



COURAGE AND CIVILITY CHURCH KIT





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INTRODUCTION



*P*olitics, just the sound of the word, produces a visceral reaction in many of us. We often think of power grabbing and corruption. We also might assume that politics is a domain of life simply reserved for sideline bantering. But for the Christian, we understand that government is ordained by God and is a servant for good (Romans 13:4). So maybe politics is not a necessary evil that we must endure, but a divine opportunity for Christians to serve the common good and point our neighbors to a greater, more perfect kingdom to come.

The current political environment and public dialogue are both chaotic and toxic. In common language, it's a "dumpster fire." It seems no one, not the politician, not the media, and not the everyday citizen, is taking the high road. Everyone has pulled off the gloves. It's anything but civil.

So what responsibilities do Christians have to engage in this current political moment? What should we really expect from government and elected officials? Speaking of elected officials, there's another election coming. How should we think about that? Issues that should be important to every Christian are on the table. How then do we advocate for those issues without wrestling with the proverbial pig and ruining our gospel witness? How do we live "Christianly" in such a contentious political environment?

The Courage and Civility Church Kit is designed to help Christians think biblically about these and other questions in order to equip Christians to engage in the public square in a way that fears God, honors those in authority, loves all of our neighbors, and invites everyone to trust Jesus Christ, the eternal King of kings and Lord of lords.



WEEK 1

THE BIBLE, POLITICS, AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD



INTRODUCTION

One of the most moving moments in a missionary commissioning ceremony is the parade of flags. Nations from around the world are represented as missionaries walk into the room bearing the colors of the nation to which God has called them. Each flag represents a distinct people with a distinct language and culture, and each nation represented is ruled by a distinct government.

Often included in this parade are a few missionaries whose identities and mission fields are concealed. These missionaries will soon move to a restricted country—one that is closed to the gospel, where the government denies basic human liberties and punishes people who fail to comply with the oppressive laws of the land.

It's in this moment of the commissioning service that everyone watching feels the tension between our citizenship in heaven and our citizenship on earth. As we watch these modern-day heroes, we are prompted to ask ourselves, "What is my responsibility to God in the context of my responsibility to governing authorities?" "How should political change happen that would allow citizens to enjoy the freedoms God intended, and what if it doesn't?" "What are basic human rights?" "Should I be concerned with those or just focus on sharing the gospel regardless of the political environment?" "How would I respond if God called me to be a missionary in a country like that?"

Although the sacrifices and dangers of serving Jesus in a restricted country are in a category all their own, every Christian has been called to live for Jesus' kingdom in a context of a government ruled by fallen, sinful, and sometimes, wicked people. We do not have the option of dividing our loyalties. Nor can we honor Jesus in certain, private areas of life while honoring the government in other, more public areas.

Instead, Christians have been tasked with living as pilgrims, sojourners, and ambassadors of Christ—missionaries, if you will—who plant our lives in the mission field among a distinct people, with a distinct culture, ruled by a distinct government.

STARTER QUESTIONS

- The role of government is often debated. In your understanding, what are the most basic responsibilities that a government has to its citizens?

- Discuss a few of the challenges of being a good citizen on earth when in Christ, our ultimate citizenship is in heaven.

In this session, we will explore what the Bible says about governments, politics, and the people of God.

CENTRAL TRUTH

In his grace, God establishes distinct nations whose people share a common humanity as image bearers of God. Every nation's government has a responsibility to restrain evil, promote justice and peace, and mirror the eternal kingdom of God.

KEY SCRIPTURES

Genesis 9:1-7:

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear and terror of you will be in every living creature on the earth, every bird of the sky, every creature that crawls on the ground, and all the fish of the sea. They are placed under your authority. Every creature that lives and moves will be food for you; as I gave the green plants, I have given you everything. However, you must not eat meat with its lifeblood in it. And I will require a penalty for your lifeblood; I will require it from any animal and from any human; if someone murders a fellow human, I will require that person's life. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood will be shed, for God made humans in his image. But you, be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it."

Genesis 11:1-9:

The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make oven-fired bricks." (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) And they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let's make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth." Then the Lord came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. The Lord said, "If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then

nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let's go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." So from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Noah and his family were spared from the worldwide flood as described in Genesis 7-9. Genesis 9 records the covenant God made with Noah, known as the Noahic Covenant, that highlighted the responsibility of Noah and his descendents to multiply and populate the earth. It also communicated the value God places on human life and man's responsibility to protect life.

The Noahic Covenant of Genesis 9:1-7 provides the basis for the establishment of governments. Human governments are responsible to act on God's behalf to protect human life and promote justice (Gen 9:6). This command affirms the basis of human dignity is rooted in the *imago Dei*—that every man and woman bears the image of God. The Noahic Covenant is not all the Bible says about the necessity, role, and scope of human governments, but it does lay the foundation.

Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth had children and grandchildren. Their family lineage is described in Genesis 10. Indeed, these families obeyed God and multiplied, and formed unique communities that would eventually emerge into nations of their own.

These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their family records, in their nations.
The nations on earth spread out from these after the flood. Genesis 10:32

These nations shared a common origin in Noah, but they were distinct from one another. As distinct nations, they were also still very much responsible to God for the care of the earth and everyone in it.

By Genesis 11, everyone on earth still shared the same language. After migrating east and settling in the land of Shinar, the people acted sinfully and with pride. They decided to build a city and to place there a tower, known as the tower of Babel, which they intended to be a symbol of their power and autonomy.

The Lord saw the dangers of a people that would choose to act with proud self-sufficiency, a people who would attempt to step out from under his rule in order to become gods of their own.

So he intervened and confused their languages, scattered them throughout the earth, and as a result, stopped their building project of the city that eventually became Babylon.

Noah's ancestors all bore the image of God, but to restrain evil, the Lord separated them into regional kingdoms. These kingdoms or distinct governments allowed residents to live in peace, respect one another, and establish order. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul affirmed this function of all governments in his letter to the Romans,

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. Romans 13:1-7

As Paul encouraged Timothy to pray for those in authority, he described the expectation of government to allow citizens to "lead a tranquil and quiet life,"

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

The Bible affirms the distinctions between nations as regional and cultural entities, but the Bible also charges every nation's government with the responsibility to build an environment where everyone is safe and free. Every resident, regardless of religious belief, social status, ethnicity, or family heritage, is stamped with the image of God and deserves freedoms, privileges, and protection. Government and the politics involved in governing are not evils to endure, but are functions of God's grace that make room for human flourishing.

Earthly kingdoms, however, have limits, and none will last forever. Instead, civil and just governments create an environment of freedom where the gospel can take root (1 Timothy 2:3-4). In essence, every earthly government is a provisional government pointing, if only in a limited way, to the eternal kingdom of God.

Sometime after the scene at Babel, the Lord made a covenant with Abram (later known as Abraham) promising to send an everlasting King to establish an everlasting kingdom who would bless all the nations of the earth:

I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Genesis 12:2-3

Through Abraham the Lord established the nation of Israel, the people from whom Jesus, the Messiah, would come. Israel is a special nation because of its unique relationship to God, a part of which was Israel's privilege of blessing people from every nation, tongue, and tribe with the hope of salvation from sin's dominion found in the Kings of kings, Jesus Christ.

Again, the apostle Paul described this divine invitation to the nations in Galatians:

You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons. Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you. Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith (Galatians 3:7-9)

Jesus is the King of the Jews, but unlike any earthly king, Jesus did not come to establish a political or even ethnic dynasty. Instead, Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, and died for the sins of the world. He was buried and raised from the dead on the third day to reconcile sinners to God the Father and establish an eternal kingdom, a kingdom over which he reigns now and forever more.

This was the testimony of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the mother of Jesus:

Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the

throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

Every earthly kingdom serves as a visible reminder of a more perfect, eternal kingdom to come, and gives its citizens the opportunity to join in.

TRUTHS FOR LIVING

1. The Lord established distinct governments to honor our common humanity.

Noah’s sons began to multiply and they formed an alliance under the leadership of Cush’s son, Nimrod. Nimrod was a “mighty warrior on the earth,” but he stood against the Lord and the Lord’s rule as he used his power to attempt to build Babylon (Genesis 11:1). He possessed a spirit of rebellion against the Lord, and Babylon became a witness to humanity’s wickedness.

Cush fathered Nimrod, who began to be powerful in the land. He was a powerful hunter in the sight of the Lord. That is why it is said, “Like Nimrod, a powerful hunter in the sight of the Lord.” His kingdom started with Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen, between Nineveh and the great city Calah (Genesis 10:8-12).

The Lord, however, had good plans for the human race. He intended to bless us rather than to curse us (Genesis 9:1). So to protect humankind against our own personal sinful, destructive nature, and to preserve humanity from the Nimrods of the world, the Lord intervened and scattered the sons of Noah.

Then the Lord came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. The Lord said, “If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth. Genesis 11:5-9

They quickly formed distinct family identities. All those hard-to-pronounce names of Noah's sons and grandsons soon became the names of cities or regions where these men and their families settled.

From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. Acts 17:26-27

So while each family's common origin was Noah, by God's gracious and providential intervention, they established communities. These communities became nations ruled by governments of their own. They developed unique identities and cultures. Some followed the Lord and some did not, but they all governed and provided for themselves. These nations were expected to honor the Noahic Covenant as they found ways to protect their citizens from those who would do them harm.

Politics—the formation and operation of governments—then, is not an evil we must endure, but a stewardship we pursue in order to honor God and serve one another. According to Romans 13, individual governments are established by God and given responsibility to justly govern a distinct people according to the specific needs of that people.

Some of these needs are cultural in their context. For example, rules of the road are important for the safety of citizens, but various governments and municipalities will adopt different standards for drivers. But there are other needs, such as protections against murder or the protections of personal property, that are a universal in nature and every government is tasked with establishing such protections.

While no earthly government is eternal, righteous governments are essential for the flourishing of any people. Whether it's in the local Home Owners' Association Board, a local city municipality, or the government of a world superpower, humans cannot live on earth the life God intended apart from some form of government.

This is why Christians care about political engagement. We have a deep interest in the way our neighbors are treated, the freedoms they are afforded, and the protections granted to all of us through government. We care about modern-day Nimrods who would abuse power and oppress people. We care about government overreach as well as government's abdication of its God-given responsibilities.

Therefore, Christians have a responsibility to engage in the political process according to the freedoms and opportunities available to us.

For Discussion

- Based on Genesis 11 and Acts 17:26-27, why did God scatter the people and force them to establish distinct nations?
- Although nations are distinct and cultural standards may vary, according to Genesis 9:6, what is the basic responsibility every government has to its citizens?
- Why is Christian engagement in the public square important for building healthy communities and a vibrant nation? According to Romans 13:1-7, what are the priorities for Christian engagement in the political process?
- How should our common humanity as image bearers of God shape the way we relate to other nations and people of other nationalities?

2. The Lord established priorities of government that allow every citizen to flourish.

The sons of Noah, motivated by sin, conspired to build Babylon because they wanted to hold onto what they perceived as power. So they used every resource at their disposal to build a mighty city and tower that would reach to the heavens, but the Lord intervened and thwarted their best efforts. This was not the first attempted coup d'état the Lord had seen.

The prophet Isaiah described the devil, Lucifer's failed attempt to make himself like God:

Shining morning star, how you have fallen from the heavens! You destroyer of nations, you have been cut down to the ground. You said to yourself, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods' assembly, in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you will be brought down to Sheol into the deepest regions of the Pit. Isaiah 14:12-15

Satan longed for power, majesty, and dominion that were reserved only for God; he was, and still is, willing to hurt other people to achieve it. The sons of Noah craved the very same thing. And we see in Nimrod an earthly ruler that was willing to gain power at the expense of others.

Modern political leaders, too, can neglect the responsibility of government to care for its citizens

and instead pursue unrighteous agendas. There are still governments and regimes throughout the world that oppress their people, denying basic human rights.

