

Minding the Political Gap

Series: Minding the Gap
October 23, 2016 – Brad Bailey

“Mind the Gap” reminds us of three basic truths...

1. We must be _____ of the gap.
2. The gap bears _____.
3. It is a gap we _____.

Three things to consider about the political gap that lies between us...

1. Political platforms involve multiple complex and competing issues that we can tend to _____.
2. We are polarized by voices that are designed to serve “_____.”
3. Our political views can reveal what we are _____ in most a source of personal security...which is hard to face.

How Jesus Speaks into the Nature of the Political Gap

1. Jesus calls us into the _____ nature of establishing God’s reign ...that puts earthly governance into perspective.

Mark 12:14-17

They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ 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.

2. Jesus calls us to focus on the power of _____ obedience rather than _____ force. (Matthew 5:16)

3. Jesus calls us to refuse the enemy’s offer for personal _____ and gain.

4. Jesus calls us to seek and serve the _____.

Philippians 2:3-4

Galatians 6:10 - *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

How we can mindfully engage the gap of political perspectives and postures between us

1. Keep an appropriate perspective on the merits and limits of government and legislation.
2. Keep any idea about a “Christian” position or candidate from being reduced to any simple criteria. (We each must discern what serves God’s goodness most...across many issues of character, positions, and the relative significance we deem that each carries.)
3. Embrace the humility to recognize that having the “right position” does not make us a right person (righteous).

1 Peter 2:12 ; Titus 2:7-8

4. Keep from presuming and projecting assumptions on others based on simply the party or position they share with others.

5. Listen and learn from those who believe in the merits of another position or representative. (Proverbs 12:15; 18:2)

6. Pray for all leaders and trust God’s power at work

1 Timothy 2:1-4 (NLT)

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Developing the London Underground was a **remarkable achievement** that would allow the mass of lives in this massive city to move about crossing one area to another. But they discovered a challenge.

There was **one step that was critical to navigate**. It was **the gap between the train doorway and the platform they needed to reach** (or vice versa).

And so **in 1969 a campaign** of warning was developed. **Signs and audio were infused** to impart one vital message: **Mind the Gap**.

> **It warned everyone: Be mindful that there is a space between you and the other side that you need to navigate in order to cross.**

God wants to speak to us about a similar gap...the gap that stands between us as people which we need to see and navigate our way across.

We believe that God wants to say to us: Mind the Gap that lies between you as my children.

We believe that Jesus can guide us across five gaps that we will engage throughout our lives...the **political** gap, **economic** gap, **racial** gap, **generational** gap, and **neighborhood** gap. It is precisely these challenging gaps which Jesus showed he can lead lives across.

So we are going to address these over these few weeks. (**Those of us who are left after these next few** challenging weeks...will have become an ever more remarkable community in **discovering there is unity amidst diversity**...and we will **celebrate Thanksgiving together**.)

Those three simple words... **“Mind the Gap”** reminds us of **three basic truths**...

1. We must be mindful of the gap ...aware and thoughtful about the gap.
2. The gap bears danger... there is real harm if we are not aware and thoughtful.
3. It is a gap we should cross.

So today we begin by facing...our **“political gap.”**

The “political gap” refers to the gap that can lie between us and those God designed us to be in relationship with, based on differences in our political perspectives and positions.

Over the past few years I have come to see that the biggest challenge we face in uniting amidst our diversity is political. ...because in many respects it carries within it, every other type of

difference Political perspectives are influenced by racial, gender, socio-economic, and generational dynamics. But there are some other dynamics that add to this challenge.

Three things to consider about the political gap that lies between us...

I believe there are at least **three issues** that we **have to recognize are at work** in the political divide...**three dynamics that at work in separating us from one another** over political perspectives. Three dynamics that **we have to confront** in order to protect our differences from turning into our division.

If we can recognize these...it will give us the ability to confront them.

1. Political platforms involve multiple complex and competing issues that we can tend to simplify.

Politics engages every facet of life – issues of freedom, economy... education...health... religious freedom and within economy lies ten different aspects.... Need I go on? **Naturally we want to simplify some cohesive “side”... that’s what political parties and platforms are...** but what we have to realize is that **by simplifying we are often further separating ourselves...because we are choosing to ignore a lot of actual information about what others believe and why they believe it.** When there are issues and information that doesn’t fit our simplified framework of right vs. wrong... good vs bad...we want to dismiss it...and that means **we will dismiss people who represent it.**

So the natural tendency to simplify...is the first challenge we must recognize. We cannot reduce another to a single or simple issue.

