



I want to have a little fun today so let me ask you a few questions:

How many of you, if you are honest, are really enjoying the drama, the chaos and the tension that have resulted in this election?

How many of you just can't wait for it all to be over?

How many of you can't stand it when the topic of politics are brought up at the dinner table, at work or with friends? It just makes you sick to your stomach!

How many of you love bringing it up?

How many of you have already made up your mind on who you will vote for in this election? How many of you are simply praying for Jesus' return?

How many of you think that churches and especially preachers should stay away from politics all together?

Today we are going to talk about politics. Politics is not an emotionally neutral topic. It has the power to divide us instead of bringing us together. Politics can so color the way we see the world that we're often left wondering how someone could hold political beliefs different from our own and still follow Jesus.

In my study, what's been helpful for me to remember is there's a difference between government and politics. There's lots of ways to define the word government, but generally speaking, the government is the authority that sets rules for a society, helps its members relate to one another and to others, and keeps it running smoothly, securely, and peacefully. Politics, on the other hand, is a little different. The dictionary defines politics as the activities that relate to influencing the actions and policies of a government and getting and keeping power. Government is the main body or institution that runs a country and politics is the theory or practice that helps in running country.

The Bible actually says a lot about how Christians should relate to the government. Romans 13 reminds us that all authority, including the government, God has established for our good. Romans 13 even encourages us to pay our taxes. In 1 Timothy 2 we're told of another obligation towards the government. We're called to pray for those in the government and show honor and respect to them as well. But what does the Bible say about politics? To answer that question, what I want us to do is look at a brief passage of Scripture where Jesus is asked a political

question. How he responds to it is a key to understanding of how Christians should view politics.

Here's the setting. After Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus and ask him this question. The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism that, politically speaking, opposed Roman rule. The Herodians were influential Jews who supported Roman rule. These two powerful forces come together in opposition to Jesus. One commentator says this, "Collaboration in wickedness, as well as goodness, has great power. Their purpose was to trip Jesus up in his words so that he would lose the support of the people, leaving the way open for them to destroy him." In other words, they were trying to get Jesus to take a political side. Here's three things we see in this text:

» **A Revolutionary Question**

» **A Revolutionary Answer**

» **A Revolutionary Revolution**

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him (Mark 12:13-17).

A Revolutionary Question

Before they ask Jesus a question, this group butters him up with flattery in order to barbecue him, "*You are such a man of integrity, you're not swayed by others and you teach the truth, the way of God.*" The truth is, they didn't believe this at all. Someone once said, "Never let praise go to your head and never let criticism get to your heart." Jesus knew their hypocrisy and knew the question was designed to trap Jesus into saying something that

would get him into trouble. Here's the revolutionary question: Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? It was not a question about taxes in general. This was about a particular tax. It was a tax used for the privilege of being a Roman citizen. It was a relatively small amount of money, but signified allegiance to Rome. You paid the tax to show your submission to the Great Roman Empire. The Jews, under Roman rule, paid a lot in taxes. Scholars believe it was anywhere from 20–30% of their income. Some Jews (the Zealots) flatly refused to pay it because it was for them an admission of the Roman right to rule, which they outright opposed. The Pharisees disliked paying the imperial tax but didn't really oppose it, and the Herodians had no objections to it. The intent of the question was to force Jesus to make a direct answer, a political one: Who does Jesus side with, the Zealots or the Herodians? They're really asking Jesus about his politics.

Why was this a trap? If Jesus says "No, don't pay the tax," in essence he's calling for an armed revolt, one that will ultimately be crushed by Roman authorities. If Jesus says "Yes, pay the tax," he's contradicting everything he's been saying about the Kingdom of God. Keep in mind that these Israelites had a heightened expectation of a physical Kingdom of God. In their thinking, the Messiah would literally usher in a new kingdom by overthrowing Rome. So, if Jesus answered yes, then his opponents could publicly discredit him as a sympathizer with Rome. If he answered no, then they could go to the Roman governor and accuse Jesus of rebellion. Instead of answering the question, Jesus asked for a coin. Jesus' request to see the denarius is setting the scene for him to turn the conversation around in an unexpected way. Jesus gives them a revolutionary answer.

