

# To Care or Not to Care

Well hey church family, hope everybody is doing well out there. If you have a bible nearby, turn with me to Jeremiah 29. This week, as some of you may already know, we are beginning a new series that we've titled *Jesus & Politics*. Soooooo before we get into the passage or anything we're discussing, it seems like at least a couple clarifications might be in order.

First, I would imagine that a few of us might be *nervous* about our church doing a series like this—especially in a political and cultural climate like we're currently in. I know that some of you feel that way because, as we were preparing to do this series, I had conversations with a good many of you about it, just to test the waters. And the most common response I think I got was something like, “are you *sure* we want to do that?” Which I interpreted as you *gently* saying “I don't think we want to do that.” Because the idea of talking about politics in church probably makes quite a few of us nervous.

So if that's you, let me respond by saying first: **trust me, you're not the only one who is nervous.** As the guy *teaching* this series, I *also* would probably prefer not to do it. There are some teaching series that we do that I get *excited* about doing. The series we did at the beginning of the year all about the bible was one of those. The series we did about a year ago on the Holy Spirit was one of those. A lot of series we do I'm *excited* about. This series is not one of those. I would not describe my attitude about a politics series as “excited.” I, like most humans, do not enjoy making people mad at me.

But that said, **there are times when, as a pastor, things *should* be addressed, whether or not you *want* to personally.** And as a church, we've tried to make it a habit of not letting *nervousness* be a reason *not* to talk about something. Especially when most everyone around us is already talking about that one thing anyway. Anytime there's something *dominating* the national conversation as much as politics does, we believe it's worth bringing what the Scriptures have to say into the conversation. And so especially in an election year, it felt like the right time to do just that, whether or not we *wanted* to do it. So that's the *first* disclaimer.

Here's the second one. We had this series on the calendar well before the year 2020 spontaneously combusted: before any of COVID-19 and certainly before any of the headlines of the past week surrounding racial injustice and protests entered the fold. And so once all that *happened*, there was definitely a part of us that thought we might change course and not do the series. Our thought was that maybe those things would take

people's mind off of politics and political division at least temporarily. But **what we've seen is that rather than either of those things moving the conversation away from politics, they both have deepened the political rifts in our country even more.** Now we're going to talk during our time of lament about how the way we respond to racial injustice really *shouldn't* be a partisan issue, but far too often, it *is*.

So while to *some* of us, it might feel like “why do this series right now, with everything else going on in the world?”, we think all this other stuff only *heightens* the need for it all the more. And additionally, let's face it: the closer we get to November, the more *none* of us are going to want to talk about politics, so we figured we'd go ahead and talk about it now, at least while we're a little *less* exhausted by it than we will be then.

Which leads me to the last disclaimer, and this one will be very quick. Even if you're still not convinced we should be doing this, and even if you're still dreading it, the good news is that this series is literally going to be one of the *shortest* series we've ever done. It's only going to be three weeks. So stick with us for three weeks—I promise you'll survive, and you might just end up benefiting from it in the meantime anyway. Fair?

Alright. So with all of *that* out of the way, let's get into our topic for today. Before we get into the ins and outs of how to think about politics, we've got to address the elephant in the room. And that's that **probably a good many of us just don't actually care that much about politics.** The stats show that a good many Americans, and especially younger Americans, tend to be fairly apolitical. If you go up to them and say “hey are you more of a Biden person or a Trump person,” there's a good chance you'll get an answer more like “I don't know—I'm kind of a Netflix person.” That's just where quite a few of us are at, politically speaking.

Or at least that's where we *were at*, prior to the events of the past two weeks or so. And even for those of us that all of a sudden care a *lot* about politics here recently, I wonder if that's just a temporary *spike* in our level of concern. My fear is that a lot of people care about *politics* right now kind of like they care about *working out* on January 1 of every year. And from what I've heard, that is very much the concern our black brothers and sisters have too—is that a lot of us who are *white* care *right now*, but we largely *won't* in a month or two. The concern is that we'll go right back to mostly not caring.