2. We are polarized by voices that are designed to serve “self-righteousness.” (Most of the talk about political issues is not an actual dialogue designed to think fairly and fully about the common good, but rather to affirm our rightness and demonize others.)

Some of us are living off of polarizing rhetoric and then wonder why we find ourselves so loaded against one another. [1a]

We like to feel good about our position. That is natural. But we have to recognize that there is a business that is making money by keeping us from actually engaging others in a thoughtful or respectful way. There is a group at **the widescreen** or at the **watercooler** that **invites us re-affirm how right we are and how wrong they are.**

Consider the increasing nature of talk radio or some television commentary. It is often **merely a product produced to sell to those who already agree** rather than to genuinely help those who disagree. **It is selling self-righteousness...more than understanding.**

This doesn't mean we can listen to certain commentators...but we need to be **responsible for checking our spirits**...and directing ourselves away from self-righteousness...and towards understanding.

3. Our political positions can reflect what we are trusting in most as a source of personal security...which is hard to face.

I know that we all believe that our positions about various aspects of national life can be based on rational ideas...whether about immigration, the military, the economy, religious liberty, but I also believe that each of these can reflect fears...and at some level our fears can reveal our deepest source of personal security. It may reflect our trust in government...or military power...or wealth...or being in the majority. While any of those may have an appropriate role in life...we do well to realize they can reflect a level of misguided trust that is hard to face.

I think of that moment in which the Roman Empire comes to take Jesus from the Garden of Gethsemane.... Peter draws his sword...and Jesus says stop...put away your sword... the kingdom is not won that way. I wonder if Jesus isn't wanting to speak to some of using a similar way. We may be fighting with the same misguided passion...the same trust in forces that God is not bound to.

Can Jesus guide us across such a gap? The good news is that he did and he does.

When Jesus gathered his first disciples...**everything was highly charged with political passions**. They were not just a nation...they were God's people...given a land promised by God. And they were now **occupied not only by another nation...but an empire that claimed their human ruler Caesar...to be a god or like a god**. As a subjugated people, they were given levels at which they could have local rule...but that only created huge divisions about how such rulers should relate to the Roman government.

So Jesus calls twelve lives in which to begin to change the world...**all had their political perspectives...but two in particular are profound** in what they **represent in terms of the political gap**. [1b]

One was Simon the zealot. The zealots were a quasi-religious sect who believed that the Jews must rise up in armed rebellion against the Roman occupiers (since Pompey's invasion of Palestine in 63 B.C. This invasion had destroyed the Jews' hopes of restoring their own government once again.). Zealots, like Simon, engaged in politics and anarchy in hopes of instigating a revolution that would overthrow the Roman government. Some would suggest that they were akin to the terrorists in their day... believing that loyalty to their nation required violence.

Jesus also called Matthew who was a tax collector. (Matthew 9:9-13). Jewish tax collectors worked for Rome to collect taxes from their fellow Jews...often extorting money from

travelers...and often known to keep some for themselves. The tax collectors, sometimes called Publicans, were despised, regarded as traitors to their own people.

These two could be as offensively opposed as any Jesus could choose.

Zealots worked *against* the government, while tax collectors worked *for* the government.

They were set **in ideological camps as different** as one could imagine. It might be akin to forming a team with Hilary and Donald. Or imagine Rachel Maddow and Rush Limbaugh; Arianna Huffington and Ann Coulter... Bill Maher and Sean Hannity.

You might think well it helped that they **didn't have social media**...no Facebook...no Twitter. They had open public scorn ! A tax collectors money was considered unclean and those taxed would avoid asking for change. A publican's money could not be tithed to the temple. They were forbidden to testify in court. A good Jew would not even associate with publicans in private life. That's why Jesus upset the Pharisees when He enjoyed a meal at Matthew's house (Matthew 9:10-13).

And here's what we should take heart in: What Jesus brought to bear in each of their lives united them.

Despite their opposing political positions, Matthew and Simon **became teammates ... they became spiritual brothers... companions.**

In fact it was Matthew who makes this clearest in his Gospel account.

How Jesus Speaks into the Nature of the Political Gap

How did Jesus lead them across the political gap?

Let me try suggest **four ways** he transformed their relationship to political passions that he imparted to them...and imparts to us.

