

Proverbs 8:15-17; James 3:13-18

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Understanding & Wisdom

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / October 31st, 2021

I'm a low-level sci-fi nerd. One of my favorite action movies is the *Matrix*. The *Matrix* is a movie about everyone being stuck in a computer-generated world and having to break free to the real post-apocalyptic world outside. In the *Matrix* Trilogy, there's a scene where Neo, the hero of the movie played by Keanu Reeves, gets stuck in a subway station. This subway station is where people and programs secretly travel between the real world and the computer-generated world, the matrix.

The name of the subway station is "Mobil Ave," which is an anagram for "Limbo."¹ When Neo gets sent to the limbo train station, he tries to get out by running down the tracks. But it takes him right back to where he began. If he were to run down those train tracks a hundred times, it would take him back to where he started a hundred times. Even if he turned around and ran in the other direction, he'd end in the same spot.

Neo cannot travel from the computer world to the real world or the other way, no matter how hard he might try. That's kind of where we are in our series, in limbo. God gives us a vision of flourishing in Genesis 1 and invites us to seek it, but the fall in Genesis 3 hinders us. Maybe all your life, you've run down those subway tracks, worked hard, voted hard, cared, only to end up back at limbo station.

In this series, we're trying to get out of limbo station. We're trying to work towards the flourishing God intended for our world, using the word "F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H." as an acronym:

- F – Faith, Not Fear – We talked about not allowing fear to drive our politics, but faithful presence.
- L – Love God & Neighbor – We talked about our faith shaping our politics and the Good Samaritan.
- O – Other Peoples' Good – We talked about biblical concepts like shalom and the common good.

One of the reasons I want this acronym to be memorable is that when you think about politics with a friend or go to vote, you can remember some of the Bible's principles for political engagement. But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. How are we supposed to exit limbo to find God's flourishing in the real world outside? What policies and politicians can best achieve shalom and the common good?

There is a gap between biblical flourishing and policies & politicians.

The Bible gives Christians a sense of what God's flourishing looks like. On your left, we have Biblical shalom and the common good; and on the right, we have public policy. But how do we get from our vision for flourishing to making it a reality when there's a gap between them? How do I know there's a gap?

a. The Bible is not a public policy manual.

Just like the Bible is not a science textbook, it is not a public policy manual. God gives his special covenant nation Israel laws and ordinances to follow in the Old Testament. And in the New Testament, Jesus gives his followers a new ethic to live by, the Sermon on the Mount. But God's word does more than just tell us how to live; it exposes our hearts.

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to expose our idols and insecurities and apply his love. God desires to reveal our idols within our politics so that we can love him more. He won't let false idols take his place. Do we come to scripture looking for it to confirm our political opinions or to expose our hearts?

Several years ago, I tried to sit down and write a book explaining the Biblical position on modern-political issues like abortion, immigration, homosexuality, gun control, and more. I was going to call it *The Political Platform of Jesus Christ*. Great idea, right? Just vote whatever the Bible says. It turns out the Bible was not written with my modern-American political issues in mind.² The Bible isn't a textbook for American politics.

Several authors have written books like these, examining specific political topics from scripture, and I respect them for their effort. Still, it's so easy for a book like that to turn into the Bible's defense of a political party or platform. While the Bible may offer insights about abortion, immigration, homosexuality, taxation, and gun control, it doesn't tell us how to apply God's truth to public policy. The Bible tells us the lives of the pre-born, the elderly, black people, and every marginalized person has immense worth. The Bible doesn't tell us which policies best protect those lives or foster their flourishing. *It's not a policy manual*.

b. The Bible endorses humility and wisdom, not politicians.

Every election cycle, there are always candidates who claim to be the Christian candidate. They might quote Bible verses or show up at prayer breakfasts, but the Bible does not endorse them no matter how Christian they claim to be. Instead, the Bible endorses a heart-attitude of wisdom.

James 3:13-18 (ESV)

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Scripture endorses heavenly wisdom that demonstrates good conduct, is meek, is humble, pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, merciful, bears good fruit, and is impartial and sincere. But bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, boasting, and falsehoods all display foolishness. Have we ever applauded those characteristics in a politician because they affirm our position? Heavenly wisdom produces peace, the closest New Testament word we have to "shalom," but foolishness falls short. *The Bible endorses wisdom, not politicians*.

