

FAITH AND POLITICS

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



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Mark 12:13-17
5th Message
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Mark 12:13-17

Last week, we considered Acts 3-4, which includes Peter and John's refusal to obey the local authorities' orders to stop speaking about Jesus. How do faith and politics meet? How should we, as believers in Jesus Christ, interact with and possibly seek to influence government? Especially, in view of the upcoming election, we might wonder what God thinks about these matters.

As a newspaper reporter and editor, I covered politics for eleven years. The first election I covered was a race for county supervisor. A local pastor took a very public stance in favor of one of the candidates, though the candidate wasn't, as far as anyone could tell, a believer. The pastor seemed to have no doubt what God thought about that particular election.

I was less than a year out of college, just starting out as a journalist. I had come to Christ when I was sixteen. I was trying to understand how to be a journalist as a follower of Jesus. I made an appointment with the pastor to talk with him off the record.

First, I told him that I was a believer. Second, I asked him what his reasons were for publicly supporting one of the candidates. He responded by trying to confirm whether I was, in fact, a believer. I assured him that I was. He asked me again, "Jesus is real to you?" I assured him again. On the one hand, I can appreciate his concern for my soul. On the other hand, I felt as if he doubted the legitimacy of my faith because I was questioning his political stance. If I remember correctly, his reasoning for endorsing the candidate had to do with her positions being more in line with what he called "biblical values," even if she didn't connect those values to any sort of faith.

Now that I'm a pastor, the tables are turned. People come to me with questions. They want to know what I think about the upcoming election, specifically what I think about the two candidates that our major political parties have nominated. Like you, I have my opinions. Unlike the pastor I approached many years ago, however, I will not publicly endorse a particular candidate. I view my role differently. My role is to immerse you in the Word of God so that we might hear from him.

In searching the Scriptures for the intersection of faith and politics, we must conclude that there's only so much we can say with confidence, in part because neither the Hebrew Scriptures nor the New Testament were written to people who were part of a liberal, Western-style, participatory democracy. Any consideration of the intersection of faith and politics must therefore be more abstract than concrete, more big picture than small picture. I therefore may raise more questions than I answer. However, God is not silent. He does give us ways of looking at the world that can help us think about who and what to vote for.

So, is there a word from God on the eve of the election? Of late, I find myself returning to Jesus' famous but curious statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

A question about taxes

Mark 12:13-17:

And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. 14 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" 15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17 Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.

Jewish leaders, having been confounded by Jesus' response to their challenge in Mark 11:27-12:12, now send a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians to discredit him. Pharisees are by and large nationalists who favor the overthrow of Rome, which ruled the land of Israel. Herodians, on the other hand, support the partially

Jewish family of Herod, which ruled under the aegis of Rome. Therefore, Herodians by and large supported the rule of Rome and opposed revolution. The two groups, hailing from different sides of the political fence, join forces to challenge a common enemy: an upstart from Galilee. As they say, politics makes strange bedfellows.

The Pharisees and Herodians feign deference to Jesus in an attempt to force him to take a stand on a controversial issue, the poll tax. Jewish nationalists such as the Pharisees resented having to pay the census-based tax to Rome, but those who collaborated with Rome, such the Herodians, favored the tax. When the tax was instituted, it sparked a Jewish revolt in 6 A.D. led by Judas the Galilean. Rome crushed the rebellion and crucified thousands of rebels. If Jesus the Galilean publicly opposes the tax, like Judas of Galilee, then the Herodians can label him a threat to Rome. If he publicly favors the tax, then the Pharisees can label him unpatriotic.

Jesus' opponents, in the interest of coaxing a politically divisive answer from him, say they "know" that he speaks the truth without fear, but Jesus, "knowing" their hypocrisy, sees through their ploy. In reality, Jesus is truthful and defers to no one, as his opponents suggest, while they are disingenuous. Jesus, in asking why they're testing him, lets them know that he knows what they're up to. In unmasking their hypocrisy with his question, Jesus shames them for asking him to show his true colors while they conceal their true motives.

Inasmuch as the Romans required their subjects to pay the poll tax with Roman coinage, Jesus asks the Pharisees and Herodians to produce a denarius, a Roman coin. The denarius bears the image of Tiberius Caesar and an inscription proclaiming him to be "Son of God" and "Son of the divine Augustus." To God-fearing Jews such as the Pharisees, the coin was both idolatrous and blasphemous. In asking his opponents about the image and the inscription, Jesus is playing with fire—and seemingly playing right into his opponents' hands. They gladly bring him a denarius and identify it with Caesar. Jesus can't ignore the question now without losing face.

