

Governing God's Way

^{CEB} **Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14** God, give your judgments to the king. Give your righteousness to the king's son. ² Let him judge your people with righteousness and your poor ones with justice. ³ Let the mountains bring peace to the people; let the hills bring righteousness. ⁴ Let the king bring justice to people who are poor; let him save the children of those who are needy, ¹² Let it be so because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper. ¹³ He has compassion on the weak and the needy; he saves the lives of those who are in need. ¹⁴ He redeems their lives from oppression and violence; their blood is precious in his eyes.

Isaiah 58:6-7, 10 CEB ⁶ Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? ⁷ Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? ¹⁰ if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon.

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In this country, many Christians have an uneasy relationship with the government. Some isolate their political life from their religious life, putting each realm into their own separate silo, allowing neither to influence the other. From 1955 to 1976, for 21 years, Richard J. Daley was mayor of Chicago. It was no secret that he was a political boss who ran one of the most corrupt city governments in the country. And every morning on his way to his office in City Hall, his limousine took him to a church to attend mass. At least, to many outsiders, this was an example of totally isolating faith from government.

Many would like to see church and state far more integrated than they are. They generally see the U.S. as a "Christian nation" and would have that expressed in many aspects of government. This raises some important issues. First, how then would we treat other faiths such as Muslims and Hindus? What about those who are of the same lineage as Jesus, the Jews? What about Unitarians and Mormons? Second, which sort of Christianity would be integrated into the functions and ceremonies of government? Thomasville is a clear example of how this might cause Christian love to be in short supply. Who should give the opening prayer at a Bulldog football game... Father Jim of Our Lady of the Highway? Many fervent Christians of this town would be displeased by that! A Baptist minister, perhaps? But which one? The reason there are so many Baptist churches in this town is that many of them fervently believe that the others are terribly wrong in some way and are in danger of eternal damnation! The same thing is true of many other denominations and non-denominational churches in town. That's the major reason that there are 100 churches in this town of 27,000 people. Most of them think the others have been corrupted by satanic forces. So, no matter who might give an invocation at the Bulldog game, a majority of Christians in the stands would disapprove of the person praying.

There are many people today who seem to have only negative opinions regarding government. There is a highly vocal segment of society that wants to reduce or eliminate much of what government does. Others take the opposite view and there is a high degree of polarization. About 150 years ago our country was polarized to the point that we were in the throes of a bitter civil war. Both the north and the south quoted scripture and claimed that God was on their side. Abraham Lincoln took note of that in his second inaugural address. He said that "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes [God's] aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered. [The prayers] of neither [side] has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

Lincoln wisely noted that both sides sought to have God on their side, but God would not be used or manipulated. Instead, we would do well to seek to be aligned with God's purposes. What does scripture have to say about government?

The letter to Titus contains instructions regarding the development of the Christian church on the island of Crete. Titus is to remind the Christians there "to submit to rulers and authorities. They should be obedient and ready to do every good thing. ² They shouldn't speak disrespectfully about anyone, but they should be peaceful, kind, and show complete courtesy toward everyone. (Titus 3:1-2 CEB) And in Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, he tells them to place themselves under the authority of the government, be obedient to the laws of the government, and to pay their taxes. (Romans 13:1-6) These scriptures have sometimes been misused by governments to claim that citizens are to give blind obedience to government authorities. And so, European kings often claimed that they ruled by divine right and with complete authority. But history is filled with examples of people blindly following their leaders into doing terrible things. The holocaust is such an overwhelming example that it may block our vision of smaller examples of where we have blindly followed kings and presidents down unfaithful paths.

Therefore, it's important to ask a very pointed question: What does God expect of government leadership? One passage that addresses this issue directly is Psalm 72. It's a job description for the king. If you do it right, then these are your priorities, this is what you do. "Judge your people with righteousness and your poor ones with justice. Let the king bring justice to people who are poor; let him save the children of those who are needy." The only stated responsibilities of the king mentioned in verses 2-7 and 12-14 is to establish justice for the oppressed and to "save" the needy.

