

“Liberty, Justice and Love for All // Luke 10:25–37; 12:13–21 // *Flags: Living as Citizens of A Better Kingdom #1*

Well, not sure if you knew this, but our country is **headed into an election**. Just as if 2020 was not challenging enough, right? How many of you watched the “debate” the other night? And I put “debate” in air quotes.

Here was my recollection of it ([YouTube](#)).

I saw this on **TWITTER** this week and felt like it summed up my year:

Me being prepared for 2020:



2020:



There’s nothing that **foments division** in our society like an election. Some of you will be on pins and needles during this entire series, so let me set some EXPECTATIONS:

- I’m not going to tell you how to vote. I’m not going to tell you how I’m voting.
- I know you are going to try to read between the lines so you can discern if I am voting for your candidate and if you get a whiff that I don’t see it your way, you are ready with a pre-written, strongly-worded email explaining why I am a compromised Christian and you are ready to look for another church. (***Is that true? Is your finger hovering over the word ‘send’?***)
- I would ask that, as much as you can, to restrain yourself, because that’s not my purpose here. Seriously, **many of you have felt shoved around** by strong opinions, and my goal isn't to be **another talking head** pushing you around.

- And I'm **not going to try to act neutral** while giving you subtle hints about what you should do. I'm NOT going to say things like, "**God's already played the ultimate Trump card if you aBIDEN him,**" that you are supposed to decode. *What did he mean?*

I (and in a couple of weeks, Pastor Bryan) am going to show you that **there is a general mindset ALL Christians** should have when they approach questions like these--a **set of first principles, so to speak**, that they should agree on--and after that they should extend to one another a level of freedom and grace.

- The church is **not supposed to be a place where everybody sees every issue** the same. That's called a **cult**.
- In fact, the church was supposed to be a place where **societal adversaries find common unity** in Christ.

Political questions are important, but the gospel that unites us is MORE important. **The bonds in the body** of Christ should be stronger than our political affiliation, and **the flag we march behind** should compel greater allegiance than the banner of any political party.

Ultimately, we're not the party of the donkey or the elephant, we're the people of the Lamb. **AMEN?**

This series is called **"Flags,"** because I want to call us to rally around a different primary flag this November.

Can I teach you a Hebrew term? **Jehovah Nissi** (say it with me): **"The Lord is my banner,"** "The Lord is the flag under which I march!" That's **what I want to be true** in this series.

Friends, these are toxic waters. These issues cause deep division in the church and they really shouldn't. The good news is that this is not a new problem in the church, and the Bible speaks directly to it. Bet you **didn't know that, right?**

In fact, let me go ahead and say it: The reason these things still cause such division in the church is that many of us, when it comes to these questions, are **more disciplined by CNN and FoxNews** than we are the Scriptures. If we were as immersed in Habakkuk and Matthew as we are Hannity or Maddow, we probably wouldn't have a lot of these problems.

Let me **challenge you going in**--some of you, when you peel back the layers, care more about how your neighbor votes than where they will spend eternity, and that shows that you have traded Jehovah Nissi for allegiance to a political idol.

There's **only 2 things I want to show you** today--

- First, in pursuing justice, Christians should be motivated by love for their neighbor.
- Second, in practicing justice, Christians can disagree on what it looks like

These things I'm going to say today are **challenging, but they should not be controversial**. Both come straight out of the **GOSPEL OF LUKE**. So if you have your Bible, turn first to **LUKE 10**.

1. Pursuing Justice: Christians are motivated by love for neighbor (Luke 10:25–37)

We're going to look quickly at a very familiar parable, **The Parable of the Good Samaritan**.

Here's the context: Jesus has just explained to the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, that the ultimate expression of the law is to love your neighbor as yourself. Apart from that, Jesus says, your religiosity doesn't amount to much. The Jewish leaders, **feeling convicted**, tried to evade the implications of what Jesus is saying by asking, vs. **29 "And who is my neighbor?"**

In response, Jesus tells a story: A man, he says, was walking along the road to Jericho, a notoriously dangerous road, when he was overtaken by a gang, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. **Along by comes a priest**, who sees him, but passes by on the other side of the road. **After him a Levite**, another Jewish leader, who does the same thing. **Jesus doesn't tell us why they passed by--**

- maybe they had religious duties to attend to; maybe it felt too dangerous to get involved.
- Maybe they thought, "I didn't beat that man up--and he probably should have known better than to be out here at night alone. It's not my responsibility" and so excused themselves of responsibility. **Whatever their reason**, they didn't stop to help.