Revolution of a different sort

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," Jesus tells them, "and to God the things that are God's." Huh? That Jesus escaped the trap is evident because he leaves his opponents dumbfounded; but how did he do it?

Jesus reworks a popular revolutionary slogan derived from the Maccabean revolt in the second century B.C.: "Pay back the Gentiles what they deserve, and obey

the commands of the law." (The reference comes from the non-canonical book of 1 Maccabees: 1 Maccabees 2:66-68.) For many Jews, the violent overthrow of pagan oppressors and allegiance to God went hand in hand. Jesus, however, advocates a different sort of revolution and sees allegiance to God in a different light.

The poll tax? Sure, pay it, Jesus says. Send the coins back to Caesar, if that's what he demands. And if you refuse to pay it in the interest of revolution against Caesar, don't deceive yourself: you don't enjoy God's favor. The tax is inconsequential in the kingdom of God, and both the Pharisees and the Herodians are mistaken to make an issue of it. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's: send the idolatrous coins back to where they came from, and don't make an issue of it one way or the other.

However, Jesus adds, make sure to give God his due. Jesus is saying that Caesar, despite the claims of the denarius, is not divine and that he will have to answer to God. The human answer to Caesar's blasphemy, however, is not to take up arms against him. What are the things of God? They pertain to worship. Knowledgeable Jews such as the Pharisees might be reminded of Psalm 96:7-10, where the psalmist admonishes all peoples to ascribe, or give, to the Lord glory and strength, to worship him and tremble before him.

The Herodians are in danger of putting allegiance to Caesar ahead of allegiance to God; the Pharisees are in danger of putting allegiance to revolution ahead of allegiance to God. Neither party, in feigning deference to Jesus and making an issue of a non-issue in order to discredit him, is giving God his due. Render to God the things that are God's: worship him alone, and neither collaborate with the pagans to curry their favor nor take up arms to overthrow them.

In favor or in opposition?

Does Jesus oppose the tax and favor the revolution, or does he favor the tax and oppose the revolution? Both and neither. He favors the tax, but not in the way that the Herodians favor it. He favors the revolution, but not in the way the Pharisees favor it. They can't pin him down as against revolution, for he favors revolution of a sort, nor can they pin him down as a threat to Rome, for Jesus takes up no sword. Jesus nuances his retort to rebuke both parties, with the hope that they will repent, while simultaneously avoiding their trap. No wonder they marvel at him.

If Jesus favors revolution while disavowing the sword, how does he expect revolution to come about? The Pharisees and Herodians, in order to ingratiate themselves to Jesus, say that he teaches “the way” of God. They speak more than they know, for “the way” has featured prominently in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus teaches the way of the Lord, which is the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love. Anyone who wishes to follow him must take up his cross (Mark 8:34).

The cross is a symbol of Roman domination. Take issue with Rome’s right to rule, and Rome will put you on one of its crosses. The revolutionaries wanted to uproot both Rome and its bloody crosses. Instead of ridding the land of crosses, as many would have expected of the Messiah, Jesus, in obedience to God, will die on one of them. Thus he will give Caesar the blood he demands while at the same time giving God the obedience he demands. He will render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s. Jesus leads a quiet revolution. He defeats evil not by killing enemies but by dying for them.

Therefore, if Rome wants your taxes, give it your taxes, even if it uses your taxes to kill the faithful. If it wants your blood for believing in God, not Caesar, then give it that, too. Join the quiet revolution and participate in the victory of God by taking up your cross and following Jesus in the way of self-giving love. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.

The primacy of worship

The things of God pertain to worship. We render to God worship. Our causes proceed from worship; worship doesn’t proceed from our causes. We abandon ourselves not to our causes but to God. If you abandon yourself to your cause, you are worshiping your cause, not God. The world doesn’t need any more right-wing zealots. It doesn’t need any more left-wing zealots. It doesn’t need any more centrist zealots. It needs worshipers of God who are filled with heaven and carry the presence of God with them into the world.

Worshippers of God purify their hearts—not to mention their worldviews and their politics—by abandoning themselves to him. Sure, they have causes, but they know that, apart from worshiping God, they are always susceptible to worshiping their causes and thereby evacuating them of righteousness. They know that if they worship their causes, they will, like the Pharisees and Herodians, make issues of non-issues. They swear allegiance to God, not their causes.

Worshippers of God understand that all earthly power is derivative. Therefore, they don’t need power, like the Herodians, nor do they need to destroy power, like the Pharisees.