1. Jesus calls us into the more ultimate nature of establishing God's reign ...that puts earthly governance into perspective.

Jesus begins declaring that he was **bringing the Kingdom of God to bear on earth**...that God's reign was at hand. Now we **might want to think** of this as "**other worldly**"... about something personal and private...**but everyone knew** that this phrase referred to something that effected **real peace on earth**. The Kingdom of God was understood to be that of God restoring what the Hebrew word "shalom" represented...which was ultimate peace - real peace to people's lives and between them...the setting of things in Gods order. Jesus made it very clear as he explained that the blind would see...the oppressed would be free....and more. **He was describing revolutionary change.**

But what he bore was that which transformed the revolution... it was the revolution of revolutions.

You may recall a rather climatic point in which the religious powers try to trap him...to force him to take a political side which should force his demise. As described in Mark's Gospel,

Mark 12:13-17 (NIV)

They sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. **Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ 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.**

He has just cleared the Temple... confronting the false authority and misuse of power of the religious establishment... so the stakes are high. The religious leaders want to force him into a position that will bring an end to the authority he bears. [2]

The tax they are asking about is a very specific tax... a head tax of one denarius... while small it was a tax that represented being a subject of Caesar...but it had created a revolution...because when the tax was issued, a revolutionary known as Judas the Galilean led an armed revolt calling all Jews to refuse to pay the tax...and raised an armed revolt by clearing the temple...throwing out the Romans and declaring the kingdom of God. So they are asking...what do you think of the head tax? They are asking: Are you a revolutionary? You have cleared the temple...called for the Kingdom of God....so **are you now calling for an armed revolt?** If so...he will be crushed. If not...his revolution will be lost.

They send both Herodians who are aligned with Roman power and the Pharisees who are not.

They try to force Jesus to come out with his political position. What position do you have? What party are you a member of? ...so they try to call him out....so that he will lose the authority that is influencing so many.

His response is profound...He says... whose image is on this (coin). The denarius had **image of Tiberius Caesar**...and the inscription claims his supremacy.

Jesus says...it bears his image so give it to him so it must belong to him... was minted by him...owned by him...has image on it.... So give it to him. BUT...he continues...**give to God what has his image on it...which is you.**

He changes the verb for “give” that implies a gift...and used “render”...which means “pay back what he deserves”. Maybe a tyrant deserves what is his goods...but not your ultimate allegiance. **You can give him what is his to have...but not your allegiance.** He neither forbade taxes...nor allowed allegiance. He called for a more ultimate allegiance.

As Tim Keller says, he refuses political simplicity... political complacency...and political primacy.

Jesus won't let his followers dismiss this world and the need to be engaged in it's good...nor to falsely believe and trust that political power is the primary way that ultimate change is made.

He is declaring the larger revolution at hand...which is **restoring people** to relationship with God.

Give to God what is His. All people bear His image and it is **only in allegiance to Him** that we are restored and can know ultimate peace...for all and between all.

This was likely challenging for the first disciples. Everything had been focused on restoring their power by removing the governing enemy....Rome.

But what they heard was ultimately liberating. It transcended the limits of human governing.

It can be challenging to hear about that which doesn't seem so rooted in just our nation.

This bears something challenging for many of us...but ultimately liberating.

It can at once **confront our patriotism and political hopes...but also give it new life...** as we **see the good but also hold even greater hope than political elections.**

During an election process... we all can **begin to believe that there is no hope for America** if one particular person or party wins... and how good it will be to have another.

The truth is that Jesus rose amidst the Roman Empire. His revolution spread most powerfully through the early church under even darker years of Roman moral decay.

If we grasp what has begun....we can grasp that **“Nothing's Gonna Stop It.”**

So first and foremost, Jesus calls us into the more ultimate nature of establishing God's reign ...that puts earthly governance into perspective.

2. Jesus calls us to focus on the power of personal obedience rather than political force.

Jesus calls us to grasp that he is **changing lives more than laws...**not because **laws don't serve lives...but because they don't ultimately change them.**

It is not a matter of dismissing the role of human government. God has raised up human governance as a vital part of serving the human good. Human government can contain evil and guide good...but it cannot make people good.