The Lord's purpose for government, however, has not changed. It is still intended as a function of God's grace toward every image bearer.

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood will be shed, for God made humans in his image. But you, be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it.”
Genesis 9:6-7

For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Romans 13:4

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. 1 Timothy 2:1-2

The Lord cares for the welfare of every person and expects governments everywhere to serve his purposed of peace and justice so that people everywhere can thrive by enjoying an environment where they can be fruitful and multiply, pursue industry, and worship.

Political leaders, then, are “God's servants for your good.” The Lord establishes leaders to serve people by not only protecting them from evil but by promoting what is good for them.

Debate continues over the extent of government's responsibility to this end. The Noahic Covenant clarifies that government should protect its citizens from murder, for example. That seems straightforward enough.

An evil dictator, like Stalin, Nimrod, or Hitler, who exterminates his people should be stopped and brought to justice. Everyone can support that.

But what about a government that permits and uses revenue from taxpayers to fund the abortion of the unborn, or that allows euthanasia of the elderly, or that fails to prosecute the drunk driver whose irresponsible actions took a life? What responsibility does the government have when a pharmaceutical company introduces new drugs without appropriate testing, or a restaurant serves contaminated food, or a passenger airline flies without adequate safety measures? What about the liability a construction company has for faulty work that costs lives? What about the emergency

room doctor who was negligent? What about an impoverished young boy's limited access to health-care that ultimately costs him his life?

It doesn't take long to understand the source of our vigorous political debates. To what extent is the government responsible for protecting its citizens without squashing our freedoms? How much responsibility does the government have to provide a "quiet and tranquil" life? How does a government fairly execute its responsibilities equally for all its citizens?

While serving a pagan king, the prophet Daniel testified,

May the name of God be praised forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to him. He changes the times and seasons; he removes kings and establishes kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. Daniel 2:20-21

God establishes governments to create an environment of health, safety, and peace for all its citizens. Yet that goal is not always achieved. Whether due to corruption or incompetence, human governments fall short.

As believers, like Daniel, our response is to honor the Lord, trust him to remove and establish rulers, and seek his wisdom. We pray for our leaders, submit to them, and then we advocate for justice for all.

For Discussion

- Human governments and political leaders fall short, yet the Lord is sovereign over them all. How can Christians demonstrate trust in the Lord while still advocating for the good of every citizen?
- Based on Genesis 9:1-6, Romans 13:1-7, and 1 Timothy 2:1-4, discuss in your group how governments should approach the dual responsibility of providing an environment that is both free and safe.
- Evil dictators are easy to spot and are widely opposed. In light of Romans 12:9-21, however, how should Christians engage with one another and with the larger community when there is so much diversity of viewpoints on the role and responsibility of government?

3. The Lord established governments to point to a greater Kingdom to come.

Jonathan Leeman, in *How the Nations Rage*, writes,

“Why should Christians care about good government? Immediately, for the sake of justice. Ultimately, so there’s a platform for salvation.”¹

A bad government erodes trust in authority. Leaders of a good government model authority we can trust. A bad government suppresses human flourishing. A good government cannot make people thrive, but it does give people opportunity to live according to their God-given design. A bad government hinders religious freedom. A good government promotes it.

No human government establishes heaven on earth, but governments can mirror, if only in part, an eternal kingdom to come.

In Genesis 12, the Lord established a covenant with Abraham:

I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Genesis 12:2-3

The Lord promised to bless Abraham and to make him into a great nation. Ultimately, Abraham and Sarah bore Isaac, who then bore Jacob and Esau. Jacob had twelve sons. One of those sons was named Judah, and in the fullness of time Judah’s lineage introduced Jesus of Nazareth to the world (Matthew 1:1-16).

Jesus was born and was reared in a region of the world ruled by the oppressive, pagan Roman Empire, but he did not launch a political campaign or a military crusade; his purpose was not to become the ruler of an earthly nation. When he was arrested and brought before Pontus Pilate, Jesus actually said,

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” John 18:36

First century Jewish leaders were expecting a political deliverer that would make the people of Israel into a great earthly nation, but Jesus consistently cast a larger view of an eternal kingdom—one where both Jews and Gentiles would be included. In John 10:16, Jesus spoke

¹ Leeman, Jonathan, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 119.

of “other sheep” who would listen to his voice. He promised that he would lay down his life for them as well.

The apostle Paul affirmed this throughout his ministry as he connected the Abrahamic Covenant with the finished work of Jesus that established a kingdom filled with citizens from every nation, tongue, and tribe:

Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you. Galatians 3:8

The practical implications of this are important. As Leeman states, governments are “common-grace gifts” that make room for the “special-grace work of the church.”² Just as the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, just as air in our lungs and strength in our muscles are common grace gifts from God, so a virtuous government creates a God-consciousness in us and, by preserving religious freedom, gives us the opportunity to respond to the special, saving work of Jesus.

For Discussion

- No earthly government perfectly mirrors Jesus’ kingdom, but how can a good government demonstrate the goodness and grace of God?
- Jesus was crucified, at least in part, because Jewish leaders were angry that Jesus threatened their political aspirations. Their national elitism distracted them from Jesus’ kingdom work. How can modern Christians be vulnerable to similar tendencies and distractions?
- What are possible signs or evidences that we have allowed personal political views to distract us from the priorities of Jesus’ kingdom?
- How can our expectations of an eternal kingdom inform the way we engage in the current political process?

Conclusion

There are some tasks only the government should do. For example, we do not want the church establishing and enforcing legal medical standards, but Christians should care about good medical

² Leeman, *How the Nations Rage*, 118.

practices as the work of medical professionals affect the welfare of our neighbors. Likewise, there are some responsibilities that only the church has; we do not want the government prescribing worship practices. If, however, a church teaches religious practices that abuse children, we would expect the governing authorities to intervene.

The apostle Peter wrote,

Submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the emperor as the supreme authority or to governors as those sent out by him to punish those who do what is evil and to praise those who do what is good. For it is God's will that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. Submit as free people, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but as God's slaves. Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 1 Peter 2:13-17

Christians both honor the Lord and the rulers over us because the government and the church are in practice cooperating partners in the care for creation, the flourishing of humanity, and the general revelation of a coming kingdom.



WEEK 1 SERMON

WE THE GOVERNMENT

A PRIMER ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Romans 13:1-10



INTRODUCTION

Interestingly, it's not uncommon for Christians to assume that faith and politics are separated like two cousins who can't get along at a birthday party . . . one sitting in one corner of the room and the other one in the opposite corner. But that is not how the Bible characterizes faith and politics.

Whether it's God charging Adam to rule over and subdue the earth, or calling Noah and his descendants to govern in a way that protects human life, or promising Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations, the Bible teaches us that every government is a provisional government, pointing the way to the eternal reign and rule of Jesus. Earthly governments are not ultimate, but they are important to the work of God in the world.

Every Christian follows Jesus in the context of an earthly government; therefore, faith and politics are not rivals but partners.

The apostle Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, shows us how that works here in Romans 13.

SCRIPTURE

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. 2 So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. 4 For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. 5 Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. 6 And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. 7 Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. 8 Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by

this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:1-10

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

This section of Romans is preceded by an entire paragraph of a “to-do list” for the Christian.

- Let love be without hypocrisy
- Detest evil
- Cling to what is good
- Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters
- Take the lead in honoring one another
- Do not lack diligence in zeal
- Be fervent in the Spirit
- Serve the Lord
- Rejoice in hope
- Be patient in affliction
- Be persistent in prayer
- Share with the saints in their needs
- Pursue hospitality
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse
- Rejoice with those who rejoice
- Weep with those who weep
- Live in harmony with one another
- Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble
- Do not be wise in your own estimation
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil
- Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone’s eyes
- If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone
- Do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God’s wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.
- If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink
- For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head
- Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good

Romans 12:9-21

For Paul, Christian ethics were holistic. Our faith in Jesus was never intended to stay in just one lane of human existence. Instead, Christ in us impacts every relationship and every priority of life. And it calls us to cast a larger, rather than smaller, net of love for others.

Early in this list in Romans 12, Paul wrote about loving brothers and sisters, but before he finished he mentioned “living at peace with everyone.” And then, he introduced enemies and our responsibility to them.

A Christian worldview, then, understands the scope of Christian responsibility as broad and overarching as creation and as personal as the relationship with the next-door neighbor:

Absolutely everything in life matters to God. He cares not only about the goings-on within the four walls of the congregational gathering, but also about the goings-on in other corners of society and culture. We must live Christianly not only as the Church gathered on Sunday morning for worship, but also as the Church scattered into the world in our work, leisure, and community life.³

How then should Christians relate to the governing authorities and engage in the political process in a way that demonstrates the redeeming love of Jesus and invites our neighbors into his kingdom?

WE VIEW GOVERNMENT AS A NECESSARY GOOD.

God ordains and establishes governments. All nations and governments are temporary, but they are essential for the flourishing of human beings.

The evils of government and politics scroll across our screens every moment, but imagine the absolute chaos of a life without any government at all. We see a taste of it in our homes when mom and dad leave the toddler alone for just a minute. Crackers, toys, and bottles end up scattered across the floor in every corner of the house. There’s crying and all-around discontent. When there is no order, chaos reigns.

Without revelation people run wild, but one who follows divine instruction will be happy.
Proverbs 29:18

³ Ashford, Bruce Riley, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 20.

God establishes government to give every person an opportunity to live freely, according to his or her God-given design and calling.

WE COOPERATE WITH GOVERNMENT FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS.

“Let everyone submit to the governing authorities...” To submit is to place oneself under the authority of another. It is to give up some personal rights for the good of others.

For example, if we are going to share the highway with other drivers, we must observe driving laws. These laws allow us to live well with one another. If I were the only person on the earth, I would self-govern and would likely impose fewer regulations than are required by sharing the planet with 7 billion other people.

So our motivation for submission is not only to honor the Lord who established the government, but to love our neighbors for whom Jesus gave up his rights, privileges, and ultimately his life. For people to work together and for communities to thrive, everyone must submit to the governing authorities.

WE EXPECT GOVERNMENT TO ALLOW EVERYONE TO EXPERIENCE GOD’S GOODNESS.

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.” Romans 13:3-4

The primary role of government is to protect its citizens from harm. In Genesis 9, the Noahic Covenant was established to protect life. Government is “God’s servant for your good.”

If you intend harm, be afraid because God has commissioned government to protect the vulnerable. And governments do so through the establishment of laws, a judicial system to litigate breaches of the law, and even by force when necessary.

Christians care about justice for every single person because every single person is created in the image of God, is loved by God, and is offered the hope of eternal life through the atoning death of Jesus. Therefore, we care about how people are treated, which also means we care about how well the government carries out its responsibility to protect life and exercise justice.

Take away from me the noise of your songs I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream. Amos 5:23-24

Just laws do not save anyone, but they just might allow everyone to live long enough to hear and respond to the Good News of Jesus. Just laws established by government, like sunshine and rain, remind a wounded soul of the love of God. Just laws announce that every human is created by God and has worth, dignity, and purpose.

WE INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT TO DO GOOD.

Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. Romans 13:5-6

We submit for the good of others, but we also yield to the government because our conscience compels us to do what is right on behalf of others.

But even submission to government has limits. When a government endorses or permits grave injustice, or restricts basic human rights, Christians have the responsibility to resist.

Two examples are the three Jewish interns in Babylon resisting Nebuchadnezzar, and Peter and John before the council in Jerusalem:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, "Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to give you an answer to this question. If the God we serve exists, then he can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and he can rescue us from the power of you, the king. But even if he does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up. Daniel 3:16-18

Peter and John answered them, "Whether it's right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Acts 4:19-20

Sometimes we influence the government through our opposition, but many times our best influence is through our obedience, public service, and active engagement in the political process.

