

Jeremiah 29:4-7

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Other Peoples' Good

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / October 24th, 2021

We are now in our fourth week, third word, of our sermon series, *Faith & Flourishing in Politics*. F stands for “Faith, Not Fear.” L is “Love God & Neighbor,” and today we’re on O, “Other Peoples’ Good.”

A British game show in the late 2000s tested whether people would put other peoples’ good before their own. The show was called *Golden Balls*, which was named after golden balls the size of tennis balls that had money from £10 to £75,000 (pounds sterling). The show started with four contestants, but the game eliminated them down to two who had to end by battling for the total they had won so far. It all came down to the contestants choosing “split” or “steal.” Each contestant had a choice they would reveal:

1. If they each chose to split, they would both walk away with half the money.
2. If they each chose to steal, they would both walk away with nothing.
3. If one contestant chose to steal and the other split, the one who decided to steal would walk away with all the money, and the one who chose split would walk away with nothing.

At this point in the game, the game show host directs contestants to talk to each other, at which point they make promises that they will split the money with each other. There’s a famous episode where a big tough guy sits across the table from a young pretty blonde girl. He promises that he’ll split the pot, £100,000. He says it over and over. And she’s so sweet and timid. And when they both open the balls, she steals it all, and the man collapses with his face in his arms.¹ Some call it “the most savage game show moment of all time.”² What would you do? Would you split or steal? Would you seek both your good or only yours?

As we move from a British game show to thinking about our world, how should Christians live? We’ve been asking, “How should the church engage in the world?” Should we focus on preserving ourselves, on protecting our group identity and beliefs? Or does God somehow call us to prioritize others?

God calls his people to seek *other peoples’ good*.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Adam and Eve and all of humankind broke their relationship with God. God exiled us from the garden of Eden, which was a temple where God dwelled with people. But God had a plan. Later in Genesis, God called a man named Abram (later renamed Abraham) and said that out of his descendants, he would form a great nation that would bless all the nations (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-6). Abraham fathered Isaac, who fathered Jacob, who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel was supposed to love God and be a light to the nations, but instead, they rebelled and acted selfishly (Exodus 19:6).

God promised Israel that if they sinned against him, he would banish them into exile just like he once banished Adam and Eve from the garden. And that’s what eventually happened. They kept sinning, so God expelled them from his temple in Jerusalem, which had garden imagery all over it (1 Kings 7:20, 36). God sent Assyria and then Babylon to take his people into captivity. When Babylon captured Jerusalem and Judah, all seemed lost. But God had a surprising plan for Israel. Even though his people were now in exile, God wanted them to live like they were in the temple garden of Eden. Remember the Genesis one mandate?

Genesis 1:28 (ESV)

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue

it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Remember Genesis one? God took chaos and created order, beauty, and flourishing. Then God gave people the right to do the same thing by making them in his image and giving them dominion. He called us to go out and be fruitful and multiply and create flourishing out of the chaos, and politics is one way we do that. We take our society and culture, and we try to order it for good. Now skip forward to Israel in Babylon. Israel is in a state of chaos, in disorder. Their rulers and their best and brightest are exiled into captivity. What should they do? Feel dismayed and give up on life? Or work to bring order and beauty to the chaos?

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (ESV)

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: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 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. 7 But 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.

Do you notice any parallels between Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 29? God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1, and he tells the exiles in Babylon to plant gardens and make babies in exile—be fruitful and multiply. God uses the same Hebrew word for “multiply” (rabah) in both passages. God is recalling his people to do the work of Genesis 1. Take chaos and create order and beauty, not just for you, but your neighbor too. Steward your time in Babylon, work towards its flourishing and good.

I’ve heard many Christians express frustration over the state of our nation. If that’s your assessment, if you feel like we live in a time of chaos and disorder or feel politically homeless, like you’re in exile, go back to our Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 29 mandate. Plant gardens, make babies, steward creation and society, and seek the flourishing of our neighbors and city. *God calls his people to seek other peoples’ good.*

How do we seek other peoples’ good? There are three ways: 1) cultivate shalom, 2) seek the common good, and 3) pray for the city. Together, these three things help us bring order and beauty to the chaos, to our exile.