Laws and legislation are a **good backdrop to serve human conscious**...but they do not in themselves make people good nor create a just society...**only good and just people do.**

So Jesus never focused on earthly governance....it wasn't going to establish God's reign on earth... and it wasn't going to stop God's reign on earth. God's reign was going to be taken up in those he taught ... and no government could stop them. [3]

It was their lives and ours that will expand God's reign. As Jesus said,

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16

3. Jesus calls us to refuse the enemy's offer for personal power and gain.

Jesus understood that his people were suffering under oppression of Roman rule. **They wanted to have power back**...what was just and fruitful and dignifying. But he knew that **earthly forms of power and gain can become a vain end.**

You may recall...at the very **moment God the Father spoke out and called him**...he was **led into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days. There Satan came to tempt him...and** offered bread to alleviate his hunger ...and power to alleviate the humility he felt. This he fought...and ultimately denounced. Why? Because it was all a demand for allegiance to that which was not his Father in heaven.

Jesus understood that it was the ultimate tradeoff – gaining some personal prosperity and power by giving our allegiance to an illegitimate power. He knows it's not easy. Jesus had gone 40 days without eating when the enemy offered him bread.

He might say to each of us...who want "one of us" in the Whitehouse...watch out that what you don't give your allegiance to earthly powers...that you don't make a deal with the enemy for the sake of food and power. Remember...your God is on the throne.

4. Jesus calls us to seek and serve the common good.

The social world of Jesus' earthy ministry was not so different than today. There were forms of mutual alignments based on social class – nationality, religious, economic, gender...and the usual tendency to care most about one's own type. This is what Jesus challenged most.

Jesus went to the marginalized...those who **held no power**. Nowhere did Jesus denounce those with wealth... or power.

He related across all classes. But he so clearly **focused his ministry on helping and healing to those who were the least and left out.**

It revealed what God had always shown and called for...that He cares about everyone...and the common good.

We need to realize that **human governing** is to **serve the common good...not just one group...our group.** We can no longer care only about our nation...our type of people...our race...our class. [4]

The apostle Paul writes,

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Galatians 6:10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

How we can mindfully engage the gap of political perspectives and postures between us

1. Keep an appropriate perspective on the merits and limits of government and legislation.

Governments ('rulers') are given to contain the evil that now is at work in the human condition. Human governing...including laws and legislation... **can serve** God's purpose in **containing evil...** but they **cannot overcome evil.** Overcoming evil can only be accomplished by the power to bring the will of God to bear within the human heart. [5]

2. Keep any idea about a "Christian" position or candidate from being reduced to any simple criteria. (We each must discern what serves God's goodness most...across many issues of character, positions, and the relative significance we deem that each carries.)

It should be recognized that just because a voting guide is intended to be based in "Christian values" or a "Christian worldview" does not mean it has accurately conveyed the mind and spirit of Christ. I wish it were that simple. The truth is that many who are seriously committed to Christ have a different grid that defines what constitutes a "Christian" perspective. In part this is because there are different underlying assumptions that are presumed to be "Christian." For instance, the value of personal freedom is deemed by some to imply less legislating of morality (thus freedom regarding abortion, marriage forms, etc.) and by others to imply less legislating of civic rights (thus freedom to bear arms, limit taxes, exercise free enterprise, etc.). The value of protecting life is deemed by some to imply a priority of limiting abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia, and by others to imply a priority of limiting war, the use of financial

resources for defense that could serve other needs related to human life, and the use of the death penalty.

There are values that have become correlated with one's identity as a Christian... which other Christians don't share because they have had different sets of correlations. Those who embrace a more traditionally liberal / Democratic perspective would deem that their Christian faith naturally aligns with the values of social justice and programs of empowerment in contrast to the what they see as the greed of the more traditionally conservative / Republican perspective which tends to argue for limiting government and thus its social programs. Those who embrace a more traditionally conservative / Republican perspective would deem that their Christian faith naturally aligns with the values of family and morally responsible control of the media's explicit use of violence and sex in contrast to the support of alternative lifestyles generally associated with the more traditionally liberal / Democratic perspective which tend to limit government control of moral issues.

The point is that there are various values we deem to be "Christian" in nature, i.e., freedom from government control, which 1) can be applied with two very different sets of implications, and 2) need more thought to define what aspect of this value is really grounded in God's Word.

In voting for a candidate, our goal is not simply to elect the candidate who is the most religiously active or even openly confessing Christ (though if such a relationship with Christ is matured it should lead to the best of leadership). Because it is the church which God established to bear the Gospel... and the civic rulers (government) to contain evil... our goal in elections is, first and foremost, who will best protect and serve life and justice for all people. [6]

3. Embrace the humility to recognize that having the "right position" does not make us a right person (righteous).

Polarizing rhetoric can easily become a safe and self-righteous way to cast all moral failure elsewhere. We quickly can become 'the 'right' against 'the wrong'... and lose our sense of humility. This is not to say that we should not feel passionate about our positions... but that we must take to heart the simple truth that holding the right positions is easy compared to being righteous people. Positions are easy.... true righteousness is not.