A Revolutionary Answer

When it comes to politics, it seems to me that followers of Jesus should be the most confident, curious, composed, and compassionate people in the room. That's how Jesus responds in this scene. Jesus takes the coin, looks at it and asks, whose image is this? Everyone knows, it's Caesar on the coin. Jesus then gives them a revolutionary answer, "*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*" Today, when politicians don't answer the hard questions or spin the answer, we get mad. But these people were amazed by Jesus' answer. In his answer he teaches us a few things about politics.

Their question should have been answered with a simple "yes" or "no." But, Jesus doesn't answer either way. This was unusual for Jesus. He was often very clear and direct to people. He wasn't afraid to be bold. He confronted the woman at the well about her multiple husbands and he told the Pharisees their father was the devil. In his response to this question, Jesus both accepts what's on the coin and rejects what's on the coin. For Jesus, it's not either/or but both/and. This is not easy to do when it comes to politics! For us, living in a highly charged political world, we

need to be careful when we say we are speaking for Jesus, saying things like, "Jesus supports Hillary" or "Jesus supports Trump" or "Jesus is a Republican because..." or "Jesus is a Democrat because..." or "All Christians should vote for (blank) because..." Jesus never took such political stances. Now, that doesn't mean the church should not occasionally speak out in favor or in disapproval of a political issue. But, whenever we do that, we need to be careful and exercise wisdom. Jesus' approach to politics is revolutionary because he refuses to offer simple answers.

Let's look more closely at the denarius coin and Jesus' interaction with it, because it's very important. The denarius was a silver coin and the image on it was of Tiberius Caesar. An inscription on the coin read, "Tiberius Caesar son of the god Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, high priest." This inscription says the Emperor is the King, the son of god and the high priest. So, what does Jesus say about this? Does he say pay taxes? No. Does he drop the coin in outrage over the blasphemy and say "Don't pay!"? No. Instead, he says give to Caesar what's his and give to God what's his. In this passage Jesus points to the image of Caesar on the coin. This same Greek word is used in Genesis 1:26 that talks about how humanity is made in the image of God. Jesus is making a subtle yet powerful contrast: Caesar's image is on the denarius, so he can lay claim to money through taxation, but God's image is on humanity, so only he can lay claim to each individual life. This means, give to Caesar only that which has his image on it—a denarius—and give to God what has his image on it—that's **you**. By answering this way, he slipped out of their trap.

Why was this a radical and revolutionary answer? Because the view held by all governments at that time was this: The king had sovereign rule and could not be questioned. All governments worked this way, not just Rome. Jesus said give the king his money but never give him your whole heart. Yes, Caesar has a legitimate claim but, so does God. Give to each his rightful claim. One scholar puts it this way, "Here Jesus is not saying that there are two quite separate independent spheres, that of Caesar and that of God (for Caesar and all that is his belongs to God); but he is indicating that there are obligations to Caesar which do not infringe the rights of God but are indeed ordained by God." In the words of author Scott Sauls, "When it comes to king and kingdoms, Jesus sides with himself."

We've seen a revolutionary question: Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? And a revolutionary answer: Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Let's look finally at a revolutionary revolution.

A Revolutionary Revolution

Jesus' statement is revolutionary—Give back to Caesar what he deserves. And what does a tyrant deserve? His money. So, give it to him. But, he does not deserve your heart allegiance. No way. Jesus is saying, you can give Caesar some of what he

wants but you can't give him all of what he wants. As followers of Jesus we can't give our total allegiance to the systems of coercion, injustice and suppression of the Roman Empire or any kingdom for that matter. Kings want ultimate allegiance but we can't give him that. NT Wright comments about this and says, "Jesus doesn't call for revolt or total submission. But his answer reveals a revolutionary idea: don't give your all to the king." The crowd is amazed by his answer because he says to simultaneously give something to your king but look to God for everything else. Here's the big idea: Your heart allegiance belongs to Jesus, not a political party or government.

