



Today our topic in our Trending Now series is politics. Of all the topics we're covering in this series this one might be the most challenging. That's why Miss Manners would tell us not to go there. An unspoken rule of polite conversation is you don't bring up politics and religion. Why is that? Because people, including Christians, have very strong, deeply held beliefs about politics. This subject can be both intensely personal and deeply divisive.

Today we're going to defy that rule of etiquette and bring this topic of politics to the table. And the reality is people **are** talking about it. I heard somewhere there might be an election this year. Is that correct? Don't worry, I'm not going to tell you how to vote. Nor will I tell you how think about specific issues. But I want us to reflect on how we as Christ-followers should think about politics.

God is in Favor of Government

Of course, politics is closely tied with what we call government, so let's start there. The first thing we should say is God is in favor of government. We learned that in our study of Romans. Paul wrote, *"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established"* (Rom. 13:1). In 1 Timothy he also commanded us to pray *"for kings and all those in authority"* (1 Tim. 2:2).

So God ordained the authority of government. In fact, the Bible identifies three institutions God established to resist decay in our society: the nuclear family, the church and the government. The Bible also highlights many servants of God who also served in public office:

- Debra served as a judge over Israel.
- Joseph served as Prime Minister for the Egyptian Pharaoh.
- Nehemiah was a trusted official for the Persian King.
- Joanna was both a follower of Jesus and manager of Herod's household.

This should encourage anyone with a career in government. Presidents, members of Congress, governors, mayors, city council members and other public servants play an important part in God's work in the world.

Politics are Often Corrupt

But we also know there's a dark side to all of this. Politics involves all the activities associated with the government—debate,

conflict and compromise among people or parties in power. Let's face it, politics are often corrupt.

Look at the trial of Jesus recorded in John 18. Jesus is brought by an angry mob before Pilate, the Roman governor. The mob charges Jesus with being an enemy of the state and a threat to Caesar. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

Pilate then says, "You are a king, then!"

Jesus says, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

Pilate sees no threat in this itinerate preacher, and says, "I find no basis for a charge against him." But then he makes a concession according to a Jewish custom to release one man for them at the Passover. The crowd wants him to release Barabbas, a known murderer and insurrectionist, and to crucify Jesus in his place. Remember, Pilate is a politician. He wants to please the crowd and so he sentences Jesus, an innocent man, to die while Barabbas goes free.

That's often how worldly politics work. What is right is often at odds with what's popular. In the politics of the world when conscience and crowd are at odds with one another, the crowd usually wins. And when the crowd wins, bad people prosper and good people suffer. The world's politics are often characterized by the misuse of power and the manipulation of truth. We call it "spin." The crowd spun Jesus' teaching to portray him as an enemy to the state. Pilate chose to go along with it because it was politically expedient. Together they promoted a false narrative about Jesus that won the day. "He's a threat to Caesar! He called himself a King!" In the politics of the world, we exaggerate, spin and tell half-truths to promote our agenda. The sad thing is Christians are often pulled into this. We portray our candidate as the righteous answer to all our problems who can do no wrong and we demonize the person on the other side of the aisle. There's nothing wrong with supporting a certain political party, but we too often ignore the weaknesses of our own party and dismiss the other party's strengths. Could it be there are great followers of Christ on both sides of the political aisle?

Jesus Doesn't Side with the Right or the Left but with Himself

The Bible gives no reason to believe Jesus would side with one political viewpoint over another. When it comes to politics, Jesus sides with himself. I love the encounter Joshua had with the angel of the Lord. Before Joshua led Israel to conquer Jericho, the angel appeared to him with sword in hand. Joshua asked, *“Are you for us or for our enemies?”* The angel replied, *“Neither... but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come”* (Joshua 5:13-15). I love that! Joshua asks, “Whose side are you on?” The angel just says, “Neither. I serve the Lord!” You see, the question isn't if God is on our side but rather if we're on **his** side!

Maybe that's why Jesus had some serious political diversity among his twelve disciples. He had a guy named Simon who was nicknamed “the Zealot.” Zealots were Jews who worked against the Roman government. They were radicals. But he also had a guy named Matthew on his team, a tax collector. Besides being notoriously crooked, tax collectors partnered with the Roman government. Somehow these two guys had to drop their political agendas and work together to advance the cause of Christ. And so do we. One thing is for sure, the only way that will happen is for us to see something in Jesus of greater value than our own party's agenda. Our loyalty to him must supersede our loyalty to our political party.

And, honestly, it's hard to figure out exactly where Jesus would stand politically. On the one hand, the Bible indicates God holds some very conservative views:

- He demands work rather than welfare for the able-bodied (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:7-13; Eph. 4:28).
- He sanctions capital punishment for murderers (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:16-21).
- He highly esteems the life of the unborn (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5).
- He justifies the forceful role of the state in keeping law and order (Rom. 13:1-5).
- He confers great wealth on some people and calls this good (1 Sam. 2:7; Eccles. 5:19; Prov. 10:22).
- He comes down hard on social issues and all kinds of threats to the family, like adultery, prostitution, fornication and divorce (Matt. 5:27-30; 1 Cor. 6:15-18; Mark 10:1-10).