It is one thing to extol high moral values It is another thing to prove your morality in the body and behavior of your own flesh.

The apostles called for us to focus on our own example.

1 Peter 2:12 (NIV)

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Titus 2:7-8 (ESV)

Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.

We must understand that the **greatest authority** lies **not in our positions... but in our lives**.

Mother Teresa is a great example. She held **no political position... had no formal authority... yet she had more moral authority** than any politician ever has. She could speak at the United Nations and say what no one else could. Why? Because she **lived her values**.

4. Keep from presuming and projecting assumptions on others based on simply the party or position they share with others.

During the start of the War in Iraq, those who supported the war were cast as ‘**warmongers bent on killing**’... inherently compassionless, greedy, arrogant, and evil. Those who opposed the war were cast as ‘**unpatriotic fools**’... **inherently unappreciative of their country and the sacrifice of it’s soldiers, morally lost to liberalism, and lacking the courage to face reality.**

We set up a caricature of what we deem most foolish... and then project this as an easy weapon upon anyone who also differs with us. It reduces any real respect for the unique heart of another. The result is that we stop listening to what is really in one another’s mind and heart... to the perspective that the other has to offer.

This is especially true regarding the nature of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative.’ I believe one of the most helpful steps we can take in going forward in our approach to political perspective is to stop wholeheartedly embracing such generalities as all inclusively good regarding ourselves and to stop presuming such generalities as all inclusively evil about others. I do not believe that a “Biblical” or “righteous” perspective on all the issues at hand can easily be reduced to what is often the traditionally conservative / Republican or liberal / Democrat position or candidate. I personally have found myself among a growing number of Evangelicals who find that neither affiliation fully represents my allegiance to Christ.

5. Listen and learn from those who believe in the merits of another position or representative.

We do well to take seriously the wisdom of listening.

Proverbs 12:15 (NIV)

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

Proverbs 18:2 (NIV)

A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

If you identify yourself as a Republican, I am convinced that you will become a more Christ-centered Republican by **listening less to Rush Limbaugh** and more to your brothers and sisters who are Democrats. **If you identify yourself as a Democrat**, I am convinced that you will become

a more Christ-centered Democrat by listening less to similar polarizing critics and more to your brothers and sisters who are Republicans. Followers of Jesus should help lead **both** parties to a broader moral vision that reflects God's will. [7]

6. Pray for all leaders and trust God's power at work

Nothing can mind the political gap more than prayer. But such prayer must not be that which simply calls God to join our side. As we have learned, prayer is not about pulling God into gravitational pull of our orbit...but of repositioning our lives around the only true orbit...which is His will.

As the Apostle Paul exhorted,

1 Timothy 2:1-4 (NLT)

I urge you... to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. ² Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. ³ This is good and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

What leaders should we pray for? "ALL who are in authority."

So often we naturally want to pray for those we like and consider good. It may be helpful to recognize that this instruction was written when the Roman emperor Nero was in power... far from a friend to those following Jesus.

What would it do to our hearts to pray for all leaders...even those we consider our enemies?

Such prayer draws us into the reality that God is at work...and to trust God's power to work.

We need to let prayer unite in the larger hope that lies in God's reign.

It's often helpful to be reminded that the epicenter of Christ's kingdom is not located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And the purposes of God have never been thwarted at the hands of men—a streak that's not about to end on election day November 8.

Whatever the results of the coming election, I can tell you for certainty of one sure outcome: "God reigns."

CONCLUSION: I want to give each of us a minute to quietly bring our own hearts before God...and particularly what has been going on inside us regarding politics.

Allow God to speak into the political gap that may lie between you and others. In particular, offer to God...first, any "self-righteousness" that you may realize has risen up in you about your politics...and second, any sense of fears that have been taking a hold of you.

Resources: I have formed these points from my own study and reflections...but have found rich articulation which I have drawn on from many who have sought to engage this difficult topic.

