

The Bible Teaches Individual Responsibility

Beside the Constitution, the founders of the United States of America also agreed upon a “Bill of Rights,” which implies that the government cannot do everything that the individual citizen can do and that the differences between individual action and collective action (through the government) must be recognized and respected. This distinction is a sound concept, defined by God and even applied to the individual Christian and the church (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Tim. 5:16). Because Christians ought to be familiar with this principle, they ought to be able to recognize when that distinction is being blurred, undermined, or destroyed in the church or society.

This issue of *Truth Magazine* is the result of some Christians, myself included, who believe that individual responsibility is not being promoted and respected as it ought by our government (not limited to any single administration or political party). This is no surprise when our leaders mock and misrepresent the Bible. President Barak Obama once mocked the idea that the Bible has a definitive use in forming public policy, asking “Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount, a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own defense department would survive its application? [*Laughter and applause from crowd*] So before we get carried away, let's read our Bibles now. Folks haven't been reading their Bibles.”¹ By reading his Bible, he could have directed the defense department to Romans 13 and Proverbs 14:34; 20:26 because Matthew 5 is a text focused on individual relationships and decisions, not civil law or military policy. Whether or not political leaders help us to recognize passages of individual emphasis, we must learn what God expects of us. As you read, ask yourself whether our government is encouraging or discouraging the thinking and practice God expects of all individuals.

God expects individuals to identify and choose between “wants” and “needs” In the sermon of Jesus in Matthew 5-7, Jesus was revealing God's plan for the lives of all individuals, not God's plan for the civil policy of government. Jesus began by teaching men the necessity of having a poor, penitent, meek, truth-seeking, merciful, pure, peace-making, and dedicated heart (Matt. 5:1-12). Human government can never make such things conditions of citizenship or assistance, but Jesus demands that every member of His kingdom view and aptly adjust the condition of their heart in order to receive His aid. Jesus also teaches that He governs not only the outward action but also the inward decision (Matt. 5:20-6:16). Jesus expects His citizens to view inward self-control as more than a lofty, long-term goal but as an urgent need. The rewards and punishments (hell, forgiveness, open reward from the Father) promised for man's response to these teachings are beyond the scope of what a government can offer to compliant or needy citizens.

In Matthew 6:19-34, Jesus teaches men to rely on God and seek His kingdom in order to find happiness. Physical prosperity, as an individual or a nation, is of minor concern to Jesus or people with this focus because all such things can be lost. Instead of waiting for a czar, secretary, president, senator, or dictator to solve my financial problem or guarantee payment for my medical needs so that I can feel content today and confident about a happy future, Jesus directs us to get our priorities straight. If my happiness is dependent on health, food, clothes, and shelter, my happiness and hope can be lost at any moment of any day (Job 1:13-19; 2:7-9). True happiness, along with every physical need, is found by seeking and loving God. Waiting for or looking to any other master (my government or myself) to bring me happiness will only lead to sin and disappointment. Jesus urges us to recognize that we need enduring spiritual gifts available only in His kingdom and accept that all physical things are temporary. With this mindset, it becomes simple for every person to distinguish between “wants” and “needs.”

God expects individuals to identify and choose between right and wrong God expects the government to distinguish between right and wrong, to cause evil people to fear, and praise those who do good (Rom. 13:1-4). However, God also expects every individual to recognize what is right and wrong, based first upon the authority of Christ, not the authority of the government (Matt. 28:18; Jn. 19:11). One danger of citizens having an excessive amount of trust in the government is that the citizens forget that God has all

¹ http://usliberals.about.com/od/faithinpubliclife/a/ObamaReligion_3.htm accessed 5-18-14

authority. When citizens forget God, then they must decide whether they believe the government or themselves individually have final authority. Both ways lead to destruction, both for the government and individual (Prov. 14:12, 34).

When citizens view the government as the final authority, then they let the government do the work of identifying and choosing right and wrong. In our country, that means that the public sale of alcohol was once absolutely wrong (“Prohibition”) and is currently only sometimes wrong (depending on whether you live in a “wet” or “dry” area). God actually expects each citizen to examine the decisions of the government and give honor to God first, before accepting the rulings of the government (Acts 5:29). So in the case of alcohol, God expects us to recognize that intoxicating drink is for foolish people even if the government approves (Prov. 20:1; Rom. 1:22). In this case, sin has become a reproach to our nation.

When citizens view themselves as the final authority, then they will cooperate with the government as long as the government agrees with them. Such people quickly come into conflict with both God and His governing authorities, thus we are told to *fear the LORD and the king; do not associate with those given to change; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two can bring?* (Prov. 24:21-22). Those who do not pay their taxes because they do not like how the government spends the money find both physical and spiritual calamity.

Jesus put this individual duty in the simplest of terms--*Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it* (Matt. 7:13-14). No civil leader can legislate you into the narrow way, but many are following them down the broad path.

God expects individuals to work I believe that God has a better plan than our current social security and food stamp plans. At the least, God’s principles would improve them. While there are many complex problems that arise, they do not change the simple wisdom and order God designed. All of it begins with the individual’s determination to work with his own hands (1 Thess. 4:11). *If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat* (2 Thess. 3:10). Withholding food from someone until they are willing to work is actually an expression of mercy and love, for it may be the only way to train someone, or those who watch them, in God’s plan. Neither we, nor the government, should imagine that we can be more wise, merciful, or loving than God.

God expects individuals to be content When we work according to our ability, God expects us to be content with what we have (Heb. 13:5). Some individuals say they are willing to work but repeatedly refuse available work, citing the low wages. They refuse to work unless the pay allows them to own a nice car, have cable TV or the internet, have a talk-text-data cellphone plan, and/or live in the neighborhood of their peers. So, *the fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind* (Eccl. 4:5-6). Our consumer-driven economy is consuming itself to death because many of us are not content with the basic necessities of life but pursue the pleasures of life at the expense of our daily spiritual needs, our family, our nation, and the churches (1 Tim. 6:8; Rev. 3:17). When our government persistently passes budgets that put our nation in debt, then it is no surprise when our citizens similarly spend irresponsibly. Is there a lack of elders, class teachers, evangelists, and spiritually mature Christians because the pursuit of the pleasures of life consume the time wherein we could bear fruit (Lk. 8:14-15)? If Christians do not learn and live this lesson, how can we expect our nation to escape this foolishness?

God expects individuals to share Work is not only intended to provide for ourselves. God also expects each individual to be *working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need* (Eph. 4:28). As you plan your daily, weekly, or monthly spending, do you depend on the government (or church) to do your sharing for you? If so, you have missed one of the purposes for work. In this passage, the one who works also does the giving to the person in need. If each family took care of the members of their family (1 Tim. 5:4-8), each neighbor provided for their neighbor (Lk. 10:29-37), each community took care of the members of their community (Lev. 19:9-10), Christians took care of

Christians according to God's plan (Acts 2:45; 4:37; 20:35; 1 Tim. 5:16), and every individual worked according to their ability and was content, I believe there would be little need for federal, benevolent aid. While society will likely never choose to function this way on a large scale, the best that you can do is share according to your ability and teach this plan to everyone you can, especially your children.

Conclusion "In God We Trust" our currency claims. Whether or not America puts their trust in God, Christians must trust Him by following His plan for us, even as citizens. "God Bless America," our nation sings. Whether or not God blesses America, He has promised to bless us if we keep His commandments. Is our government following God's plan for individual responsibility? More importantly---are you?