



Today we continue our series called Trending Now and we are looking at the topic of politics. When you think of politics, what comes to mind? You can't help but think about the presidential election we're in: Campaign ads. News stories. Sound bites. Pictures of smiling candidates looking like they're all friends. Maybe you think about the rhetoric between Justice Ginsburg and Trump this past week; Justice Ginsburg calling Trump a "faker" and Trump saying, "her mind is shot." Maybe you think about Bernie Sanders coming out this past week in endorsement of Hilary for president.

You might be wondering how I'm going to preach a non-partisan, non-controversial sermon on a subject that is so latent with controversy. That's a good question! Some of you might prefer we not talk about such a divisive issue in church. Doesn't the saying go, "nothing ruins a good dinner party faster than a discussion on politics or religion"? I'm going to talk about both this morning!

We need to talk about politics because God's Word tells us to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. Christians should be informed. We need to think clearly and graciously on this complicated issue. Most of us aren't involved in politics as an occupation, but as followers of Jesus, we should ask ourselves a few questions:

- What does the Bible say about politics and government?
- How do our personal beliefs effect our political/social involvement?
- How much should Christians look to government for political solutions and how much should they look to the church for social change?

These are messy questions that I can't fully answer for each of you today. But we can walk away with a basic understanding of God's view of politics and government.

To begin, let me clarify the difference between politics and government. **Government** is the system of people, laws, and officials that define and control the country that you live in. God is in favor of government. It's one of the three institutions God established (the nuclear family and the church being the other two) to resist decay in society and bring benefits. Different from this, **politics** is defined this way: activities that relate to influencing the actions and policies and laws of a government; or getting and keeping power in a government.

So government is the structure that does the work and politics involves the conversations and the compromises that determine what the government spends its money and time on. Significant parts of the political process in America is lobbying and campaigning.

Before we start answering what the Bible says about politics, listen to what *The Atlantic Magazine*, July 12, 2016, wrote describing why the issue of politics is such a sensitive issue for many Christians today. "For most of the country's history, ... white Protestant Christians—set the tone for our national conversations and shaped American ideals. But today, many white Christian Americans feel profoundly anxious as their numbers and influence are waning ... The key question is ... why white Protestantism as a whole—arguably the most powerful cultural force in the history of the United States—has faded. The answer is, in part, a matter of powerful demographic changes."

Some Christians respond to this loss of power with increased enthusiasm or zeal to change politics to be like they were in the past. Some respond to this loss of power by disengaging completely. And while I don't pretend to hold all of the answers to your political questions today, I will show you how Jesus responded to a tricky political situation. His attitude and actions will instruct and guide us.

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).

The situation in these verses is that Jesus has just cleansed the temple. The Pharisees and Herodians, both Jews, are in the crowd around him and they ask him a political question. The

Pharisees opposed the Roman rule and wanted a descendant of David to rule over the nation of Israel. The Herodians supported the Roman rule and wanted a Herod to rule over Israel. They were on opposite sides of a political debate and they ask Jesus a political question trying to get him to take a political side.

A Dangerous Question

This question wasn't really about paying taxes. This was about a particular tax. It was a head tax for the privilege of being a Roman. It was a very small monetary amount but it signified allegiance to Rome. Jesus's request to see the denarius is setting the scene for him to turn the conversation in an unexpected way. They're really asking Jesus if he's a revolutionary or a sell out?

The trap: If he says "no, don't pay the tax," in essence he's calling for an armed revolt and he'll be crushed by the authorities. If he says "yes, pay the tax," in essence 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 with their Messiah on the physical throne. The set up was, "Jesus, are you really a revolutionary bringing the Kingdom of God?" A dangerous question!

A Revolutionary Answer

Jesus' answer was revolutionary. Instead of falling into their trap, he changes the conversation. People get frustrated because politicians don't answer the hard questions and we get mad. But these people were amazed by Jesus' answer! But he did answer them in an unusual way. In his answer he refuses three typical approaches to politics:

- He refuses political simplicity by answering according the party lines.
- He refuses political complacency by saying "just stay out of it."
- He refuses political primacy by redirecting them to God (the follower of Jesus has to refuse these too).