Notes:

1a. How easily we can cast all those who take another position as ‘fools’. Our culture has become increasingly given to a polarizing rhetoric that is generally destructive and divisive and bears little redemptive good for the culture it claims to serve. It rarely helps people to listen and learn. It’s very intent is to be sensational because sensationalism sells. Consider the increasing nature of talk radio program. It is often merely a product produced to sell to those who already agree rather than to genuinely help those who disagree. If there is anything we must seek to offer to the world around us, it is a more loving way to address others when we feel strongly about a position in which we disagree. This ability must first begin within Christ’s own community: the church.

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.” (Titus 3:1)

Paul says... “slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.” This instruction is in stark contrast to the angry rhetoric of many Christians today.

Polarizing rhetoric can easily become a safe and self-righteous way to cast all moral failure elsewhere. We quickly can become ‘the ‘right’ against ‘the wrong’... and lose our sense of humility. This is not to say that we should not feel passionate about our positions... but that we must take to heart the simple truth that holding the right positions is easy compared to being righteous people. Positions are easy.... true righteousness is not.

Certainly the Bible depicts God speaking strongly at times through the prophets against the hearts of the people. In a similar way, there may be times to speak strongly about a general tendency we see in ‘the people.’ However, we must take to heart that we are not God. Even the prophets when they spoke strongly are generally noted to have understood they were speaking for God and identified themselves among the people who bore the sinful tendencies being addressed.

1b. Description of Simon and Matthews positions drawn from [Occupations of the 12 Disciples](#) and article adapted from [Jesus Outside the Lines: A Way Forward for Those Who Are Tired of Taking Sides](#).

2. This assessment of the encounter in Mark is drawn from a great sermon by Tim Keller [Arguing About Politics](#),

3. The development of true morality requires the development of internal character (i.e., becoming a good person rather than just ceasing bad behavior to avoid punishment). However,

legislation is a good backdrop for morality. Establishing proper laws provides a plumb line... upholding a clear picture of right-living (righteousness) just as the Ten Commandments have long done to serve human good by providing healthy boundaries for our lives and a framework for understanding righteousness (Paul even states that the law serves as our "tutor" in this regard. In this sense they serve God's heart for the human life He so values... and the justice He desires. But righteous laws will never make righteous people in and of themselves. Legislation and laws are worthy of our shaping... but it will prove naïve to think that if we get all the right laws in place we will perfect society. Governmental structures and laws cannot render ultimate righteousness, but they can help reflect and uphold it.

Consider also...

Matthew 12:33-35 (NIV)

³³ "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

James 3:10-13 (NIV)

¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. ¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Matthew 7:21-23 (NIV)

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Titus 3:14 (NIV)

Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.

James 2:14-17 (NIV)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

4. Regarding the “common good”, one may also consider...Jeremiah 29:7 ‘...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

How easily we detach ourselves from being responsible servants of the good of the city in which we live. We can become sideline critics ... those who curse... when we are called to be those who bless. Let us embrace and love our city and our communities.

One may see this potentially reflected in Matthew 25:31-46.... We will be judged by how we cared for those who were hungry...thirsty... without homes... unclothed...sick...and imprisoned... those he sums up as “the least of these.” While Matthew 25 could suggest that we are judged by our basic care for the poor....there is reason to understand that Jesus is speaking of specific care for the needs of fellow disciples as they face the costs of going out to share the message as described in Matthew 10. This is summarized well in “[What You Probably Don’t Know about ‘The Least of These’](#)” A more biblically accurate understanding of Jesus' words in Matthew 25., by Andy Horvath.

5. The God given role of government

It is important to establish that **God has a role for government** because many of us have become disillusioned with or detached from our government. And people who believe there is a greater source of power and authority (God) can also naturally begin to become critics of human governance. Let’s be honest... we live our lives surrounded mostly with negative connotations towards government: the authorities who tax us and hold power that we must fight against and for.

What is God’s perspective about the role of government and citizenship? First and foremost, God’s purpose in establishing the role of governing authorities is to help deter the effects of evil (Romans 13:1-4). These words may seem difficult in light of how wrongly some governments rule. But just as we recognize that God ordained for good purposes the roles of marriage and parenting which we fail deeply to fulfill... we can recognize that God’s intention for government is good, even as it can fall destructively short of those intentions.