In college, I volunteered for a congressional candidate to get extra credit in my political science class. No matter how much I liked her or went door to door reminding people to vote for her or how many signs I waved for her, she was my candidate, not the Bible's. *There is a gap between biblical flourishing and policies and politicians*. Mind the gap! So how do we get across? Do we bridge the gap with political ideologies, just do whatever my party says? How about news soundbites? We can't just proof-text policies from the Bible. So what are we to do? How do we get from our vision of flourishing to specific policies?

Wisdom helps us bridge the gap between flourishing and policy.

Wisdom helps get out of the subway limbo station and into the real world. Wisdom, which is complex and requires time and effort, helps politicians and us set good public policies. Proverbs defines wisdom:

Proverbs 1:7 (ESV)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Fear of God is different than fear of man. Fear of man leads to fighting, fleeing, fusion, or freaking out. But the fear of God, meaning respect and awe for who he is, leads to flourishing. Here's how we define it:

What is wisdom? It's a capacity of mind that combines the fear of the Lord with the skill of living in God's created but fallen world in a way that yields justice, peace, and flourishing.³ – *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?* by Jonathan Leeman & Andy Naselli

Wisdom is skillfully navigating our world to create justice, shalom, and flourishing. Wisdom helps us bridge the gap between flourishing and policy. The Bible gives us a vision of flourishing. It tells us some things that are wrong. Thou shalt not steal or murder (Exodus 20:13, 15). But in general, the Bible doesn't say how to stop those things. Proverbs encourages us to be especially mindful of the most vulnerable, including the poor, widows, and orphans but doesn't say how to do that (c.f., James 1:27).

Proverbs 29:7 (ESV)

A righteous man knows the rights of the poor;
a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

Proverbs 15:25 (ESV)

The Lord tears down the house of the proud
but maintains the widow's boundaries.

Proverbs 23:10-11 (ESV)

Do not move an ancient landmark
or enter the fields of the fatherless,
for their Redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you.

A flourishing community takes care of the poor, widows, and orphans, but the Bible doesn't say how exactly to do that. Should we create a social safety net for them or try to offer more jobs? That's where wisdom (not partisanship) bridges the gap.⁴ Wisdom helps set policies that help the needy without hurting them or others. Wisdom is not simple, easy, or sometimes even expected.

There's an interesting story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who resisted Hitler during WWII. The day France fell to Germany, Bonhoeffer was sitting in a public café with his friend when the German victory was announced throughout the city. The friend describes what happened next:

The people around the tables could hardly contain themselves; they jumped up, and some even climbed on the chairs. With outstretched arms, they sang "*Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles*" ("Germany, Germany above all") and the Horse Wessel song (the Nazi's anthem). We stood up, too Bonhoeffer raised his arm in the regulation Hitler salute, while I stood there dazed. "Raise your arm! Are you crazy?" he whispered to me, and later: "We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for that salute!"⁵

In that moment, surrounded by crowds of cheering, patriotic Germans, Bonhoeffer had to decide whether to stay seated and risk being arrested and thrown in prison or pretend to celebrate something he did not affirm for the sake of resisting later. What does wisdom say? Was Bonhoeffer wrong or wise? *Wisdom helps bridge the gap between flourishing and policy.* It doesn't solve everything, which is why we need understanding.

a. Wisdom takes time to listen and understand, then act.

Foolishness and uninformed decisions are the opposite of wisdom. Those who are foolish make snap decisions and do not care what others think, but the wise listen and learn.

Proverbs 1:5 (ESV)

Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,

Listening and understanding take mental and emotional energy. It's much easier and quicker to create boxes, my political party, which is good, versus their political party, which is bad.⁶ Thus, I don't have to think about what others are saying. They must be wrong because they're not on "my side." But I've recently heard it said, "Curiosity is the new humility."⁷ When we show genuine curiosity about people and policies and try to understand them, it shows humility.

Let's pretend for a moment your doorbell ringing wakes you up in the middle of the night. You open your door and find two people there, a Democrat and a Republican. The one you disagree with the most politically grabs your shoulder and exclaims, "Your house is on fire!" But at that moment, the one you like the most jumps in and declares, "No, it's not! Go back to bed!" What would you do? Would you go back to bed? Of course not! You'd make sure your house was not on fire. You would listen, understand, and act.

