



Why Government Can't Save You

An Alternative to Political Activism

John MacArthur

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

why government can't save you
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Study Guide



Why Government Can't Save You

CHAPTER 1 POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Getting Started

1. What specific departure from biblical standards and morality concerns you most today? Why? Have you had any firsthand encounter with this particular problem? If so, how did you deal with it?
2. What is the most important lesson you have learned from your own past mistakes? How did that lesson change your life?

Answering the Questions

1. Compare the social values of an average '50s teen to those of an average teen today.
2. List five practices in contemporary culture that you think ought to alarm believers.
3. How has democracy and political freedom been linked to Christianity during the past two centuries? Does such a connection justify the American Revolution?
4. How does the Prohibition Movement of the late 1800s parallel many of the tactics of recent Christian prolife activists?
5. What degree of involvement in politics and social causes should believers have? How does complete noninvolvement violate God's Word, and what wrong attitudes does it reveal?
6. How do examples of Joseph, Daniel, and Cornelius, who worked as public servants, show us that God does not prohibit our involvement in government?
7. What is the core issue concerning the amount of our involvement in government and politics? How should this affect our service to God (see Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9)?
8. What political and social factors during Jesus' time made life so difficult for the Jews?
9. How should Jesus' command for us to carry on His ministry priorities (Matthew 28:18–20) mesh with out political and social activities?
10. What short, well-known passage summarizes Jesus' command for us to carry on His ministry priorities?

Focusing on Prayer

- Ask the Lord to grant you the desire to have a balanced, Christlike perspective on the church's involvement in politics and the understanding to apply it wisely.
- Pray that God will remove any antagonism you might have toward the many unbelievers who are enslaved to the destructive, harmful practices and ideas of today's culture. Ask that you are able to show mercy to them as He's shown mercy to you. Then ask God to free them from their sins and turn their hearts to Him.

Applying the Truth

Reread the quote from Robert L. Ottley concerning the Old Testament prophets. Then over the next week or two read one of the major prophets, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah, and note the places where you see Ottley's analysis verified. What did you learn about the prophet's heart for the world and people? How can you apply that to your ministry to others?

CHAPTER 2

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO AUTHORITY

Getting Started

1. Do you think it's okay for a Christian to belong to a labor or professional union, especially if that group might some day vote to strike? What would it mean to you if membership is required to hold a particular position (teacher, firefighter, police officer, civil servant)?

2. It's not always easy to accept the laws and directives issued by ungodly authority. Describe a struggle you've had with such compliance. How did you eventually resolve the tension?

Answering the Questions

1. What is the essence of Paul's statement in Romans 13:1? Are there any limitations to our subjection?
2. What principle did the two Jewish midwives in Exodus 1 exemplify?
3. What is especially commendable about the manner in which Daniel and his three friends differed with the king's dietary request (Daniel 1:8, 12–14)?
4. How often will most of us have to follow the apostles' example and "obey God rather than men"? What situation would require civil disobedience from you?
5. How in the past decade have professed believers gone to excess in protesting evil in society?
6. What truth does David reveal in Psalm 62:11?
7. What significant role concerning world and national affairs has God permitted for Satan?
8. What is rebellion against the government equivalent to? How seriously does God view this (Numbers 16)?
9. To be biblically based and effective, punishment must: (1) fit the offense, (2) be viewed as a deterrent to crime, (3) be administered impartially, (4) be applied without delay, and (5) be balanced with mercy. Which of these are missing from our legal system?
10. In its responsibility toward government, how did the ancient church compare to ours today?

Focusing on Prayer

- Confess any ways in which you have failed in your scriptural responsibility toward authority. Ask the Lord to give you a better understanding of the principle of civil obedience and the reasons to obey it.
- Pray that your local church, in all it does and says, will be a godly society within your larger, ungodly community.

Applying the Truth

Read Psalm 62:11 and Jeremiah 29:7. Choose one to memorize this week.

CHAPTER 3 THE BIBLICAL PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT

Getting Started

1. Have you ever been a member of a club, professional society, association of hobby enthusiasts, or any other organized group that seemed to stray from its original purpose? How frustrating was that for you? Did you try to persuade the leaders or other members to get back to the original objectives? Discuss your experience.
2. In what ways do you think our government fails most in meeting its biblical purposes—to restrain evil, to protect and support us, or to punish law-breakers? Why?