Jesus told them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him." Mark 12:17

In the United States, we are a democratic nation governed by the people and for the people. In reality, the citizens are the government. What a blessing and responsibility! Therefore, political engagement is a stewardship of trust that God has given us that enables us to love and serve our neighbors.

CONCLUSION

Faith and politics are not rivals. They are two God-ordained features of the Christian life. And we are called to pursue both for the glory of God.

Honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the emperor. 1 Peter 2:17



WEEK 2

POLITICAL TRIBES AND THE GREAT COMMANDMENT



INTRODUCTION

Tribalism: trib·al·ism | \ 'trī-bə-,li-zəm : (1) consciousness and loyalty; *especially*: exaltation of the tribe above other groups; (2) strong in-group loyalty.⁴

Merriam-Webster records the first use of this word was in 1861, so tribalism has been around for a while. That was the year right after Abraham Lincoln won a four-way race for the U.S. Presidency with less than 40% of the popular vote, and then became our sixteenth President by the skin of his teeth through the Electoral College.

In total, nineteen out of the forty-five United States Presidents have received less than 50% of the popular vote. In addition to Lincoln, this “less than half club” includes Presidents like John Quincy Adams, war hero Zachary Taylor, Grover Cleveland (the only President to win two non-consecutive terms), Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump.

Political divisions are not new to the American experiment. And any constitutional democracy will invite the free flow of diverse ideas. Our Founders valued disagreement and welcomed a strong political discourse. They cemented the freedoms we call civil liberties into the fabric of our nation with the introduction of the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment, which reads:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

The freedoms we enjoy to express our unique perspectives are central to the beauty of our nation. The dark side of this free and public discourse, however, perverts the open exchange of ideas by using it as a weapon to dehumanize those they disagree with. Political differences can quickly lead to personal division and push us into tribes that undermine our ability to engage one another with kindness or civility.

⁴ “Tribalism,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Accessed 17 Apr. 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tribalism>.

How then can we encourage the free expression of ideas without allowing different opinions to divide us? Better yet, how can we build bridges of friendship with those with whom we disagree? If loving our enemy means anything at all, surely Christians are called not only to avoid needless division but to build meaningful relationships with people who hold diverse convictions. So how does a biblical worldview shape the way Christians navigate the current polarized political environment? We will explore these questions in this session.

STARTER QUESTIONS

How do your conversations with people who hold diverse political or social opinions usually go? Is there a free flow of ideas? Are you more reserved or less reserved in your comments? What factors influence your decision to engage in substantive conversations about political or social issues?

CENTRAL TRUTH

Political differences are not new and they are not necessarily unhelpful, but they do reveal the loyalties of our hearts, our attitudes toward people who hold different views, and what we believe is most important in the world. As Christians, we look at every issue through gospel lenses, we demonstrate love for God and for our neighbors, and we unite around Jesus and His Kingdom agenda.

KEY SCRIPTURE

One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which command is the most important of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. 31 The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.” 32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him. 33 And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to question him any longer. Mark 12:28-34

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Mark 11 records Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on the Sunday before Passover. This was the beginning of his last week of earthly ministry before his crucifixion. As he confronted

corruption in the temple and taught about the Kingdom of God in the public square, he faced increasing scrutiny from the religious leaders.

The Jewish sect of Pharisees tried to trap him in an indictable offense against the Roman government, so they asked him a question about paying taxes to Caesar.

Jesus told them, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him. Mark 12:17

Members from another religious sect, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, asked him about marriage in heaven. It wasn’t an honest question, so Jesus called out their ignorance and told them, “You are badly mistaken” (Mark 12:27).

But then in our Key Scripture in Mark 12, we read about a nameless scribe who had an honest question. He was a part of the Jewish religious establishment, but as he watched his peers trying to trap Jesus, he saw through the futility of their plotting. He noticed how Jesus answered them with integrity and handled himself with a striking contrast to their corruption. Although this man was not a disciple of Jesus, he was an honest inquirer. So he asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

That was a question Jesus wanted to answer. We read no hesitation from him. It’s as if he was eager to answer the question of what is absolutely essential for a person committed to Jesus and his kingdom.

To answer the question of what God requires most, Jesus quoted the Bible. Specifically, he referenced Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Beginning with Deuteronomy 6, Jesus quoted what every Jew recited to their children. It was known as the “Shema.” That word means, “Listen up!” and it is how this passage opens:

Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

So the primary thing the Lord requires is our total love. But Jesus did not stop there. He went on to say there is a second commandment that is equal to the first, and he quoted a passage from Leviticus 19,

Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:18

When Jesus was asked what is the most important commandment, he said loving God with all of your heart, soul, and strength and then loving your neighbors as you love yourself. We call this the Great Commandment. Jesus did not say there were no other important commands, but Matthew recorded that Jesus did say, “All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” (Matthew 22:40).

The scribe agreed with him, and actually affirmed that these things were more important than burnt offerings, which were central to Jewish worship practices at the time. Then Mark records,

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Mark 12:34

We do not know who this scribe was, but his attention to the most central requirement of God gave Jesus reason to encourage him. While many of the religious leaders focused their energy on smaller, non-essential, and even corrupt priorities, this nameless scribe had an uncommon interest in the kingdom.

What is the kingdom? According to pastor Robby Gallaty, “The kingdom of heaven is the work of God in the world today through kingdom citizens. It’s not just a realm to enter but also a ruling of God over our present life.”⁵

Although the scribe’s question may appear to be a simple religious one, its implications ripple through every area of the Christian’s public life. Every political issue, for example, originates with questions like, “What does it mean to be human?” “What’s my responsibility to fellow image bearers?” “Who has power and authority, and how does a person get it?” And as we think through every political and social issue, we should also ask ourselves the question, “What is the greatest commandment?”

So in an age of cultural tribalism and political polarization, perhaps our greatest public influence grows as we too focus our attention on Jesus’ kingdom.

⁵ Gallaty, Robby, *Here and Now: Thriving in the Kingdom of Heaven Today* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2019), 18.

TRUTHS FOR LIVING

1. Our focus on the Great Commandment puts personal priorities in perspective.

Someone has said, “When our stomach is full, we have many needs. When our stomach is empty, we have only one need.” In a similar way, when we seek Jesus’ kingdom first, every other priority, even good ones, become secondary in importance.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encouraged his listeners not to worry about food or clothing. Instead, he said,

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. Matthew 6:33

Many of the religious leaders that confronted Jesus during the last week of his life were corrupt power-grabbers. But there were some, maybe even the inquiring scribe of Mark 12, who had an honest interest in political stability, for example. Maybe he cared about the economic impact religious or political instability would have in the region. He understood how difficult Rome could make things for them if the Jewish leaders were unable to maintain order and peace among the Jewish population.

We can empathize with these concerns. These are the kind of issues that are important to all of us. We want more stability rather than less. We prefer more money to less money. Health and safety are better than sickness and danger.

Just as the decisions of political leaders in the first century impacted the lives of the residents of Israel, the decisions modern political leaders and governing authorities make affect us and the people we care about. As a result, our personal interests, needs, and dreams greatly influence our political perspective and affiliations.

God cares about our personal needs. Jesus promised that he would “provide all these things” to sustain us. And God cares about the welfare of our communities.

But is it possible that the political-religious leaders of Jesus’ day missed Jesus because they lost their perspective on “these things” in light of Jesus’ kingdom? Is it possible that legitimate needs turned into illegitimate self-interest? Is it possible for us to miss Jesus and his work in the world by moving our personal interests and natural priorities into first place and Jesus’ kingdom agenda of loving God and loving our neighbors into second?

For example, let’s assume for a moment that you believe the scope of responsibility for the government should be relatively small. So you advocate for limited government, lower taxes, individ-

ual freedoms, and personal responsibility. You do not believe, for example, that working people should be taxed at higher rates to provide entitlements to poorer or more disadvantaged citizens.

Let's also assume that you are an evangelical Christian who believes the role of the local church is to share the gospel, convert the lost, and make disciples of Jesus. You believe that churches lose their way when they give attention to social needs in the community. You contend that the "social gospel," as it's often called, is not the work of the church.

So if it's not the government's responsibility to care for the poor, and it's not the church's responsibility to care for the poor, then who *should* care for the poor?

It's a complicated question. Mere handouts don't work in the long term, but doing nothing means individuals and families suffer in the short-term. Both excessive taxation and excessive entitlements stifle economic growth and lead to other problems, which in turn can limit governments' ability to do what only governments can do. And churches are vulnerable to losing evangelistic zeal if social ministries overtake gospel proclamation. So real solutions to poverty aren't exactly easy to find.

But here's the question for us: "Is our political disposition or our association with a political tribe influenced more by our personal needs or rights or by Jesus' kingdom agenda?"

Or consider the ongoing tragedy of racial justice in America, also a difficult, but important issue for our neighbors. In his book *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race*, John M. Perkins writes,

True repentance requires that we lovingly confront our brothers and sisters concerning racial sins and personal bigotry. And this is the perfect time to put this principle into practice: "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

He continues,

We need to get beyond our ignorance of each other. We need to move beyond the thinking that white privilege means that all whites live a privileged life. This perspective ignores the reality of class in this country.⁶

Perkins contends that to make progress on this issue, we all must lay aside our own priorities for a moment and think of others first.

⁶ Perkins, John M., *One Race: Parting Words to the Church on Race*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 2018), 117.

Sincere Christians will offer various solutions for poverty, race relations, and a host of other societal challenges, but the point is that we humble ourselves, ask the questions, have the conversations, pray for wisdom, and look for ways to realign our priorities with Jesus' kingdom priorities in the public square.

It's not that personal needs are unimportant; they are very important. They are so important that Jesus promised to provide what we need, but they are just not of first importance. Instead, Jesus said to seek his kingdom first—to make his agenda of loving God and loving our neighbor our first order of priority.

When we do that and move Jesus' priorities into the primary position and our priorities into a secondary position, the way we view political parties and the way we engage in the political process will shift as well.

For Discussion

- Because the inquiring scribe agreed with Jesus' focus on the Great Commandment, Jesus said this man wasn't far from the kingdom. Discuss the connection between the Great Commandment (loving God and loving our neighbors) and the kingdom of God (the rule and reign of Jesus).
- How should the Great Commandment influence our public policy priorities and the sacrifices we are personally willing to make in order to love God and love others?
- Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does Jesus' care for the "least of these" inform the way we evaluate public policy priorities?
- How does a focus on the Great Commandment remove personal barriers between us and people of different political tribes?

2. Our focus on the Great Commandment means we pursue Jesus' rule in every segment of the community.

As important as our personal needs and interests are, Jesus said they are secondary. Jesus moved the Great Commandment into first place. Everything flows from our love for God and for others.

While we may be tempted to separate out public square issues as secular matters and personal interest issues as more spiritual ones, Jesus did not do that.

Instead, when he answered the scribe's question, he used language that was much more encompassing. He used the word, "all." He described every aspect of our nature (e.g. heart, soul, and mind). He said, "All of the Law and Prophets depend on these two commands"(Matthew 22:40).

Jesus placed no limit on how and to what extent his kingdom priority would impact our lives and our influence in the larger community.

Bruce Ashford writes, “Absolutely everything in life matters to God. He cares not only about the goings-on within the four walls of the congregational gathering, but also about the goings-on in other corners of society and culture.”⁷

If everything matters to God, then applying his kingdom priority of loving him and loving others in every sphere of life must matter to us. So every political issue, every platform in every political party, every public policy initiative, and every political rally, therefore, exists under the reign of King Jesus.

So let’s consider how the everyday Christian pursues Jesus’ kingdom in the public square:

First, honoring the Great Commandment by loving God begins in our own hearts when we are reconciled to God by trusting Jesus as Lord. Our primary expression of loving God is placing personal faith in his Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. In his life, death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus was our substitute and paid the penalty for our sin. So in Jesus, we are brought near to God in a personal, eternal, and secure relationship.

