

Wading Into Toxic Conversations:

Good morning, welcome. This week, begin new series “Avoiding Election Infection”.

Right now, this nation is polarize like never before. About to embark on THEE most contentious election of our lifetime. And regardless of your political affiliation, how many of you, when you think of the next few months, it gives you some heartburn? (Show of hands). Maybe you saw an obituary (made news) appeared in county newspaper in Virginia.

ILL: Obituary

There are a lot of us that feel that way.

But not only are we polarized politically, we are polarized racially. And the forces of darkness/division win when the people of God are driven by fear, rather than faith.

So how can we, as Jesus followers, how:

- best navigate the next few months? How do avoid same election inflection that inflicting our friends, neighbors, co-workers as evidence by their FACEBOOK posts?
- How can we, those whose leader has ALREADY been ENTHRONED to the highest place and are citizens of a new and better Kingdom, how can we invite people – through our words and actions –invite others into this upside down society where meek, poor, peacemakers are declared blessed. . .and all the old left/right, Democrat/Republican, black/white paradigms have broken down?

That’s what we are going to be looking at over the next month. **TODAY:** Toxic conversations. So I’d like to begin by giving some foundational principles and tools.

1). **Politics** (in and of itself) **is good**.

- Shocking statement. Because live in a time when that word is almost universally seen as something negative.
- But the truth is politics, *like any human endeavor* can be a force for good or a force for evil.

Word has its roots in Latin and Greek.

- **Greek: Polis - city.**
- **Latin: Polticus - citizen**

Politics: relating to the citizens of a city.

Polite: the proper way citizens relate to each other.

Metropolis: meter "mother" polis city.

Cosmopolitan: cosmos world, polis city.

So, when we talk about politics, we're simply talking about how citizens seek to live together.

When we talk about politics we're talking about how we collectively organize our shared life together. . . .for the common good of all.

You can see, that politics is something that's extremely practical and material.

So the first step in navigating these toxic conversations over the next few months, is that when you hear the word **Politics**, don't think of:

- abstract debates and arguments.
- Or people promising things that they may or may not be able to deliver.

But think of its true meaning and intention: **Politics is the very real way we attempt to negotiate our shared life together.** Do by asking questions about practical issues that affect our life every day.

For example, Water (pic).

- When you think of the water that comes out of your faucet:
 - Where does water come from?
 - Who decides how much is available?
 - Who decides where it comes from?
 - Who set the price?
 - What happens when there's a drought (like we had 4-5 years ago)?
 - Who decides how often you can water your lawn?
 - Who built the system and maintains it so that when I turn the Faucet, water comes out?

These are all political decisions

Or let's take another example, Food (pic):

- when you shop, do you look at the ingredients?
- As a parent, do you find it more or less helpful knowing what is going into your children's bodies?
- Who decided that companies need to provide that information? Even though it's an added cost to them.

All of that came through a political process:

Or how about Parking? (pic) Go visit Brother in law in city. These signs in front of his house telling you:

- where you can park?,
- when you can park?
- how long you can park for?,
- the days of the week?
- Some signs are literally 6-7 lines long. Who decides all that?

So when I'm driving in circles trying to find somewhere to park and wishing there were less regulations, I'm driving by homes that if those regulations were NOT there, wouldn't even be able to get out of their own house. . .because they'd be blocked in all the time.

Q: So parking, who decides that?

Water, Food, Transportation . . . these are all part of our shared life together.

These everyday things are deeply shaped by this thing we call politics.

Politics: (is simply) **how we organize ourselves for our shared common good.**

So, when somebody says, "*I don't want anything to do with politics*" or "*we need to just get rid of politics*" because they see it as something inherently bad.

Need to say, no, no, no. Politics is absolutely essential for shared life together.

So, I believe, we as Christians. . . must refuse to give into the cynicism that is engulfing so many today.

That's not to say that we place our faith in the politics of our current world system.

We believe that God is at work creating an alternative polis, a new and better Kingdom that transcends red and blue, left and right, elephants and donkey's. A people who:

- Are faithful to their promises
- Love their enemies
- Honor the poor
- Stand for justice

But God's people can nevertheless participate in secular movements that advocate for these things and enhance the common good. Reducing poverty, change bad law, care for the vulnerable.

The Apostle Peter, speaking to followers of Jesus (who he refers to as 'aliens and strangers' of the political empire that time) nevertheless encourages them to work within that system because

". . . by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people."
I Peter 2: 15

Q: How many would agree there's a lot of 'ignorant talk' going on this year?