Three Approaches to Politics

Jesus refuses political simplicity

Verse 14 is a simple question with a "yes" or "no" answer: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" Jesus doesn't answer either way. This was unusual for Jesus. He was often very clear and direct. He wasn't afraid to be bold. For example, he confronted the woman at the well about her multiple husbands; 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. This is not simple.

We mustn't take simple stands on politics because Jesus didn't take a simple approach—Jesus supports Hilary or Jesus supports Trump; Jesus is a Republican because ... or Jesus is a Democrat

because ...; all Christians should vote for (blank) because—Jesus never took such stances and neither should we, as his follower. A pastor of a conservative church in the rural south could make a biblical case for a conservative candidate and tell his congregation to vote for them. At the same time, a more liberal pastor in the Bay area could make a biblical case for a liberal candidate and tell his congregation to vote for them. This happens every Sunday in America.

I suggest that we shouldn't do this as followers of Jesus because Jesus didn't do it. Here's how a Christian's approach brings more complexity: Does the Bible say anything about the care of the environment? Yes. What if a person felt this was the top crisis of the day? Out of deep conviction you could vote for a candidate who intended to give the best care for the environment. That could be exactly what that person should do as a follower of Jesus. Does the Bible say anything about the dignity of human life? Yes. What if a person felt this was the top crisis of the day? Out of deep conviction you could vote for a candidate who intended to protect the lives who were defenseless with equally deep convictions. That could be exactly what that person should do as a follower of Jesus.

And these two people may be voting for different candidates but both following Jesus! This is why a Christian can't take a simplistic approach to politics. Jesus created life and personalities with complexity and diversity and that's good. Every Christian is not going to be the same politically. Jesus' approach to politics is revolutionary because he refuses to offer simple answers. Next we see that Jesus approaches politics in a revolutionary matter because ...

Jesus refuses political complacency

The denarius coin and Jesus' interaction with it in this passage is very important. The denarius was a silver coin. Jesus asks, "who's image is on it and who's inscription?" The image was Tiberius Caesar. An inscription read "Tiberius Caesar son of the god Augus, Pontifus Maximus, high priest." This inscription mentions King—son of god—high priest.

Imagine Jesus holding this coin in his hand, looking at the image of a man who was claiming to be a god and a high priest. What does Jesus say about this? Does he drop the coin in outrage over the blasphemy and say "Don't pay!"? No. Does he say pay taxes? No. Instead, he says to "give back to Caesar what's his and give to God what's God's" meaning, give to Caesar only that which has his image on it—that's the coin; give to God what has his image on it—that's **you**.

Jesus' insights about politics don't allow for a complacent approach—he says to give the tax to Caesar. That's involvement. But in his answer he also refuses Political Primacy.

Jesus refuses political primacy

The view held by all governments at that time was this: The kings had sovereign rule and couldn't be questioned. All governments worked this way, not just Rome. Jesus said, "don't do that. Give the king his money but don't give him your heart allegiance." In the words of author Scott Sauls, "When it comes to king and kingdoms, Jesus sides with himself."

Remember what the angel of the Lord tells Joshua? Right before the Israelites are going to siege the city of Jericho, he sees an angel. Joshua asks him, "Are you for us or our enemies?" The angel said, "neither ... but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." This perspective reveals why Jesus goes beyond just giving a Revolutionary Answer and actually calls for The Ultimate Revolution that's bigger than any one government.

The Ultimate Revolution

We see Jesus' call to the Ultimate Revolution in the change he makes to the verbs "pay" and "give." Verse 14: "pay" the imperial tax to Caesar (a gift); verse 17: "give back" to Caesar (pay back what he deserves). What does a tyrant deserve? His money? Sure. Give it to him. But your allegiance, your heart? No way.

Jesus is saying, you should give Caesar some of what he wants but you can't give him all of what he wants. The kings want ultimate allegiance but we can't give them that. Jesus is inviting people to be part of the Ultimate Revolution of all time. On Jesus' mind is the Kingdom of God. He's not just bringing inner peace to his faithful followers. He is bringing the kingdom of God to them. NT Wright said, "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 slipped out of the trap. He says to simultaneously give something to your king but to look to God for everything else.