1) Cultivate *shalom*

Jeremiah 29:7a says, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile...” Wait a second. This letter is to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. That’s not us. Peter actually identifies believers in the New Testament as “exiles” (1 Peter 1:1)³ and Paul says our “citizenship is in heaven...” (Phil 3:20). That means while we may be in a different time and place, we’re still exiles who take the same posture.

As believers, our true home is not Israel, or Westford, America, or Massachusetts, but the kingdom of God. That means we’re also live in Babylon today—American Babylon, Canadian Babylon, or Turkmenistan Babylon. Wherever our Babylon, what are we supposed to do? “Seek the welfare of the city!” That word for welfare is “shalom.” Shalom is far richer than our English word for peace.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all of creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight [. . .] Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.⁴

We think of peace as the “absence of conflict.”⁵ But shalom is harmony, flourishing, and how things ought to be, with both God and with each other. Shalom captures heaven and earth’s goodness together.

As Christians, God calls us to seek the “shalom” of the city, in our case “Westford” or wherever we live. Did you know the Greek word for city, “polis,” is where we get our word for “politics?” Aristotle wrote a work called “*politikê*” where he talked about running “city-states like Athens and Sparta.”⁶ So to care about politics is to care about your city and state.⁷ Politics is different than partisanship, which is about party loyalty to being a Republican or Democrat. Politics is caring about the flourishing of the community of people where God has placed you. So we’ve been doing politics as a church when we care for our city, and one way to care for your city is to get involved in politics at a local level. I chatted with one of my church-planter friends, and he is running for city council. He cares about his city.

The concept of “politics” is not so different than “shalom,” but shalom takes the theory of politics and applies God’s vision of flourishing. How can we bring God’s vision for flourishing, justice, and goodness to a group of people so that they live and enjoy life together in harmony and peace with one another and God? We can’t offer flourishing if we’re fighting the city, fleeing from the city, or fusing with the city, but only by faithful presence—faithfully loving God and neighbor as we are present in our cities and states.

There’s a town in Northern Ireland named “Londonderry,” or at least that’s what the Protestants and pro-British supporters call it. But the Catholics and Irish-nationalists want to rename it “Derry” because that’s its original name and what they call it.⁸ As you can see here, “it is common to see the ‘London’ part of the city’s name spray-painted over on road signs in republican areas of the north.”⁹ This city has experienced a lot of violence and division and is further divided by a river running through it, with most Catholics living on one side and most Protestants on the other.¹⁰ To address the division, the city has built a new 900-foot bridge that curves like a snake across the river for walkers, joggers, and cyclists, all in an attempt to bring people together. They’ve named it “Peace Bridge.” Shalom is taking a city divided—Jew and Babylonian, Catholic and Protestant, Republican and Democrat—and building a bridge to foster peace and harmony.

How might we build a peace bridge? How might we cultivate shalom in our city and with our neighbors? That’s the kind of politics God calls us as Christians to do. *God calls his people to seek other peoples’ good.*
1) *Cultivate shalom; and...*

2) Seek the *common good*.

One of the things I want to do in this sermon series on politics is to develop a shared language for discussing faith and civic engagement. A word I think is helpful and is derived from biblical principles is the concept of the “common good.” The “common good” is not a communist or capitalist word. Rather, it predates both ideologies back to Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic priest who lived in the 13th century, and Pope Leo XIII, who developed it more fully in the 19th century.¹¹ The “common good” is meant to be a measure of how well the government is doing.¹² The common good asks if everyone is flourishing in society, starting with the most vulnerable and weak. We want to serve the poor and weak, right? Unless it decreases funding for my kids’ school or creates low-income housing in my neighborhood (NIMBY: Not in my back yard!).

When the church functions as God intends, it demonstrates to the world the common good. Keller calls the church a “Counterculture for the common good.” We’re salt and light; bringing flavor to our cities and preserving what’s good in culture, not separating ourselves from it. Remember Genesis 1? Remember how “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of waters” in verse 2? The Holy Spirit was there when there was only chaos and a void. And yet the Holy Spirit descended and brought order and beauty.

When the Jews were in exile in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the Holy Spirit leaving the temple, God’s presence departing Jerusalem (Ezekiel 11). But do you know where God’s Spirit went when he left Jerusalem? The Holy Spirit went to Babylon to be with the exiles. God never left his people, even in exile. God’s Spirit went with them to create order and beauty, shalom, and the common good in Babylon.