So while **in this series, we obviously need to speak to those who care too much about politics (which we are going to do), we also need to speak to those who**

**don't care that much at all about politics. So that's what we're going to do largely, today.**

Now, all *my* cards on the table, political *apathy* has very much been *my personal* inclination in the past, and still is from time to time. The first time I voted was in the 2016 presidential election. I had not even *registered* to vote until that election. Just for reference, I am now *33 years old*. That's quite a few national and local elections that I did not vote in, even though I could have. So trust me: I identify with the distaste for all things political. That said though, **I've become more and more convinced in recent years that complete political apathy may not be a faithful posture for followers of Jesus.**

And one of the reasons I've become convinced of that is passages like the one we're going to read here in a second, from Jeremiah 29. Now just for context, this is a book written by the prophet *Jeremiah* to the nation of Israel. And at this point in the story, God has sent Israel into something called "exile." We actually talked in the 1 Peter series we just finished about what an exile is. An exile is a person who lives in a place, but doesn't truly *belong* or *fit in* in that place. God is sending the nation of Israel into *that type* of situation: to live in a place, under foreign rule, where they as God's people don't truly fit in or belong. They're going to be *exiles*.

And as you might expect, they were all wondering how they should *relate to* and *interact with* their new host society. Most of us, when we find ourselves in a foreign, unfamiliar or even hostile situation, our default reaction is to keep to ourselves. We tend to put our heads down, insulate, and just ride it out until it's all over. And you've got to think that quite a few of the Israelites were thinking they'd take that sort of posture while *they* were in exile. But in what we're about to read, we're going to discover that God has a very *different* posture in mind for them in this context.

So let's just take a look. Follow along with me in Jeremiah 29, starting in v. 4:

[4] *"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, **to all the exiles** whom I have **sent into exile** from Jerusalem to Babylon: [and here are the instructions, starting in v. 5] [5] **Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.***

So he tells the Israelites, while they're in exile, to "build houses" and "plant gardens." Now, just to make sure we're all following: "building houses" and "planting gardens" are generally long-term activities, right? Those are things you do when you're gonna be

somewhere a *while*. Because they both take a good bit of *time* to complete. I mean, even today with all of our modern machinery, building a quality house takes what—six, nine months at least? So just try to imagine the process of building a house in the year 587 B.C. You don't *do* that if you're staying somewhere only *temporarily*. Same with "planting gardens." Like, the last time you stayed at a hotel for overnight, did you think to yourself, "you know what? I'm going to take a few hours to set up a planter box right outside my window"? No, because you're not planning on being there anywhere *near* long enough to see that garden *produce* anything. But God says to the nation of Israel, "hey, plant gardens here. Build houses here. **Settle in, on some level, to the society you're now a part of and make it your new home.**" That's how I want you to think about your situation.

Continuing in v. 6:

*[6] Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; **multiply there, and do not decrease.***

In other words, don't just isolate and keep to yourself—I want you to see this place as **home for a while. Be deeply connected to and involved with it this new place.** All of this is God's way of saying "take a *vested interest* in the place you're about to live." And just in case there was any confusion, he just comes right out and says this in v. 7:

*[7] **But seek the welfare** [if you like to highlight or underline things in your bible, you might want to take note of that phrase right there: "seek the welfare"] **of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare** [again, if you like to highlight or underline things, make note of that phrase "in its welfare, you will find *your* welfare"].*

We are called to, in the words of this passage, "seek the *welfare*" of our society. We are to work for the *good* of the civilization we're a part of. That's what our lives should look like as followers of Jesus. So there's one *misperception* of what it means to be an exile out there that we need to correct. Most Christians are aware that on some level, they don't truly *belong* in this world. We say things like "this world is not my home," "Heaven is my home," "I'm just passing through." And I say yes and amen to all of that—that's all true.

But there is an *outworking* of that thinking that *isn't* very biblical at all. And that's when we start thinking things like, "this world is not my home, *and therefore I don't care about what happens in this world.*" When we think things like "I'm just passing through, *so I'm not going to invest any time, effort or energy in the world that I'm passing through.*" And we start to become sort of cool, calm, and disconnected from our surroundings and for some, just play the game of waiting until Jesus comes back. When we start thinking like *that*, it stops being biblical and becomes *unbiblical*, or even *anti-biblical*.