Wisdom takes time to listen and understand, then act. Wisdom recognizes that it needs to be careful not to misrepresent the other side. To misrepresent what the other side is actually saying is to bear false witness (Exodus 20:16). Wise people represent those they disagree with well. We need wise voters and leaders.

b. Wise leaders help a nation flourish.

The book of proverbs repeatedly talks about the need for wise rulers. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman. She says this about kings and governors.

Proverbs 8:15-17 (ESV)

15 By me kings reign,
and rulers decree what is just;
16 by me princes rule,
and nobles, all who govern justly.
17 I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.

Having rulers in power who fear the Lord, and seek to do justice and rule wisely, is good for the people. King Solomon once had two prostitutes approach him. They each had a child, but one of them had accidentally caused the death of her child during the night, and she had gotten up and swapped hers with the other woman's child. When that woman awoke, she knew the child wasn't hers and that the woman had stolen hers. But nobody knew which woman was right. So king Solomon called for a sword and said he would cut the child in half and give a portion to each. The one who wasn't the child's mother agreed, but the true mother said the other woman could take her child. That's what a true mother would do.

1 Kings 3:28 (ESV)

28 And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.

Wise leaders help create good policies. Solomon demonstrated God-given wisdom. Does this mean that non-Christians who don't fear the Lord cannot display wisdom? No. They may still show a measure of wisdom as they prioritize the common good and govern society according to how God made the world. On the other side, some politicians might claim to be Christians and even quote scripture, but they're acting quite foolishly and using scripture for "selfish ambition." Sometimes it's the person who is not making a show of their faith, who if you look at their past decisions, shows more wisdom.

I watched a politics and Christians panel where Chuck Colson talked about how difficult it was at the highest levels of public office. He worked in the Nixon administration before committing Watergate. He said that there is not much black and white at the highest levels of government but many shades of gray. Every decision has a myriad of unintended side-effects in a myriad of unintended places. Our government needs leaders with wisdom, and as Christians, we can pray that God would give them understanding and wisdom.

There is a gap between biblical flourishing and actual policies. Wisdom helps us bridge the gap between flourishing and policy.

Jesus embodies wisdom and grants wisdom to those who seek it.

Jesus took on every aspect of God's character, including wisdom, and became flesh.

1 Corinthians 1:30 (ESV)

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

No matter how much understanding we acquire and how wise we become, we're going to fall short. "Knowledge puffs up."⁸ We'll vote for policies that love some neighbors and hurt others. We're going to put politicians into office who demonstrate more foolishness than wisdom. But God forgives us.

God forgives us because he became wisdom for us.⁹ The Son of God stepped down into our world, took on human flesh, and embodied wisdom. Jesus always made the wisest choices. He never failed, neither politically nor in any way. He was full of wisdom and did justice better than Solomon or any other ruler. He died to pay the penalty for our foolishness and rose to grant us the righteousness and wisdom of God.

Now you and I can know God and develop true wisdom for walking through this world. And now Jesus is seated on the throne in heaven, ruling and reigning over the entire cosmos with perfect understanding and wisdom. Wisdom begins by confessing our foolishness and choosing to trust in Jesus, and then we pray:

James 1:5 (ESV)

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Let's pray that God would make us into wise people. But that takes curiosity. As one pastor says, "Don't just be a headline reader. Be educated. Learn. Go deep."¹⁰ Seek understanding as you ask for God's wisdom. May we become wise people who support policies that help our world flourish. *Wisdom helps us bridge the gap between flourishing and policy. Jesus embodies wisdom and will grant his wisdom to those who seek it.*

Another one of my favorite movies is *Groundhog Day*. Bill Murray plays this selfish awful reporter who gets trapped in the same day over and over again. He does anything he wants and lives selfishly for a long time. But eventually, he begins to pursue the common good. He begins to care about others. He begins to save lives and learns how to play the piano. And finally, that's what gets him out of his time loop. Somehow instead of repeating the same mistakes over and over again, he starts thinking about others and caring for them. He begins demonstrating wisdom and cultivating flourishing, and that's what gets him out of limbo and to a new day. *Wisdom helps us bridge the gap between flourishing and policy.*

Benediction – Jude 24-25 (NIV)

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

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

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my fifth sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *Understanding & Wisdom*. Here are several follow-up items to reflect on during the week:

Pray: James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (ESV) Let’s take some time and ask God for wisdom. Ask God to develop the fear of the Lord in you and to give you wisdom (skill) for navigating life and politics.