Historically there have been many false attempts to live this out. The Essenes, a religious community of Palestine during the time of Jesus, totally withdrew from society and weren't paying their taxes. In their thinking, the only way they can give their all to God is by withdrawing from society and not participating politically. Jesus is saying "no" to this approach to life. On the other hand, the Zealots wouldn't pay taxes either. They conspired revolts and tried to overthrow the government. Jesus is saying "no" to this approach as well. Why? Because on Jesus' mind is the Kingdom of God. He's not just bringing inner peace to his followers. He is bringing the kingdom of God to them. Your heart allegiance belongs to Jesus because if you are a follower of Jesus, you are a citizen of his kingdom first. That means we need to learn how to put our faith ahead of our politics. We should have more in common with Believers than with people of our political parties. But, that's not always easy.

There's some irony in verse 15 that point to some of the things Jesus' kingdom is about. Jesus doesn't even have a denarius and has to ask for one. A denarius was only one day's wage. It wasn't just chump change but it wasn't much either. Think about this, Jesus was a king without any money who compared himself to a king who had everything. When Jesus said he was a king he never said he'd replace Caesar. Jesus is bringing a new kind of kingship. A spiritual revolution. Why does this eternal King have nothing? Probably because Jesus was showing us an entirely different kind of kingdom. In Matthew 5, the Kingdom of God is described as this,

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.**

**Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.**

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.**

**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.**

**Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.**

**Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.**

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (verses 3–10).**

Since the beginning of humanity, Jesus has seen the coming and going of thousands of worldly kingdoms. He knows that all worldly revolutions have the same values of power, success, comfort, recognition and control. The only thing that is different is a new face and a new slogan. Jesus sees the futility of man-centered solutions. There's no lasting hope found in these. Yes, the government and politicians can do great things, good things, but they are limited to this kingdom. And a politician can't do a good thing unless they're elected. But, the climax of Jesus' kingship wasn't his election, it was his execution. We are ushered into his kingdom when we no longer seek and need the values of the world and instead start living as citizens of another world.

So, why is Jesus a king without any money? Was it a political statement? No. Was it a wonderful example? No. Jesus was a king without any money for **your** sake. The gospel says that Jesus took the poverty you deserve so we could have the wealth of God's love and his embrace. Only when we're transferred out of the kingdom of this world are we free to love the people of this world sacrificially. Listen to what C.S. Lewis says about this, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next...The conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

How does all this affect me politically? The question is not whether Jesus is on our side of politics but whether we are on **his**. The longer it takes people to figure out where we stand on politics, in all likelihood the more faithfully we are living like Jesus. When you and I are transformed by Jesus, you'll be politically moved from somewhere to somewhere else. If you are a strong conservative, Jesus will move you toward the middle. If you're a strong liberal, Jesus will move you toward the middle as well. All because we can no longer see the others as our enemies. Centrists and Moderates move as well. God is a God of hope and the kingdom of God calls us to do something. The gospel moves moderates to the extremes and extremes to the middle. Everyone moves somewhere.

Here's another political question Christians have today: How should we vote in this election? John Wesley, who lived 250 years ago, gives us 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." That's great advice.

If you are deeply concerned about where our world is heading politically, let me quote again from Scott Sauls who reminds us of our hope, "Christianity has always thrived most as a life-giving minority, not a political majority." Acts of love, justice, and service for the common good have always gained more traction for the cause of Christ than anything else. This means Christianity

embraces both conservative and progressive values. We champion the cause of the weak, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and show hospitality to people on the margins. That's what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God. So, Republican, Democrat, left or right, we're all precious in his sight. This political season is an opportunity for us to showcase our political diversity in a way that honors the God who made us so diverse. If we get this right, we'll learn something. We'll become a more generous and loving people. If we get it wrong, the church and Christians will continue to be seen as irrelevant and hostile. Let's change that.

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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Catalog No. 1422-6N