Jesus then says: **33 But a Samaritan** (which, as you may know, were the political and cultural enemies of the Jews. It would be like **saying to you Democrats, "But a Republican**, as he passed by..." Or to you Republicans, "And a progressive, with a on AOC "Green revolution" rat and 'Feel the Bern' shirt on..." You tracking?), **as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.**³⁴ **He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.**³⁵ **And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'** He used his own money, and even opened a line of credit!

Jesus' answer to "And who is my neighbor?" is "whoever around you is in need." Your responsibility? To regard their needs as important as your own and be willing to do whatever it takes to lift them up, even if that comes at great personal cost to yourself.

The **fact that you weren't involved** in their predicament doesn't relieve you of your responsibility to do what you can to help them.

What's that got to do with an election? As Americans, we love to talk about our rights, and according to Scripture, that's not all wrong. Our Founding Fathers recognized, from the Bible, that God gave to each of us rights, dignity, and certain freedoms--chief of which is the choice of whether to worship or reject him.

- As my friend David Platt said, in a new book which I'd recommend you read, **7 Questions Before You Vote:** "These fundamental rights form the essence of who we are as men and women made in God's image."

So, rights are good. But for followers of Jesus, we are also called to die to our rights. "If any man follows me, Jesus said, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

- In one sense, the priest and Levite had the “right” to walk on by this man. They **hadn’t** caused the accident!
- But in another sense, they are profoundly responsible.

Insisting on your rights feels very American; dying to your rights does not, but that’s where the call to follow Jesus and the call to follow the American dream diverge. It was a radical, unpopular message in Jesus’ day just as it is in ours.

- The world says to prioritize OUR needs; Jesus calls us to prioritize the needs of others.
- The world says only, “Demand your rights.” Jesus said also, “Lay **down your life.**”

Let me take this a step deeper. There is a biblical word that Christians often don’t quite understand: the word is “**justice.**”

- When we say “justice,” we often mean only that everyone’s rights are protected--and it means that. But **biblically, justice also means the obligation of the rich to care for the poor** and their responsibility to use those resources to lift them up.
- **The word “justice” (mishpat) occurs over 200 times in the OT**, and usually when you see it, you’ll see 4 classes of people brought up: widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor—what one scholar calls “the quartet of the vulnerable.”
- **The just person, Scripture says**, is the one involved helping these four groups.
- **Deuteronomy 10:18: “(God) executes *justice* [mishpat] for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, *giving him food and clothing.*”** See how “*justice*” and “*giving him food and clothing*” are interchangeable?
- One scholar said: **“In the OT, ‘justice’ is not just putting down the oppressor, it’s also helping to lift up the oppressed... The just person, in the Old Testament, is one who sees his or her resources as belonging to the whole community... a gift they’ve been given to steward for the benefit of the whole community.”**
- Over **100 times the Bible talks about the obligation of the rich** to care for the poor¹ and another 100x about our obligation to defend the cause of the oppressed.² Proverbs 31:8: **“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”**

God considers it our obligation to look after those in a impoverished or vulnerable state and will hold us accountable for how we used our resources to lift them up. I’m **not saying that the best way to help them** is always through government charity programs. I’m just saying **that the spirit we bring to life** is, “How can I help lift others up?”

Now, some of us want to respond, “Yeah, but why are the poor poor?”

- And it’s true, sometimes people are poor because of their own sin: **drugs, pride, laziness, family break-up**: these are often factors in poverty.

¹ E.g. Proverbs 31:8; Psalm 140:12; Deut 15:7; Luke 12:33–34; James 1:27.

