

Jethro's Qualifications For Good Civil Leaders

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God “ordained” civil government for a purpose. Civil authorities are to protect those who do good and punish those who do evil (Romans 13:1-4). In order for God’s purpose for civil government to be accomplished, civil officials must be people of integrity. They must be honest and unbiased. They must themselves adhere to the law, and they must believe in the equal treatment of people under the law. They must speak the truth, whether the facts and events *help* them or *hurt* them. They must not give preferential treatment to certain groups or individuals, nor should they apply double standards. Such things dispirit citizens and cause them to lose respect for their government. David executed “*judgment and justice for all his people*” (2 Samuel 8:15). Good civil leaders will not use their position as a means to exploit others and enrich and empower themselves. They will instead use their position to help others and to preserve their rights and liberties.

We will learn from Jethro’s advice to Moses that civil leaders do not necessarily have to be *faithful Christians*, nor do they have to be *doctrinally correct* in all matters. Electing civil officials is not like selecting elders in a local church. Jethro’s qualifications emphasize basic principles of respect for God and man.

The absence of integrity in civil officials harms citizens in several ways, and can be catastrophic. When civil leaders are corrupt:

- Citizens are denied the basic *rights, freedoms, protections* and *societal conditions* that God authorizes civil authorities to provide for them (Romans 13:3-4; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:14).
- Citizens are defrauded by means of their tax dollars being squandered by self-serving politicians. Their money goes, not for programs and services that promote the common good and persevere basic liberties, but to programs and services that promote the politician and enrich him and his cronies.
- Citizens lose respect for their government. As can be observed from history and in life, people tend not to respect civil laws in societies that are controlled by *lawless* civil officials. The citizen reasons that he

should not be required to obey the law if his leaders refuse to do so. This eventually leads to absolute anarchy and chaos.

Thankfully, not all civil leaders are corrupt. There are conscientious and patriotic men and women who simply wish to protect, serve and preserve their country. Such people should be encouraged and supported in their efforts as public *servants*.

“Politicians”

The political environment has so degenerated that even the word “politician” has undergone a radical redefinition. The word “politician” originally described one who was professionally devoted to serving the *people*. There is nothing inherent in the word “politician” that necessarily suggests dishonesty or crookedness, even though many people now have this impression when they hear the word. The word “politic” comes from the Greek word *politikos*, from *politēs* (citizen) and *polis* (city). Originally, a politician was simply one “*of the people*.” He merely wished to represent and serve his people.

Sadly, the connotation of the word has changed, and not for the better. The second entry of the New Oxford Dictionary has for the word “politician” - “*a person who acts in a manipulative and devious way, typically to gain advancement within an organization.*” Words are subject to definition, and word definitions can change according to word use. In this case, the bad behavior of many politicians has changed the connotation of the word *politician* from good to bad. Being a “politician” is no longer viewed as a positive and good thing. It does not have to be this way, and the Bible shows us why.

Jethro’s Judges

Exodus 18:13 tells us that Moses was spending “from morning till evening” settling personal disputes among Israelites. When Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, learned that Moses had assumed such responsibility he warned Moses that he would “wear” himself “out” by continually judging such petty claims among the people (Ex. 18:14-20). Jethro advised Moses to appoint judges to adjudicate the small disputes and leave the larger ones (and the teaching of God’s law) to Moses (Ex. 18:21). Jethro said:

“Moreover, look for capable men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over

the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens” (Ex. 18:21).

Moses was to look for men who were *capable, God-fearing, trustworthy,* and who could not be *bribed*. These were admirable and needful traits in Moses’ day and they are just as valuable today. Let us consider each quality:

1. **Capable** - The Hebrew word for “capable” is used of military strength and *valor* (Deut. 3:18; 1 Sam. 14:52). It is also used in the sense of *industriousness* and of acquiring wealth (Deut. 8:17-18). It is used in the sense of *virtue* (the “virtuous” woman - Prov. 31:10). The civil official should be motivated and willing to work. He must not be “*slothful in his business*” (Romans 12:11).
2. **God-fearing** - The God-fearer has “*conscience toward God*” (1 Peter 2:19), not just toward other people. He knows that God watches him and holds him accountable for how he treats others. He believes that “the golden rule” and “the royal law” are divine obligations, not just human philosophies (Matt. 7:12; James 2:8).