Answering the Questions

1. What role do you think terror from authorities should play in controlling flagrant lawbreakers? How can the form of government determine how effective this terror is?
2. If you were the governor of your state, what new program would you develop to reduce crime?
3. How has the knowledge of good and evil, passed on to every human being since Adam and Eve, affected us all—even unbelievers? Does that mean everyone is born with a conscience?
4. Why is basic morality crucial to a viable social order and cultural stability?
5. What is your definition of a good citizen? How does government generally treat such a person?
6. What specifically in Romans 13:4 indicates that *all* rulers at *all* levels deserve our honor and respect?
7. How early in mankind's existence did God institute capital punishment (Genesis 9:6)? How do you feel the government should administer this punishment?
8. How do you think God views nations that outlaw capital punishment or seldom carry it out (see Ezra 7:26)?
9. How well have prisons worked in modern America? What do you think would happen to our crime statistics if we did like the Jews and promptly executed criminals or required restitution rather than imprisonment?
10. What does Paul mention as a loftier motivation for believers in maintaining good citizenship (Romans 13:5)? Why does that motivation work?

Focusing on Prayer

- Find out who your leaders are at all levels of government. Pray for them by name and ask that they be diligent and sense their divinely ordained mandate as they seek to restrain evil and promote good in the community.
- If you know someone who is now imprisoned or of a family who has a member in prison, pray that the Holy Spirit would both convict and encourage that person as he or she serves time. Ask God for that person to be able to repay his victims and regain a sense of dignity through genuine salvation.

Applying the Truth

Write a brief letter of support to one of your local government or law enforcement officials. Without getting “preachy” tell them you are praying for them—then do it.

CHAPTER 4 OUR TAX OBLIGATION

Getting Started

1. Among the various taxes you have to pay, do you feel any are unfair or levied at too high a percentage rate? Which ones are they, and why do you feel that way? How do you maintain a proper attitude toward such taxes?
2. Our leaders often seem to use tax revenue unwisely

or for the wrong things. If you had the authority, how would you reallocate some tax money? Explain your reasons.

Answering the Questions

1. Look back in the chapter and review how the government in Rome displayed its ungodliness and inequities. In what ways do you see evidence of that behavior in our government?
2. Why were national tax collectors so hated throughout the Roman Empire?
3. Read Romans 13:1–8. What is Paul’s view of tax payments? Why was Paul so adamant about it?
4. Scripture first mentions a form of national taxes in Genesis 41:33–36. What would have been the result had Pharaoh not listened to Joseph’s advice?
5. Reread the section called “Jewish Tax System.” What was the total annual rate of the six taxes and tithes the Lord mandated under the Law for the nation of Israel? How does that compare to your tax rate?
6. According to Matthew 22:15–22, what did Jesus teach concerning taxes? Why do you think His response here was politically wise?
7. What is the significance of the Greek word for “ministers” in Romans 13:6? Who is it defining in this context?
8. How does the apostle Paul’s command in Romans 13:7 reinforce Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 22:21?
9. How would the quality of life change in your city if everyone paid what they felt to be fair taxes?

10. Read Deuteronomy 12:10–19. As a citizen, what lesson on national unity and cooperation can you draw from the passage?

Focusing on Prayer

- Spend some time this week asking God to examine your heart attitude toward paying taxes. Confess any sin He reveals, and ask Him to help you turn from it and adopt a godly attitude toward *all* aspects of your tax obligation.
- Pray that your leaders would have wisdom and discernment in fairly administering tax requirements and prudently spending the revenue.

Applying the Truth

Make a list of all the good things you can think of that are paid for by your taxes. Spend time thanking God for each one.

CHAPTER 5

JESUS' LESSON ON TAX EXEMPTIONS

Getting Started

1. Have you ever been concerned about being able to pay your taxes? Share with the group the most interesting or creative way you found the money to pay your tax bill. Or, share briefly a unique way you spent a tax refund check.

2. What style of supervision do you prefer from your boss in the workplace—a hands-on, involved style, or the more hands-off style that lets the employee be a self-starter? Why? If you're a manager, explain why you use one style or the other.

Answering the Questions

1. What was the greatest hands-on lesson you ever learned about paying taxes? Who taught it to you?
2. What was interesting and perhaps a bit ironic about the timing of Jesus' tax instruction to Peter (Matthew 17:24–27)?
3. Where did the confrontation over taxes take place, and why do you think it involved just Jesus and Peter?
4. In Bible times the temple tax was collected so that the Jews would have funds to operate the Jerusalem temple. How would you react to such a tax today?
5. Why do you think Peter was curious about Jesus' position on paying taxes?
6. As the son of God, Jesus could have claimed exemption from the temple tax. Why didn't He? How do you know when claiming tax exemptions is wrong?
7. What type of coin did Peter find in the fish's mouth? Why was it particularly useful for his needs? (See Matthew 17:24–27.)
8. Has God ever provided tax money for you just when you needed it? If so, in what way?
9. How in the New Testament has the Holy Spirit turned the harsh and dreary terminology of slavery into something positive?