² E.g. Psalm 9:9, Psalm 10:18, Psalm 103:6, Isaiah 1:17, Ezekiel 45:9, Isaiah 58:6

- Sometimes, though, it is because of the sin of others--b/c of oppression, abuse, or a lack of opportunities.
- Sometimes it is because of the general curse of sin in the world: natural disasters, or things like sickness, aging or mental incapacities.
- Usually **it's a combination.**

Many Christians say, “Well, if someone is poor and it’s NOT their fault, I’ll be glad to help. But if it’s their own fault, I’m not helping.” And yes, I get that there are some things people can only **fix for themselves**. But even if someone is poor through their own fault, doesn’t the gospel teach us to help?

- Our **spiritual poverty** was something we brought on ourselves, and Jesus helped us anyway! **Thank God! Amen?**
- Jesus said how well we understand the gospel is measured by how we respond to the poor.³

Look again at **Deut 10:18**. Here’s another vulnerable group the Bible commands us to care for: “the sojourners.”⁴ See it? **“For the Lord...loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.”** The **Hebrew word for “sojourner”** in these passages can be translated as “immigrant.”

He says: **Ex 22:21:** “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

- Of all people, God says, you should be motivated to help the sojourner, because you were an outsider when I cared for you and made you part of my family!
- This doesn’t mean there are no **immigration laws**--the Hebrew Bible was full of them, as a matter of fact--just that we **recognize they are people made in the image of God** and therefore worthy of our respect and care.

The point: As Christians, when we go into the ballot box, like the Good Samaritan, we should be thinking not just about our own rights, but the rights of others, also; and we should be thinking about what helps create the best society for everyone, not just for ourselves. We should think not only of our children but other’s children also.

- We should have no tolerance for statements or policies that denigrate or harm them. **“Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker.”** Prov 17:5. **God takes it personally** when a group is disparaged or mocked, and so should we.

Notice that at this point I’m not getting into which policies better serve society at large; or what part private enterprise plays vs. when or how the government steps. Those are great questions, I’m only talking about the heart **posture we bring to these questions: love and concern for others**.

Here are a **few other things Christians who are motivated by love/justice** will think about:

- **The unborn:**

³ Matthew 25:31–46

⁴ See also. Psalm 146:9, Ezekiel 22:29, Jeremiah 7:6, Zechariah 7:10

- Every day in our country, more than **3000 children are aborted in the womb** with the blessing of the state. Each of these is made in the image of God, possesses a soul and is loved by him.
- God says in **Psalm 139 that he knows each of these children** in the womb as individuals. By name.
- The humanity of these children in the womb is **NOT a debatable** issue. The biblical clarity here is **overwhelming.**
- Abortion is an affront to God's authority and an assault on his glorious work in creation.
- For this reason, **Christians work to save children in the womb.** Of course we mean we love them from the womb to the tomb. Christians have **established literally thousands of crisis pregnancy centers** all over the nation. Looking into those spaces where mothers are making the choice to keep their children, you'll find it glutted with evangelical Christians. A lot of **our church members.** We need even more.
- Christians motivated by love will always be considering the best way to help these innocent children.
- HERE'S ANOTHER thing Christians motivated by love will care about: **Public righteousness.** It's loving to want to see righteousness upheld in our society. **Proverbs 14:34** says, **Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.**
 - **'Reproach' means it degrades;** causes harm to. Sin is **like a cancer** that rots out the soul of a nation. Celebrating the deterioration of things like marriage, gender and sexuality has devastating effects, as does glorifying bigotry or prejudice.
 - Listen: We understand that we live in a free, pluralist country where people can make their own choices, but we also know that **what God declares 'good' is not arbitrary,** but leads to good in people's lives. So as much as is possible, we want to see our society align with what God declares 'good.'
 - We **rightly should desire to see elected** those who both promote and exemplify righteousness. (**John Adams** famously said that we have staked the future of our country on our ability to follow the 10 Commandments and if Americans ever departed from that framework, our Constitution would be like a fish net trying to restrain a whale.)

There are **other things love compels us to care about, too,** of course: religious freedom, international affairs and etc.