The atheist reasons and behaves quite differently. Since he denies the existence of God and of the soul, the atheist does not reason or act in consideration of *eternal* repercussions. He is concerned only about the potential *physical* consequences. This makes the average atheist much less conscientious than the God-fearer. God-fearing civil officials serve the public, not with mere *eye service*, but mindful of God’s presence and watchfulness (Eph. 6:6). We are reminded of some notable Bible characters:

- a. Joseph cited his “fear of God” as the reason why his brothers should trust him to keep his promise: “*Then Joseph said to them the third day, ‘Do this and live, for I fear God’*” (Genesis 42:18).
- b. It was Joseph’s God-consciousness that kept him from succumbing to the repeated sexual advancements of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:9). Sadly, sex scandals are commonplace among governmental officials today. Hard-earned tax dollars end up subsidizing the immoral lifestyles of such officials. We need men and women in government with the character of Joseph.

- c. Nehemiah cited his “fear of God” as the reason why he did not burden the people with excessive taxation: *“But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from the bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God”* (Nehemiah 5:15). {Note: We here see an example of bloated bureaucracy. Even the “servants” of the (godless) officials took advantage of their masters’ position!}

Contrast these men with Jehoshaphat who was rebuked because he *helped the ungodly and hated those who loved the Lord* (2 Chronicles 19:2). **A country’s survival is in jeopardy when its leaders favor the ungodly over the godly and favor the haters of God over the lovers of God.**

3. **Trustworthy** - The word suggests *faithfulness, firmness* and *reliableness*. The trustworthy man keeps his promises. Candidates often make promises when they run for office. Some candidates really do intend to keep their promises, but being naive about the nature of government, they get into office only to learn that some plans are crushed under the sheer weight of government lethargy and bureaucracy. Others never intended to keep their promises in the first place, but knew that much of the population can be deceived by an eloquently-stated lie. Government officials should be people *of truth*. Citizens deserve to hear the truth from their civil officials, even when the truth is unpleasant. Politicians often distort or withhold information that might result in unrest or discontent on the part of the electorate. Information like the amount of the national debt, the degree of solvency of government programs (medicare, social security...etc) is understated or misrepresented for fear that the electorate will hold the politician(s) responsible for the failure. (*Did you know that every American under 18 years of age owes \$218, 676 as a share of the national debt?*)
4. **Opposed To Bribes** - A “bribe” is a sum of money or some other inducement that is given to someone to persuade them to act in one’s favor. In Exodus 23:8 Moses instructed civil judges, *“Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.”* Justice is not possible when bribes are taken. Eli’s corrupt sons were guilty of “taking bribes and perverting justice” (1 Samuel 8:3). Sadly, their immoral conduct led the Jews to make the horrible mistake of

asking for “a king” to lead them (in place of God’s judges).

Along with exacting heavy taxations of grain, Israel’s corrupt leaders “took bribes” (Amos 5:11-12; Micah 7:3). Bribery robs men of their just and fair rights. When it becomes pervasive, bribery can destroy an entire country. Solomon said, *“By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down”* (Proverbs 29:4).

It should be observed that “politicians” and special interest groups often engage in extortion/bribery schemes in what is generally considered normal government activity. The votes of corrupt civil officials are purchased by lobbyists. Preferential treatment is shown by politicians to those who are represented by the lobbyists. In post-prison interviews, Jack Abramoff alleged that such conduct was pervasive in Washington. *No one was shocked at his testimony!*

Conclusion

Jethro’s advice regarding the character of civil officials was good for the Jews in the wilderness and it is good for nations today. It was Joseph’s fear of God that drove him to live and rule as he did. It was his integrity that kept him from succumbing to the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:9). It was his respect for God and his compassion for his brothers that kept him from becoming bitter against them (Genesis 50:15-21). It was Nehemiah’s zeal for, and fear of God that kept him from taking advantage of his position over the people. We need these traits in our leaders today.

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