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Politics, Government, and a Christian Perspective

Special Session Bible Study – Monday, May 16

By Ed Hamrick

With the passage of the state budget the 82nd session of the WV State legislature will officially end. For the many individuals involved in the process, the state capitol has literally been the center of the universe during the session. Attempting to solve the serious problems our state faces in such a short period of time is a formidable task and a great responsibility. With state and national elections looming on the horizon there has and continues to be a heightened sense of accountability and increased political pressure. For part time citizen legislators, meeting the difficult challenges of government service can be a heavy burden to carry affecting our personal, professional and spiritual lives. As we reflect upon the recently completed 60 day regular session let us consider this question, "Were there times in the heat of the moment, while caught up in the process when we misplaced our priorities and lost our Christian perspective?"

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

Habakkuk's Complaint

Habakkuk was an Old Testament prophet ministering to the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah was knee deep in sin and moral decay and Habakkuk questioned God's seeming failure to set things right.

"Why do you make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises.

Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted." Habakkuk 1: 3, 4

God responds to the prophet's complaint by informing him that He is sending the Chaldeans, a wicked Godless nation, to punish Judah. Habakkuk is stunned by God's answer and challenges Him on how He plans to handle the situation.

The prophet not only questions God's failure to address Judah's sinful society but also the wisdom of His plan of action. If Habakkuk's complaints sound familiar, they should. Any believer involved in politics and government has likely stood in his shoes and asked the same questions.

A Failing Society

Today, America's moral decline is real and many are concerned about its impact on our future. In a 2010 Gallup poll, 76% of Americans say the moral condition of America is getting worse. Gallup also reported that only 30% expressed satisfaction with the current moral and ethical climate in the United States.

Our failing society can be not only disappointing but frightening to some Christians. That fear and frustration can lead us to look for solutions in the realm of politics and government. This in turn can create tremendous pressure on officeholders to produce results. It is in the pursuit of those results that we can sometimes lose our Christian perspective.

While the establishment and enforcement of law is necessary for an orderly society, is it the best way to compel a sinful society to change?

"The moral standards America sets for its citizens by enacting them into law come from America's collective consciousness-or specifically, from that of the lawmakers. All types of religious, spiritual, historical, and personal opinions are thrown into the mixer, and after debate, trade-offs, compromises,

*gauging voter opinions, and pressure from the executive branch, out comes a moral standard, for better or worse."*¹

Establishing moral and ethical standards by a government reflecting the ever changing will of the people can be like trying to hit a moving target with no bullseye.

By contrast the Christian basis for morals is found in the Bible, reflecting the character of God and it doesn't change. It becomes a part of the heart and mind when we are united to God in spirit by faith in Christ.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." Jeremiah 31:33

When we are transformed from the inside out conforming to God's law in our hearts we live a moral life because we want to, not because we have to. This comparison shouldn't be viewed as a condemnation of what is generally regarded as the most effective form of government in history. Instead it should give us pause to consider carefully the effectiveness and longevity of each approach in addressing the moral condition of our country.

Perspective is defined as the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance or simply put, the ability to understand what is important and what is not.

As believers we are called to look beyond the temporary, perishing things of this world focusing first on God's commandments and promises.

Christian Priorities and Responsibilities

The Greatest Commandment

"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12: 30, 31

In these two commandments, Jesus summarized all of God's laws. Imagine for a moment, what the outcomes of this year's 60 day legislative session might have been if the thoughts, decisions and actions of everyone involved were motivated by these two commandments.

In the book of Revelations, Christ through the apostle John admonishes the Church of Ephesus for its flawed perspective.

"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." Revelation 2:4

Motivated by their love for Christ, the founding members had fashioned a model church at Ephesus. But, over the years the church had moved away from the foundation upon which it was established and had forgotten the fundamental reason for its very existence. They were still an active church but they had allowed their service to take precedence over and become an obstacle to their love for God. They had become more concerned and attentive to what they were doing than why they were doing it in the first place.

Here at the Capitol have you ever found yourself in danger of loving a political cause more than you love God and your fellowman (neighbor)?

As participants in the legislative process each of us have strong opinions and beliefs on what is right when it comes to the issues. Problems arise when we associate people solely with their point of view. If we don't like what they represent, we may not like them. Jesus answers the question "Who is my neighbor?" and why you must love them as "yourself" in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10; 25-37). To summarize this important parable, our neighbor is anyone in need. It doesn't matter whether the person is rich or poor, influential or insignificant in society. It doesn't even matter if they are your enemy. Most of all it doesn't matter if your neighbor shares or is diametrically opposed to your own political and religious beliefs.

Believers are expected to love and care as Christ would for anyone who has a need whether it's physical or spiritual and by doing so we reflect His love.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13: 34-35

Mission One

The passage of legislation at the Capitol can be cause for great celebration resulting in accolades from the press and constituents and a bill signing

ceremony with the Governor. When we lead just one soul to Christ, scripture tells us we bring joy to God causing the angels to celebrate and all of Heaven to rejoice.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the son and the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." Matthew 28: 19, 20

Have you ever formed an opinion about someone before you even met them? It can be an easy thing to do here at the Capitol where labels abound. Republican, Democrat, Liberal, Conservative, Labor, Business and Industry, Environmentalist and endless combinations of the aforementioned names represent the identities and different ideologies of those involved in government.