Because **according to Jeremiah 29, if we are exiles, a necessary part of that is investing heavily in the good of the place where God has called us to live.** *Actively* participating in the lives of the people and systems and structures around us to make them better and more reflective of the kingdom of God. You see, **following Jesus means living for the common good.**

And just so we're clear, a central mechanism for achieving the common good of society *is politics*, like it or not. Now do understand that when I say "politics," I don't mean partisan campaigning and attack ads. You could make the case that *those* don't serve the common good much at all. But politics in *reality* is actually much broader than those things. The word *politics* literally translates to "affairs of the cities." When I say **politics**, what I actually mean **is just the organizing structure around how cities, states, and nations go about life together.** Politics are how our collective lives get organized and structured.

Laws get passed through *politics*. Laws get *enforced*, to a large degree, through politics. Goods and resources get *distributed* through politics. *Taxes* get determined and collected through politics. People get access to the *resources* they need, often, through politics. Listen: if *criminal justice reform* is going to happen or *not* happen, it will be because of politics. If *police reform* is going to happen or *not* happen, it will be because of politics. **For better or for worse, a significant portion of the common good of our society comes about through—or at least in relationship with—politics.** It's not the *only* way that we work towards the common good, but it is a pretty *large* piece of the puzzle in our society.

Now, obviously Jeremiah doesn't specifically mention politics in this passage. Most likely because there was *no such thing* as a democratic government in that society. But **if our goal as followers of Jesus is to "seek the welfare of the city"—if our goal is to work for the common good of our society—some of that is going to have to happen via politics.** Saying you care about the common good of society but not about politics, is

kind of like saying you really care about having healthy teeth but not about *brushing* them. Brushing your teeth, *whether you like it or not*, is a pretty central component of having healthy teeth. And for better or worse, in our modern society, politics is a very central piece of how the common good gets pursued and achieved. So I think **as followers of Jesus, we should shoot for something a little higher than total apathy towards politics.**

Now, before you hear me say something I'm *not saying*, my point isn't that we all need to go out and join the Young Republicans. It's *not* that we all need to become volunteer staffers for Joe Biden's campaign. And I'm not saying, as a follower of Jesus, your entire *life* needs to be political—far from it. I'm simply saying that *some* of us should probably care a little bit *more* than we do right now. **If complete political indifference is a zero on the scale, and the person who only ever posts political things on Facebook is a ten, I'm not saying you need to be a ten. But I am saying, as a follower of Jesus, you might consider at least becoming a one or a two.** And you should consider doing that *because politics is one very strategic way to work towards the welfare of the city and society we're a part of.*

Now *to* that, some of you might be thinking, “okay sure. I hear you on all this. But our political system is so *broken*, and so *divisive*, and so *corrupt*, that I just don't see the point in getting involved at all. Like it just feels so busted beyond repair. It just doesn't seem like me caring about that is ever going to change *anything*.” And *to* all of that I say “absolutely—I get it.” In fact, I often feel a *lot* of those very same hesitations in *me*. A couple things to consider though:

One, in many ways you're right. There is a *lot* of brokenness and corruption and division in our political system. I don't think I need to convince *anybody* of that. Nobody's arguing that the political system isn't broken, including some people who have been a major part of it. And I'll add to that that *out of* our elected officials in America, *90%* of them are *white*. So for those of us who are *white* and feel like the system is rigged, just imagine how *minorities* in our country feel. So yes, there is corruption and brokenness in our political system—absolutely.

But here's the thing: the Founders of our country actually *anticipated* that reality. Which is why they *built into* our founding documents quite a few *anti-corruption* measures: things like the balance of power, checks and balances, just the idea of officials being elected by the public in the first place. The Founders *knew* that corruption in our

government was a possibility, so they decided to take proactive measures to *counteract* that and fight against it.

But do you know what *one* of those measures was? *Informed citizens who would do something about corruption*. They anticipated that, in a free society, you and I would sniff out corruption and injustice and not just let politicians get away with it. But **the one thing they never anticipated is those citizens would use corruption and brokenness as a reason not to care. They could've never conceived of a society that complained about corruption and simultaneously took no steps to do anything about it.** That was fairly inconceivable from their perspective. And yet, that's the posture that an awful lot of us have taken.