The second commandment to love others originates with our love relationship with God. Notice how the apostle Paul described this:

Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:8-10

Our public influence, and thus our political perspective, flows from our personal relationship with God. Our sincere love for God produces sacrificial love for our neighbors, which breaks down barriers and builds bridges for meaningful friendships, even with those who oppose us. When Jesus said to love our neighbors as ourselves, he knew some of those neighbors would be our political enemies.

In political conversation, you will sometimes notice a contrast drawn between the ideologue and the pragmatist. The ideologue, on the one hand, builds her political priorities on ideas—often lofty

⁷ Ashford, Bruce, *Every Square Inch* (Lexham Press: Bellingham, WA, 2015), 20

ideas of the way things should be. She is willing to pursue the grand end goal even if it means expending her current reservoir of influence. The ideologue's motto is: "All or nothing."

The pragmatist, on the other hand, is often seen as a political opportunist who is willing to compromise his core convictions for short-term gains. He sees calculated compromise as a necessary part of moving toward the greater goal. The pragmatist's motto is: "Let's live to fight another day."

Interestingly enough, both the ideologue and the pragmatist often share a common interest in achieving lasting change, they just choose different paths toward that goal. And both are equally capable of foolishness and virtue.

All worldviews and political ideas are not the same. Differences are real, and those differences have tangible consequences. A Christian worldview confronts a secular one on many levels. Not everyone who appears to be an enemy, however, is an enemy for life, and not everyone who appears to be a friend is a friend for life. But Jesus' Great Commandment calls his followers to love our enemies as if they are our future friends.

Third, love is not just a warm sentiment. It is sacrificial action on behalf of and for the good of another. So the Great Commandment demands from us good work that requires sacrifice on behalf of others in the public square.

Jesus' ministry to others was carried out in the open courtyards, in the public streets, and on hillsides in the open air. He healed and helped all kinds of people in all kinds of environments. The way Jesus loved others set the bar for courage and civility. If Jesus had only preached the gospel from a pulpit or from a street corner, he would never have been crucified. But it was the way he loved others that invited outrage from the religious establishment that ultimately cost him his life.

His willingness to serve the outcast, to touch the unclean, and to dine with the despised infuriated those who expected him to limit his ministry to the synagogue, temple, or religious community. But Jesus defied all boundaries in his ministry to others.

We will take a closer look at the prophet Daniel in a future session, but for now it's worth noting how Daniel's faithful, loving ministry to wicked kings served the practical needs of the king and the people. He was a pragmatic ideologue, never losing hope in the coming kingdom; but he served a godless ruler in the only way he knew how in the situation in which the Lord had placed him.

There is no domain of life, no geographic location, and no public or private environment where Jesus' kingdom priority should not motivate us to seek the good of our neighbors—whoever they are and however they vote.

For Discussion

- Why do we often tend to create distinctions between secular and sacred? How does that false distinction affect the way we engage in the political process?
- If our love for others flows from our love relationship with God, how can we build meaningful relationships with people who hold different political perspectives than we do?
- How does our priority on the kingdom of God motivate us to love our enemies?
- Share meaningful ways you can demonstrate love for your political rivals during the upcoming election cycle.
- Why does Jesus' kingdom agenda of loving God and loving others move us to serve the common good in every segment of our community, among every political tribe?

3. Our focus on the Great Commandment provides an opportunity for sincere inquirers to come closer.

We do not know the name of the inquiring scribe, but maybe one day we will. Jesus and this scribe were both Jews. They were both subjects of the Roman Empire. The color of their skin was the same. Their cultural and religious pedigrees were very similar. But they were not of the same tribe.

The scribe was part of a socio-political religious system that longed for earthly, political dominance. Jesus cared about governing systems and authorities in relation to how they cared for people, but Jesus' kingdom was not of this world.

As different as these two perspectives were, Jesus was not put off or threatened by the scribe's political affiliations or motivations. Instead, Jesus made room for this scribe from another tribe. He listened. He answered the scribe's question with candor. And he even shared a word of encouragement: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

This scribe was close, but he was not actually in the kingdom. Interestingly, at least one significant barrier to the kingdom for this scribe seemed to be his socio-political-religious presuppositions. His tribe encouraged a type of religious devotion that did not lead to the kingdom of God.

There is no political or religious tribe that will reconcile us to God. It's nothing short of idolatry to assume that belonging to a certain political party, for example, puts us on the Lord's side. In a representative government, political platforms move governments one way or the other. So politics matters and political parties obviously matter. But for all the good that a political party can do, it can never bring a person into the kingdom of God.

That's where you step in. That's when the Christian speaks up. That's when you reach out and engage the person from another tribe in a sincere conversation about things that are ultimate, things that are eternal. There is no actual cure for political tribalism, but when Christians enter the public square, we enter as gospel missionaries inviting everyone from every tribe to move from outside of the kingdom into the kingdom of God, no matter how far away they appear to be.

For Discussion

- Use five adjectives to describe how Jesus related to this unnamed scribe. How did the way Jesus related to this scribe compare or contrast to the way many of us often relate to people who are both outside of our tribe and outside of the kingdom?
- With so many issues at stake, including Jesus' pending rejection and crucifixion, what is Jesus' primary interest for this scribe? What does Jesus' focus on the kingdom tell us about the way he felt about this scribe?
- How can the way you engage in politics this election season encourage people who think and believe differently than you do to take their next step toward Jesus?

CONCLUSION

As we evaluate the virtue of our particular political tribe, it's easy to assume that we are right and everyone else is wrong. It's tempting to believe God is on our side. In the context of this question in his book, *The Divided States of America*, Richard Land asks this question about Germany just prior to the Second World War:

“Germany was arguably the most scientifically, culturally, educationally, and medically advanced society in the world in the 1930's, and yet it succumbed to the idolatry of an evil, twisted nationalism known as Nazism. How could this have happened?”⁸

Land answered his own question in part by laying the responsibility at the feet of the German church. Referring to the work of Robert P. Ericksen, Land contends the “German church's fatal flaw was its failure to distinguish adequately between Christian values and German values, between inherently Christian concerns and inherently patriotic concerns.”⁹

⁸ Land, Richard, *The Divided States of America* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 46.

⁹ Ibid, 48.

As President Lincoln famously said,

Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.

What is the greatest commandment? Jesus said to love God and to love your neighbor.



WEEK 2 SERMON

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

**THE UNCOMMON ORIGINS
OF COURAGE AND CIVILITY**

Matthew 5:43-48



*T*he public discourse may be as angry as ever, but incivility in personal relationships and between diverse groups of people is not new. Jesus' ministry context was at the crossroads of social, political, and religious division. Religious elitism, ethnic bigotry, political tribalism, and social discrimination marked public life in Israel in the first century. People segregated themselves. Even among religious people in the Jewish community, sects formed that created division among the most devoted God-fearers. Social outcasts were also common.

So right in the middle of the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called for an uncommon brand of love that invites people who we might prefer to ignore, marginalize, or reject to come closer. In this contentious political environment, Jesus' words have pointed application for Christians as we engage in the public square.

SCRIPTURE

You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43-48

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES WHEN IT FEELS UNNATURAL.

Jesus challenged the common notion of loving your neighbor while hating your enemy. "Love your neighbor" is found in Leviticus 19:18. But you will not find "hate your enemy" anywhere in the Bible. It seems to be a natural corollary to "love your neighbor," but it's just not a biblical one. So Jesus used the familiar formula, "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you" to contrast conventional wisdom with godly wisdom, what feels normal according to the flesh with what is produced by the Spirit of God in the life of a believer.

This unnatural love produces a distinctive brand of civility and kindness toward those who oppose you, hurt you, or offend you in some way. In doing so, it also requires an equally distinctive brand of courage. Jesus modeled this courage as he healed the demoniac, yet was rejected by the residents of the city. His kindness cost him, but it transformed the life of the former demoniac who then became a gospel evangelist to the ten-city region he called home. (See Mark 5)

Sometimes showing kindness to the outcast makes us one as well. Sometimes loving our enemies makes a few more enemies than before.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES WHEN THEY ARE ALL AROUND YOU.

In the first part of this statement, Jesus used the singular “neighbor” and “enemy,” but when he said, “love your enemies,” he used the plural form of the noun. Persecution and opposition are not unique experiences for the Christian. Every human being is created in the image of God, and worthy of honor and respect; but every image bearer is also marred by sin. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

If you only love the people who love you, people who are easy to love, or people who agree with you, you will have very few people to love. But loving your enemies, showing kindness and respect to your opponents, opens up the opportunity for gospel influence and kingdom impact to many people who are not only far from you, but far from God.

Wouldn't it be nice if politics were as simple as Democrat or Republican? But politics is much more nuanced than that. The issues are complex, and we can find enemies on many fronts. But Jesus said, “Love them all.” He didn't say agree with them all. He didn't say minimize the issues of disagreement. He didn't say fight them. And he didn't say stay away from them. Jesus commanded you and me to love them all.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES WHEN IT COSTS YOU SOMETHING.

There are different kinds of love. There's brotherly love, there's erotic or romantic love, and then there is the love Jesus describes here: sacrificial love. Sacrificial love is gracious—an expression of God's love for us, which is generous, and generosity always costs something of the giver. “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only son . . .” (John 3:16).

Loving your enemy requires you to give up personal privileges and set aside personal rights in order to demonstrate God's grace to someone who does not deserve it or may not appreciate it. This is the essence of courageous Christianity—trusting God as we give away our personal rights

for the benefit of others. Practicing your faith in public calls for this kind of courage. It's dangerous. It's costly. But it's also a powerful witness to the redeeming work of Christ.

In the public square, you simply will not get everything you want. Loving others guarantees you will lose some battles. It will often cost you a piece of your soul. But even a costly effort motivated by Christ-like love isn't a total loss. It often moves the needle just enough today to build a bridge for progress tomorrow.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES WHEN YOU PRAY.

Jesus said to pray for those who persecute you. Perhaps there is no greater way of loving another person, whoever they are, than to intercede before God on their behalf.

“This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.” –Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁰

While in agony from the cross, Jesus prayed for those who nailed him there, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In his darkest moment, Jesus prayed for those responsible for his pain. He prayed for their reconciliation with God, which his own death made possible.

Loving your enemies is not simply a positive attitude or a fresh resolve to be nicer. It is not simply looking the other way. It is you joining the redeeming, reconciling work of God on behalf of another human being. As an ambassador for Christ, you are pleading “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

So fighting for political outcomes without the ultimate goal of winning souls is not civil or courageous at all. We know what political fights look like, but do we know what wrestling with God in prayer, fighting for the soul of our political rival is like? Do we know what it is, as Bonhoeffer said, “to stand by the side of our enemy and plead to God for him”?

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES BECAUSE YOU NEED HOPE AS MUCH AS YOUR ENEMY DOES.

Jesus asked what reward there is in loving people who love you. If you only “greet” or speak life to your brothers, you're just doing what is ordinary, typical, or expected. Even the tax collectors (political traitors), and even the godless Gentiles do that, Jesus said. And then he said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 166.

Loving other people can turn into a cover for something less sacrificial and more selfish. So we often try to love and serve our enemies like a prison guard serves food to an inmate—by sliding a tray of food through a small window in the door. You're close, but not too close. You're helpful, but not too helpful. Politics can in the same way turn us inward, leading us to isolate as we protect ourselves from losses.

Jesus said there is no reward in that. Anyone can express a form of love from a distance, doing the very least necessary to fulfill the obligations of service. But Christian engagement in the public square is different. It is bold, uncommon, generous, winsome, and risky. It is not naïve, and it's not ambiguous about what is in the best interest of the public, but it refuses to sacrifice personal character on the altar of conquering another person.