It sounds like Jesus might make a good Republican. But the challenge is the Bible also clearly tells us God holds some very liberal views:

- He demands radical care for the poor (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 15:7-11; Matt. 25:34-40; Luke 3:11; Acts 6:1; Gal. 2:10; James 2:15-16).

- He demands compassion for the immigrant (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19).
- He calls for massive debt forgiveness (Lev. 25:25-30).
- He insists on careful stewardship of the environment (Gen. 2:15; Lev. 25:4; Ps. 24:1).
- He pronounces judgment on those who destroy the land for their own gain (Hos. 4:1-4; Rev. 11:18).
- He commutes the sentences of certain people who've committed capital offenses (John 8:1-11).
- He rails repeatedly against the selfishness and abuses of the wealthy (Amos 3:15-4:3; Mal. 3:5; Luke 16:19-31; James 5:1-6).
- He calls for the cessation of war (Micah 4:3-4) and a variety of other policies that sound like they come right out of a Blue State like California.

So we ought to be very careful when we suggest God is clearly with our party's platform or that righteousness can be painted in Red or Blue. It seems God's politics are more complicated and challenging than most of us have the stomach for. That may explain why, in the end, Jesus was rejected by both the liberals and conservatives.

Give to Caesar What is Caesar's and to God What is God's

For example, look at Mark 12:13-17. Some Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus and publicly ask him about his politics. These two groups were on different sides of the political aisle. The Herodians supported Roman rule and the Pharisees resisted it. But they joined hands in trying to bring Jesus down. Mark says they wanted to *“catch him in his words”* (v. 13). But before they do that they flatter him a bit: *“Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, but you pay no attention to who they are, but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth”* (v. 14). You can see what they're doing: they're buttering him up before they barbecue him.

Then they ask him, “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar, or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?” This particular tax was at the center of a political firestorm because it was a symbol of Jewish oppression. It was the annual one denarius tax, about a day's wage, that Rome imposed on every non-citizen in the Empire to fund the Roman occupation of Judea. Every time they paid it, the Jews were reminded they were a subjugated minority group under Rome's thumb. Groups like the Zealots refused to even pay it. They're asking Jesus a tough question: “Are you pro-Roman or anti-Roman? Are you in support of this idolatrous Empire that oppresses us Jews? Or are you a political revolutionary who wants to overthrow Rome? Which are you, Jesus? Come on, take a stand and tell us.”

Jesus knew exactly what they were up to. He saw through their hypocrisy and asked, *“Why are you trying to trap me?”* Then he asks for a denarius. By the way, there's a bit of irony in this request because it appears Jesus doesn't himself have a denarius. It wasn't all that much money. It was like chump change. Here's a King without a dime! Here's the Master of the universe who once said he didn't even have a bed to lay in at night. This is a different kind of King with a different kind of power. His kingdom wasn't started with an election but with an execution.

This is a reminder to us that the kingdom he came to establish will flourish most as a life-giving minority rather than a powerful majority. It's a kingdom that's established through weakness, service and sacrificial love. It's a kingdom made up not of the kind of people you'd typically court for a political endorsement, but of the “least of these.” And, by the way, this played out in the history of the Roman empire. When the early believers faced severe opposition as a minority group within the Roman empire, Christianity flourished. But, later on, when the emperor Constantine tried to impose Christianity on all of Rome as the state religion, the results were disastrous and the church became watered down and saltless.

So they bring Jesus the coin and Jesus asks, *“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”* They reply *“Caesar's”* (v. 16). Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor. The inscription read, “Tiberius Caesar son of Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, high priest.” You can imagine how the Jewish people felt about that. Basically, this is idolatry. It means Caesar isn't only the king but he's divine; he's a god. In fact, the Jewish people tried to circulate coins without the image of Caesar, but this one they bring had it. So Jesus says, *“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's”* (v. 17).

This, I believe, is the defining statement for a Christ-follower regarding politics. The one thing I'd like you to keep in mind as we approach November, the one prayer I pray for all of us is this: that we'd give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. That means having at least three obligations.

First, we have an obligation to our nation. This obligation is based on ownership. If his name is on it, he owns it. So give it to him. There's a domain that belongs to him, and we have an obligation to not just pay for it but to abide by its laws. As people who enjoy many of the benefits our government provides, we should pay for them through our taxes, even when we don't like many of the things our government stands for and promotes. So we're to avoid the extreme of the Pharisees who were hostile to secular government. We're to avoid retreating from the government, and from politics, and from supporting our nation. Obey the laws of our land insofar as they don't force us to disobey a clear command of God. Participate in the political process, which is one of the wonderful freedoms our nation gives us. Give

proper respect to whoever is elected. Pray for them. Better yet, run for office!

