

We're continuing our One Kingdom. Indivisible. series. We're focusing on what it means to live as citizens of God's kingdom here on earth. Last week we saw how important unity is among those who follow Jesus. We may care deeply about many different things, but we're unified by a higher allegiance to King Jesus. This allegiance transcends all other allegiances.

Now we want to consider what is the right relationship of the citizens of the Kingdom of God to the earthly kingdom to which we belong? For us, that means, what's the proper relationship of followers of Jesus to what we call the United States of America — an appropriate question to ask on the weekend we celebrate our independence. Should we somehow try to rule over or even take over the state? Should we try to create a distinctly Christian nation? Or should we see ourselves as the servant of the state, blindly submitting to its authority? Or is the truth somewhere in-between?

God is in favor of government

We should start by saying God is in favor of government. We see that in the book of Romans. Paul writes, "*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 added this,

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 1 Timothy 2:1-2

Wow! What a challenge! Do you pray for our President? Do you pray for our Governor? Do you pray for the members of Congress, Supreme Court Justices, and mayors? Maybe if we prayed for them more, our hearts would soften towards them more, even if we disagree with them.

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, Congress, governors, mayors, city council members,

police officers, and those who serve in our military play an important part in God's work in the world.

Followers of Jesus have a higher loyalty

But we also know we have a higher loyalty. Again, we're citizens of another kingdom. And when push comes to shove, our first obligation is to God. When the Jewish authorities told Peter to stop preaching about Jesus, he said to them, "*We must obey God rather than human beings!*" (Acts 5:29).

Of course, this has become a relevant issue today as we've been prevented from meeting together in person as a church for almost four months. We've had to sort through this question. Is this one of those issues where we should defy the government? By not meeting in person, are we obeying human beings rather than God? We've decided that's not the case. First of all, one of the roles of government is to protect people; to keep people safe. We think that's a good idea, too. Second, we can still preach about Jesus. We can still worship together online, in homes, and now in smaller groupings. Third, the word of God is not bound. God is on the move through all of this. But if they told us, "You can't preach about Jesus any longer," we'd say, "Sorry! We must obey God rather than human beings." Of course, that's happened repeatedly throughout history. And believers have paid the price for it.

Politics are often corrupt

We all know there's a dark side to government. Look at the trial of Jesus recorded in John 18. He's 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 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 Passover. The crowd wants him to release Barabbas, a known murderer, and 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. Politics are often corrupt. What's 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 often wins. And when the crowd wins, bad people prosper, and good people suffer. Let's face it; the world of politics is 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 of the state. Pilate chose to go along with it because it was politically expedient.

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. I mean, how is it that millions of card-carrying Christians could support the institution of slavery in the early part of our nation's history? How is it, one party prides itself on being compassionate for the poor and yet somehow maintains a callous disregard for the unborn? How is it, another party prides itself on protecting the unborn but maintains a callous disregard for the poor and oppressed? 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.

Jesus doesn't side with the right or the left

In fact, the Bible gives no reason to believe Jesus would side with one political party over another. Maybe that is 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—as 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 esteems the life of the unborn highly (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 progressive 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 repeatedly rails 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).

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. 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. 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 did that, they flattered him a bit: "*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*" (v. 14a). Clearly, they were flattering him before they tried to flatten him.

So they ask him, "*Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar, or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?*" (vv. 14b-15a). This particular tax was at the center of a political controversy because it was a symbol of Jewish oppression. It was the annual one denarius tax 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? Are you a servant of the state or a master of the state?"

Jesus knew exactly what they were up to. He saw through their hypocrisy and asked, "Why are you trying to trap me?" (v. 15b). And 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. Here's a king without a dime! It seems this is a different kind of king with a different kind of power.

So they bring him the coin, and Jesus asks, "*Whose image is this? And whose inscription?*" "*Caesar's,*" they replied" (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. It's 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 Caesar's image.

So Jesus says, "*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's*" (v. 17). This 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 that we'll give Caesar what is Caesar's and 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 Caesar's 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 promotes.

So we're to avoid the extreme of the Pharisees who were hostile to the 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 great 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 was not God. He didn't rule over all of life. He could regulate conduct to a degree, but he could not control their spirit. The government has a domain over part of our lives, 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 our 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 is directed only to him. We don't give that to our country. We don't give that to a political leader. Give the government your money through taxes, but give God your soul, your entire person, your very life, your deepest worship.

Third, we have an obligation not to 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, our affections, and our hopes, we can give our country what's most precious to us.

We mustn't let Caesar define our identity. How do you define who you are, and how does that impact how you relate to others? So you're an American, or you're a Republican or a Democrat, or you're a conservative or a liberal. These labels define us and shape the way we see ourselves and others. We begin to 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?

We mustn't give Caesar our ultimate allegiance. We can pledge allegiance to the flag, but we have a higher allegiance. Don't fuse together the mission of the kingdom of God 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 questions test our allegiance.

And we mustn't pin our 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. But we don't pin our hopes on America remaining a bastion of Christendom. Many people have

said America is now living in post-Christendom. That means Christianity no longer has a place of privilege and power in our culture and society. But maybe that's not all bad.

You see, the kingdom Jesus came to establish often flourishes most as a life-giving minority rather than a powerful majority. Consider how this played out in church history. In the book of Acts, Jesus ascends to heaven and leaves about 120 believers. A few days later, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached, and about 3,000 people were saved. So then there were somewhere around 3,120 believers; all of them are Jewish people in Jerusalem. At this point, Christianity is barely a speck in the vast Roman empire. The Roman Empire saw them as a minority group within a minority group. They had no position of power or privilege within society. Over the course of the next 275 years, they'd experience seasons of intense persecution. And yet, on the eve of the last and most brutal persecution by the emperor, Diocletian, Christianity had grown to have over five million adherents from a vast array of people groups.

All that growth took place as a persecuted minority—no buildings to meet in, no advertising, no internet. That's when the church was at its best, not when it later became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The results of that were disastrous as the church became watered down and saltless.

Yes, America has become post-Christian. Christianity no longer has a place of privilege and power in our culture, but that doesn't limit what God can do. We don't pin our 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 righteousness dwells. God will one day establish his kingdom on earth through his Son. We hope for a new heaven and a new earth. We will talk about that more next week.

There's so much more to wrestle with as we try to wrestle with the relationship of the church to the state. Maybe Martin Luther King put it best when he said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool." Each of us needs to grapple with how this ought to get worked out in the voting booth because we won't find God's name on the ballot.

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar: engage in the political process, be informed, vote, support worthy candidates. We should obviously be open to supporting and voting for Christians, but not exclusively. Remember, Christians are fallible human beings.

There were church-going Christians who supported Hitler, not to mention slavery. John Wesley, who lived 250 years ago, gives great advice about this. He advised people, "To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy. To speak no evil of the person they voted against. And to take care, their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side." Good advice!

And we can do even do more than just vote. We can advocate for worthy causes. An advocate is someone who pleads for another's cause. Proverbs says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute" (31:8). We can all find ways to speak up, to advocate for those who have no voice.

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 and kingdom-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, 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. And, together, changed lives can create a better world. But only the King who came with a towel around his waist is worthy of our hope. So give to him what belongs to him. Some trust in chariots and horses, some in nations and human leaders, 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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