The reward of loving your enemies is not just the hope of winning them over, but in the perfecting work of God in your own life. Loving your enemies is as good for you as it is for your enemies.

CONCLUSION

Politics is a high-stakes enterprise. The lives and livelihood of people are often in the balance, and you may feel that your political position or your candidate gives other people the best opportunity for a better future. That means you will oppose the position of your political enemy, but it doesn't mean you must reject your enemy.

The Bible says all of us were at one time enemies of God. Yet rather than rejecting us, he loved us and in loving us dealt with the problem of our sin.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Romans 5:6-10

Before we came around to love God, God loved us and Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among a people who would ultimately crucify him. His love for us, his courage and civility, motivates our love for our fiercest rival. "We love because He first loved us." 1 John 4:19



WEEK 3

COURAGE, CIVILITY, AND THE PUBLIC CHRISTIAN



INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, a virus known as COVID-19 hit the shores of the United States. In a matter of weeks, government officials, scientists, the healthcare community, and leaders in commerce rallied together to put protocols in place designed to protect the American people from this serious and sometimes deadly virus. One of those protocols was a quarantine, which required individuals and families to isolate in their own homes in order to remain safe from the virus and to prevent its spread.

The threat of danger naturally leads us toward isolation in order to protect ourselves from that danger. Just as we isolated ourselves during the COVID-19 crisis, Americans have increasingly isolated ourselves from what has become an uncivil environment for political discourse.

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention in cooperation with the Fetzer Institute and LifeWay Research conducted a study in 2019 on the issue of civility in the public square. The conclusions were compiled in a report by Paul D. Miller called *Faith and Healthy Democracy*.

In one section of that report, Miller recounts asking nearly 50 evangelical leaders how they would describe the current political discourse:

“Tellingly, the single most common adjective our interviewees used was ‘toxic’: something that is actively poisonous and unhealthy even to be near.”¹¹

As if it were a deadly virus, we often avoid political discourse. But could Christian disengagement from the public square be more harmful than we think?

STARTER QUESTIONS

- In addition to “toxic,” what adjectives would you use to describe the current political discourse?
- How does the current divisiveness in political conversation affect the way you personally participate in public conversation about important issues?

¹¹ Miller, Paul D, *Faith and Healthy Democracy*, (Nashville, TN: Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, 2019), 8.

CENTRAL TRUTH

Even in a politically contentious environment, Christians can engage in the public square with both courage and civility that effectively helps people from different backgrounds and worldviews understand the ways of God, experience the common goodness of God, and respond in faith to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

KEY SCRIPTURE

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?” Others replied, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities”—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? 20 Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new. Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 23 For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. 26 From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. 27 He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ 29 Since, then, we are God’s offspring, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. 30 “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” 32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” 33 So Paul left their

presence. 34 However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. Acts 17:16-34

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The apostle Paul was a committed missionary and church planter. So on his second missionary journey, he stopped in Athens. Athens was a city rich with culture, but it was also a city known for its idols. Buildings and courtyards were dedicated to gods of various kinds. As Paul observed the spiritual lostness of the city he was “deeply distressed,” which is better translated, “angry or provoked.” (See Acts 17:16-21)

Paul was not a passive observer. Instead, he was an active student of the city, learning all he could as he walked around and noticed what was important to the people who lived there. He was also genuinely grieved over the spiritual and moral climate of the city, so he engaged both in the synagogue with God-fearing Jews on the Sabbath and every day in the public square with the philosophers—the thought leaders of Athens.

It’s likely these philosophers were among the city fathers who held authority or influence over those who did. Epicureans were disciples of Epicurus (341-270 BC) and they were “thoroughgoing materialists, believing that everything came from atoms or particles of matter. There was no life beyond this.”¹²

On the other end of the philosophical spectrum were the Stoics. They were pantheists, believing in all kinds of gods and that those gods fill all of nature, including the affairs of human beings. They relied on reason and championed self-reliance.

As different as the Epicureans and Stoics were, they not only contributed to the spiritual lostness and moral brokenness of the city, but were unified in their suspicion and criticism of Paul and his beliefs. Yet they were intrigued enough to invite Paul to the Areopagus, which was an official courtyard where substantive issues were discussed and debated. Paul was not on trial as if defending formal, legal charges. But he was given the opportunity to speak in a way that compared and contrasted the widely held beliefs of the community with a Christian worldview.

He knew his audience and respected them, but he also spoke with courage that called them to reconsider their core convictions and turn their hearts to Jesus. In this session, we will consider how Christians publically engage when dealing with issues that are not only political, but deeply personal.

¹² Polhill, J. B., *Acts* (Vol. 26) (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 365-366.

TRUTHS FOR LIVING

The Courageous and Civil Christian Listens to Understand

Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 23 For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. Acts 17:22-23

Paul noticed what was going on in the city; he was a student of the city who respected and cared for the people. Paul showed deference to the community; he walked slow enough to pay attention, to observe, and even to discover things that some Athenians may not have known about themselves. James wrote,

My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. James 1:19

We often get this backwards, particularly when it comes to religion and politics. When we are quick to anger and slow to listen, we often fail to understand and appreciate the people we are trying to engage. We want to be heard, but are less interested in listening.

Consider these observations recorded in Paul Miller’s report:

“We are not good listeners,” as Danny Akin, president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, “we are really good at...talking at people, but we are not very good at listening to people.” Cherie Harder, president of the Trinity Forum, said public discourse is a contest between “verbal gladiators.” We talk past when we talk in the presence of someone else but without aiming at their understanding or persuasion, and without any intention of reciprocal listening.¹³

The words “Verbal gladiator” form a powerful word-picture. A gladiator was a person who killed for the sport of it. To be a “verbal gladiator” is to use words in a way that harms people rather than

¹³ Miller, *Faith and Healthy Democracy*, 15.

helps them. When we are quick to anger and quick to speak, we fail to show respect, and we miss the mark of pursuing the good of other people.

That is quite a contrast to the way Paul engaged the people of Athens. Instead of using words as his primary weapon, Paul first used his ears to listen and his eyes to observe.

Listening to understand does not remove differences or create uniform agreement of views, but it does create an opportunity to clearly understand the disagreement.

For Discussion

- When it comes to religion and politics, why are we often quicker to speak than to listen? How does that tendency undermine our relationships with others and compromise the results we hope for?
- Paul spent some time in the city before attempting to engage the city. Why is it important that we are students of the people around us and show genuine interest in the communities in which we live?
- Some political viewpoints are distinctly unbiblical and inconsistent with a Christian worldview, but that's not always clear to the people holding those views. How important is it to understand the basis for a person's political perspectives before speaking up against them?
- What are practical ways you can actively listen to people who share a different belief system, lifestyle, or political viewpoint?

The Courageous and Civil Christian Confronts Others to Promote Jesus

Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. Acts 17:23-24

Both the Epicureans and the Stoics had misguided views about God and creation, and those errant views had social implications that impacted the entire city and the welfare of its residents. But those views did not surprise or offend Paul. Instead, he understood the nature of humankind. He understood how sin has corrupted all of us, and he cared for the people of the city enough to begin his comments with their perspective in mind.

There is a concept that theologians and philosophers call “natural law,” which, among other things, contends that God created a moral law that applies to everyone of all times and cultures.

It is evident in the creation, and at some level, we are all aware of it. For example, to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote,

For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. Romans 1:20

Similarly, Paul could see that the people of Athens were religious people. He observed a social and religious structure built around their view toward divine beings. These misguided religious views that informed the unhealthy social climate in the city, however, were not simply fodder for criticism. Instead, their “ignorance” served as the basis from which Paul began to point them to the one true God.

Rather than simply criticizing or attacking the Athenians, Paul engaged their errant beliefs with a greater goal in mind. He was not content to win an argument. He hoped to win people over to a different way of thinking, believing, and living.

So Paul’s comments did not dismiss their views out of hand. Instead, he connected the natural order of creation to the personal work of Jesus Christ. His public discourse gave people who were far from God the opportunity to thoughtfully consider the implications that the Lord God is the only true God and that he has provided for our redemption in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Public policy issues are serious and should be debated vigorously, but all of them find their origin in questions like: “Is there a God?” “If there is a God what difference does he/she/it make in my life?” “What does it mean to be human?” and “What’s my responsibility to other humans?”

So as courageous and civil Christians we learn to dialogue with people who hold opposing views, not as opponents with whom we have nothing in common but rather as fellow image bearers who observe order in creation and are searching to make sense of it all.

In the *Faith and Healthy Democracy* report, one point of interest is that holding to a thoroughly biblical worldview, as Paul certainly did, leads Christians to be more civil and thus more effective witnesses in the public square:

Encouragingly, the LifeWay index found that higher levels of agreement with the statement, “Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty

of my sin,” is associated with greater civility, suggesting that theological orthodoxy does help Christians’ public witness.¹⁴

Courageous and civil Christians then, publicly discuss important political issues in a way that explains and affirms the nature of God and his work in the created order. We may not share the Gospel in every political conversation, but every hot-button political debate gives us an opportunity to give other people a more accurate picture of the nature of God, the nature of man, and the redeeming hope found in Jesus.

For Discussion

- As disturbed as Paul was over the condition of the city, the gospel was his primary motivation in confronting the city leaders. How should the “big picture” of God’s redeeming purpose inform how we speak to political opponents about current political issues?
- How should a biblical worldview frame our convictions regarding public policy issues?
- How can “natural law” serve as a bridge to meaningful gospel conversations?

The Courageous and Civil Christian Teaches to Move Hearts and Minds

From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also his offspring.’ Since, then, we are God’s offspring, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. Acts 17:26-29

If we desire more influence in the public square, Christians must become teachers who educate our opponents rather than rivals who dominate them.

Paul deliberately explained what God had done from creation to the present day, and he tied the current situation in Athens to the eternal work of God. He made it personal and relevant to all of his hearers by reminding them that God created them.

¹⁴ Miller, *Faith and Healthy Democracy*, 10.

Even without using the term, *imago Dei*, he appealed to this core tenet of the faith that every human is stamped with the image of God and is worthy of respect. He was passionate, but not angry or over the top. He chose his words well so that thoughtful people might be curious enough to ask more questions.

Instead of preaching or heralding the gospel as we would expect in a local church setting, Paul understood his particular situation in the public square and “reasoned” with people both in the synagogue and at the Areopagus in a way the Lord could use to move hearts and minds.

No one is persuaded to a new way of thinking by argumentative, sarcastic, or condescending speech. We may win the “verbal gladiator” duel like that, but strongly held beliefs, as wayward as they may be, are loosened through prayerful, reasoned, and courageous conversation. The power of our words is not in their volume or venom, but in the veracity of the gospel demonstrated by our love for others.

For Discussion

- Describe how you respond when someone criticizes your personal convictions or opinions? How does their tone of voice and choice of words influence your decision to listen and respond? How should this influence the way we speak to others about their beliefs?
- If it’s true that we earn the opportunity to influence others through respectful and thoughtful reasoning, what kind of preparation does that require of us?
- In the book of Colossians, we read,

Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.
Colossians 4:5-6

For the Christian, gracious speech and effective speech are tied together. What is the significance of this for the modern Christian who engages “outsiders” over strongly held social and political issues?

The Courageous and Civil Christian Invites Everyone into the Conversation

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” So Paul left their presence. How-

ever, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. Acts 17:32-34

Paul took this moment in the public square to talk about the person and work of Jesus. It was clearly a gospel-centered message that concluded with the resurrection of Jesus and invited criticisms, no doubt, from the Epicureans who did not believe in life after death.

Paul, however, did not shy away from controversial issues. The gospel is exclusive. Jesus is the only way to God, but he is the only way for *everyone*. So as Paul made his case, as controversial as he knew it would be, he was careful to remove every unnecessary barrier and invite everyone to consider his claims.