Here's the big idea: Your heart-allegiance belongs to Jesus, not a political party or government. Since the beginning of humanity, Jesus has seen the coming and going of thousands of worldly kingdoms. He knows that all worldly revolutions are a re-hash of the same values. They want power so they can influence their vision of the world. There's no lasting hope found in the governments of the world so don't give your heart to it. You'll be disappointed. But when we give your heart to Jesus he will satisfy us in the deepest and most complete ways.

One of the ways we see that Jesus' Revolution was the Ultimate Revolution is that he turned the systems of the world upside down. Why is Jesus the king without any money or even a bed? As a political statement? No. As a wonderful example of humility? No. For your sake. The gospel is that he took the poverty you deserve so we could have the wealth of God's love that he deserves. Only when we're transferred out of the kingdom of this world ... striving for power, acceptance, comfort and control

... are you free to live in God's Kingdom. The power of the world is broken.

At a 1970 Urbana Conference Tim Skinner in a sermon, said, "Barabbas was a guy burning the system down. He's killing people. But if you let B go you can always arrest him again. The worse B will do is round up some other guerrillas and start another riot. You can always stop him. But how do you stop Jesus? They nailed him to a cross and killed him. They rolled a stone in front of his grave and said, 'There's 1 radical who'll never disturb us again.' Three days later Jesus pulled off one of the great coups of all time. He got up out of the grave. A leader of a new order who overthrows the existing order. That is not built on man. To put B to death ends his revolution. To put Jesus to death only launches it. So keep in mind my friend with all your militancy and radicalism that the systems of man are doomed for destruction. Only God's Kingdom will prevail. You will never be truly radical until you become part of that order. And then go out into the world and proclaim liberation. Tell them that the real liberator has come."

How does this effect me politically? No doubt you've thought of ways this applies to your life already. But I want to end by answering the question, How should Christians apply this to our lives Let me give you three ways.

First, inform yourself biblically. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ you should study and know what the Bible says about government and your relationship to it. Here are some examples:

- You are to submit to your government
- You are to pray for your governing leaders
- You are to seek first the kingdom of heaven

Don't allow yourself to get so focused on governmental programs that you neglect to live primarily focused on God's Kingdom.

Second, get involved. In Matthew 5 Jesus calls his followers salt because we have a preserving effect on cultures and societies, and light because we reveal the truth in the darkness. In order to be salt and light, we must get involved. C.S.Lewis says about getting involved, "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."

So, get involved in making this world a place that God wants it to be. And when we get specific on this, we see that our involvement doesn't align cleanly with one political party.

In the Bible you'll see 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 esteems the life of the unborn highly (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5).
- He justifies the forceful role of the state in maintaining 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 God would make a good Republican. But the challenge is that the Bible clearly tells us God holds some very liberal views too:

- 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.

It sounds like God would make a good Democrat! 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.

The Bible challenges us to see that God's politics are more complicated and challenging than most of us have the stomach for. When you 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. All because we can no longer see the others as our enemies.

All Christians should be involved in politics in some manner. You should vote. It's a right that's been given to you through great cost and sacrifice.

- You should pray for our leaders.
- You should work toward bringing God's justice and love within your sphere of influence.
- You might not be able to change the abortion laws but you can volunteer at the crisis pregnancy clinic.
- You might not be able to change the racial tensions in America but you can show love for every race through your words, actions and social media posts.
- You might not be able to influence the legislative process in Washington but you can write or call about an issue.

Third, don't despair. It's normal to get discouraged and for your heart to be troubled by the political state of America. There are some big problems in our political processes today. Big surprise! We live in a fallen and broken world. But followers of Jesus shouldn't let their hearts be ruled by anything other than Jesus. Scott Sauls, who reminds us of our hope says, "Christianity has always thrived most as a life-giving minority, not a political majority."

So while we should intentionally be salt and light, our hope isn't connected to it. We know that at the second coming of Jesus, God will create a new heaven and a new earth. He will usher in a perfect government with Jesus Christ as the Eternal King of Kings. There will be perfect unity, sinless relationships, and there won't be any problems to solve. It will be wonderful! Until then, our role is to live faithfully to Jesus, spread his message of love and lovingly get involved in government like God wants us to.

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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