

4 Ways to Keep Your Political Speech Civil

The book of James diagnoses one of our greatest inconsistencies as Christians. James 3:9-10 says, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

Nowhere is this inconsistency of speech more apparent than in our political discourse.

One of the key problems in our society today is that we fail to remember that our politicians are actual people.

Most of us don’t personally know our politicians, so verbally attacking them feels more like attacking an idea than a person.

While any particular politician may function as a symbol of his or her party’s platform, they are first and foremost, a person.

Every person, James reminds us, is made in the image of God. If we are to take James’ word seriously, we must recognize that God takes our speech about other people seriously, even our speech about politicians.

What are we to do, then, in political discussions about politicians with whom we disagree, often vehemently?

Here are some basic suggestions to improve our rhetoric toward politicians.

1. Avoid personal, “ad hominem” attacks.

None of us can know for certain the motivations of another person. It is easy to assume that our political opponents have nefarious reasons for their actions.

The far more likely explanation of their deeds is that they believe their party’s platform is the best course of action for the country.

There’s no need to label a person as evil for simply holding a different political position than you do. Remember, James calls that kind of speech evil.

2. Take time to listen to the other person's point of view.

Recall James' admonition earlier in the letter. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). This applies to politics even though it is not heeded often.

When we understand another person's point of view, we still may not agree with their policy decisions, but we will tend to see them as actual people with legitimate concerns.

This alone will help lessen the temptation to verbally assault our political opponents.

3. Focus the discussion on policies not personalities.

Slandering people is easy. It is the political discourse of the lazy. It's also unhelpful.

Life is complicated. The problems our country and this world face are multifaceted. We need healthy discussions about solutions.

For this to happen, the focus of our conversations must be on policies and not people.

These discussions should focus on the following questions: What policies do you disagree with? Why do you disagree with them? What policies do you think would be better? Where are there points of agreement?

4. Pray for your political opponents.

Few actions help us remember that others are made in God's image better than praying for them.

If Jesus commanded us to pray for our enemies, it makes sense that we should pray for our political opponents as well.

As one wise woman noted during a recent Bible study at our church, "What a difference it might make if we replaced all the mean-spirited words we say about our political opponents with prayers." I say a hearty "amen" to that.

Seeking to follow this list of guidelines would not only help us take James' words

seriously, but also Jesus', who commanded us, "In everything, do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).



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