Diverse philosophical viewpoints, political perspectives, or religious beliefs did not discourage Paul or put him in a defensive posture. Instead, he welcomed everyone into the conversation. Some ridiculed him, others wanted to hear more, and then “some people joined him and believed.”

It’s interesting that Paul was intentional to engage people that he knew would disagree with him, but in doing so, he won some over. Could it be that we struggle to make progress in the public square because we hesitate to invite everyone, including our opponents, into the conversation?

There is nothing more personal and important to a believer than the gospel of Jesus Christ, yet Paul did not allow his personal convictions to isolate him from people who did not hold those same convictions. When we engage people with various viewpoints in significant dialogue we make more progress than we would by staying behind our religious or political walls. Also, the gospel gets more of a hearing, and more people than ever before take new steps toward Jesus.

For Discussion

- Why do we hesitate to discuss personal, even controversial, issues with people who may disagree with us?
- How have you intentionally built friendships with people who hold diverse beliefs or who have made different lifestyle choices than you? Discuss ways you can begin to invite people from various backgrounds and belief perspectives into your life during this contentious political season.
- Although there were many needs in the city of Athens, Paul circled back to the spiritual welfare of the city. How can our focus on the ultimate, spiritual needs of our neighbors influence how we discuss other important social and political issues?

CONCLUSION

The apostle Paul was not a politician, but he found himself in a public setting speaking to politicians about the welfare of their city from his perspective as a Christian. In essence, Paul served as a public theologian in Athens.

In the same way, God has given each of us a unique platform for public engagement. As Christians, we are all public theologians who serve in various domains in our community (e.g. business, education, healthcare, communications & technology, arts & entertainment, government, agriculture, or nonprofit sectors).

Identify the domain you are most often engaged in, and then identify a political issue that most directly impacts that domain. How should a biblical worldview shape your political perspective on that issue? How can this issue bring to light the nature of God and his redeeming work in Jesus? How can you engage others about this issue with civility and courage?



WEEK 3 SERMON

OUR NEIGHBORS' GOOD, JESUS' KINGDOM, AND GOD'S GLORY

**THE GOAL OF COURAGE AND
CIVILITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE**

Jeremiah 29:4-7



INTRODUCTION

The tone on social media, in the news, and in the public square in general is really harsh and often negative. It seems when we're backed into a corner or in a situation we would not choose, we feel intimidated. When we feel overlooked, we want to be heard. When someone else asserts control over us, we feel insecure. Fear takes over. We bow up and start fighting our way out. It looks like bravery. Many people will call us strong, and maybe that's true. But we learn from the prophet Jeremiah that when we engage in social, community, or even political issues, courage isn't necessarily loud, and civility isn't toothless at all. In fact, Christians have much good to do and the power to do it.

BACKGROUND

Under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon became the superpower of the day. After several years of war against Judah (the Southern Kingdom), Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586 BC. There had already been one Jewish deportation eleven years earlier, but the significant one came when Jerusalem fell. The exiles, those Nebuchadnezzar deported from Jerusalem, were people of religious, financial, and political influence. They were upset about their situation, so they began listening to the false prophets who were promising a quick return home. Jeremiah, who was still in Jerusalem, wrote to them to remind them they weren't coming home soon. It would be 70 years before the God who deported them would allow them to return. Seventy years is a lifetime. Many of the exiles would never see Jerusalem again. Babylon wasn't their hometown, but it was their home now.

We also know from reading the prophets Amos and Hosea, that Israel and Judah were conquered and then deported into exile because of their moral and spiritual disobedience. The prophets warned them, calling them to repent, but their hearts were hard, so God disciplined them by allowing their enemies to defeat them and deport them. Living under a foreign ruler on foreign soil became fertile ground for God's sanctifying work in their lives.

If providence remove us to some other country, we must resolve to live easy there, to bring our mind to our condition when our condition is not in every thing to our mind. If the *earth*

be the Lord's, then, wherever a child of God goes, he does not go off his Father's ground.—

Matthew Henry¹⁵

One final note, when God deported His people to Babylon, he did not isolate them in concentration camps or private communities. He put them in established cities. They lived in the city of Nippur, some in Susa, others in cities along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They were surrounded by people who spoke a different language, embraced different values, and worshipped false deities.

APPROACH TO THE TEXT

Jeremiah wrote this letter recorded in chapter 29 to a specific group of people at a specific time for a specific purpose. In our case, we are not in exile, but we are “foreigners and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11). We aren’t waiting to return to Jerusalem, but we are waiting for a new Jerusalem. We may not live in our hometown, but this is our home now. So when we consider how to apply these words Jeremiah wrote to the exiles, we take the long view, in light of the Lordship of Jesus and his view of the Kingdom.

In his book¹⁶, *The Kingdom Focused Church*, Gene Mims notes that Jesus mentioned the “church” only twice in the Gospels, but he referred to the kingdom nearly ninety times.

After John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! Mark 1:14-15

We may think of the Kingdom of God as a faraway idea or place or future event, but the Kingdom is near and now. The Kingdom is Jesus’ rule in the lives of his people, so the priority of the church and our motivation to engage in the public square are to join Jesus’ Kingdom activity in the world to redeem the world and prepare for his coming.

Just as God’s people were put in cities throughout Babylon, God has placed you and me in this community with the same expectation of advancing his Kingdom. So in light of the social, ethnic, religious, and political challenges how do Christians advance Jesus’ kingdom here and now?

¹⁵ Henry, M, *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1284.

¹⁶ Mims, Gene, *The Kingdom Focused Church: A Compelling Image for an Achievable Future for Your Church*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2003), 42.

When the political climate is so divisive, what is the real win for Christians in the public square? If we are to represent Jesus with courage and civility, what is the goal and how do we get there?

THE SCRIPTURE

This is what the Lord of Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the exiles I deported from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 “Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Find wives for yourselves, and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters to men in marriage so that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there; do not decrease. 7 Pursue the well being of the city I have deported you to. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive.” Jeremiah 29:4-7

We see three major priorities for believers serving in the public square in a way that advances Jesus’ kingdom:

PLANT YOUR LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

Just because this isn’t your home doesn’t mean it isn’t important. God loves your city, and he has blessed you so that you can bless your community and ultimately all the nations of the world. So rather than living as transients waiting on the next bus out of town, Jeremiah told the exiles to build houses. Live in them. Plant gardens. Eat from them. Find a spouse. Have children.

Is your investment in this city conditioned on your neighbors following Jesus with you, attending your church, or even agreeing with you on social issues? Not at all. Will your neighbors ever worship your God? We hope so, but only God knows. Will their priorities be the same as yours? Will they agree with your politics? Not necessarily. Jesus loved and served many people who did not follow him.

This is where courage is required. Rather than fighting from a place of fear or frustration as if being dominated by an enemy, we engage our neighbors with love. That means retreating behind your privacy fence, isolating with your religious friends, segregating into your political tribe, only to ignore your neighbors, or worse yet, throw rocks at them for their wayward views or lifestyle, will not serve anyone or advance Jesus’ kingdom agenda.

Planting your life in this community, on the other hand, means you settle down, grow roots, and become an active part of public life. You build relationships with your neighbors, you engage in commerce, join the HOA, volunteer at the Senior Center, run for office, and pay taxes. And you even advocate for social issues that affect the everyday life of your neighbors.

PURSUE PEACE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY.

Some translations say, “seek the welfare of the city.” It’s the idea of a courageous, aggressive pursuit of “shalom.” The word “shalom” means completeness, safety, or peace. God cares about every aspect of our community. He cares about families. He cares about the safety of children. He desires for the marginalized to flourish. He cares that our neighbors experience his goodness, and ultimately his redeeming grace.

So if you and I are to join Jesus’ kingdom work, we too will care about the people God cares about. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. When you walk into a business to make a purchase, when you go to work, when you campaign for a candidate, when you are that candidate, your motive is to serve, not be served.

Christians are by nature public servants who seek the welfare of the city. Sacrificial service is the power of public civility. Kindness and genuine care for other people change hearts and impact the way people live.

In Matthew 25, Jesus personally identified with the needs of the naked, hungry, and imprisoned. In doing so, he demonstrates to us that the way we care for the least of these is a mark of our devotion to him. Seeking the welfare of the city and serving the good of our neighbors, then, is a way of life for the follower of Jesus.

PRAY FOR YOUR COMMUNITY.

Every great work of God is empowered by prayer. Even in Babylon, God’s people were called to pray for their neighbors, their rulers, and for one another. The temple laid in ruins back in Jerusalem, but God could still hear the prayers of His people. God hears you too, wherever you are.

The apostle Paul called Timothy to this public ministry of private prayer as well:

First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

We do our neighbors a disservice when we advocate for them, speak up for them, and serve them while neglecting the privilege of praying for them. The welfare and peace of the community rest on our making prayer our primary act of service.

- Pray for leaders and those who are in authority.
- Pray for teachers and school administrators.
- Pray for first responders.
- Pray for the people with whom you do business.
- Pray for your neighbors by name.
- Pray for your future neighbors.

When you pray, pray for the salvation of souls, pray for the success of the city, and pray for the kingdom of Jesus to advance in every vulnerable place in your community.

Prayer means you are never backed into a corner. It means you are never overpowered or under-resourced. It means as you serve in the public square, you don't have to fight with worldly weapons. It means you can serve your neighbor and your community with courage and civility in the face of even the toughest challenges. God is willing and able to respond to your prayers and to show favor to your community.

The greatest act of public service is prayer.

CONCLUSION

Whenever an empire would deport the citizens of a conquered nation, it would not deport everyone. Instead, it only took the wealthy, the powerful, and the educated. The working class people, for the most part, would be left behind. Then the conquering empire would resettle the land with people from other vassals. When Assyria resettled Israel in the 700's BC, many of the remaining Israelites adopted foreign practices, false religions, and intermarried with people who were not faithful to God. That's how the term "Samaritan" became known as a term of derision. These Samaritan Israelites were seen as traitors and half-breeds. Later, however, as Jesus was answering the question, "Who is my neighbor," it was the Samaritan that he celebrated for his compassion.

It takes courage to love neighbors who may not love you in return. It takes civility to view other people with dignity and worth and to put their interests ahead of your own. God's call on our lives is "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). He has placed us here so that through our acts of justice, mercy, and humility, our neighbors would see a picture of a coming Kingdom, a "city whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).



WEEK 4

THE GOSPEL, THE KINGDOM, AND THE PUBLIC GOOD OF CHRISTIANS



INTRODUCTION

Reading the headlines or clicking on the latest bad news stories can lead to one of two conclusions: (1) If everyone would just do their part, society would be rescued from this chaos and things would get better, or (2) This world is just going to burn up one day anyway, so let's just get out of the way, protect ourselves, and hang on until Jesus returns.

We may even vacillate between one perspective and the other depending on what kind of mood we are in or how personally we are affected by those bad news stories. The tension, however, is real. Christians don't always know how to make sense of the world. We believe and share a message of hope, and we pray that Jesus' kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven, but the brokenness around us looks more like a salvage yard than streets of gold.

One of the first recorded moments in Jesus' ministry is found in Luke 4:

He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. He began by saying to them, "Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled." They were all speaking well of him and were amazed by the gracious words that came from his mouth; yet they said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" Luke 4:16-22

Jesus announced that he had come to preach good news to captives, the blind, and the oppressed, and to proclaim the "year of the Lord's favor." This was it! Finally, a ruler was coming to set the people of Israel free from Roman oppression and usher in a superpower government of all governments!

And then Jesus made a statement no one saw coming. He said that all of the expectations of a

new kingdom were fulfilled in him. Those listening really didn't know what to do with that. Later in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees asked him when the kingdom would come,

He answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with something observable; no one will say, 'See here!' or 'There!' For you see, the kingdom of God is in your midst."
Luke 17:20-21

We can conclude that Jesus is the rightful and reigning king of his kingdom, but obviously his kingdom is not fully realized. Sin is still on the move. Creation still groans. In a very real sense, Jesus' kingdom is "already, but not yet."