Despite our differences, there is one label we share.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" Romans 3:23 and "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." Isaiah 64:6

Because of this shared condition and its dire consequences believers should be consumed with their responsibility to share the gospel.

One of the most effective ways to share our faith is by the example we set. Our actions and interactions with those around us establish our credibility as Christ's ambassadors. *"Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person."* Colossians 4:5, 6

When we consistently conduct ourselves with Godly attitudes before others we provide convincing testimony of our Christian faith.

Borrowing from our last study lesson we know that when a Christian walks by the Spirit he manifests His fruit.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: against such things there is no law." Galatians 5:22, 23

Sadly, Christians today are becoming increasingly known for the things we stand against, instead of the things we stand for. We can defeat that perception by exhibiting the characteristics outlined in Paul's epistle in the way we live our lives and how we interact with others. This not only pleases God but

provides a positive example for those who may be considering inviting Christ into their lives. As we look back on this year's legislative session are we confident that our actions and attitudes reflected "the fruit of (God's) Spirit?"

Pray

"First of all then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." 1 Timothy 2: 1, 2

In America it has become second nature to criticize the actions of our government and its elected officials.

At the Capitol, when someone does something we disagree with oftentimes our initial reaction is to protest and cast blame. Paul however instructs us to "First of all" pray "on behalf of all men." This includes fellow believers, non-believers and even our political opposition.

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) Not only must we pray for our government leaders to make wise policy decisions but more importantly that they find salvation through Christ.

"The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." (James 5:16) Since in essence, while we are here at the Capitol we "are in authority" we are to pray earnestly for each other. When we do, we not only recognize God's sovereignty but we also foster an environment that allows us to live peacefully "in all godliness and dignity."

Trust in God Always

When we put our trust in men and man-made institutions we are often disappointed and that can be especially true when it comes to politics and government. When we put our trust in God and His sovereign rule and care over the entire universe, the earth and our nation we will never be disappointed.

Why should we trust God?

- God has given Christ absolute sovereign authority over all things. Jesus came and told His disciples, *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth."* Matthew 28:18
- God is omniscient and His past record of performance for His people through fulfilled prophecies and providential blessings is perfect. *"Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one*

like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying my purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all my good pleasure." Isaiah 46: 9-10

How do we trust God?

- In addition to acknowledging God's divine power and strength we must also recognize our own weaknesses and need for him. When we do, His strength will carry us through life's difficulties and allow Him to work through us to accomplish His purposes. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ will dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."* I Corinthians 12: 9-10

Recognizing God's sovereignty doesn't provide an excuse for human sinfulness nor is it a concession to the moral decay of our society and it is not an argument against government service. It is simply a perspective on life that acknowledges that God is in charge and His plan for our lives and this world will always work for our good and His glory.

Back to Habakkuk and Living by Faith

God answered Habakkuk's complaints by contrasting the opposing characteristics that distinguish the wicked from the righteous.

"Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right with him: But the righteous will live by his faith." Habakkuk 2:4

The "proud" Chaldeans trusted in their own self sufficiency and military might while true believers are to "live by faith" trusting every aspect of their lives to God. God was going to punish the Chaldeans severely after He used them to discipline Judah. Habakkuk didn't know the totality of God's plan but he didn't need to. He, like all believers today, need only live by their faith knowing that regardless of whether we see or understand it, God is orchestrating all things for our good and His glory.

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

With invasion and war looming on the horizon Habakkuk takes to heart God's message and reaffirmed his faith.

"Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength." Habakkuk 3: 18, 19

Notice the difference as the Prophet regains his perspective and reorders his priorities affirming his love for God, rejoicing in his personal salvation and finding rest and strength in God for earthly trials.

A Christian Perspective

Followers of Christ know what Habakkuk temporarily forgot, God is sovereign over every government and all the affairs of this world. (Acts 17:26) We also know that someday Jesus Christ will return to establish His perfect kingdom. (John 14:1-3) We are already citizens in this eternal kingdom. (Philippians 3:20) But before this happens God warns us that there will be a continual decline of our society. (II Timothy 3: 1-4)

This can present a tremendous challenge to all who serve at the Capital. But believers know that when we live by faith, trusting first in God, we can find strength and rest in His promises enabling us to maintain a Christian perspective in all that we do.

"The government of this poor child will be great. It will encompass the whole earth. All generations until the end of time will serve him whether they know it or not. His will be a rule over the hearts of all humankind. Thrones and great kingdoms will be strengthened or broken by this power. The unseen, loving rule of this divine child over human hearts will be more firmly grounded than the visible and shining might of earthly lords. And ultimately all governments on earth must serve the rule of Jesus Christ over all humankind." ²

¹ Jeremiah, Dr. David. *I Never Thought I'd See the Day!* 2012

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Government Upon the Shoulders of the Child.* 1940

Parts of this study adapted from "*Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*". John MacArthur. 2009