

“Guard the deposit entrusted to you” (Part II)

Introduction

Paul writes to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 6:20–21 — O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

Once again, the goal of this message is to equip us to guard and to love that precious deposit of the true Gospel that has been entrusted to us. My prayer is that God would use this message to humble the self-righteous “conservative,” to confirm and establish those who struggle to explain why they believe what they believe, and to bring back those sincere Christians who may be deceived.

Today, we’re being told by many “trusted” Christian leaders that how we vote is a matter of Christian freedom. Some Christians will examine the Scriptures and according to their conscience vote Democrat. Other Christians will examine the Scriptures and according to their conscience vote Republican. The basis for this idea is that we as Christians must not be “single-issue” voters. In other words, the evangelical vote has traditionally been decided (at least in large part) by the “single issue” of abortion. More recently, the evangelical vote has also been decided by the additional “single issue” of homosexual “marriage” and the LGBTQ agenda. The argument of these Christian leaders is that this “single-issue” approach is too simplistic; it doesn’t really take seriously the whole counsel of God’s Word. There are more issues that just abortion and homosexual “marriage.” What about poverty? What about immigration? What about racism? What about healthcare and education? What about the marginalized and the oppressed? What about compassion? Isn’t this a major biblical issue? Indeed, it’s this question of compassion that can even impact our approach to the issues of abortion and homosexuality. Is it possible that doing a better job at addressing the issues of poverty, fatherlessness, access to medical aid and education, etc. might do more to combat abortion than the legislative campaign to make abortion illegal or to restrict abortion rights? Isn’t it a compassionate Gospel approach to those trapped in sexual sin that will be more effective than legislation when it comes to turning people from homosexuality, etc.? These Christians don’t want abortion and homosexuality in our culture, but they’re suggesting that government legislation is not the only, or even necessarily the best way to combat these “ills” in society.

Now we have to be careful here, because these are not *all* illegitimate questions. We cannot automatically accuse those who ask these questions of being undercover Marxists or Social Justice warriors. That’s the fastest and most illegitimate way to lose any chance of ever being heard. We have to carefully watch our own attitudes and our own motives.

It’s a good thing to be compassionate. The question we have to ask as Christians is what does compassion look like biblically and whose responsibility is it to be compassionate? In other words what is the biblical role of government? What is the moral duty of all private citizens? What is the biblical role of the Christian and of the church? And is there a danger in confusing

these different spheres and the roles and duties and expectations appropriate to each? I would suggest to you that there is a danger, and that danger is nothing less than a subverting and undermining of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. The Biblical Role of Government

Let's start with the biblical role of government. The Apostle Paul writes:

- Romans 13:3-4 — Rulers are not a terror **to good conduct**, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then **do what is good**, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Notice in these verses who it is that's called upon to "do good." It's not the "rulers" or the government, but the Christians *in their role* as private and individual members of the society in which they lived. In Romans 13 the role of the government is not to "do good" but rather to "approve" of those who "do good" and to deter *by the use of force* ("he does not bear the sword in vain") those who would do wrong. This *is* the "good" that the government is supposed to do. We read in 1 Peter:

- 1 Peter 2:13-14 — Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human creature, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

Once again, we see that the biblical role of the government is not to do the good that the individual members of society are supposed to do, but rather to praise those who do good – the practical manifestation of this praise being the protection that law-abiding citizens can count on from the legal system (cf. Achtemeier & Calvin on 1 Pet. 2:14). The flip side of this praise is once again the "punishment" of those who do evil. The distinctive prerogative of the government is the use of coercive punishment and force against those who do evil as well as the exoneration and protection of those who do good.

So what is the evil that the government punishes and what is the good that the government protects and encourages? We can't be thinking here of the kingdom ethic (cf. Mat. 5-7; Exod. 20:17) because we know that the kingdom ethic cannot be enforced with the sword. What if the government required everyone to turn the other cheek (Mat. 5:39)? Even if that were somehow possible, the result would be lawlessness and anarchy. Or what if the government tried to punish everyone who didn't measure up to the "Golden Rule" ("Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them"; Mat. 7:12)? While Christians are called upon to pray for those who persecute them and never to take their own revenge (Mat. 5:44; Rom. 12:19), it's the responsibility of a properly functioning government to be an avenger who carries out God's wrath on those who would violently persecute Christians – or any other individual or group. While it's the Christian's duty to forgive from the heart the one who murdered his family member and who has since been converted to a true faith in Christ, it is still the government's duty and responsibility to require a life for a life (Gen. 9:6). While Christians are to "count others

more significant than themselves” (Phil. 2:4) and “do good to everyone” (Gal. 6:10) the role of the government is to seek the good of its own people ahead of the good of the people of other nations—this by virtue of the fact that it is a “state” government and not a “world” government. What we see here is that there is at times a very stark *contrast* between the Christian ethic of the kingdom and the God-ordained role of the government.