Our response to this reality is to honor what is right and God-given, while honoring God above all as the One who alone fully brings to bear justice and righteousness. In a day when disrespect for government is in vogue, Christians have a challenge to adopt a different attitude... as did David when subjected to a morally-degraded, insanely-driven King Saul. It is clear in Scripture that secular governments and world powers, even those which appear to oppose God’s ways, are subject to God’s ultimate sovereign purposes and will (consider Cyrus of Persia, the Pharaohs of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, Herod of Judea)... and that due process and rule of law is to be leaned upon rather than mob “justice” (consider Paul’s appeal to both Jewish and Roman authorities and ruling processes).

Grasping the limits of government may be particularly hard for Americans. Our country was founded with many uniquely Biblical principles...that it has enjoined itself with being “God’s Country” and a level of patriotism that can be both understandable...but dangerous.

We need a healthy sense of what America is: a nation quite uniquely founded with Biblical principles and in many respects enjoying the fruit of peace and prosperity that came forth from such... but not a nation that has ever been purely Christian or righteous. There is a **healthy pride** that should rise up and **appreciate deeply what is right** with our civic life... while **not becoming so presumptuous as to ignore what is wrong** with America’s civic life. The patriotism of one who is a citizen of God’s kingdom isn’t the patriotism of **naïve pride** that says ‘my country right or wrong’... nor is it the critic who dismisses the significance of what our unique Biblical worldview has raised up in the midst of human history. **Healthy patriotism and healthy citizenship involves being contributors and correctives towards righteousness, in word and deed.**

To those who may tend to become critical and cynical: don’t lose sight of the true reality of suffering and sabotage of human dignity that has defined so much of history and nations before the American experiment through which a new hope flowed from many of God’s principles at its soul. Christians of the early nineteenth century were at the forefront of founding public hospitals and public education, of meeting human needs, and stopping abuses of working men and women. The abolition of slavery was spearheaded by Christians, as was the civil rights movement. **There is much to bless.** Stay sensitive to the ways in which criticism can turn to cynicism... and cynicism can turn into cursing.

To those who may tend to idealize this nation as a light to the world: don’t lose sight of the fact that this country rose out of a **deep mixture** of influences... including an opportunism to prosper and even a greed that exploits. As Tony Compolo says: if we are to understand that all world systems are Babylonian in their own right, America may be the best Babylon... but it is still a Babylon. It may be a system that is blessed to have righteously chosen Biblical principles of justice and human rights... but it is still a world system vulnerable to it’s human nature.

We must keep our distinct identity and as ambassadors living in another nation...not forget our true country.

We cannot legislate or create ultimate morality by simply accepting a majority vote or view.

As Francis Schaeffer wrote many years ago,

“The Reformation’s preaching of the Gospel brought forth a true basis for form and freedom in society and government... that 51 percent of the vote never becomes the final source of right and wrong in government because the absolutes of the Bible are available to judge a society. The ‘little man,’ the private citizen, can at any time stand up and, on the basis of biblical teaching, say that the majority is wrong” (Francis Schaeffer, How Should We Then Live?)

6. In regards to voting, we need to evaluate political issues (candidates, policy, propositions, etc.) based not simply on family and party lines, but on God's vision and values as reflected in 'the whole counsel of Scripture.'

There is a tendency on each side of the political spectrum to frame certain issues as 'religious' in nature; for example, conservatives focus on the social issues of abortion and sexuality... liberals focus on issues of economic justice. It should not surprise us that roughly 80% of white evangelicals are Republicans while roughly 80% of black evangelicals are Democrats; because each group has a different past and point of reference...and those create different priorities. We naturally assume that God is on our side... but God is not registered as a Republican or a Democrat. Here is where we must ask who we really are... if our primary identity is that of a particular political party... or a follower of Jesus:

As Tony Complo writes,

"Clearly there are those on the Religious Right who would make Jesus into a Republican and an incarnation of their political values. And on the other side of the aisle there are those who would make Jesus into a Democrat who espouses their particular liberal agenda. But Jesus refuses to fit into any of our political ideologies. Transcending partisan politics, Jesus calls us to make judgments about social issues as best we can when we vote, and to do so in accord with our best understanding of God's will. This of course will make voting into a difficult decision-making process. But who said following Jesus was easy?" (From Tony Compolo, Red Letter Christians)

Legend has it that some members of clergy visited Abraham Lincoln at the White House to assure him that fighting and winning the Civil War as 'God's will'. Lincoln is said to have answered, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." We do well to always ask the same question. In determining the moral good, we must do our best to both define and prioritize the most critical issues.