So, as citizens of a different and better polis, we can avoid election inflection by refusing give into cynicism and reclaiming the word POLITICS as something good..

2). Leadership is Difficult

- Common refrain you hear during elections is just how terrible a job this leader/politician/candidate has done or is doing their job.

- Particularly this comes from those who are NOT in charge, making the decisions, feels that THEY could do the job so much better the one actually doing it.
- And now, with the rise of social media, everyone's a critic. . .everyone is a Monday Morning quarterback. . . able to pontificate how much better life would be if they ran things.
- But, another foundational truths needs to be understood if we are going to avoid Election inflection this year is that . . .leadership is difficult.

-ILL: Manger at Starbucks. (pic)

- If you are manager of some kind, the times **you're called on** is when the people working for you encounter something is too difficult, complex so they hand it up one click in the organization chart.
- and the higher one goes in leadership, the more complex the issues that land on your desk.
- so, imagine if you are the president. The things that come to you are things that were unable to be solved at the lower levels of the organization.
- so all day long, you are facing issues that are:
 - so complex,
 - so many competing interests,
 - so many pitfalls with either direction you take,
 - That it can be overwhelming.
- You wonder why presidents have end up with grey hair.

There's no such thing as a simple answer.

- Political rebels and populists. . .they're great at making noise, stirring up crowds,
- But they also tend to make terrible administrators. Think in black/white.

And so, when we (as Kingdom People) find ourselves in these toxic conversations. . .person is railing on ALL the things that are wrong and all they would do if they were IN CHARGE. One ways keep from getting sucked in is to acknowledge that LEADERSHIP IS DIFFICULT. . .

And if that's true. . . then we'll find it much easier to extend those individuals some grace.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Jesus followers in city of Ephesus to do just that,

²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.
Eph. 4:29 ESV

- I know that grace and politics are two words you're going to be hard pressed to find together this year, *but Jesus followers represent a different polis.*
- Doesn't mean we should never disagree with those in political leadership, particularly when their actions, policies do not reflect the Character of God reveled in Jesus. . .doesn't look, smell like the Kingdom.
- But can we at least stop long enough to acknowledge that the issues they deal with are complex (more complex than we probably fully understand)

- And in many cases, there are just. . . NO. . . simple. . . easy. . . answers.

Q: So what if over the next few months, whenever we find ourselves in conversation about politics (On FACEBOOK or neighbor down street), what if we stopped to remember the complexities of the position, so that our initial response would be one that will be lubricated with GRACE.

- And this doesn't just apply to those who are running for president.

Q: Could we extend that same grace to those on:

- city council,
- local school board,
- Homeowner association board.

What if you went to that meeting, and even though you have huge problems with some of those seated up front, what if you walked up to that open mic (where people are given a chance to vent). And before you addressed the issues in which you don't currently see eye to eye on, what if you started out with:

"I can only imagine how difficult your job is".

What if every Christian approached political leaders with whom they disagree with that same spirit of grace. . . how might it change the tone of this year's election?

So if we were going to avoid election inflection, be reflector of another Kingdom, it means **understanding politics is good** and **leadership is difficult**. But finally

3). **Wisdom is Essential**

As much as we may seek to avoid political conversations over the next few months, eventually (at some point) you are going to find yourself FACE to FACE with someone in whom you disagree with and disagree strongly! .

- Might be the guy leading over your cubical going on and on about something they saw on their FACEBOOK feed, thinking the whole time that you are right there with them. . . ever had that?
- Or at a family picnic and Uncle Dan or Aunt Sally back you into a corner of room with plate of potato salad and stars in on the thing they heard on talk radio/NPR on the way over? And you're like, "Oh my word, I'm going to lose my mind!"
- So how do we as Kingdom people respond in way that doesn't devolve into angry words and hurt feelings.

Times like these call for divine wisdom. Scripture promises

*All wisdom comes from the LORD, and so do common sense and understanding.
Proverbs 2: 6 CEV*

The Apostle James says that if any of us lacks wisdom, we can ask God. And the kind of wisdom he gives is,

pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.
James 3: 17-18 NLT

This, James says, should be the qualities of our conversations with people.

Q: How do we, as Kingdom people, talk about politics in a way that produces this kind of fruit. . . conversations that enlightens rather than enflames??

1) First, we can **Avoid VOS** (vague ominous slam)

○ Decide ahead of time you are going to avoid VOS:

- Obama is trying to destroy America.
- Or All Republicans are mouth breathing idiots.

