

LESSON 7

*August 7-13

Respect for Authorities



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:13-16, 22:15-21, Acts 5:29, Rom. 13:1-5, 1 Pet. 2:13-15.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience” (*Romans 13:5, NIV*).

One of the greatest questions facing the church is the issue of political involvement. How do people in the world but “not of the world” (*John 17:14*) relate to the political challenges presented by the world? History is replete with examples of churches that have kept silent during times of great moral and political crises; history, however, also bears a sad witness to what happens when churches take upon themselves political prerogatives that place them decidedly upon the side of evil.

This week we look at the complex and often difficult question of how Christians are to relate to the political issues of the day. Because Christians exist in all sorts of political environments, we can look only at broad principles; in fact, the Bible gives us only broad principles. Perhaps that’s because the Lord, knowing the various and often delicate situations His people would be facing through the centuries, revealed principles broad enough to be used in any environment.

The Week at a Glance: What kind of influence should Christians have in society? How should Christians relate to the political process? Should Christians be in government? What principles should we follow in seeking to balance our obligations as citizens with our obligations to the Lord?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 14.*

Sanctified Caution (Matt. 5:13-16).

Many Christians believe we should give up on the world. The world is so evil, so confused, and so estranged from God's original purpose that there is no hope of turning the situation around. Plus, the more we are involved with the world, the greater the chances we will become even more contaminated by it than we already are. Withdrawal is the only option for those who want to remain faithful to the Lord. This argument may sound plausible, but is it biblical?

What role does God expect a Christian to play in society? Matt. 5:13-16.

Christians must do all they can to make a difference in society. They are called to give a more pleasant taste to the world around them and to provide spiritual light. As someone once said: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness!"

In early Adventism, the question was often asked whether it would be right for an Adventist Christian to go to the ballot box. Today, most Seventh-day Adventists do recognize that it is their privilege to cast their vote in democratic elections and referendums in an attempt to help promote an agenda that is closest to upholding kingdom values. How we do this, of course, isn't always easy; much depends not only upon our political and social environment, which can vary greatly from country to country, but also on what individual members believe regarding which agenda best upholds *kingdom values*. Because these questions can be so fraught with many potential hazards, as believers we should always proceed with *sanctified caution* when it comes to dealing with social and political issues.

How do you balance the verses quoted above in Matthew with texts such as 2 Corinthians 6:17 or James 4:4?

The issue for most Christians isn't that we should seek to better whatever society we find ourselves in, but rather, How do we best do that in a way that doesn't compromise our witness or our obligations to the Lord? As with so many things, we need to strike a correct balance, which is not always easy. At such times, when these questions can have a very powerful impact for good or evil upon the church or upon society as a whole, members, more than ever, need to seek the guidance of the Lord and the counsel of others in how to best proceed.

Christians in Government?

Imagine your nation is overrun by a foreign power that occupies your land, defeats your army, kills thousands of civilians, levels numerous cities, and takes many prisoners. Imagine, next, that one of those prisoners not only becomes a favorite of the very ruler who destroyed your nation but actually serves that ruler faithfully for many years. Most people would deem this person a traitor, would they not?

Who is the Bible character described above?

The answer, of course, is Daniel (*see Daniel 1; 2:48, 49*), whose story (among those of others) raises all sorts of interesting questions regarding the role of faithful people who are in positions of political power and authority.

What other biblical hero became a powerful political figure? *Gen. 41:41-44.*

Though, no doubt, the world of politics offers many potential pitfalls for any Christian, there have been those who have faithfully served in government positions. Indeed, even in our own church, Seventh-day Adventists have been involved in government. For a number of years a Seventh-day Adventist Christian served as the prime minister of Uganda. In Papua New Guinea, Seventh-day Adventists form a sizable percentage of the population, and, thus, it should not surprise us that there are many church members in high government positions. The same is true for several of the small island states in the Pacific. And even in countries where Adventists are less numerous when compared to the size of the population, we now find Seventh-day Adventists as members of Parliament or in other high positions.