Now I want to be clear that my goal here isn't to guilt or to shame. Again, I've already admitted that for an awful lot of years, I have been part of the problem. Probably still *am*, in some ways. But as someone who has been part of the problem, I want to make sure we realize: **if our concern is corruption and brokenness in our government, we do realize that by withdrawing from the whole process, we're perpetuating the problem**, right? The more people like you and me, who *care* about what's right, and still refuse to do *anything* about corruption, the more the corruption spreads. We live in a democracy. So you know what we should do if you notice that a law or policy or politician is corrupt? *We should do something about it*. But if all we do is say "well the system's so broken I'd just rather not get involved," do you know what will happen? Things will likely get worse. I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, but **we got to where we currently are because a lot of people didn't care enough to do something.**

I won't lie to you guys, there is some *alarming* stuff happening right now on the edges of *both* major political parties. And sometimes, right in the *middle* of both parties. There is alarming stuff happening within some of our police, *and* in some of those who *oppose* the police. In all those arenas, there is injustice, and corruption, and sometimes, outright *evil*. There are things that need to be confronted and corrected. And in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "for evil to succeed, all it needs is for good men to do nothing."

But whatever you do, hear me out on this: the primary reason I want us to learn to care, at least a little bit, about these things is not because the Founders *hoped* we would or because Martin Luther King *said* we should, or even because we want America to flourish. All of *that* is *secondary*, at the end of the day. The *primary* reason I want you to care is this: **because apathy and indifference have never been defining traits of God's people.** *Apathy* is not a fruit of the Spirit.

Romans 12:11 says this:

*Do not be **slothful in zeal**, be **fervent** in spirit, serve the Lord.*

According to Romans 12, God's people are to be a *fervent* people. That word "fervent" there is a very *vivid* word. It's literally the word for water that bubbles over because it's hot enough to boil. When Paul says we should be *fervent*, what he means is that we should be *boiling over* with intentional, proactive, passionate *attentiveness* to things in our world. We *don't* respond to brokenness with apathy. Because apathy doesn't *fix* anything.

In fact, it usually makes things a good bit *worse*. The very first story we read about in the bible, in the book of Genesis, details an account of a time when evil arrived on the scene, and Adam did nothing about it. As one of the only four living beings in the account, he is suspiciously absent from the conversation between Eve and the serpent. But we find out eventually that he was there the whole time. You can almost imagine the thoughts running through Adam's mind: "well, you know, this sounds like a really divisive, contentious conversation going on here. And it seems like the whole thing is kind of corrupt and broken, so I'm just going to mind my own business and not get involved." But at the end of the story, we find out that God holds Adam every bit as responsible as Eve. Because he was there, and he chose not to do anything.

So my point is that **when our default response to brokenness is apathy, we're falling for the oldest trick in the book, literally. And what's more is that we're not embodying who we were made to be. We're actually embodying the opposite.** We're *enabling*. We're shirking our responsibility and calling as image bearers of God. That's the problem with apathy.

And more pointedly, responding to brokenness with apathy stands in *stark* contrast to the posture of Jesus himself. The very idea behind the gospel—the good news that we celebrate together every single Sunday—is that **Jesus responded to our brokenness by entering into it.** Can you imagine if God took the same posture towards our brokenness that we often take towards the brokenness of the political world? "Well, I don't know—it just seems too dark, too divisive, too far gone to do anything about. I think I'll just steer clear of getting involved in all of that." Praise *God* that he didn't respond that way to *our* situation. Praise *God* that he saw brokenness as an opportunity to *step in*, not to *step out*. Praise *God* that he saw it as an opportunity to *care*, and not to *withdraw*.

Praise God that he responded with action and not with apathy. **The very nature of the gospel is that God came, *incarnationally* into our brokenness, and took it upon himself to do something about it.**

And if you're a follower of Jesus and you know Jesus did that for you, now it's your job to do the same. You see what the world needs now, even and *especially* in the realm of politics, is for *followers* of Jesus to join him *in caring*. To choose to *care*, rather than withdraw. To "seek the welfare" of the place where God has sent us into exile, because "in its welfare, we will find our welfare."

