, - gambling, charter schools, recreational marijuana, and the treatment of farm animals.

And if you should feel **inclined** to be even **more engaged** – to **run** for office, to **join** a party, to **volunteer** for a candidate or an issue, it can be a **noble** and **God-honoring** endeavor. Which leads to our **second** biblical truth.

### **Politics is ultimately about loving our neighbors.**

The **real** root of the word “politics” is “polis” – Greek for “city.” It reminds us that we **do not live alone**. There are **other people** out there. We're part of a **community**. Politics requires us to **think collectively**, not just **individually**.

And this, of course, is exactly **what Jesus asks** us to do. Or rather, **commands** us to do. *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, is this: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Mark 2:29-31*

We tend to **think** of loving our neighbor in **personal terms** – like cooking a **meal** for the **new mom** next door. \* But politics **enables us** to love our neighbors on a **systemic level** – like providing **nutrition programs** for **thousands** of needy moms and children.

To love our neighbor as ourselves is to **want our neighbors** to have the **same opportunities**, the same **freedoms**, the same **protections** that we enjoy. Paul Brink is a Political Science professor up at Gordon College. He likes to tell his students that **politics** is primarily **about justice**, and that **Justice is the opposite of “just us.”**

The **tragedy**, in our current climate, is that we are all **retreating** to our respective **parties** and **preferences**, and **hunkering** down with people who **think like we do**, instead of **doing** the very thing that **politics requires**, which is to **think about our neighbors**; to **see things** from **another's** point of view.

You see, we all have **unconscious biases**. We are **pre-disposed** to see the world a certain way, **depending** on the family and **community** we grew up in. An upper **middle class white person** in Lexington **experiences life** in America very differently from a **first generation immigrant** living in a crowded apartment in **Chinatown**. The **system** needs to **work for all of us**.

Which is why Michael **Gerson** says that politics **requires** **“a necessary empathy”**. Gerson was a speechwriter and policy advisor in the George W. Bush White House, and is now a columnist with the Washington Post. He spoke at a **forum** here a month or so ago and I thought this was one of his most helpful **insights**. Politics, and the **pursuit** of the **common good**, means that I **can't simply ask** which candidate or party will do **right by me**, but which will do right **by my neighbor**?

And that's **not** always an **easy** question to answer, because we have **a lot of neighbors**. My neighbor **includes** the **un-born child**, **and** the **un-documented** child. My neighbor includes the **entrepreneur** who's trying to run a profitable business, **and** his **minimum wage employee** who's trying to put food on the table. **Which neighbor** should I be thinking about when I step into the voting booth, and **which party** or **candidate** will **best meet** the **needs** of those **neighbors**?

It's **not simple**, is it? Which leads us to our **third** truth.

**No party or platform fully embodies the vision and values of the Kingdom.** One day, two **political factions** came to Jesus and posed a **question**. Actually what they were doing

was **setting a trap**. The **Pharisees** were **nationalists** who wanted nothing to do with Caesar and his empire. The **Herodians** were **pragmatists** who had **sold out** to Rome. The two groups were **as far apart** as Red State conservatives and Blue State liberals. So they came to Jesus and **asked**, “*Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*” If Jesus were a **savvy politician**, he would have **dodged** the question and **pivoted** to his talking point. **Instead**, He **turned** the question back on them and **caught them** in their own **trap**. Holding up a coin he, *Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.* **Mark 12:17**

Notice, **first**, that he **refused to choose sides** – as if one party was **right** and the other was **wrong**. Instead, he **reminded** them that **God’s agenda** was way **bigger** than Caesar’s. **Caesar** could demand a few **gold coins**. **God** had claim over their **very souls**.

He not only refused to choose sides. He **refused to let them off the hook**. They were going to have **make their own decisions** – about paying **taxes**; and how best to **honor** God and **Caesar**.

**God’s agenda** is **greater** than any party’s **platform** and any candidate’s **promises**. That’s why we have to **resist identifying** the **church** or the **gospel** or **evangelicals** with **any** particular party or platform. **None** of them are **adequate**!

**Ron Sider** is a well-known Christian thinker in the social justice/political action arena. Years ago he wrote the best-selling book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Sider **confesses** that as a **thoughtful Christ-follower** in the evangelical tradition, he often finds himself **torn** between the two major parties. He says he tends to **lean Republican** on issues like **sanctity of life** and **freedom of religion**, but finds himself siding with **Democrats** when it comes to serving the

**disenfranchised** and **racial justice**. As a result, he’s **voted both ways** over the years, and **refuses** to be **categorized**.