Verse eleven says, "all the kings bow down before him; all the nations serve him." Why? Verse twelve says, "because he delivers the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper. ¹³ He has compassion on the weak and the needy; he saves the lives of those who are in need. ¹⁴ He redeems their lives from oppression and violence; their blood is precious in his eyes."

Psalm 72 makes the claim that other nations respect and honor this government, not because of military power or clever economic strategy, but because of the care given to those who are weak and oppressed.

In the third chapter of First Kings, we read about when Solomon succeeded his father, David, as king of Israel. Solomon prayed with humility that God would give him a discerning mind so that he could rule God's people wisely. God answered Solomon's prayer, saying, "Because you have asked for this instead of requesting long life, wealth, or victory over your enemies--asking for discernment so as to acquire good judgment-- ¹² I will now do just what you said."

These passages make the claim that national security comes through compassionate goodness rather than overwhelming military might. Suffice it to say that being the greatest military power on the face of the earth has failed to make us safe and secure.

Psalm 72 repeatedly refers to righteousness. But, the king's righteousness isn't about the king's attendance record at worship, or the regularity of the President's Bible reading, or participation in national prayer breakfasts. No, the issue is what we would call social justice.

Psalm 72 is a prayer asking that God's rule on earth come about through the reign of the king. The king, the prime minister, the president, the governing leaders, are called to rule by God's policies and God's royal policy (God's will) is justice and righteousness. Justice and righteousness are the foundations on which all other possibilities rest.

Psalm 72 is not a lonely isolated description of how God would have governments rule their nations. Hear these words from Psalm 82. "God takes his stand in the divine council. . . Give justice to the lowly and the orphan; maintain the right of the poor and the destitute! ⁴ Rescue the lowly and the needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked!"

Those words immediately made me think of an old gospel song by Fannie J. Crosby – "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying." It's a song with stirring words and a rollicking tune. Unfortunately, Fannie missed her chance to exhort us to rescue the perishing and care for the

dying by following closely in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus said little about after death glory or torment. When he did, he pointed out that a rich man was in torment because he ignored a suffering hungry beggar named Lazarus. And he made it clear that those who had given compassionate care to the naked, the hungry, the homeless, and the sick had been caring for him.

At this time of year, we focus on rich magi bringing expensive gifts to a haloed baby. We burst into song, singing "King of kings, and Lord of lords!" And we miss the point of the visit of the magi. We overlook and forget that God was found with-us among the indigent poor. The magi were wise men because they understood that. But it completely escapes us. We think of taking Christ to the poor and needy, but scripture tells us that is where we will find Christ, because that's where he has always been.

Jesus said, "I didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give my life to liberate many people." (See Matthew 20:28) Serve and liberate is what he did. There are thirty-four listed miracles of Jesus. In twenty-six he liberated people from disability and sickness. In three, he liberated people from hunger. In one, he liberated people from danger. In another, he turned water into wine for a party. In each of those cases, he served others. This is how the King of kings and Lord of lords ruled.

We place much emphasis on the economic strength of our nation. We place great importance on our Gross National Product. Daily, even hourly, we check the Dow Jones Average and the S & P Index. These measurements include tobacco sales, the cost of prisons, the decimation of natural resources, and a vast entertainment industry and gigantic medical complex. But they do not measure the health of our citizens, the quality of our education, the safety of our food, or the quality of our shelter. They do not measure the joy of our families, the beauty of our arts, the integrity of our officials, or the intelligence of our public debate. Our present system of government seems to appeal to the self-interests of various segments of the population and the business world rather than to a vision of equitable well-being for all.

Scripture declares that justice, righteousness, and peace are the signs of good government. Those are God's standards. No nation does these things perfectly. The difference between the standard held up for governments and the reality of their performance is much like the difference that exists when we remember that the church is the body of Christ.

Shalom, that is, real peace and well-being, is only found when those in power take responsibility for justice clothed in compassion and regard every person in the land as valuable and precious. We are to evaluate our government on how it treats the powerless, the sick, the aged, those who suffer in body and mind. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Do not serve God out of fear, but in response to God.

Respond to the steadfast love of God with all the love you can muster.

Respond to the blessings of God by passing them on to others.

Respond to the bounty of creation with generosity and joy.