So what do we do until then? How do we live in this "in-between" time?

In his book *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel*, Russell Moore provides helpful insight:

The natural world around us isn't just a temporary "environment," but part of our future inheritance in Christ. Our jobs—whether preaching the gospel or loading docks or picking avocados or writing legislation or herding goats—aren't accidental. Our lives are shaping us and preparing us for a future rule, and that includes the honing of a conscience and a sense of wisdom and prudence and justice . . . Our lives are *an internship for the eschaton*. (emphasis mine)¹⁷

Eschaton is a word describing the end times. If there is anyone who demonstrated how to live in the present moment for the future kingdom it was the prophet Daniel. He was literally *an intern for the eschaton*. As he served well in the public court of a pagan kingdom, he pointed to a greater, eternal kingdom to come. He lived for the glory of God in the "in-between."

STARTER QUESTION

As you hear or read daily news reports, are you generally optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the United States? Are you more motivated or less motivated to get involved in political action?

¹⁷ Moore, Russell, D, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2015), 53.

CENTRAL TRUTH

Christians have a unique opportunity to live for Jesus' kingdom now—even in a difficult, contentious political environment—by honoring the Lord, seeking the common good, and inviting others to follow Jesus with us.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself. God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, yet he said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king." So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king's food, and deal with your servants based on what you see." He agreed with them about this and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. Daniel 1:8-16

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Bible teacher Stephen Miller writes, "At some point between the defeat of the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in May–June 605 B.C. and the death of his father Nabopolassar in August of that year, Nebuchadnezzar subdued Jerusalem and took captives, including Daniel and his three friends."¹⁸

The king took the captives back to the capital of the Babylonian Empire, also bearing the name Babylon, which was a city of 55 square miles. It was a grand metropolis of wealth, sophistication, and paganism.

Nebuchadnezzar had no interest in the God of the Jews, but he did understand the value of indoctrinating the younger generation in the ways of Babylonian culture. So he selected the best and the brightest of the Jewish exiles and enlisted them in a three-year training program, and Daniel quickly rose to the top of his class.

¹⁸ Miller, S. R. *Daniel*, Vol. 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 56.

The book of Daniel is divided into twelve chapters, but it covers a span of 70 years. Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (also known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego) begin their time in exile as 19-year-old teenagers. Yet they soon discovered that God was not absent in Babylon. Indeed, the Lord was with them and worked through them even in a difficult and contentious political environment.

In this session, we will see the unique opportunity believers have to see God's kingdom advance in even the most contentious political conditions.

TRUTHS FOR LIVING

Confidence in the Lord's providence gives Christians courage in the public square.

Before the beginning of Daniel's journey to Babylon, we see the Lord superintending over every detail:

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. The Lord handed King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels from the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar carried them to the land of Babylon, to the house of his god, and put the vessels in the treasury of his god. Daniel 1:1-2

"The Lord handed King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him . . ." It's not always easy to understand what the Lord is up to, but we can see that even the capture of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Jews were according to the Lord's providential purposes. In verse 9 we read, "God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch" (Daniel 1:9). In Proverbs we read,

A king's heart is like channeled water in the Lord's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses.
Proverbs 21:1

We have every reason to grieve over injustices and incivility in our current political environment, but we have no reason to conclude the Lord is in some way aloof. Even the wicked and brutal Nebuchadnezzar did nothing that was not permitted and ultimately leveraged by the Lord who directs the events of history for his glory.

As a young man exiled to a foreign land, Daniel lacked no confidence that the Lord was both with him and sovereign over the kings and kingdoms that he served. This confidence in the Lord gave Daniel courage in the king's court and motivated him to serve well.

Interestingly, political corruption and the injustices that follow often de-motivate Christians from engaging in the public arena.

In a quote often attributed to Dr. King, he lamented,

“The greatest tragedy is not the brutality of evil people, but rather the silence of good people.”—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' half-brother James wrote,

If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.
James 2:15-17

Evil, corruption, and injustice are not reasons for the Christian to shrink back. Rather, they are reasons to trust God and step forward to exercise our faith in the public square as we serve others, advocate for the common good, and make Jesus known.

For Discussion

- When we see unjust rulers doing unjust things, how does our confidence in the Lord's providence influence our response?
- Why do you think Daniel's confidence in the Lord encouraged even better service to the wicked king?
- How does your confidence in the Lord give you courage to both honor your leaders and advocate for just causes in the public square?

Biblical convictions expand our gospel influence in the public square.

We may be tempted to believe that biblical convictions move Christians to the margins of public life—that we must compromise our principles in order to keep our seat at the table. Daniel reminds us through his time in Babylon that just the opposite is true.

Daniel *determined* that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked *permission* from the chief eunuch not to defile himself. Daniel 1:8 (emphasis mine)

As a faithful Jew, Daniel wanted to observe the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law. He likely did not want to do anything to suggest to the Babylonians or to the Jews who were with him that his God was not worthy of glory and honor. So he “determined,” he settled in his own mind what was important, and then he “asked permission” to abstain from the king's food and wine.

There are at least two important observations worth your consideration here: (1) Daniel knew who he was in the Lord. His faith was his own, and he was willing to stand for righteousness even as an exile. His decision would certainly separate him from the crowd. He would be viewed with suspicion at best and as a traitor at worst. Yet with eyes wide open, Daniel planted his feet firmly in his faith in God. (2) Daniel submitted to the king's servant. He asked permission. The chief eunuch had concerns for his own life if Daniel and his friends were not healthy. So Daniel vowed to exceed his expectations by just eating vegetables and drinking water. Upon examination after ten days, Daniel and his friends looked better and healthier than everyone else.

Daniel's conviction and kindness expanded his influence in the king's court.

God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind. At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief eunuch presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king. In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. Daniel 1:17-21

The entire book of Daniel is a testimony that the kingdom of God advances on earth through the courageous and often contrasting decisions of believers who choose to remain true to biblical convictions in the public square. Dr. Bruce Ashford wrote,

“Secular modernity, for all its proclamations of tolerance, cannot coexist with Christianity because both modernity and Christianity make totalizing claims . . . A Christianity that

is comfortable in the modern context is a Christianity that has had its teeth removed. It is a sham.”¹⁹

Because Jesus is Lord over every area of our lives, our life in him necessarily runs us into opposition. We will never be comfortable in the current political context but will often find ourselves standing in contradiction to the modern social, cultural, and political winds. That contradiction, however, does not have to limit our influence.

Daniel demonstrated that living as an *intern for the eschaton* in a foreign land opens up amazing opportunities for kingdom influence. He lived with distinction in the king’s court, and the Lord used him on multiple occasions in the lives of several pagan kings not only to serve the nation but also to preserve the exiles.

For Discussion

- Daniel’s decision to abstain from the king’s food and wine was an important act of faithfulness in his particular context. Take a moment to list a few “hot-button” issues in this cultural moment that require Christians to stand with courage.
- Simultaneously, Daniel held to his convictions and had compassion for the chief eunuch. He took the responsibility on himself to protect the chief eunuch? Describe ways that our biblical convictions may create trouble for our neighbors. For example, as we advocate for the unborn, how can we take responsibility to serve others whose lives are impacted by our convictions?
- A Christian worldview is not widely popular and may result in some form of persecution for the believer; but in light of Daniel’s relationship with the chief eunuch and ultimately with the king himself, consider a scenario where your convictions might expand your gospel influence in your network of relationships or responsibilities.

Christian compassion leads us to serve the common good in the public square.

Daniel and his friends served the king with excellence. They were “ten times better” than other servants.

The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king. In every matter of

¹⁹ Ashford, Bruce, *One Nation Under God: A Christian Hope for American Politics*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2015), 31.

wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. Daniel 1:19-20

The best servants the unrighteous king had were the ones who honored the Lord. Daniel and the others served in a way that added tangible value to the king and to his kingdom. They stepped into a strained political environment, served those in authority, and helped other people.

When Jesus said that he had come to “preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed,” he also demonstrated tangible compassion for the welfare of other people.

The public square of politics and public policy invites believers to act on behalf of our neighbors, to put others first, and to actually shape the impact government has in the lives of its citizenry.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. For it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience. And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God’s servants, continually attending to these tasks. Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor. Romans 13:3-7

Long before the apostle Paul penned these words, Daniel applied these principles of submission, respect, and service as he walked with God under the dictatorial rule of Babylonian kings. At great risk to his own life he both honored the Lord and pursued the good of others.

Three times in these five verses, Paul refers to the government as “God’s servant.” In a representative democracy, we are self-governed. That means, among other things, we are both the government and the servants of God for good. We rule to do good, to protect our neighbors from harm, and to “bring wrath on the one who does wrong.”

Rather than leaving the care of the vulnerable to someone else, for example, Christians have the opportunity and responsibility to be a part of a government that considers the marginalized, that finds good solutions for our neighbors, and that advocates for protections for those who could become vulnerable through the implementation of unjust policies.

Again Russell Moore states,

Seeking first the kingdom does not dampen our concern for justice and righteousness in the social and political arenas, but heightens it. The goal of history is not, after all, to escape to heaven, but the merger of heaven and earth—when the dwelling of God transforms the material creation (Rev. 21:1-4).²⁰

When Christians give of themselves to care for people, those people tend to flourish by experiencing a little bit more of what God created them to experience ultimately in Jesus.

For Discussion

- Daniel consistently spoke truth to the kings he served, added value to their administrations, and served the common good. How can Christians live in a way that adds value to our political leaders?
- How does our representative form of government place more responsibility on us to engage in the public square? How does Christian involvement in politics help fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves?
- Discuss the kingdom implications of Christian engagement in the work of government based on this statement from Russell Moore: "the goal of history is not to escape to heaven, but the merger of heaven and earth."

The Christian focus on the coming kingdom offers hope in Jesus.

Daniel's influence in Babylon grew. He served several kings and remained faithful to the Lord often in the face of threat to his life and livelihood. But Daniel understood that the Babylonian kingdom he was serving was inadequate and, like all earthly kingdoms, temporary.

In addition to using Daniel to serve the king, the Lord allowed him to prophesy of a coming kingdom—a kingdom whose King would reign forever:

I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took *His* seat; His vesture *was* like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne *was* ablaze with flames, its wheels *were* a burning fire. "A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon

²⁰ Moore, *Onward*, 60-61.

myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened. Daniel 7:9-10
(emphasis mine)

The “Ancient of Days” is a term for the Messiah, who is Jesus of Nazareth. This prophecy and others like it in the book of Daniel point to a future hope. Daniel knew that ultimate peace on earth and in the hearts of people would never come through a kingdom ruled by a man or woman. Timothy Goeglein and Craig Osten remind us,

Looking for peace on earth through politics is a hollow quest, no matter which side of the political spectrum engages it.²¹

What we see in Daniel is a faithfulness to serve several different kings, all the while holding on to an immovable testimony that the only hope for peace was not in an earthly king or kingdom but in an everlasting King of kings.

Political parties can serve an important function in a representative government. They provide a space for discussion and debate. They clarify political philosophies and articulate hopes and dreams for a nation. But they all fall short because they all emerge from an ideology that ultimately falls short as well.

Bruce Ashford rightly warns that we are tempted to look to our political ideologies as “political saviors.” But neither political conservatism, nor liberalism, nor any other ideology perfectly represents a biblical view of politics. As Ashford states, political ideologies “are good servants but bad masters.”²²

Every political ideology and every political party fails to adequately represent Jesus and his kingdom work. So while we may identify with one party over another, faithful Christians hold our party loyalties loosely. We stop expecting more than a political party can deliver, and we continually bring Jesus’ kingdom priorities to bear on our political activities.