Think about this: We believe God's law is a transcript of His character; that is, the law He has given us reflects the kind of God He is. With this idea in mind, why would we be better off living in a nation where Christians are involved in the political process, the very process that originates the laws of the country? At the same time, what potential dangers arise from those who seek to use government power to promote a religious agenda?

Obedience, Yes . . . But *(Acts 5:29, Rom. 13:1-5).*

Read Romans 13:1-5 and 1 Peter 2:13-15. What attitude toward political leaders do they admonish Christians to have?

Read Acts 5:29 and Romans 13:7. How do these verses help us better understand the texts quoted in the previous question?

There's no question that Christians, in whatever land they are in, should be good citizens, obeying the laws of their country. At the same time, as followers of the Lord, they answer to a higher Power, One greater than the government, to whom they are to give all due honor and respect, tribute, and custom (*see Rom. 13:6, 7*). At the same time, we must not forget that Paul and Peter died at the hands of the very authorities they were telling their people to obey. Obviously, then, respect for authority and obedience to the government have their limits.

Indeed, one powerful example comes from the history of the United States. In the nineteenth century, when the issue of slavery was dividing the Christians in the United States, Ellen G. White made it no secret as to where she stood.

"When the laws of men conflict with the word and law of God, we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be. The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 201, 202.

Throughout the years, there have been many examples of civil disobedience, of people purposely violating the law of their land in order to bring about political change. What potential dangers await Christians who get involved in such action? At the same time, what situations might exist where their Christian duty demands they get involved?

Paying Taxes (*Matt. 22:15-21*).

Few people, if any, like to pay high taxes. But in any modern society, the state must have large amounts of money to pay for the things a government is expected to provide: education, basic health care, roads, tunnels, bridges, police, armed forces, and so on. We may question whether the taxes should be as high as they often are, but we cannot question the legitimacy of being taxed.

What did both Jesus and Paul say about the legitimacy of taxation by the authorities? *Matt. 22:15-21; Rom. 13:6, 7.*

The tax referred to in Matthew 22 was “payable into the imperial exchequer, imposed on every inhabitant of the country from the time of puberty until the age of sixty-five. It was resented by the Jews as a repeated reminder of the fact that they were subject to foreign power in their own land.

“The attitude to the payment of taxes remained a moot issue in the early church. Paul finds it still necessary, nearly thirty years later than this, to lay down the rule for Christians. The authority of the state is divinely ordained, and the payment of taxes is to be made ‘for the sake of conscience.’ ”—Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 439.

What other principle comes into play when we deal with our taxes? *Luke 16:10-12, 2 Cor. 13:7.*

We must show honesty and integrity in all our financial dealings. This principle also extends to what we can receive from or must pay to the government. It is dishonest to claim a benefit to which we are not entitled, and it is just as wrong to withhold from *Caesar* what is his due.

Of course, we may use all legitimate means to lower our taxes. But making false claims and defrauding the government are as much a dishonesty as stealing from our employer or from our neighbor. A Christian cannot be expected to smile when his or her taxes are higher than expected, but he or she can be expected to be honest.

Suppose you have cheated on your taxes in the past. What can you do to make restitution?

Promoting Christian Values.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church always has been strongly opposed to any interference by the state in the affairs of churches and other religious communities and, vice versa, the meddling by organized religion in matters of government. Individual members may choose to serve their country in a high office, but the Adventist Church believes that, as a corporate body, it should stay away from politics.

This does not mean, however, that the church has no interest in the values that are promoted in society and that it should not make its voice heard on moral issues that affect society. It would be wrong to impose some of our values on others, but it would be equally wrong not to present a strong witness with regard to the values we believe would make the world a better place in which to live. It is not always an easy balance to find.

What examples can we find in the Bible of faithful followers of the Lord who sought to bring about a change in government policy?