As a Catholic guide describes (**Catholic Answers**, El Cajon, CA 92020 USA):

"On most issues that come before voters or legislators, the task is selecting the most effective strategy among several morally good options. A Catholic can take one side or the other and not act contrary to the faith. Most matters do not have a "Catholic position."

But some issues concern "non-negotiable" moral principles that do not admit of exception or compromise. One's position either accords with those principles or does not. No one endorsing the wrong side of these issues can be said to act in accord with the Church's moral norms.

You should avoid to the greatest extent possible voting for candidates who endorse or promote intrinsically evil policies. As far as possible, you should vote for those who promote policies in line with the moral law.

In many elections there are situations where all of the available candidates take morally

unacceptable positions on one or more of the ‘non-negotiable’ issues.

In such situations, a citizen will be called upon to make tough choices. In those cases, citizens must vote in the way that will most limit the harm that would be done by the available candidates.”

7. Regarding listening and learning, consider also...

Proverbs 18:13 (NLT)

Spouting off before listening to the facts is both shameful and foolish.

James 1:19 (NIV)

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Home Church Study

Minding the Political Gap

Series: Minding the Gap
Week of October 24- 30, 2016

1. Have you ever misjudged a gap in your pathway or roadway that caused you to trip or Fall? What can that potential tell us about the gaps that lie between us as people which we need to see and navigate our way across...such as political gaps, racial gaps, economic gaps, and generational gaps?

2. We are beginning a series entitled “Minding the Gap.” We will be seeking how God not only calls us to live in unity...but how he can lead us in living in unity amidst our diversity. The first gaps we are engaging is the political gap.

The “political gap” refers to the gap that can lie between us and those God designed us to be in relationship with, based on differences in our political perspectives and positions. It was noted that this may be the most challenging because it often carries within it every other type of difference – as political perspectives are influenced by racial, gender, socio-economic, and generational dynamics.

Share ways in which you recognize that some of these other differences would influence differences legitimate differences in political perspectives, priorities, and positions.

3. There are some other dynamics that add to this challenge. One dynamic that we have to confront in order to protect our differences from turning into our division is that of the fact that polarization is what sells...and why it sells. We all do well to admit we naturally want to feel good and right about what we believe. However, we are more deeply polarized by voices that are designed to serve “self-righteousness.” (Most of the talk about political issues is not an actual dialogue designed to think fairly and fully about the common good, but rather to affirm our rightness and demonize others.)

How do you experience being polarized by voices that are designed to serve “self-righteousness” (talk radio / TV, social media, friends, family, etc)?

4. Jesus united many who likely had quite conflicting political perspectives. We need to take heart in this...as well as look to his leading in this. Jesus called lives to enter into God’s Kingdom... which had very earthly social implications...yet he never focused on human governance nor specific political engagement. To help understand why, read Mark 12:13-17.

If what bore the image of Caesar was his, what was Gods?

5. How was Jesus bring a different revolution than others?

6. How does this help us relate more easily when we have different political positions?

7. Consider the following more specific ways we can mindfully engage the gap of political perspectives and postures between us. Try to identify one that challenges you and share how so.

1. Keep an appropriate perspective on the merits and limits of government and legislation.

Human governing...including laws and legislation... can serve God's purpose in containing evil... but they cannot overcome evil. Overcoming evil can only be accomplished by the power to bring the will of God to bear within the human heart.

2. Embrace the humility to recognize that having the "right position" does not make us a right person (righteous).

It is one thing to extol what is good, it is another thing to be and bear that same good.

3. Keep any idea about a "Christian" position or candidate from being reduced to any simple criteria. (We each must discern what serves God's goodness most...across many issues of character, positions, and the relative significance we deem that each carries.)

4. Keep from presuming and projecting assumptions on others based on simply the party or position they share with others.

5. Listen and learn from those who believe in the merits of another position or representative.

6. Pray for all leaders and trust God's power at work

Nothing can mind the political gap more than prayer. But such prayer must not be that which simply calls God to join our side. As we have learned, prayer is not about pulling God into gravitational pull of our orbit...but of repositioning our lives around the only true orbit...which is His will. As the Apostle Paul exhorted,

"I urge you... to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. ² Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. ³ This is good and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth." - 1 Timothy 2:1-4 (NLT)

This may be the most powerful call of all...for to pray for "ALL who are in authority" calls us to join the reality that God is able to work in all lives despite the level of what we may deem "bad."

Close with a few minutes of prayer....in which you try to pray not "against" those candidates or positions you are against...but FOR them.