

# How to watch the Trump vs Biden debate

*with*

## THE AFTER PARTY

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THE  
**AFTER PARTY**  
TOWARD BETTER CHRISTIAN POLITICS





# ARE YOU PLANNING TO WATCH THE UPCOMING TRUMP-BIDEN DEBATE?

I've been weighing this question for myself. As the host of a [podcast](#) that includes politics in our topic rotation and as the co-author of a [book](#) on how to move towards better Christian politics, I suppose that watching the debate should be something of a professional responsibility for me.

But I really don't want to.

I'd rather watch the latest Game of Thrones episode for entertainment, catch a MLB game to see how my fantasy baseball team is faring, or attend to my playlist on Spotify with [Andy Crouch's advice](#) in mind on how to get the most out of listening to music.

But Trump vs. Biden? What could I possibly get out of that content stream? It's a rerun. We know the plot. We know the lines that will be uttered. And it's not even a rerun of a series that most of us really enjoyed the first time. Many feel outright antipathy about one of the characters and disturbing ambivalence about the other. And even if one is actually a fan of this show (is this true for anybody out there?!), what's the purpose of rewatching? What can I actually gain at this point?

## The What vs the How of Politics

As I asked this question, I realized that I was enacting in myself the key framework of The After Party. We draw a distinction between the What vs the How of politics, which can be summarized this way:

The What of Politics	The How of Politics
Ideology	Spiritual Values
Party	Relationship
Policy	Practices

My initial approach to the debate — “What can I actually gain at this point” — was based on the What side of things: What can I learn about the ideology, party, and policies being debated by the two candidates? Based on that question, the debate does indeed feel like a tired and predictable rerun.

While The After Party acknowledges the legitimacy and need for Christians to care about the What of politics, we make the argument that Christians have overly focused on that definition of politics. Yes, the What side matters. But we believe Jesus’ teaching is much, much more clear and uncontested about the How side of politics. We have allowed our culture’s overwhelming preoccupation with the What to obscure Jesus’ clear and challenging teaching on the How of politics. The purpose of The After Party project is to rebalance Christian passions in politics from the What to the How.

Suppose we approach the debate from the How side. Might this shift make the viewing experience more interesting and fruitful?

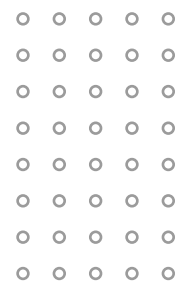
## Other-Rage vs Self-Reflection

If you purposefully switch attention from the What to the How, you may experience next week’s debate differently. The video screen showing the two candidates may become less of a provocation, and instead become more of a mirror. By that, I mean the debates can become less about what horrible things other people say, believe, and want to do, and instead be more about how our own heart is being formed or deformed.

Why might this happen? When we fully submit our politics to Jesus, the shift from the What to the How is accompanied by a shift in our preoccupation: from getting agitated about others to humbly examining ourselves. The spiritual values, relationships, and practices being shaped are ours, well before we start pointing fingers at others.

Jesus was constantly inviting this kind of shift. For example, remember the story of Jesus, the mob, and the “sinful woman” in John 8:1-11. To the mob, the woman stands as a poster child of what is wrong in someone else. What she has done provokes them to such rage that they are on the verge of violence. As they get ready to cast their stones, Jesus shifts their attention to a somber realization of how their own hearts might be no better. “Let him who is without sin among you,” he says, “be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7).

When we are locked in to the What definition of politics, we will be tempted to watch the debates with a similar sense of other-rage. Which candidate receives the brunt of your outrage depends on what your particular ideology, party, and policy preferences are, of course. But If we switch to the How definition, we perhaps can hear the same invitation issued by Jesus in John 8. As we prepare to cast our emotional or rhetorical stones at the screen, can we do a spiritual simul-cast? Can we simultaneously tune into the spiritual channel of Jesus, and consider what might be happening in our own hearts?



# My Viewing Plan

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What would such a viewing plan look like?