I don’t know about you, but I **don’t appreciate it** when a **religious leader** tries to **speak for me** or for **the church** politically. Not only is it **impossible for one person** to represent the **broad spectrum** of believers, it sets up an **artificial barrier** to the gospel. I **don’t want people thinking** they have to **become** a Republican or a Democrat to become a Christian! That’s one of the **reasons** we don’t **sign petitions** or hand out **voter guides** at church. We don’t want people to be **confused** or **distracted** by **political** issues when they’re coming to **seek** and **worship** God.

**No** party or platform can **adequately represent** the vision and values of the Kingdom. So **individually** we have to make the **best decisions** we can – **thoughtfully**, **prayerfully**, and **humbly**. Which leads to the **fourth 2x4** I want to throw your way.

**Reasonable Christian minds will differ, and deserve to be respected.**

This is a **principle** we’ve talked about before in terms of **disputable matters** in the church – like **baptism** or speaking in **tongues** or **baseball** teams!?! **Thoughtful people** who **believe the Bible** and sincerely **want to honor God** will sometimes come to **different conclusions** about the **best way** to address a social or political **issue**. \* We need to give each other the **freedom to disagree**, **and to engage each other graciously** and **constructively**. In other words, **NOT like** the candidates have been **engaging each other!?**

Listen to what the apostle Paul writes to **believers** who were **at odds** with each other over a social and theological issue. *One person considers one day more sacred than another. Another considers every day alike. Each of them*

*should be fully convinced in their own mind....Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Romans 14:5-13*

Notice, Paul allows for the fact that **two sincere**, thoughtful **followers** of Christ could **arrive** at **different** points of view on a matter of **Christian practice**. The **important thing** isn't that one of them **prove the other wrong**, but that **each** of them be **convinced** in their own mind, and then **respect** one another's perspectives.

So **politically**, when we **see things differently** from a brother or sister in Christ, we need to **refrain** from **making judgments** about their faith, or their intelligence, or their patriotism. This is perhaps the **most disheartening aspect** of the current political environment – our **inability** to have **civil discourse**. I've had to **repent of this** myself – dismissing a person's point of view as **foolish**, or getting defensive when someone **challenged** my point of view. **If any group** of people ought to be able to **listen** to each other, to **learn** from each other, it seems like it should be **the church**. But it's **not easy**.

**Surveys** reveal a **great divide** politically between **white** evangelicals and **black and brown** evangelicals; and also between **older** evangelicals and **millennial** evangelicals. **For the sake** of our unified witness and **mission**, we need to **hear from** and **respect** each other. I was **proud** of our church **this fall** and the **two forums** we hosted – *Faithful Citizenship* and *Q Commons*. A few **hundred people** came out to **listen** to different **points of view**, and to **talk** about them without calling each other names!? Reasonable Christian minds will differ, and are worthy of respect.

So let's **get practical** and talk for a minute about how a “reasonable Christian mind” might go about **deciding** who and what to vote for. We typically identify **three factors**, or criteria, **to consider** when deciding how to cast your vote.

It **begins** with the **Policy** factor. We consider the policies that each of the candidates or parties are proposing, and we have to **decide which** candidate's or party's policies we think will **best serve** the **common good**. \* That's not a **simple question**, in light of the **many issues** to be considered – immigration, the economy, sanctity of life, climate change, homeland security, foreign relations, education, health care. **Some voters** may decide that **one issue** supersedes the others; other voters will want to consider the **whole range** of issues. In a **perfect world**, we would **cast our votes** based simply on which **policies** we believe are **best** for **the most people**.

But it's not a **perfect world**, so we also have to consider the **Character** factor. We want our leaders to be people we can **trust**; people of integrity, honesty, compassion, and courage. \* In his recent **book** on **American liberty**, Eric Metaxas writes, “*The character of our leaders is important because it affects everyone – their peers and those they lead. Listen to this next line: If at any point...the people begin to distrust their leaders as somehow corrupt or as more concerned with themselves than those they serve, the whole [system] begins to unravel and is fatally threatened.*” As **voters**, we have to **decide** not only whose **character** we are **most comfortable** with, but **how important** the Character factor is. Is it more or less **important** than Policy?

But there's a **third factor** to be considered, as well. And that's, **Competence**. A candidate may have sterling Character and a comprehensive Policy, but **can they** actually **do the job**? \* Do they have the **executive skills** to function at such a high level? Do they have **sufficient experience** to draw on as they lead on a local, national, or global stage? Do they have the **stamina** or **temperament** to hold high office? Do they **look** “**presidential?**” These are Competence questions.