This happens again in the New Testament God sends his Holy Spirit back to Jerusalem, but this time not to the temple, but the new temple, the church. In the chaos of first-century Palestine, God sends his Holy Spirit to his exiles living in Jerusalem. Pentecost! All the disciples are in an upper room praying when the Holy Spirit descends as tongues of fire and hovers over them, like the Spirit hovered over creation. It's through these people that God is going to bless their Babylon, their city, once more, both with the gospel and helping the poor and needy. Here we find the clearest example of the common good in the New Testament.

Acts 2:42-47 (ESV)

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

When people come together to love God, love neighbor, and seek the common good, God “multiplies” their community; more fruitfulness and flourishing just like Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 29. The Holy Spirit has come to redeem the city! What did the Holy Spirit do at Pentecost? He filled people to speak in multiple languages—the gift of tongues—so that travelers heard the gospel in their native language. Do you remember the tower of Babel in Genesis 11? The Tower of Babel was the first mega-city where a whole bunch of people got together to build a vast city and massive tower to climb up to heaven. But God sent the curse of babbling (speaking different languages) on the people to scatter them throughout the earth. The Hebrew word for Babel is the word Babylon.

Now you and I are in exile in our earthly Babylon, and God has sent us his Holy Spirit to share the gospel, cultivate *shalom*, and seek the common good of our cities. We create and enjoy the common good together.

Maybe you're thinking, “Okay, the common good is like a really big pizza.”¹³ We slice it up to make sure everyone gets a piece. As one author explains it, “The idea of a common good is that it is a good that only can be enjoyed in common with others.”¹⁴ So the common good is “more like a symphony.”¹⁵ Imagine trying to enjoy a symphony one instrument at a time. The violinist would start, then a flute would play, then a tuba, and finally a triangle would go ding-ding-ding! No. All the instruments have to come together to play at once to benefit the whole—the common good is enjoyed together.

The song of the common good is only possible because of the Holy Spirit. God himself is the common good. He's the melody that holds all other goods together. Jesus has come to restore God and humanity to harmony. Together we enjoy him. And you know how Jesus did it? By becoming common. He became common and exiled so you could become good.¹⁶ Now because of Christ, you can share God's goodness, the ultimate common good, with others; and you can seek their shalom and the city's common good. How are we seeking the common good of our city? How are we sharing Christ and serving our community?

God calls his people to seek other peoples' good: 1) cultivate shalom; 2) seek the common good, and finally:

3) Pray for the city.

The prophet Jeremiah calls the exiles to pray for the city—“pray to the Lord on its behalf...” Maybe you've heard believers pray this prayer for America from the Old Testament.¹⁷

2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)

if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

The idea is that if we Americans humble ourselves and stop sinning with things like abortion and homosexuality (less often greed, racism, or violence), God will forgive us and make America a Christian nation. Can I encourage us to be wary of praying this for America, to show “caution?” Remember the book of 2 Chronicles is written to the exiles in Babylon (a people called by God’s name), and the closest parallel to those exiles are actually us, the church (Christians, called by the name of Christ). So, it’s appropriate for us to pray some form of this prayer for our churches to repent and for God to heal us; but I think we can pray for Shalom for our city like Jeremiah says or pray what Paul prays in the New Testament:

1 Timothy 2:1-4 (ESV)

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Jeremiah calls us to pray for the flourishing of our cities, and Paul calls us to pray for the flourishing of our government officials. We pray for them to lead quiet, wise, and dignified lives and that they would come to salvation in Christ Jesus. It’s okay to pray people out of office or against their bad policies.¹⁸ But even as we pray against those things, let’s pray for politicians, who are people too.

God calls his people to seek other peoples’ good: 1) cultivate shalom; 2) seek the common good; and 3) pray for the city.

Benediction – Jeremiah 29:7 (ESV)

But 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.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my fourth sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *Other Peoples' Good*. Here are several follow-up spiritual exercises for continuing to learn and grow this week:

Listen (sermon 1/2): Listen to Tim Mackie preach on Daniel 3 and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego staying faithful to the one true God while in exile in Babylon. I had never heard the story of the fiery furnace quite like this. Listen here: "[71. Faithfulness in Exile: Daniel Part 2 – The National Idol.](#)" (55 minutes) It's also available through [Apple Podcasts](#).