Esther 7:1-7

Dan. 2:24-27

Exod. 5:1-3

Besides these examples, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is filled with examples of the prophets attempting to influence government policy; that is, to try to get the rulers to turn away from apostasy and to follow the Lord. Of course, the times back then were radically different from any we face today. Nevertheless, there's nothing wrong with Christians seeking to use their influence toward helping bring about positive moral and social changes. The difficult questions arise, however, concerning just what changes a church should seek to bring about and how a church should implement these changes. Not everything that's sinful should be made illegal, a distinction Christians in all ages have not always understood. Where to draw the line has been and still is a difficult question for the church to answer. Thus, as mentioned earlier, this is a topic in which *sanctified caution* must be used.

What have been your own attitudes toward church involvement in politics? Do you tend to be an aggressive advocate of involvement, or do you think the church should shy away from these issues? What reasons do you have for the position you take?

Further Study: “Christ’s reply was no evasion, but a candid answer to the question. Holding in His hand the Roman coin, upon which were stamped the name and image of Caesar, He declared that since they were living under the protection of the Roman power, they should render to that power the support it claimed, so long as this did not conflict with a higher duty. But while peaceably subject to the laws of the land, they should at all times give their first allegiance to God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 602.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Ellen White was very active in the temperance movement in the United States. In fact, she was so strongly in favor of banning alcohol (prohibition) that she encouraged people to vote for prohibition—even if the vote was held on Sabbath. “Shall we vote for prohibition?” she asked. ‘Yes, to a man, everywhere,’ she replied, ‘and perhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, If necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time.’ ”—A. L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1984), vol. 1, p. 160. Discuss the implications of her stance in the context of this week’s lesson.**
- 2 Is it legitimate, or even a duty, for the church to speak out on some moral issues, even if this may draw the church into a political debate?**
- 3 Though living at a time of great political corruption, Jesus said very little about the political issues of His day. What lessons can we draw from His example? What lessons should we not draw from that example?**

Summary: Christians are citizens of the heavenly kingdom first, but they are most definitely also citizens of their own country and are to accept their part of the responsibility all citizens should share. The principle of rendering to Caesar what is his and to God what is God’s gives us a broad outline from which Christians are to work in whatever land they reside.

Two-Banana War

by BONNIE NORTON and TREVOR ROBINSON

Too often it takes very little to start a war, and in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, it took only two bananas. When two Adventist pilots flew into an isolated village in the highlands of PNG, they discovered almost the entire village burned to the ground. Slowly they pieced together the story.

About two weeks earlier two friends from the village had gone to Port Moresby, the major city on the southern coast. One man had two bananas, but the other man had brought nothing to eat. In the morning Friend A awoke to discover one of his bananas was missing. Friend B denied having taken the banana, but Friend A was not convinced. In his mind he vowed that he would get revenge for the stolen banana.

The night that the two men returned to their village, Friend A sneaked out and set Friend B's hut on fire. The grass-mat sides and grass roof erupted into a ball of flame and burned to the ground in minutes. Thankfully, no one was killed. But Friend B knew who had done this and he vowed revenge.

The next night Friend B set Friend A's hut afire. Friend A called his clan members together, and that night they set fire to all the huts that belonged to Friend B's clan. In turn, Friend B and his clan set fire to clan A's huts. The remaining villagers could not stand to watch the excitement, so they took sides. Friend A's supporters set fire to Friend B's supporters' huts, and Friend B's supporters set fire to Friend A's supporters' huts. Soon nothing was standing except the little Adventist church.

Even the church seemed doomed when a man ran toward it with a burning torch in his hand. Then suddenly the man tripped and fell. He landed on a sharp stick poking out of the ground. The raging villagers stopped in their tracks. "God is watching out for His church!" they cried. "Which one of us would dare set fire to God's church?"

And so, if you fly into that village today, you will see our lone little Adventist church standing amidst a burned-out village. It stands as a reminder that amidst human frailties and passions, God stands waiting to change hearts and lives into the likeness of His Son.

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