So let's talk for a bit about what this might look like. Let's talk about some ways to *care well*, about what happens in the political realm. Just for time's sake, I'll just cover three. There are obviously way more ways to go about it than this, but hopefully these at least give us some big categories. We'll start with one we often tend to *neglect*, and that's that we should...

## Way to Care #1: Pray

One way to express care and concern for the political world is to regularly and consistently *pray* for it. Now notice I didn't say *only* pray. I said *at least* pray. This is one we should *all* participate in. 1 Timothy 2 says it like this:

*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for **kings and all those in authority**, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

Now, originally I thought about doing a whole week in this series where we just unpack these four verses, because there is so *much* in there. But just briefly, notice a few things. Notice first the *types* of prayers he encourages. Not just generic "God, help this person make good decisions and be a good leader." It's *more* than that: He says *petitions*—meaning we persistently and aggressively ask God to do something in and through these leaders. *Intercessions*—meaning we set aside *specific* time to pray exclusively for *specific* leaders by name. *Thanksgiving*—meaning whether it's easy or not, we *look* for things to *thank God for* about specific leaders. So let me just ask: do you ever spend time *thanking God* for things about leaders from *both* political parties? I'll just let you be as convicted as *I* was on that one.

Now again here, I know what our pushback might be. “Well what if a leader is really, *really* awful and corrupt? We still have to find things to thank God for about *them*?” And to be sure that does make it difficult. But let’s remember that Paul writes these words in 1 Timothy while the ancient world was under the reign of Emperor Nero. If you know your history, Nero was pretty horrible. As in, he set Christians on fire for fun. So if Paul can say it then, he would certainly say it to us now. So ***petitions, intercessions, and thanksgiving: all types of prayers that should characterize our posture towards those in political office and positions of authority in our world.***

Now look also at the *purpose* for those prayers: he says it’s so *that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness*. So if I’m reading Paul right here, what he just suggested is that the reason that some people—and likely some of *us*—are more *anxious* and *worked up* when it comes to politics than we should be is because we aren’t *praying* enough about it. Did you catch that? **We lack peace in our lives when it comes to politics because we go to social media more than we go to the Father about it.**

And lastly, just look at the *motivation* behind these prayers: because *God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth*. So one thing we should *specifically* pray for is for those in political offices to come to know Jesus. So listen, if you feel like you should, feel free to pray that Trump gets voted out of office, or that he gets removed from office for legitimate reasons—if that’s your conviction, be my guest. Just so long as you are *also* praying that he comes to know Jesus one day. I told you, *so much* in this passage—feel free to pull it up and work through it on your own sometime this week.

But first off, care by *praying*. Secondly....

## **Way to Care #2: Vote**

Another way to get involved is to get out and cast your vote. A couple of notes on this one. First, notice **I am not telling you *who* or *what party* to vote *for***. There’s a reason for that. My take is that **followers of Jesus can, with deep conviction, vote for candidates of either major political party, and for many third parties as well**. I have heard Christians articulate compelling reasons for why they vote Democrat, for why they vote Republican, and for why they vote for Democrats *and* Republicans depending on the candidate, the office, and the election. And I would say that as long as you are

thoughtful and intentional about it, those can all be faithful responses. We'll get into more of that next week.

But second, if you currently *don't* vote, and want to *start*, here's what I would suggest: **start local, and then work your way out** from there. Sometimes, it can be hard to feel like your vote matters in a national election. I get that. And in a state like Tennessee that generally trends only one way in national elections, it's even *easier* to feel that way. But local elections are a little different. So next time there's a local election—whether that's mayor or city council or sheriff or school board superintendent—whatever it is, do your research, and cast your vote. Sometimes it is easier to care about *local* elections, because the things you're voting on impact a lot more of your day-to-day than national elections sometimes do.