Listen (sermon 2/2): Listen to Timothy Keller preach on what it means for the church to be "the salt of the earth" and "a city on a hill" from Matthew 5. He describes the church as a "[Counter-Culture for the Common Good](#)" (Gospel in Life link). YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/p7XcnJ6K7YA> (34 minutes)

Question: Still wondering what the common good is, especially when it comes to Christians and politics? I found this short YouTube clip helpful: [What exactly is the Common Good?](#) by Duquesne University (4 minutes). Additionally, I found Andy Crouch's article helpful: [What's so great about the common good?](#) If you have trouble accessing it, let me know, and I can help.

Worship (music): Play the rap song *Shalom* by Urban Doxology (4 minutes). YouTube: <https://youtu.be/9jGPaYSu6J8>. This song adds poetic language to creation's desire for shalom, the flourishing of all. You can [read the lyrics here](#).

Reflect & Pray: Take time to think about your city, where you live and work. How can you seek the shalom of your community? What people have you seen in your own life who have done this well? Now pause and pray and ask God to bless their efforts, and ask God how he might be leading you to seek the common good of your community. This may mean running for office, coaching your kid's soccer team, or participating in community activities. How does the Holy Spirit nudge you? Let's pray.

I hope these resources are helpful. Let me know what you think.

God bless,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

P.S. We talked about idolatry in politics during Christian Ed this morning. This article is an interesting follow-up as we try to love God first in all things, especially politics: [Our Attraction to Idols Remains the Same, Even When the Names Change](#).

Sermon Slides

See this week's [sermon on our website](#).

Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small group coming soon.

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Endnotes

1. SocialChateau, “How To Spot A Liar (£100,000 Split or Steal) (Using Statement Analysis),” YouTube, published February 26, 2017, accessed October 13, 2021 <https://youtu.be/0vYejrbiPBU>.
2. “This Goldenballs £100,000 steal remains the most savage game show moment of all time” Joe, accessed October 15, 2021 <https://www.joe.co.uk/entertainment/this-goldenballs-100000-steal-remains-the-most-savage-gameshow-clip-of-all-time-193429#>.
3. 1 Peter 1:1, 17, 2:11; Hebrews 11:13.
4. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) 10.
5. Stephen Um, *Gospel Shaped Mercy Leader's Guide: The Gospel Coalition Curriculum* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2017) 35.
6. Fred Miller, “Aristotle's Political Theory”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/aristotle-politics/>. Emphasis his.
7. Thank you Skye Jethani for being the first to explain this to me on *The Holy Post Podcast*.
8. James Wilson, “Why is Derry also called Londonderry?” IrishCentral, re-published May 7, 2021 (originally May 2017), accessed October 15, 2021 <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/derry-called-londonderry>.
9. Wilson, “Why is Derry...” IrishCentral.
10. Mark Simpson, “New peace bridge is symbol of hope in 'stroke city',” BBC News, published June 24, 2011, accessed October 15, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-foyle-west-13901885>.
11. Andy Crouch, What’s So Great About ‘The Common Good’? ChristianityToday, published October 12, 2012, accessed October 15, 2021 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november/whats-so-great-about-common-good.html>.
12. Andy Crouch, What’s So Great About ‘The Common Good’? ChristianityToday, published October 12, 2012, accessed October 15, 2021 <https://youtu.be/x6oSJg6wuBg>.
13. See Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019) 115-116, Kindle. Meador introduces pizza vs. symphony illustration.
14. Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 115, Kindle.
15. Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 116, Kindle.
16. Matthew 27:46; Ephesians 2:17-19.

17. Russell Moore, “2 Chronicles 7:14 Isn’t About American Politics,” published January 14, 2016, accessed October 15, 2021 <https://www.russellmoore.com/2016/01/14/2-chronicles-714-isnt-about-american-politics/>.

18. Christopher J. H. Wright, interview by Christopher Reese, “Our Attraction to Idols Remains the Same, Even When the Names Change,” Christianity Today, January 29, 2021, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-february/idolatry-old-testament-idol-names-change-attraction-remains.html>. *Emphasis his*. He references Isaiah 10:1-2, Jeremiah 6:13-15, Ezekiel 22:26-29, Amos 2:6-7, 5:10, 12, and Micah 3:1-3.