So we need to **weigh all three** when we cast our votes – **Policy – Character – Competence**. And **reasonable Christian minds** will differ when it comes time to fill out a **ballot** \*

Now **what about** the wisdom or efficacy of voting for a so-called **third party** candidate, whether it's a name **on the ballot**, or a name you **write in**. (By the way, you can't just write in any name, at least in MA. It has to be a **registered** candidate, so **forget** about writing in **David Ortiz**!?)

The **question** of third party candidates has become **particularly relevant** in this election given the high **unfavorability** ratings of both major party candidates. There's actually a **third-party candidate** making **headlines** suddenly as it looks like he has a chance of **winning Utah**.

Now **some** will say that voting for a third party candidate is a **wasted vote**. Better to **proactively choose** the lesser of two evils, they'll say, than to **inadvertently help** elect the worse of two evils.

**Others** will argue that voting for third party candidate is a **legitimate** way to exercise your **voice** and your **vote**. By doing so you are **expressing** your **disapproval** of the candidates or the system, and **casting** a vote for something or someone **new** to come on the scene. You're **even allowed** to **skip** the **presidential line** completely, and fill out the rest of the ballot.

These are the **decisions** that **each** of us will need to make over the next 9 days. The important thing is to **vote your conscience**. Paul said to the Corinthians, "*Each one should be fully convinced in their own mind.*" In the end, we are **accountable to God** for making the **best decision** we can – prayerfully, thoughtfully, and respectfully. Because the **very good news** is that we can **trust God** with the outcome. And that leads to our final truth.

### **Our citizenship is in heaven and our hope is in Christ.**

Writing from **prison**, his **fate** in the hands of a **pagan emperor**, the apostle Paul writes, *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ....Therefore, my brothers and sisters, ...that is how you should stand firm in the Lord. Philippians 3:20-4:1*

In the face of an **uncertain future**, Paul is reminding himself and his readers and us that **no matter what happens** here on earth, **our King is still on the throne**. He grants us **freedom**, to be sure. Even freedom to **make a mess** of things. But He is **still in charge**, still **at work**, still **advancing** His Kingdom – through or in spite of **whoever** happens to be in power.

**Our hope** is not in any name on that ballot. Our hope is in Christ, who even now is **putting things right**, one person and one place at a time. And he promises to **continue** doing that until **all people** and **all places** come **together** under **His rule**.

This has been an especially **gloomy** election season, and people are **already anxious** about what might happen on the **other side** of Election Day. But **whatever happens**, we who **follow Jesus** are to be **people of HOPE**, because **our God** is **able** to do **something good**, and maybe even something **new**, with **whatever happens** on November 8. And **if ever** there was a **time** for Christ's people to **come together**, to **love our neighbors**, to **serve the common good** – this is **that time**. And **I hope** and trust that this community – Grace Chapel – will be **leading the way** and **showing** the world **how it's done**.

So as **disturbing** as this election has been, let us **not lose heart**. As **distracting** as it's been let us **not lose focus**. And as **divisive** as it's been, let us **come together** with **renewed energy**, passion, and unity to **see the Kingdom come**, on earth, **as it is in heaven**. And that, my brothers and sisters, is **how to stand firm** in the Lord.

(I MAY INSERT THIS SECTION JUST BEFORE THE LAST PARAGRAPH, DEPENDING ON TIME AND FLOW.)

A few weeks ago we had a group of house church pastors from China visiting with us. I was talking with them for a while after services. They had all kinds of questions about how we do church here in the United States. And when we had exhausted those I told them I had a question for them. How do they deal with a government that is hostile to their faith and ministry?

They explained that their environment was very unpredictable. They might have great freedom in one province, and be under attack in another. They may operate for months with no interference, and one day arrive to find their building locked up. Then they said something so simple and profound I scribbled it down on a scrap of paper. “*Yes,*” they said, “*it’s very hard sometimes. But unless our gospel message itself is being threatened, we try to be flexible, and not to be distracted. And we pray.*”

What struck me is that in a political environment far more hostile and unpredictable than ours, they are not wringing their hands over what to do next, or hunkering down in fear and self-pity, or plotting how they can take the government back. They are faithfully, graciously, and courageously going about the work of the Kingdom. Taking advantage of the opportunities they have, accepting the consequences when they come, and believing that Christ will bless their efforts and build His church no matter who’s in power.

And that’s exactly what’s happening. In spite of a repressive government and an irreligious population, the church in China is growing far faster than it is anywhere in the western world.

PRAYER (conclude with The Lord’s Prayer)