My point is simply that all followers of Jesus, going into the ballot box, should be thinking not just about their own interests, but what is best for everyone. **Again, that may be challenging,** but it shouldn't be controversial. That's **basic discipleship 101.**

But that leads me to #2... **2. Practicing Justice: Christians can disagree on what it looks like (Luke 12:13–21)**

Flip over a couple of chapters to **Luke 12.** I want to take you to a moment in the life of Jesus I've talked about recently, but I really want to press in on. I'm going to lay out a case for why the church--the institutional church--what our pastors, staff and I here represent--why we, on the whole, should avoid getting entangled in political specifics in the practice of justice.

Here's the situation in Luke 12. Vs. 13, Jesus was asked (look at it) (13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."), to adjudicate a particular social justice complaint—a younger brother was accusing his older one of leveraging his position to cheat him out of his rightful inheritance.

And this was a problem in ancient Israel. This was a legitimate social justice complaint. Now, if you know ANYTHING about the life and ministry of Jesus, you know that **Jesus cares about injustice**. He preached against it all the time!

- He condemned greedily exploitation, particularly by the powerful against the weak.
- He goes so far as to say in chapter 16 **that those in positions of power** who did not use that power to lift others up were in danger of hellfire, regardless of the fervency of their religion⁵
- And, as we just saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he said that Christians were responsible to address injustices even if they had no part in them!
- So, suffice it to say, **he cares about injustice**.

Yet here, **instead of giving a specific—you might even say political—**answer to this question, Jesus withholds his opinion. He says, rather starkly, "**Man, who appointed me as a Judge or arbiter over you?**" (Luke 12:14). Instead he **warns both brothers about the idolatry of money that threatened to condemn them both**. Had he adjudicated this case, he would have cut off half his audience, and he was sent to seek and save all the lost.

- So, he showed **restraint in adjudicating the particulars of this case**, so he could preach the gospel to both of them.

Following him, **the institutional church shows restraint** in adjudicating the particulars of political/social (?’s)-- which policies or candidates get the job done--because our commission is to preach the gospel to all.

You say, "But I thought it was my job to bring my faith and my understanding of God's kingdom into all that I do--especially my work"?

Yes, so perhaps it is **helpful here to recognize the distinction** between the church as *organization* and *organism*, because the calling on each is different.

- As an ORGANISM, members of the church ought to infiltrate every dimension of society bringing God's wisdom and shalom into it. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is not one square inch of the entire cosmos over which Jesus does not declare, 'Mine!' This is part of the creation mandate. (This is the role of members, to apply Kingdom principles in these areas.)
- As an ORGANIZATION, the church has a limited platform, reflecting an extension of the earthly ministry of Jesus. As such, our focus is on proclaiming the gospel message and teaching all things that Jesus commanded--those principles explicitly stated in Scripture. (This is the role of church leaders.)

⁵ Luke 16:19–31

Whereas members can and should bring their perceptions of God's wisdom into their respective spheres, church leaders should limit their platforms to what the Bible directly says. We're responsible to disciple people in what Jesus directly commanded.

Which policies work best in accomplishing societal goods is almost always an indirect application of Scriptural principles. In places where there is a direct line between what the Bible says and an application, **we speak**. Where there is more of a dotted line, we usually refrain.

As an organization, we preach righteousness, justice, compassion and love. As members of the organism, you (the members) seek to apply that in government, education, business, etc. **The roles are complementary**, but in most cases they are distinct.

- (Tim Keller says that we tend to think about this in terms of controversial areas, but we could really expand it beyond that. As a pastor, I teach the principles of justice and integrity. But when it comes to determining ethical practices in stock trading, that should be done as a dialogue with those Christians called to work in finance. I'm teaching the principles, they are working out the nuances of what qualifies as unfair or unethical: What qualifies as insider trading? What is the difference in healthy vs. predatory lending practices?). **I'm neither called nor competent to make that judgment.**
- The **same kind of dialogue should happen** between pastors and politicians, with pastors advocating principles and the electorate applying.
- **But the church-as-organization should refrain from attaching its authority to particular strategies in the dotted line realm.**

I should add: There are exceptions. There are places where the application is so clear that we can connect the dots. If, for example, you were **German Pastor in 1940**, you need not only to speak about the value of Jewish lives but also oppose Nazism as Bonhoeffer did. Tragically, much of the evangelical church sat on the sidelines for the **Civil Rights movement**. Today: pro-life legislation, anti-discrimination laws, and religious freedom protections are often clear enough that we can advocate directly, like Paul did on occasion.