Worshippers of God employ the methods of God. They speak the truth, both courageously and sensitively. They pray—for many things, yes, but especially for the advance of the Gospel, the good news concerning the in-breaking of God’s healing, loving rule. They love. The arrows of this world pierce them, but they cleanse their wounds with the pierced love of the Savior so that they raise not a fist in anger against the world, or against any politician, for that matter, but instead take up a cross in love. They will, if they must, die for their enemies. They know that no matter how dark things get, truth, prayer, and love will overwhelm evil and win the revolution. Was there ever a darker day than the day that the Lord Jesus Christ (the Lord!) was crucified, when darkness fell over the whole land?

Worshippers of God are worshippers first and revolutionaries second. Everyone has causes. Only the church can worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Worship both inspires and purifies the revolution.

Don’t get trapped

Like Jesus, we inhabit a country that features two opposing political parties. Some in those parties, like the Pharisees and Herodians, would feign deference to followers of Jesus to determine where we stand to either enlist our support or shout us down. Like Jesus, we must defer to neither political party. As worshippers of God, we defer to him.

As his worshippers, as those who purify their hearts, their worldviews, and their politics, we have a prophetic voice in our world. In order to maintain our integrity, we cannot afford to be trapped in the worldly, modern categories of left or right, which are, of course, subject to change, as this election is proving.

If we allow ourselves to be trapped by political parties, we compromise our prophetic voice. If we cast our lot wholeheartedly with one party or the other, we compromise our prophetic voice. If we allow ourselves to be hijacked by one party or another, we compromise our prophetic voice.

Jesus escaped the trap of the political parties by both affirming them and critiquing them at the same time. As those who speak for God, we both affirm and critique. Was Jesus for the Pharisees or for the Herodians? Both and neither. Are we for the Democrats or for the Republicans? Both and neither.

The Pharisees and Herodians had different stances on a controversial issue: the poll tax. Jesus, though, saw the issue in a way that transcended the stances of both parties. Likewise, the controversial issues of our day transcend the modern categories of left and right.

Controversial issues

Consider what the Scriptures teach about some of the controversial issues of our day. Humans are charged with caring for the environment and caring for the poor. Life begins in the womb, and marriage is defined as being between a man and a woman. On the one hand, the left, including the evangelical left, tends to emphasize the first two issues but not the second two. On the other hand, the right, including the evangelical right, tends to emphasize the second two issues but not the first two.

It is not necessarily a matter of remaining neutral on controversial issues. It is definitely a matter of being biblically consistent, affirming all of what the Scriptures teach, not just favorite parts, so that we maintain our prophetic voice, which allows us to both affirm and critique with integrity.

Although the Scriptures are entirely clear that humans should care for the environment and support the poor, that life begins in the womb, and that marriage is between a man and a woman, they are less clear on how followers of Jesus should attempt to influence a particular government in a particular place at a particular time concerning a particular issue.

For example, although the Scriptures define marriage as between a man and a woman, it does not necessarily follow that followers of Jesus should try to influence governments to define marriage in such a way. Divorce is an immense cultural problem, and Jesus had some things to say about it, but few today would argue that it necessarily follows that followers of Jesus should campaign to make divorce laws conform to Jesus' teaching.¹

Which is more important: care for the poor or the sanctity of the womb? Which is more important: marriage being defined as being between a man and a woman or care for the environment? Which is more important: keeping markets free or keeping people from abusing free markets?

Harold Areno, who was interviewed for a recent book, "Strangers in Their Own Land," by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, lives on a polluted swamp in Louisiana, and he and his wife both have had cancer. Nevertheless, he supports candidates who oppose environmental regulation because he cares more about banning abortion. "We vote for candidates that put the Bible where it belongs," he said.²

Of course, the Bible not only speaks to caring for the unborn, it also speaks to caring for the environment. As early as Genesis 2:15, we hear God commanding the first man to work and "keep," or protect, the garden in Eden. Moreover, the condition of the environment has significant bearing on the kind of world that the unborn will be born into, and whether they will get cancer or not, for example. According to the World Health Organization, in 2012, 6.5 million deaths worldwide were linked to air pollution alone, including more than 38,000 in the United States, a not-insignificant number. So, what do you vote for: the unborn or the environment into which the unborn are born?

Purpose of government

The apostle Paul says that government is a "minister of God" for the promotion of good behavior and the discouragement of evil behavior (Romans 13:4). Likewise, the apostle Peter says that governing authorities serve to punish evildoers and praise those who do right (1 Peter 2:14). Paul, Peter, and the early church could not campaign, lobby, or vote to change the laws of Rome so that they might more closely conform to biblical definitions of good and evil. However, we can do so in the hopes that government will more closely conform to its God-given purpose to promote good behavior and discourage evil behavior.