Listen (sermon): I’m sharing this sermon from Pastor Jon Tyson called *The Controversial Jesus – Jesus and Politics* because it demonstrates wisdom and communicates a great deal of understanding. Pastor Tyson is very thorough in his sermons and includes a great deal of historical research, clearly a strength of his. He also offers a unique perspective as he was not born in America. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/1En37ldKvIU> (1:07 minutes).¹¹ This is probably my second favorite sermon on politics.

Listen (panel): Listen to Krista Tippett moderate a fascinating discussion on Christians and politics between Chuck Colson, Gregory Boyd, and Shane Claiborne. Colson worked in the Nixon administration and became a follower of Christ before being sentenced to prison. Boyd is a pastor who preached on politics in the 90s and lost 20% of his church (1,000 members). And Shane Claiborne founded a counter-cultural community trying to live the way of Jesus. Each has written on God and politics. By listening to the different perspectives, I hope we will develop greater understanding and wisdom as we navigate politics today. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/7Ky32FX03GA> (1:32 minutes).¹²

Journal: Write a list of 3-5 political issues that matter to you. Ask the Lord if there is an item or two on your list you need to investigate more thoroughly, especially the opposing political viewpoint. What does he tell you? How is he calling you to grow in your understanding and wisdom? How might you represent the issue well, even if you do take a particular viewpoint?

Worship: Listen to Shane and Shane's worship song *Psalm 51 (Wisdom in the Secret Heart)*. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/px-eU1QjQiU>.

Read (advanced): If you want to dive deeper into wisdom’s role in politics, you can pick up the challenging yet worthwhile book, *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics*, by Robert Benne (2010, 128 pages). Benne is a Lutheran theologian and offers a pathway for the complex relationship between Christians, their churches, and political issues today. Available on Kindle and paperback.

I hope these resources help us grow in understanding and wisdom.

In Christ,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

P.S. I am looking forward to next week’s Christian Ed. I’m going to present some models that explain the gap between Biblical flourishing and policies that I hope will make for some good discussion.

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

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1. “Mobil Avenue,” The Matrix Wiki, accessed October 21, 2021 https://matrix.fandom.com/wiki/Mobil_Avenue.
 2. “Lecture on the Early Church & Politics: Tim Mackie (The Bible Project),” Tim Mackie Archives, YouTube, published August 15, 2017, accessed October 21, 2021 <https://youtu.be/wXcSJVW8rg4>.
 3. Jonathan Leeman & Andy Naselli, *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?* (Church Questions) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021) 14, Kindle.
 4. See Timothy Keller, “How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don’t,” The New York Times, September 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>.
 5. “The Turning Point for Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” [bonhoefferblog](https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2016/01/19/6296/), published January 19, 2016, accessed October 21, 2021 <https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2016/01/19/6296/>, quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 16, published June 12, 2006, 1-2. I added translation and explanation of songs. Thank you Pastor Alex Burgess for telling me about this story.
 6. Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of our Neighbor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020) 30, Kindle.
 7. Chris Lake, “Curiosity is the New Humility,” published October 25, 2021, accessed October 25, 2021 <https://cornerstonewestford.com/2021/10/25/curiosity-is-the-new-humility/>.
 8. 1 Corinthians 8:1b (ESV).
 9. Proverbs 8:22-23; Matthew 11:19; Luke 2:40; Colossians 1:15-20.
 10. Eugene Cho, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: A Christian’s Guide to Engaging Politics* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2020) 142, Kindle.
 11. “The Controversial Jesus - Jesus and Politics - Jon Tyson,” Church of the City New York, YouTube, published May 28, 2018, accessed October 27, 2021 <https://youtu.be/1En37ldKvIU>.
 12. “Christians in Politics Debate - Greg Boyd, Shane Claiborne, and Chuck Colson,” Third Way, YouTube, published October 19, 2014, accessed October 27, 2021 <https://youtu.be/7Ky32FX03GA>.