But they really should be the exceptions.

We see this restraint in the early church. There were plenty of political and societal reforms needed in the first-century world--arguably more than in ours! Yet we don't see the Apostles prescribing political solutions to really any of them. (Not because they weren't smart enough to think of answers. **I, for one, would have loved to read a letter from the Apostle Paul** outlining his planned reforms for the Roman Empire! He was certainly capable of that kind of analysis. But **in an act of incredible discipline, he chose not to so he could preach the gospel to all**.

Of course, the gospel the Apostles preached planted the seeds that would ultimately lead to these societal reforms. But the church, as an organization, and the Apostles, as its representatives, kept itself focused on preaching the gospel and proclaiming those things that Jesus explicitly commanded.

- **Christians must care about poverty relief.** But is a state-mandated “living wage” the answer? Some Christians say yes, that’s best; others say no, it would ultimately hurt the poor. That’s a good discussion, but should the church tie it’s message to one of those positions?
- **Christians must care about healing the sick.** Is universalized healthcare the best way to help that?
- **Christians should care about education.** Is school choice the right answer? A voucher system?
- **Christians rightly care about our voting process.** Are voter ID laws a helpful protection against voter fraud, or are they inherently discriminatory?
- **Christians must care about immigrants and refugees. But does the Bible give us the exact number he wants our nation to allow?** Are there verses in the Bible that outline that? Is God always on the side of the higher number? The higher number represents his generosity and the lower one means bigotry?
- **We have to be careful to differentiate between that which is clear in God’s Word** and applications which are less clear.

Let me tell you one place where I got it wrong. In 2003, I was on the Southern Baptist Resolutions Committee, and we were asked to make a public statement in support of the Iraq war. At the time, the mood in our country was hawkish. Nearly everyone was in favor of our military involvement in the Middle East—Republican and Democrat alike. This committee decided to vote to endorse the war, a decision that, at the time, would have been completely uncontroversial. Though at the time I was personally in support of the war, I argued that the institutional church didn’t have any business weighing in on the strategic value of a particular military engagement (except in extreme circumstances). I suggested we make a general statement about our belief in "just war," and urging our leaders to use wisdom, compassion and restraint. Another man on the committee argued that if we didn’t connect our virtue with policy, our witness would be anemic. In the end, I caved. Well, sort of. I didn’t vote in support of the statement, but I was too cowardly to vote against it. It passed 8-0, with one abstention.

Just a few years later, the case for the Iraq War mostly fell apart. **And that’s ok. We’re human. But did we have to tie the church’s authority and reputation to an issue which we were neither called nor competent to judge?**

“Man, who appointed me a Judge or arbiter over this?” Luke 12:14

Policy always looks so clear in the moment! But given a little time and perspective, we see things differently. Let’s not tie the church

You see where I’m coming from? You, as believers, need to study these things out and vote your conscience.

- But we, as a church, will restrain, in most cases, from advocating for particular candidates or particular approaches.
- And as Christians united in one body, you should have patience with those who see things differently from you--differentiating between **what is clear in God’s word that we must agree on** and practical applications that we don’t.

What unites us here is not our politics but our identity in Christ, and our commission to preach the gospel-- that's what is of **first importance**. That's **above all**.

IN CONCLUSION: David Platt: "There are certain issues on which every Christian should agree... but there is no political method for resolving these issues upon which every Christian has to agree. However, there is a clear spiritual method for resolving these issues upon which every Christian should agree, faith in Jesus."

You've got to wave a flag on the top of your heart: Republican. Democrat. I hope what you fly highest will be the gospel flag. I hope you'll pledge your highest allegiance to Jehovah Nissi. **Like I said**, we are not the party of the elephant or the donkey; we are people of the Lamb, and that's because our hope doesn't come riding in on the wings of AF1, it was born into a manger 2000 years ago. Our true King doesn't sit behind the Resolute desk, he reigns from the right hand of God.

Is he your flag? And is his cause your highest cause? (Salvation? / Confess: "I've cared more about how my neighbor votes than where he spends eternity.")