How government is best able to serve God's purposes, however, is a complicated question. How big should government be? In what ways should it be big? In what ways should it be small? What should it regulate? What shouldn't it regulate? What should it provide? What shouldn't it provide? How is government helpful? How is it hurtful? What sort of legislation, if passed, would actually, not just theoretically, serve to encourage good behavior and discourage evil behavior?

What candidate, if elected, seems more likely to serve such purposes? To answer that question, of course, one should consider not just the candidates' positions but also their characters. Jesus was critical of rulers who "lord it over" their people, and he encouraged his disciples, as leaders, to serve those they lead (Mark 10:42-45). Which candidate seems more likely to view people with the value that God assigns to them: as being made in the image of God?

Which is more important: the authority to appoint Supreme Court justices or the character of the one making those appointments—and how his or her character plays out in other areas?

Worshipfully, prayerfully, and humbly

Just as we must not cast our lot wholeheartedly with one party or the other, we must not cast our lot wholeheartedly with one candidate or the other. Otherwise, we compromise our integrity to both affirm *and* critique. We must not assume the posture of modern campaign managers, who overemphasize everything positive about a candidate and ignore everything negative. Regardless of how well candidates do in debates, campaign managers will say they did exceedingly well. If a campaign manager says that her candidate did poorly, she will be looking for another job. We are truth-tellers, not spin-doctors. No political party or political candidate is worthy of our unqualified support.

None of this is to say that we should be apolitical or uninvolved politically. When Jesus told a Roman governor that his kingdom was "not of this world," he did not mean, as some suppose, that he was unconcerned with human government. No, the kingdom that Jesus rules is decidedly of this world: he is Lord of heaven and earth. His kingdom is not of this world in the sense that it is not established by force (John 18:36). Jesus instructs us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

How, then, are we to be involved? Jesus told his disciples, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). The wolves, including political operatives on the left and on the right, would devour us: both our innocence and our integrity. We must proceed worshipfully, prayerfully, and humbly.

We don't know the future. We don't know whether the issues or candidates that we support will accomplish what we hope they will, to say nothing of the potential unintended consequences of the passage of certain legislation and the election of certain candidates. We therefore cannot be too confident that we enjoy God's favor for advocating a particular issue or candidate. Especially because we don't know the future, we should be gracious with those who disagree with us. They may turn out to be right, and we may turn out to be wrong.

William Wilberforce, a stout follower of Jesus, proceeded worshipfully, prayerfully, and humbly as an English Parliamentarian who campaigned relentlessly for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. He persevered for twenty years through opposition, setbacks, and ridicule before the abolition bill became law in 1807. A month after his death in 1833, Parliament finally abolished slavery altogether. Few would take issue with Wilberforce today, but in his day, he faced fierce opposition and stinging ridicule.

In modern times, I am impressed by what I have heard about believers in Texas who have lobbied successfully for legislation that protects the vulnerable from predatory lenders. Near as I can tell, they have proceeded worshipfully, prayerfully, and humbly.

Take up your cross

Render to God the things of God: Worship him. As we worship him, he transforms us into the kinds of people who take up our crosses and follow Jesus in the way of self-giving love—so that we are even willing to die for our enemies. Would you lay down your life for Hillary Clinton? Would you lay down your life for Donald Trump? Jesus would. Jesus did. Jesus took up his cross: he died for both of them—and for us. Will we likewise take up our cross—that is, the cross of self-giving love—and follow Jesus worshipfully, prayerfully, and humbly into the world—and into the voting booth?

Today, if Jesus were here, we might imagine representatives of the different political parties asking him to take a stand on controversial issues. "Are you for gay marriage or against gay marriage?" "Are you for free markets or for the regulation of free markets?" "Are you pro-life or pro-choice?" "Should we build a wall or open the borders?" How would he answer? I know this: I don't know. But I have a pretty good idea that the questioners would marvel at his answer. Did he ever answer a question in an expected way?

As his followers, how would we answer? Is it possible that we could be so steeped in the Scriptures, so saturated in the way of Jesus, so filled with the Holy Spirit that at least once in a while we would answer such questions in a way that transcends the traditional stances of left and right so that those who ask them would marvel at us?

Please consider attending our worship and prayer service from 7:15 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Fireside Wing, when we will intercede before the Lord in advance of the election.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.(1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Endnotes

¹ Grant, Scott. "The Way of the Lord in Marriage": <http://www.pbc.org/messages/the-way-of-the-lord-in-marriage>.

² DeParle, Jason. *Feeling Their Pain*. New York Times. 25 September 2016. BR16.

³ Grant, Scott. "Overcoming Evil With Good": www.pbc.org/messages/overcoming-evil-with-good.