10. What responsibilities should our heavenly citizenship remind us of (see 1 Peter 2:11–12)?

Focusing on Prayer

- Ask the Lord to help you trust Him more during the coming year to provide the resources you need to pay your various taxes. Thank Him in advance for His faithful provision.
- Thank God this week for the privilege of being a heavenly citizen. Pray also that you would live worthy of being part of his family.

Applying the Truth

Read 1 Peter 2:9; 2:11–12. Spend time praising God in song for choosing you to be His child. Praise Him for the abundance of all your heavenly riches.

CHAPTER 6

SUPPORTING OUR LEADERS: HOW AND WHY

Getting Started (Choose One)

1. Think about a time when you did something unwise or even reckless and someone held you accountable for it. How did you respond to their reprimand? What approach would have gotten the best response from you?
2. Has it ever been challenging for you to support a new boss? How did you overcome your negative feelings? What did you learn from that experience?

Answering the Questions

1. Which early Christians do you consider good examples of citizens who boldly supported their government despite their personal treatment? What was so remarkable about their statements?
2. In the early decades of Christianity, how did most Roman officials view Christians? What shameful behaviors did they wrongly charge believers with?
3. What false accusations have you heard leveled against believers in today's media? What do you think our reaction to them should be?
4. With what has the world always associated the attitude of submission?
5. After God judged Nebuchadnezzar for his arrogance (Daniel 4:30–34), what was that king constrained to acknowledge (see Psalms 92:8; 93:1–2)?
6. What effects are inevitable when government leadership becomes too detached from God's principles? What reminder from believers would help prevent or delay those?
7. Look back in the chapters under "Leaders Have Civic Duties." What four specific responsibilities should we remind our leaders of as part of their general faithfulness to civic duties?
8. What is the wisest way we as Christians can offer reminders and lend support to our leaders?
9. What responsible limit does God place on our life of liberty in Christ (see 1 Peter 2:16)?
10. What benefits result from our support of authority?

Focusing on Prayer

- Ask the Lord to help you better follow the pattern of early church leaders such as Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian as you support your government leaders.
- Spend extra time praising and thanking God that He is sovereign over world affairs and in His appointment of rulers. Pray for the leaders of other countries by name.

Applying the Truth

Obtain the names and addresses of all your government officials—local, state, and national. List these in a notebook or daily planner, and begin praying regularly for each person. Occasionally send them written notes or e-mail messages reminding them of their accountability as leaders and telling them of your prayers for them. Be sure to record answers to specific requests.

CHAPTER 7

DANIEL'S UNCOMPROMISING CIVIL SERVICE

Getting Started (Choose One)

1. Experts have always extolled the virtues of good educational preparation. But what kind is best—four or more years of college, or several years of high-tech training in a very specific area of application? How has your own training helped or hindered you in obtaining jobs? Discuss.

2. Would you encourage a young person in your church to pursue a career in politics or government service? Why or why not?

Answering the Questions

1. Ezekiel, one of Daniel's contemporaries, recognized his greatness as a role model. Who is your contemporary whom you consider a Daniel? How are they alike?
2. What do you see as challenging for Daniel during his rise to prominence?
3. What factors helped influence the choice of Daniel and his companions for royal service under Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:4)?
4. What were the positive and negative aspects of Daniel's reeducation process? Why did he have to exercise great discernment?
5. What's the likeliest reason that the Babylonian officials urged Daniel and his friends to partake of the royal food and drink? Why did Daniel take such a strong position against indulging?
6. When have you seen Christians take a strong, godly position in a self-righteous, ungodly way? How did others react to their behavior? How did it affect their witness for Christ?
7. How did Daniel apply Proverbs 29:25 in making the dietary issues clear to his superiors?
8. What did Daniel's willingness to submit to a ten-day test involving no meat or wine reveal about his character?

9. How has God blessed you personally when you have chosen to live uncompromisingly?
10. What does Daniel's success in government tell you about God's involvement in politics?

Focusing on Prayer

- Pray that God would grant you the wisdom and courage not to be intimidated or perplexed when your convictions are tested.
- Pray that your city and county officials (police, judges, etc.) administer justice honestly and fairly. Pray for as many as you can by name.