Second, we have an obligation to God. “Give to God what is God's.” This is a subtle but powerful protest against the idolatrous claims of Caesar. Despite his claims, he's **not** God. He doesn't rule over all of life. He can regulate our conduct to a degree, but he can't control our spirit. The government has a domain over part of our lives, and Jesus is okay with that, but its domain is limited. Give to God what is God's. What is that? Think of it this way: Caesar's image is on the coin, but whose image is on your heart and soul? We're created in the image of God, we have his stamp and inscription on us, so we belong to him! He deserves our deepest affections and loyalty; our worship and admiration are directed only to him. We don't give that to our country. We don't give that to a political leader. Give Caesar your money, but give God your whole self, your entire person, your very life, your deepest worship.

Third, we have an obligation not mix the two. As sinful humans, we're tempted to blend them together, giving to Caesar what properly belongs to God alone. This has been a problem throughout history for the church—rendering to Caesar what should only be rendered to God.

We do this when we see very little difference between the mission of the church and the mission of the United States. It's very subtle but we begin to give Caesar the very thing that belongs only to God: worship. Of course, we don't literally worship our leaders or our nation the way the Romans worshipped Caesar. But in our hearts and our affections we can give our country what is most precious to us.

Don't let Caesar define your identity. Caesar or the state can begin to define who you are and how you see others. So you're an American, or you're a Republican or Democrat, or you're a conservative or a liberal. These labels define us and shape the way we see ourselves and others. We begin have a closer affinity with those who share the same political views than with those who share our faith in Jesus. We have more in common with a non-Christian who votes the way we do than with a Christian who doesn't. What does that say about our sense of identity?

Paul tells us, *“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Phil. 3:20). As God's people, the most fundamental thing about us is we're citizens of heaven, not that we're citizens of the United States.

Don't give Caesar your ultimate allegiance. We can pledge allegiance to the flag, but we have a higher allegiance. Don't fuse together the mission of the church with the mission of our country. We hear people talk about revival in the church in order to bring about revival in the country—as though the goal of the gospel is to renew America. We can take a healthy patriotism, or love of country, and inject it with religious devotion. It's patriotism on

steroids. It's the melding together of faith and flag. That's when we give to Caesar what belongs to God, without even knowing it. Where do your deepest loyalties lie? Who has your highest allegiance? Do you feel a greater sense of pride when your candidate gets elected or when Jesus gets honored? Do you have a greater sense of joy when someone comes to your side politically or when someone embraces Christ? These are questions that test our allegiance.

Finally, don't pin your hopes on what Caesar can do. We can place too much hope in politics. We think that through political action we can stem the tide of secularism, reclaim America for Christ, unleash revival in the country, renew the moral fabric of our society, and so on.

Don't pin your hopes on Caesar, because in the end, he'll always disappoint. Hope in God. Look to God alone for that perfect society and government where goodness and righteousness dwells. God will one day establish his kingdom upon the earth through his Son. We hope for a new heaven and a new earth.

- It will be a city that never goes dark because the glory of God shines in it—no dark alleys, no street lights, but the light of the Lamb of God.
- It will be a city whose gates will never be shut—no police, no locked doors, no deadbolts, no barbed wire fences, no security cameras.
- It will be a city where you'll never hear the sound of gunshots, a crying baby or a howling siren, but only singing, laughing, and celebration.
- It will be a city where nothing unclean will enter in—no stealing, murder, prostitution, gang violence, racism, terrorism or suicide.
- It will be a city of righteousness where everyone who's there belongs because their names are written in the city registry—the Lamb's Book of Life. That's what God is calling us to hope in today.

There's so much more to wrestle with as we try to have a God-centered vision of politics. Each of us needs to grapple with how it ought to get worked out in the voting booth, because I suspect we're not going to find God's name on the ballot in November.

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar: engage in the political process, be informed, vote, support worthy candidates, run for office. But be careful. Caesar can steal your heart without you knowing it. He can become an idol. And soon, you'll find yourself giving to Caesar what isn't really Caesar's at all, but God's. John Wesley who lived 250 years ago gives great advice about this, "I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them 1. To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy 2. To speak no evil of the person they voted against, and 3. To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side." I like that.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but to God what is God's. Let your vision of life—all of life, including your political life—be God-centered, not man-centered, not Caesar-centered. Ask yourself: Am I giving to Caesar what belongs to God alone? Who's shaping my identity? Where does my most basic allegiance lie? What do I really hope in? We look around our nation today, as well as the rest of the world, and there's such brokenness, such callous disregard for human life, such evil. What's the answer? Politics can help, but only Jesus Christ and his gospel can transform a life from the inside out. Only the King who came with a towel around his waist to wash your feet and mine is worthy of our hope. So give to him what belongs to him. Some trust in chariots and horses, some in political candidates and the casting of votes, but we trust in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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