The framework articulated above can suggest some helpful starting points for a How based viewing plan. Starting at the level of **spiritual values**, I think it is always helpful to reflect on the different spiritual temptations that are in play for each of us. As I imagine myself watching the debates, I anticipate three feelings arising within me: fear, despair, and disgust. I know that these three feelings lurk within my heart, and they have the potential to deform me as a disciple of Jesus.

If I'm going to watch, then I will want to monitor in real time what's happening within me when it comes to these three spiritual vulnerabilities. As I notice feelings of fear, despair, disgust, and hatred arise, it's a signal that I need to do some spiritual work with Jesus. This kind of spiritual work is often challenging and uncomfortable, but it is necessary if we wish to engage with politics as a disciple. As viewers, we need to be prepared for this kind of hard work (and by the way, if this kind of spiritual work seems too much for you in this season, that in itself may be a sign that you should also choose to care less about electoral politics right now).

Our framework indicates that the kind of spiritual work done with Jesus will involve **relationships** and **practices**. As disciples, we would be well served to plan ahead of time — before we watch the debates — so that we will be prepared to seek spiritual growth in those terms.

In terms of **relationships**, one of my best friends is someone who is politically more conservative than me on the What of politics, but who shares a commitment to a similar Jesus How of politics. We talk on the phone every week, so for the week of the debates, I plan on asking him to hold me accountable in my spiritual posture. It's going to be tricky, because it's possible we may both be tempted to fear, despair, and disgust — but by different takes on ideology, party, and policy. We'll have to agree that our phone check in isn't about debating those What differences, but instead meant to support each other on the shared How commitments. By the way, if you're wondering about those shared How commitments — or need to be reminded — that's a great reason to check out or review [The After Party course](#).

In terms of **practices**, I want to reserve some time for prayer right after the debate. I imagine those feelings of fear, despair, and disgust will be circulating in my heart by then. Rather than hopping on social media to vent my own feelings and be further stoked, I want to spend time with my true King, my ultimate Political Ruler.

In my own current spiritual practice, I've been praying my way through the Psalms. I love the Psalms for how honestly some of them start with feelings like fear, despair, and disgust, and then provide pathways (albeit sometimes very complicated ones) to God's resolution. I've already marked out some passages that will likely match my post-debate condition.

For example, if I sense my fear of what will happen if one candidate wins and gets his way, I'm teeing up [Psalm 2](#), with its opening lines, "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain?" [Psalm 10](#) stands at the ready to articulate my feelings of despair with its plaintive questions: "Why do you hide yourself? Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

One of my favorite prayers is [Psalm 139](#), which opens with the invitation to God's Spirit "to search me and know me in my inward thoughts." Only very recently have I realized that for the author, this searching involves acknowledging the thoughts of utter disgust at one's enemies: "Do I not loathe those who rise up against you?" (vv. 21-22). In the flow of the Psalm, that disgust seems to be justified in the moment of utterance... until you proceed to the very next lines. Imagine expressing that feeling of disgust and then being led to pray verses 23-24 which close the prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" Remember that the Psalms were originally set to music. I imagine that both notes — one of other-rage and another of self-reflection — are meant to stand in tension and linger in the air, as those two contrasting notes echo against each other to create a new and complicated resolution. By the way, the power of music to express the complicated feelings of this political moment is precisely why I'm so excited about our [Songs for The After Party project](#).

So, that's my viewing plan. If you're planning on watching the debate, what's yours? I'd really love to know — simply reply to this email and your note will land in my inbox.

**As you consider creating your viewing plan, here's a quick checklist to review:**

How is politics most likely to deform you at the level of spiritual values? Can you name your top three temptations?

Do you have a relationship where you can confess these temptations? If there's a good candidate, how can you two support each other in a spiritually healthy manner? What might you two need to agree to ahead of time?

What spiritual practices are important for you in this political season? Have you identified one or two? Have you started practicing? Have you reserved a time and place to engage in these practices?





I would love to hear what you come up with, and what your experience ends up being. Please let me know - and I may read some of your feedback on a future Good Faith episode. Send your thoughts & learnings my way by replying to this newsletter or [email me here](#).

I'm glad to know so many of you are with us in this work!

Warmly,

Curtis