VOS are when we attempt to paint people or parties with a very broad brush.

We don't only do this with people or parties; we can do this about policies.

ILL: Anyone that mentions growing gap between rich and poor. . .calling them a socialist/communist. . .not helpful!

ILL: Anyone that wants to 'tap the breaks' on pace of which traditional gender lines are being blurred and labeling them a homo/transphob. . .is not helpful.

Not saying we can't debate issues, discuss policies. . .but if all you have is VOS. .
.you're in the way!!

2). Second (and this will not sound particularly profound, but I believe it's one of the wisest things we can do) when you find yourself in an awkward political conversation. . .**Simply ASK QUESTIONS.**

Don't attack. . .because it rarely works. . .if we want to move toward one that is peace-loving, considerate, full of mercy. . .then when you find yourself catch in a difficult conversation and you are given a chance to respond. . .start asking questions.

Q: *Why so passionate about this? Be curious. . . "Wow, you seem really passionate about this. . .tell me more?"*

Or

Q: *"How long have you felt this way about this issue? How did you arrive at this way of thinking? Really? What sources have helped shape your thoughts on this? Books? Writer/journalist?"*

Just shift into questions. . .you'll be surprised how quickly it moves the conversation past gut level emotions into something more substantive.

After all, that's what Jesus did. When people engaged him in conversation, instead of just blurting out what he thought on the particular issue, he more often than not, responded with questions:

- *Why do you call me good?*
- *Whose image is on this coin?*
- *What were you arguing about on the road?*
- *Who do the people say that I am?*

I think the reason Jesus did this is to move the conversation past the particularities of an issue and onto the common dreams all people have, that he alone could fill. .

And frankly, the sooner we can get to THAT. . .the sooner we can dig down past the caricature we have of people who hold certain views and see into our shared humanity, the more productive, fruitful our conversations will be.

So ask a thousand questions. . for example

Another way you could use questions. Say conversation turns to a particular group of people: immigrants, Muslims, police officers, etc. And it sounds unduly harsh You could ask, say, if you're talking about Muslims:

Q: What do your Muslim friends think when you share your viewpoint?

Or talking about how racist police are, ask:

Q: What do your police friends think when you express your views?

Nothing shifts the conversation faster, than asking that question.

Not trying to be mean, or shame . .put someone down.

It's simply a way to shift the conversation from "*those people*" to *friends, real flesh and blood human beings who happen to be THOSE people!*"

Might say, "I've don't know anyone who is part of that group". *That's important to know.* Because it's easy to have all kinds of ideas about people you've never met.

MUCH MORE DIFFICULT to have some of those same ideas if you have a relationship with those who are being talked about.

So. . .when those toxic political conversations come up. . .resist the urge to go into attack mode. . .instead STOP, ask God for wisdom. . .and then ask 1000 questions. . .become a journalist. . .become a reporter.

- How long have you felt this way?
- Did you grow up feeling this way?
- Tell me way this action or this policy makes you so angry?
- I sense there is some fear in your voice. Are you afraid for this country? Why?

And we do it kindly. . .we do it taking on shape of Calvary-shaped love. . .we do it in the Spirit of a God who LOVES them. . .right where they are. . .and who is at work breaking down barriers and bridging irreconcilable differences.

Can't tell you how often, when I've done this. . .that I've seen a conversation that was about to explode, turn a corner. . .into some deep personal story about somebody's pain.

- I lost my home in the crash.
- My grandparents are undocumented
- I had a cop pull me over in my own neighborhood, spread eagle on hood of the car, humiliate in front of my kids. . .

Now not talking about politics anymore, talking about someone's wounds, we're talking about the kinds of fears, indignities real people face every single day.

All of a sudden you're like, *"Oh wow, I can see why you feel as strongly as you do."*

If we ask questions, good questions, we will learn a ton.

And the more we do this. . .more we make the effort to enter into someone's story, seek to truly understand why they think the way they do. . .in spirit of grace. . .you'll be surprised as how often they will. . .at some point. . .turn to you and ask: *"Well, what do you think"*.

And that may be a wonderful opportunity to say: "I think you're nuts!! ":-)

No, opportunity talk about Jesus (how he met me in the midst my pain, sorrow, fears)

- Extended his deep love and forgiveness toward me.
- Invited me to be a part of his dream for the world, Kingdom of God.
- Society that transcends all the old divisions. . .black and white, male and female, red state/blue state, republican and democrats.

A community rooted in grace, mercy, justice, compassion, forgiveness FOR ALL.

Invitation