Ashford makes this appeal:

We need Christian thinkers who will soak themselves in the biblical narrative and Christian tradition so that they will be able, reflexively and intuitively, to challenge the reigning

²¹ Goeglein, Timothy S. and Craig Osten, *American Restoration: How Faith, Family, and Personal Sacrifice Can Heal Our Nation*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2019), 137.

²² Ashford, Bruce, *Letters to an American Christian*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2018), 47.

narratives of the politicians, parties, and cable news networks. So they will counteract the foolishness that dominates our nation's public square and the incivility that degrades our public discourse.²³

If you're a sports fan, you probably have a favorite team. You may wear your team colors, and you cheer for your team to defeat the opponent on game day. You may be an incredibly passionate fan, but it's for fun. It's entertainment. The outcome of the game or even of the season likely has very little personal impact on your way of life.

Political tribalism, however, is not so benign. We identify with a political party based on ideologies that have personal and public consequences. Platforms speak to important issues. And though no political platform is perfect, there are likely enough "planks" in a given platform that make identifying with a political party important to you. That's not unreasonable at all.

Where things turn grim is when we fail to be "Christian thinkers who soak in the biblical narrative and Christian tradition." Instead, political tribalism leaves little room for people who do not share those same ideologies. Rather than Jesus' kingdom priorities dominating our relationships, we fully identify with a political party that isolates us from people who hold different perspectives. Rather than using our words to build others up, we succumb to divisive speech. Rather than loving our enemy, we attempt to destroy our political opponent.

Daniel did not do that. Instead, he kept his eyes on a greater, more perfect kingdom to come. And his kingdom perspective freed him to love his enemies, to serve unrighteous kings, and to invite everyone to look upon the one true God. That is courageous Christianity.

For Discussion

- Daniel's public service over time to several kings built his personal platform for public witness. What are key characteristics of a Christian who builds a credible public witness?
- Political views are very personal but they are worked out in public. What are some practical ways we keep Jesus' kingdom priorities in view as we engage important political issues in the public square?
- If Christians should be involved in politics, what should our relationship to political parties look like? How can we support good policies of a party without becoming tribal and divisive? How can we advocate for righteousness without building barriers to the gospel?

²³ Ashford, *Letters*, 54.

CONCLUSION

Daniel was an “intern for the eschaton.” In 2 Corinthians, apostle Paul encouraged a similar role for Christians,

From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective. Even if we have known Christ from a worldly perspective, yet now we no longer know him in this way. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf, “Be reconciled to God.” He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Like Daniel, modern Christians view our neighbors with an otherworldly perspective. They are not a demographic. They are not primarily a political ally or opponent. They are not an ethnicity or nationality. They are not a voting bloc. They are image bearers in need of new life in Christ. They are, we hope, future citizens of a greater kingdom to come.

So as ambassadors for Christ, interns for the eschaton, temporary residents in a foreign land, we plead with people to “be reconciled to God.” We trust the Lord has planted us in the middle of this contentious political environment as a divine appointment to live for Jesus’ kingdom, serve with distinction, seek the common good, and invite others to follow Jesus with us.



WEEK 4 SERMON

TEN TIMES BETTER

**WHAT IN THE WORLD
DO WE DO IN AMERICA?**

Daniel



INTRODUCTION

There is a presidential election coming. You may be tired of hearing about it. There are a few political junkies in the room, but a lot of us are a little weary of it all. The gospel and our gospel influence, however, can flourish under all kinds of governments and in all kinds of political environments.

In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar and his army took Jerusalem and deported some of the finest young men back to Babylon. Among this group were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were given Babylonian names, trained in Babylonian language and literature, and placed on a special diet (Dockery, Holman Bible Commentary).

The book of Daniel describes how Daniel and his friends lived for the glory of God in a foreign land. Early in the story, we see Daniel refuse to eat the king's food. The Mosaic Law prohibited certain food, and instead of compromising with a king that held the power of life in his hands, Daniel lived with distinction.

Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief official not to defile himself. God had granted Daniel favor and compassion from the chief official, yet he said to Daniel, "My lord the king assigned your food and drink. I'm afraid of what would happen if he saw your faces looking thinner than those of the other young men your age. You would endanger my life with the king." Daniel 1:8-10 (HCSB)

They were slaves in Babylon under a ruler who did not share their worldview or their values, yet they grew in their faith in God and in their influence among the people around them.

God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind. At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to serve in the king's court.

In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them 10 times better than all the diviner-priests and mediums in his entire kingdom. Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. Daniel 1:17-20 (HCSB)

Daniel and his friends were found ten times better than any of the priests or philosophers in the kingdom. In an environment of idolatry, in a culture of death, and in a politically anxious situation, these young men were not legislators or lobbyists. But they were faithful in the role God assigned to them. They experienced God's favor, and God ultimately used them to move the heart of kings and rescue his subjects. Like Daniel and his friends had an opportunity in Babylon, we have an opportunity in this moment to make a real difference.

So what does it mean for us to have a distinctive gospel influence in an age of political stress? What does it take to be "ten times better?"

WE ARE TEN TIMES BETTER WHEN WE PRACTICE OUR FAITH IN A SECULAR CULTURE.

Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God's Law, but they were not simply trying to preserve their customs or religious way of life. They practiced their faith publicly and privately as an out-working of their relationship with God. On one occasion, Nebuchadnezzar demanded everyone bow down and worship him. They refused.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, "Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to give you an answer to this question. If the God we serve exists, then He can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and He can rescue us from the power of you, the king. But even if He does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up." Daniel 3:16-18 (HCSB)

On another occasion, King Darius signed a law prohibiting people from praying to anyone but him. The penalty for doing so was the lion's den.

When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went into his house. The windows in its upper room opened toward Jerusalem, and three times a day he got down on his knees, prayed, and gave thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Daniel 6:10 (HCSB)

The worldview of the Babylonians and the worldview of the people of God were in total opposition to one another. They would never find common ground. And actually, in the long term they could not survive together. The same is true, in many ways, today between the modern worldview and the Christian worldview.

The totalizing claims of Christianity mean that our faith in Jesus affects every aspect of life. Whether marriage, sexuality, family, the arts, science, business, education, or politics, the Christian contends God is sovereign over everything. Jesus' rule extends to every dimension of life. This is why a Christian worldview promotes the freedom of religion in every aspect of life.

And like Daniel and his friends, we have the opportunity to live faithfully in foreign territory in order to influence those who are far from God. We have the opportunity to show and tell the gospel in a way that God can use to rescue lost people from their sin. In a democratic form of government, we vote for representatives and advocate for policies that promote righteousness in every sector of life.

WE ARE TEN TIMES BETTER WHEN WE TRUST GOD'S SOVEREIGN RULE OVER ALL OF LIFE.

Many Christians see their lives in categories: family, work, leisure, and religion, with one rarely affecting the other.

Daniel did not see life that way all. For Daniel and his friends, all of life was lived as unto the Lord. They lived as witnesses to the glory of God, and their lives demonstrated their hope in Him. They did not see themselves as living in opposition to Nebuchadnezzar, although they disapproved of him and many of his actions. Instead in everything they did, both in discharging the duties assigned to them and in practicing their faith, they leveraged their lives for God's glory that they might show others a picture of the one true God.

Dr. S. R. Miller in his commentary on Daniel says this: "'Delivered' found in the first paragraph of this book is literally the Hebrew word *nātan*, 'gave.' It was not Nebuchadnezzar's military might or brilliance that brought about the downfall of Jerusalem, but it was the sovereign will of God. 'Kings like to think themselves sufficient as ruler, but they are as much under the supreme control of God as any person.'"²⁴

²⁴ Miller, Stephen, *Daniel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 58

God put Daniel and his friends in Babylon. He was actively and purposely involved in putting Daniel on foreign soil. Joseph said as much to his brothers who sold him into slavery:

You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. Genesis 50:20 (HCSB)

And God has put you and me right here on foreign soil, right now so that we may leverage every decision, including our vote on Election Day and our involvement in the public square, for the welfare and benefit of many people. He superintends the actions and affairs of every government and public official with the same power and purpose that he allowed Nebuchadnezzar to reign.

WE ARE TEN TIMES BETTER WHEN WE CHAMPION LIFE IN A CULTURE OF DEATH.

The ancient rulers of Babylon were brutal. Anytime Nebuchadnezzar or any of the kings were dissatisfied, they killed people. Human life was not valuable to them, but Daniel knew better. Nebuchadnezzar had dreams that even the wisest men in the kingdom could not interpret. So he decided to kill them all. Daniel stepped up.

Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had assigned to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He came and said to him, “Don’t kill the wise men of Babylon! Bring me before the king, and I will give him the interpretation. Daniel 2:24 (HCSB)

Daniel did not want to die, but he didn’t want anyone else to die either. From the very beginning of creation, God warned Adam and Eve of the threat of death. They ignored him, sinned, and death entered the world (Gen. 3). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Death is Satan’s sweet spot. He does whatever he can to keep people in their sin so they will remain dead in their sins and trespasses. That’s why we continue to see a culture of death growing up around us. Wherever sin reigns in the hearts of people, death does not lurk. It takes over.

Since 1973, America has lost almost 70 million babies to a culture of death that we know as abortion. Abortion is not a health care decision. It’s not healthy for the mother, and it’s certainly not healthy for the baby. The Bible says that every person is knit in his or her mother’s womb and is created in the image of God. Every baby conceived has value and dignity and is worthy of our protection.

Every person who makes it out of the womb, whether White, Black, Asian, or Hispanic is also created in the image of God and has value and dignity. Every person who makes a bad decision in the back seat of a car or anywhere else is created in the image of God and has value and dignity.

Like Daniel stepped in, we have a divine mandate to step up. We have a moral and biblical responsibility to support candidates who champion the life of the unborn, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. We have a moral and biblical responsibility to step in and adopt and care for kids whose parents are not ready to parent. We have a responsibility to fight for justice for every child, no matter how bad the odds may be, to ensure they get a shot to know God and live for His glory.

Daniel lived with distinction because he was willing to give his life so others could live. He was a picture of the Christ who would come to save us and offer us eternal life. We, too, are called to the very same life of distinction . . . the very same life that champions life in a culture of death.

WE ARE TEN TIMES BETTER WHEN WE CALL LEADERS TO REPENT AND RETURN TO GOD.

Daniel had the amazing opportunity to serve and influence three very worldly kings.

We mistake if we confine the privilege of an intercourse with heaven to speculative men, or those that spend their time in contemplation; no, who was more intimately acquainted with the mind of God than Daniel, a courtier, a statesman, and a man of business?

Matthew Henry²⁵

In other words, Daniel was not so heavenly-minded that he was no earthly good. He did not squander his opportunity in order to maintain good relations with those who held great power. Instead, he spoke truth to power and stood firm in his beliefs. He told Belshazar that he had not humbled his heart and then interpreted the writing on the wall:

This is the interpretation of The Message: MENE means that God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. TEKEL means that you have been weighed in the balance and found deficient. PERES means that your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” Daniel 5:26-28

²⁵ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume IV-III Ezekiel to Hosea*. (Woodstock, Ontario, Canada: Devoted Publishing, 2017), 260.

That night, Belshazar died, and Darius assumed the throne. Daniel served three kings. He always served them in every way he could, but he also called them to repent and follow God. Like Daniel was faithful in Babylon, we can be faithful in America.

We must pray for our leaders, serve them in every way possible, speak biblical truth to them, call them to repent, and then pray for them some more and expect them to respond. Daniel knew that unrighteous leaders, left to themselves, produce unrighteous results. We should know that as well. As close as Daniel was to power, he never became enamored with it. He never idolized the one sitting on the throne. He never got comfortable in Babylon.

So Daniel and his friends stepped in, served well, and spoke up. They left no question that their hope was not in the acts of the king, but in the hands of the Lord.

What in the world do we do with America? How do we live ten times better?





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