So we ask again, “What exactly is the *evil* that the government punishes and what exactly is the *good* that the government encourages and protects?” Paul and Peter both assume that all human governments are fulfilling—at least at some basic level—their God-ordained role. If they weren’t, we would have to say that God’s idea was a failure. Paul is clear: “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” But Paul wasn’t ignorant. He could see the immorality and corruption of the government in his own times and he was also aware of many oppressive governments throughout history. How could even these governments be said to be fulfilling their God-ordained role of punishing the evil and praising the good? I think the answer should become clear to us when we try to imagine a society without any government at all. If we know anything at all about human nature, we know that the result sooner or later would be a society completely overrun with unrestrained and indiscriminate bloodshed and violence (cf. Gen. 6:11-13). So one commentator points out:

“Governments, even oppressive governments, by their very nature seek to prevent the evils of indiscriminate murder, riot, thievery, as well as general instability and chaos” (Stein; quoted in Schreiner on Romans; see also Mounce on Romans 13, NAC).

Calvin writes:

“There has never been a tyranny, (nor can one be imagined,) however cruel and unbridled, in which some portion of equity has not appeared; and further, some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy” (Calvin on 1 Pet. 2:14).

Do we fully realize just how much we benefit every day from the divinely ordained institution of government? My point here is not that we should be satisfied with the lowest common denominator, but that we should be able to see in this “lowest common denominator” the basic biblical role and function of the government. The God-ordained role of the government is to create an ordered and “civil” society where well-doers can prosper (including especially Christians, who are careful to submit to the governing authorities) and where evildoers (those who would steal from, cheat, defraud, extort, harm, or kill their neighbors) are punished (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-2). The biblical role of government is not to guarantee that every child gets a quality education. The government may provide a public education system and still be a legitimate God-ordained government, but this is not its legitimate, God-ordained role. The biblical role of government is not to make sure that every citizen gets healthcare. The government may provide a “universal healthcare system” (which is certain to be “unjust”) and still be a legitimate God-ordained government, but this is not its legitimate, God-ordained role. The biblical role of government is not to give to the poor, but to praise those who do give to the poor and especially to punish those who would defraud and cheat and steal from the poor. Once again, the government may give to the poor and still be a legitimate God-ordained government, but this is

not its legitimate, God-ordained role. The biblical role of the government is not to “do good” (it is not to be “compassionate”) but to protect and encourage the doers of good and to punish and restrain the doers of evil.

This certainly leaves a lot of freedom as to the kinds of laws that various governments at various times and in various places might put in place in order to fulfill this role of encouraging the good and punishing the evil. But even here we have to remember that this “good” and “evil” cannot be measured by the ethics of the kingdom but rather by the ethics of such universally known moral laws as “you shall not murder” and “you shall not steal.” The emphasis here, as well as in the Old Testament law of Israel, is on the *protection* of individual rights – of personal life and property. “You shall not murder.” Why? Because this violates your neighbor’s God-ordained right to life and to the pursuit of happiness in this life (cf. Ecclesiastes). “You shall not steal.” Why? Because this violates your neighbor’s God-ordained right to keep his/her private property. Now this is important: The government is to protect the rights and the property of the rich in the same way as it is to protect the rights and the property of the poor and everyone in between.

- Leviticus 19:15 (cf. Exod. 23:3) — You shall do no injustice in court. **You shall not be partial to the poor** or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.
- Deuteronomy 1:17 — You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small **and the great** alike.

This is what justice looks like. And yet in a major “evangelical” commentary today, we read:

“‘The justness of society can be measured by its treatment of the dependent...’ Human rights in the Bible [is] ‘that treatment which the dependent has a right to expect of society and that treatment which society owes to the dependent’” (Christenson, quoting Hamilton).

Do you see how “justice” is being defined purely in terms of the “dependent”? This same commentator writes:

“Secular society has taken its cue from the Enlightenment rather than from the Scripture in seeing human rights as things to be safeguarded from encroachment rather than a set of obligations owed. The church must champion the latter point of view.”

Do you see the false dichotomy here? And do you see how once again we’re defining human rights as something only the rich owe to the poor and not something the poor owe to the rich? Do you see how there’s also an expectation here that secular government should be adopting and enforcing the ethic of the kingdom?