Applying the Truth

Reread Daniel 1:8–15. Test yourself by eating Daniel's diet for ten days. During that time, pray for wisdom and for courage to stand for your conviction in a godly way.

CHAPTER 8

PAUL'S EXAMPLE BEFORE WORLDLY AUTHORITIES

Getting Started (Choose One)

1. Voter turnout in American elections is now much lower than it was several generations ago. In your opinion, what is the main reason for this phenomenon? Do you find it a pleasure or a hassle to exercise your right to vote? Why?

2. Which category do you think is more difficult to deal with and submit to in a dispute: unsympathetic religious leaders, or indifferent and apathetic secular authorities? Explain your answer and, if possible, relate a specific experience you've had that proves your point.

Answering the Questions

1. How might Paul's rights as a Roman citizen have affected the way he conducted himself when he was arrested? When have you felt your rights were violated (as a citizen, as a spouse, as an employee, etc.)? How did you react?
2. What two major religious factions dominated the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6)?
3. Why was Paul's confidence so high as he addressed the Sanhedrin in Acts 23:1?
4. The conscience is not always a reliable guide for our words and actions, otherwise Saul's would not have allowed him to persecute Christians. With Saul, what was lacking? (see 1 Corinthians 2:14–15; 4:4.)
5. What sparked Paul's anger at his hearing (Acts 23:1–3)? Was it justified? When have you had to restrain your actions and submit even though you were right? When have you reacted angrily, willing to suffer the consequences? What determines your decision to react boldly?
6. What did Paul's angry reaction toward the high priest reveal was still true about the apostle (Romans 7:14–25)? How was the way he handled the reprimand for his outburst wise and what did that response show concerning his character (Acts 23:5)?

7. How were Paul's beliefs on certain doctrinal matters more compatible with the Pharisees than the Sadducees (Acts 23:6–9)?
8. Because of Paul's drastic, sudden change from zealous Pharisee to zealous Christian, neither side trusted him. When have you experienced such a situation in your church?
9. The Jews were repeatedly unable to make their charges against Paul stick. What does that fact underscore about the character of Paul and other early Christians?
10. The chapter section "Lessons from Paul" Names four lessons we can glean from the apostle's experiences before worldly authorities. What other lessons did Paul teach you?

Focusing on Prayer

- Thank God for Paul's righteous example in relating to authority. Pray that you would live in a way that reflects that legacy.
- Pray for the leaders of nations where Christians are persecuted. Ask that the hearts of those leaders be changed for good.

Applying the Truth

Watch the news or ask your missions ministry for the names of countries where Christians are being persecuted. Try to get specific names of Christians so you can send or e-mail them encouragement and support.

CHAPTER 9

HOW TO LIVE IN A PAGAN CULTURE

Getting Started

1. What sorts of things can happen when people forget or stray from their life's priorities or calling? How have you experienced that?
2. Do you think people are more prone, less prone, or equally prone to criticize worldly institutions when they're first saved than they are after being Christians for a while? Explain your answer, based on your observations and experiences.

Answering the Questions

1. What attitude can we take that will ensure that unbelievers will ignore or reject our message? What one Christian trait can by itself make the lost more receptive to the gospel?
2. Why is it so harmful and wrong "to speak evil" of someone? What especially does it reveal about us when we direct it at rulers and leaders?
3. Which one of our duties listed in Titus 3:2 is also a beatitude and an aspect of the fruit of the Holy Spirit?
4. What moral and spiritual situation has characterized the world since the Fall? What should Titus 3:1–8 keep us mindful of and motivate us to do?
5. Why is "humility to all men" important in our Christian walk in a pagan society?

6. What all is involved in being born again (see Titus 3:1–8)?
7. As a result of God’s love and kindness, what can you reflect on and be grateful for in your life?
8. Salvation has delivered us from spiritual death, but what spiritual privileges do we receive? (See John 3:16; Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 1:13; 1 Timothy 2:4; Titus 1:2.)
9. What is necessary for regeneration (see John 3:5, 7; Ephesians 5:26)?
10. What does 2 Corinthians 5:17 say about the beginning of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work in our lives?

Focusing on Prayer

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater sense of daily gratitude as you reflect on your past unsaved condition and your present condition of salvation.
- Pray that the genuine message of salvation would prevail over all other messages that futilely seek to reform society along external moral and political lines. Ask God to grant you and other believers a renewed dedication to our primary mission.

Applying the Truth

Reread the list of Christian duties in Titus 3:1–2. Select one or two that you need to improve in, and then do some additional Bible study on the key words and concepts involved. Pray that God would show you a tangible way to minister one of these actions in the life of those around you.