And lastly, keep in mind that **a vote is not the same as an endorsement. By voting for a candidate or a party, you are not saying I'm 100% behind everything they stand for.** That wouldn't even make sense—there has *never been* a candidate or a platform I agreed with 100%. Instead, when you vote for something, what you're saying is, “in general, I think this candidate or this platform is a good thing for this position.” Or maybe even just, “I think they're better for it than the other options out there.” So set yourself free from needing to completely see eye-to-eye with everything a candidate or a platform stands for in order to vote that particular way. A vote is not an endorsement. Otherwise they would've called it an *endorsement*.

And I'll add this: that means **other people's votes aren't endorsements either.** For example, you shouldn't operate as if everyone who votes for *Biden* is okay with killing unborn children, and you shouldn't operate as if everyone who votes for *Trump* is a racist. That is such a flat, unhelpful way of viewing people and politics. And **it is impossible for you to love people while also turning them into political caricatures.** So remember that just like *your vote* isn't an endorsement, *other people's votes* aren't either. A vote isn't an endorsement. Lastly, one more way to care is to...

### **Way to Care #3: Get Involved**

Finally, we should consider getting involved in more regular and more hands-on ways than just voting. Some of us need to consider attending our local school board meetings, neighborhood meetings, city council meetings—because often, in those settings, we can make our voices heard.

So as an example, I know many of you these past few weeks, like me, were *horrified* to see so many *blatant* examples of racial injustice. I know many of you tweeted about it, posted on social media about it. And if you did that, that's great. I'm glad you did—that's certainly better than saying nothing at all. But at the same time, just so you know, a tweet generally doesn't accomplish all that much. It's helpful, it maybe helps our black brothers and sisters know that we're not silent about it, but at the same time, it doesn't generally lead to much lasting change, unless you're somebody with tens of thousands of followers (which most of us probably aren't).

For things to change, you need to do things like research whether our own government has effective protections and policies in place. And if we don't, you need to write or email or call to the people that make those decisions and make your voice heard. For things to change, you need to actually figure out what the *barriers* are in our city that make minority voices unheard, and be an advocate for *those* to change. Tweets and Facebook posts are great—they can be a good place to *start*—but actual change usually requires a little more than that.

Now for others of us, politics is actually something we're especially *passionate* about. Some of you are just very cut out for the political world. So for you, getting involved may *very well* look like volunteering with your candidate or party of choice. Some of you may even end up running for office one day. And I'll rejoice the day that happens, because it means that we have someone from our church family who legitimately follows Jesus, making decisions that affect our society at large. And whether I personally agree with all your decisions or not, I'll thank God for affording you that opportunity.

So for some of you, you need to ask ourselves "*is that me?*" "Am I one of the people that God has especially equipped for that world?" Maybe for too long, you've seen the worlds of following Jesus and political aspirations as *incompatible*, and you need to instead see it as an opportunity. If you spend much time in the Scriptures, you'll notice that God uses *plenty* of his people in positions of political influence, for his purposes. David, Nathan, Esther, Daniel—these all people in the bible who God elevated to positions of political power and used them for the common good. And there may be some of us listening right now that God wants to utilize in that way too.

And when that happens, the response from the rest of us shouldn't be to roll our eyes and sigh at those people or accuse them of being "too *political*." But instead to praise God for people who feel called into the inner workings of the political world, and praise

God for people who bring a true, passionate faith in Jesus into it all. We need that, and the political system needs that.

So again, those are just a few ways for us to “*care*,” politically speaking. I want us all to prayerfully consider—if our current posture towards politics is apathy—how God might want us to *care*, well. So like I said, for the other two weeks of this series we’ll talk about how we *don’t* want our church to be one that *overemphasizes* politics. I don’t want people to think of us as *entangled* in and *wrapped up in* politics as a community—God knows there are already far too many examples of that in evangelicalism.

But at the same time, I don’t want us to make the *opposite* error, either. I don’t want us to let *fear* of that first error scare us into complete political apathy. That’s not a solution. I don’t want it to create in us a posture where we *run* from the brokenness of our world, rather than entering into it with wisdom and grace. We follow a savior who brings life into death, and light into darkness. So let’s, as his people, join him in that effort.

Let me pray for us to that end.