There are many Christians today who are evaluating the government or a political party based on their (selective) understanding of the kingdom ethic. Very often these *same* Christians are arguing that we can’t legislate morality – as in maybe we shouldn’t be “single issue” voters. The reverse, however, is true. *It is* the God-ordained role of the government to enforce this basic morality (the criminalization of infanticide and the refusal to institutionalize sodomite “marriage”). It is *not* the God-ordained role of the government to enforce the practical results of

the kingdom ethic applied to society. For example, it is not the government's role to make sure that we see the practical results of the rich being generous and not loving their money because those values are *ultimately* unique to the ethic of the kingdom (1 Tim. 6:17-19; this is not to say that the unregenerate cannot be generous). It is also not the government's role to make sure that the poor don't covet what their richer neighbor possesses but are rather content with food and clothing because those values, too, are *ultimately* unique to the ethic of the kingdom (Exod. 20:17; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 6:8; this is not to say that the unregenerate cannot be content). The government is simply to occupy itself with protecting the rights and property of the poor and rich alike without impartiality. That may be a complex issue for the government to address because the rich often have ways of extorting and stealing from the poor that are only available to the rich. But the basic principle is simple.

II. What does Biblical compassion look like?

But what about the right of the poor to the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter; I'm *not* talking about subsistence living or just barely surviving)? Of course, we remember that in the Bible, not everyone has the right to eat food. Paul says:

➤ 2 Thessalonians 3:10 — If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

But what if someone truly is unable to earn their own living (cf. 2 Thess. 3:12)? In the Old Testament, there were different ways of meeting this need. We read in Deuteronomy 14:

➤ Deuteronomy 14:28–29 — At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Notice first of all that this is not a government tax enforced with criminal penalties (cf. tax evasion; but see Mal. 3:8-11), but a “voluntary” religious tithe in the context of the covenant community (cf. Deut. 14:22-29). Notice second of all that those who benefit from this tithe are clearly spelled out as the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. In the culture of ancient Israel, these people, *by definition*, had no way of earning their own living. Notice what one commentator says:

“Though the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner are meaningful *symbols* of the dependent in ancient Israel, their circumstances *differed* from one another” (Christensen; WBC).

Why emphasize the fact that their circumstances *differed* from one another when that's clearly not the point of the text? Because this commentator wants to obscure what did *not* differ and what was the single, common cause of their dependency (they were *by definition* unable to earn their own living). I suspect this is also why this commentator lists *three* of the four dependent groups (widow, orphan, sojourner) but fails to mention the Levite – because the Levite doesn't fit in that broader modern category of the “marginalized.” What Christenson wants us to do is to

see a general category of the “needy” and “dependent” who are entitled to “charity” so that we can apply this category in equally broad strokes to our modern culture (“The mechanics of dependence in our society create different classes of people in special need”). But the principle is clear: This charity that God commanded in the covenant community (the tithe of every third year) was for those who at that time and in that culture were by definition unable to earn their own living. It was for those who, apart from this charity, would certainly be reduced to subsistence living or even to starvation (unless the Levites were to neglect their duties). But even those unable to earn their own living could still be required to do a hard day’s work in order to benefit from the charity of others. We read in Leviticus:

- Leviticus 19:9–10 — When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest... You shall leave them for the poor [the fatherless and the widow; cf. Deut. 24:19-21] and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

It was hard labor to go out after the reapers and gather the left-overs of the harvest. We see an example of this in the story of Ruth when the young man in charge of the reapers explained to Boaz:

- Ruth 2:7, 17 — “So [Ruth] came, and she has continued [gleaning] from early morning until now, except for a short rest” ... She gleaned in the field [from early morning] until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned.

What would probably be considered “oppressive” in our day was considered in that day to be true charity. In fact, notice how Boaz seeks to give Ruth additional provisions:

- Ruth 2:15–16 — When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, “...pull out some [grain] from the bundles for her and leave it *for her to glean*, and do not rebuke her.”

Why not just give her the grain and let her go home? I wonder if part of the reason was the *honor* and the human *dignity* of the hardworking, poor and widowed sojourner? How different this is from our way of thinking today! How oppressive and demeaning to make Ruth labor all day long picking up the leftover scraps of harvest!

On the one hand, we have those who by definition are unable to earn their own living. On the other hand, what about those who *can* work to earn a living but who have fallen on hard times and become poor?

- Deuteronomy 15:7–11 — If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and **lend him sufficient for his need**, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, “The seventh year, the year of release is near,” and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you **give [lend]** him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall **give [lend]** to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you **give [lend]** to him, because for this the LORD your God

will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.

Notice: “It is not charity, in the sense of almsgiving, that is advocated here; it is a charitable attitude to be expressed by [voluntarily] lending the poor man *whatever he needs*... while he pledged to repay the loan in due course” (Craigie). The meaning of “giving” here (and in many other places in the OT) is a voluntary [no civil/criminal penalties] interest free loan between brothers in the covenant community (cf. Deut. 23:19-20). This isn’t to say that the wealthy could not give to his poor brother without any expectation of repayment, but God never requires this as a matter of moral duty in Israel’s law (on Deut. 15:1-3, 7-10 see McConville, AOTC; cf. Craigie, NICOT).

III. Reinterpreting the Bible through the lens of “social justice”

What we see from all this is that those in our day who are emphasizing compassion and the importance of not being “single-issue” voters are very often re-interpreting the Old Testament (and the Gospels) through the unbiblical contemporary lens of “social justice.” When we measure the *government* by the standard of a *kingdom* ethic (always selectively applied) what we end up doing is minimizing the true demands of God’s holy law on the one hand and secularizing the Gospel on the other. What we end up with is a Gospel that is unable to humbly and lovingly confront a woman who has had an abortion with the true nature of her sin because it’s automatically assumed that her shame is synonymous with repentance and that her suffering means the only thing she needs to hear about is the good news of Christ’s love and compassion and unconditional acceptance. But is this really compassionate? Do we really *believe* the true Gospel? When we measure the government by the standard of a kingdom ethic what we inevitably end up with is a “social justice” Gospel that’s not “just” at all—rather than the true Gospel of salvation and deliverance from the wrath to come.

Today, many are falling into the trap of reading into the Bible our modern day ideas of what compassion and “justice” actually are (and even who the “marginalized” really are) when the Bible actually contradicts these ideas of compassion and justice and of the identity of the marginalized. The language of the poor and needy in the Bible is being hijacked by many who have no true love for the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, there are many today who are reading their Bibles without any awareness of its covenantal context. Listen to what one commentator says of the three-year tithe in Deuteronomy 14:

“This law... is not, properly speaking, a ‘welfare’ provision; it rather ensures that these groups within society can participate fully in Israel’s enjoyment of Yahweh’s [covenant] blessing [for obedience], which is their entitlement as members of the holy people” (McConville cf. 1 Tim. 5:3-16; DOTTE, vol. 1, p. 837).

What we learn from this is that it’s not the role of the church as an “institution” to pick up where the government leaves off by caring for the poor and needy in society. Certainly a Christian can

be generous to a poor and needy non-Christian neighbor (cf. Gal. 6:10). That can be a very good thing in and of itself *as well as* an opportunity for the Gospel. But the unique role of the church is to be a community whose members freely and generously care for one another. We read in Psalm 112:

- Psalm 112:1–9 — Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments! His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever. Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with the man who **deals generously and lends**; who conducts his affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved... his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD... **He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor**; his righteousness endures forever; his horn is exalted in honor.

What we have here is the lavish and voluntary and uncoerced generosity of a righteous and God-fearing man toward his poor brothers within the covenant community. So in 2 Corinthians 9, when Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the collection for the relief *of the saints* (cf. 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1) and when he emphasizes the importance of giving not under compulsion, but voluntarily, freely, and cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:5, 7) he quotes Psalm 112:

- 2 Corinthians 9:9 — As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

Conclusion

We’re being told by many Christian leaders today that we ought not to be single-issue voters – the implied assumption most often being that we ought to vote Democrat. It’s true that there is corruption and self-serving motives on both sides, but when the platform of a political party or candidate is built on the foundation of critical theory and the relentless promotion and celebration of infanticide and sodomy, it should be clear to us that how we vote in our present cultural context is not a matter of Christian freedom. This should be especially clear to us once we’ve answered biblically the following questions: What is the biblical role of government? What is the moral duty of all private citizens? What is the biblical role of the Christian and of the church? And is there any danger in confusing these different spheres? The danger, here, is nothing less than exchanging the true Gospel that saves for a counterfeit “social gospel” that’s powerless to save.

Do we really have confidence in the Gospel? Are we really not ashamed of the Gospel? The Gospel teaches us that it’s only the poor and oppressed who repent of their sin and who trust in Christ to take away their guilt who will experience the ultimate protection of the Messiah from all violence and all oppression in his everlasting kingdom (cf. Ps. 72; Isa. 61). The Gospel also teaches that it’s only the poor and oppressed who repent of their sin and trust in Christ who can participate fully in the blessings of this messianic covenant community – where it ought to be said of each one of us: “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever” (cf. Lk. 18:28-30; Acts 6:1; 1 Cor. 8-9). Yes, we can lobby for truly *just* laws that better protect the life and property of the poor in society (as well as the life and property of

the rich), but the most compassionate thing we can ever do is preach the *true* Gospel and welcome repentant sinners into this community where there is no rich or poor, black or white, slave or free, but where we are all one in Christ Jesus—and therefore where we all have “the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25).