

## **“Following Jesus in a Polarizing Political Climate”**

### **Greetings From 2020**

**Downtown & Lexington**

**July 19, 2020**

In this series, we wanted to pull the curtain back and address head-on some of the current issues that are on our minds as a church. Last week Brandon set up the series for us and how in the midst of all the chaos, how can we as God’s people keep our eyes fixed on Jesus?

This week we’re talking about how to follow Jesus together in the midst of our current polarizing political landscape where many of us will find ourselves saying, "We know it's lose-lose... but if you had to choose." Hamilton reference number one for you.

And as we approach this topic, for followers of Jesus every four years or more - it often feels like there’s no obvious choice on who to vote for or which side to be on. Christians don’t fit neatly into this either/or dichotomy.

- For one, we care about the quality of life for all people...and that includes the unborn.
- And then on the other side, we care about the security and safety of people in our country... and that includes the immigrant, the refugee, and the poor.
- We hold to treating everyone with love and respect as God’s Image Bearers and we also hold to a biblical sexual ethic.

Where we’ve felt these tensions in the past, but it seems like the left is moving further left and the right keeps moving further right, and we’re feeling these tensions and divisions increase more and more. And it feels like you’re potentially stepping on a landmine with whatever side of an issue you end up on. Or if you decide to stay out of it altogether, then you’re also part of the problem too, if not worse.

A recent NY Times article highlighted this polarization that everyone is feeling:

“Based on data collected by Gallup on 45,000 individuals between March and June, the authors conclude that fear, economic expectations, workplace visits, social-distancing, and mask-wearing are all driven by party identification to a much greater extent than local public-health conditions, state economic conditions, or state public health policies.”

So this season, the pandemic, etc. has done nothing but highlight how truly divided and polarized we are. We’ll cover some reminders of how we are to operate politically, but we also want to focus on how we operate relationally as Christians in such a time and place. Because if we’re not careful to watch out for this, then we become susceptible to the polarization and it threatens our ability to think as followers of Jesus and it breeds more division into our church family.

#### **Matthew 22:15-22**

**15** Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

**16** And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

If you didn't catch that, that's called buttering him up.

**17** Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

Ok, to us that doesn't seem like much of a question. “Hey should I pay my taxes, yes or no?” “Huh? Yea sure. Moving on.” But it is not that simple. This is an absolutely loaded question to them. This is a touchy divisive political subject fraught with implications. You can almost line this up to our modern day, like “Who did you vote for in 2016?” or pick any political topic that's bound to ruin your Thanksgiving dinner with family. It's more than a simple answer, it's a loaded question.

At the time, Israel was under Roman occupation. During this time you had a number of Jewish political groups form, each with their own interpretation on how they were to treat this Roman superpower, the two major parties were the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were on complete opposite sides of the spectrum.

**Pharisees** - we might liken them to the cultural and theological conservatives of our day. They believed that Roman rule was an act of God's judgment because they weren't holy or religious enough so they regulated the religious law to an extreme - believing that if they were just holy enough, God's justice would come and it would bring an end to Roman rule. The apostle Paul came out of this group.

**Sadducees** - we might liken them to the cultural and theological liberals of our day. They didn't view the Roman government as an act of judgment. They made peace with their Roman oppressors and made large accommodations to the culture. Or if you grew up in Sunday school, you may have heard that they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead or the supernatural which made them “sad, you see?”

So by the Pharisees asking Jesus this question, they are asking Jesus, “Jesus, should willfully give a portion of our hard-earned money to a corrupt government who will use our taxes to keep us in bondage?” And if you read in between the lines, they're essentially asking Him, “Jesus, whose side are you on? Which of these Jewish political groups do you fall in line with?”

- If Jesus says in front of all of his followers, “Yes of course it is lawful to pay taxes,” then Jesus identifies more like a Sadducee and basically aligns with “The Man” and in so doing, endorses this oppressive government.
- But if Jesus says, “No it is not lawful,” then Jesus labels himself as an anarchist which in turn would mean the Romans in response would wipe both him and his movement out

So imagine this crowd of people surrounding him, pressuring him to fall into political divisiveness. “So who's side are you on Jesus? Who's group do you most identify with? Are you an anarchist or are you part of the establishment? Yes or no? Are you more right-leaning or left-leaning Jesus?”

Now watch how he responds, Jesus outflanks them:

**18** But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? **19** Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.

This coin bore the image of the emperor and the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus” on one side and “*pontifex maximus*” on the other. The Jews understood “*pontifex maximus*” (lit. chief bridge-builder) in the sense of high priest. Both inscriptions were offensive to the Jews.

**20** And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” **21** They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” **22** When they heard it, they marveled. (jaws dropped, no reply)

He doesn't give them a straight yes or no. Instead, he says, “Render to Caesar what is Caesars. Render to God what is God's.” Which at first glance sounds very carefree, like Jesus is saying, “Yea pay your taxes, whatever, who cares?” But if you were a Jew who knew your Bible backward and forwards, which they did, you would have read between the lines and knew exactly what Jesus was getting at.

Look back with me at verse 20. That word “likeness” is the Greek word *eikon*. It can also be translated as image. And if you're a Jew and you hear the word “image” or “likeness” where does your mind immediately jump to in your Bible? Genesis 1:

#### **Genesis 1:26**

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

But there's another wordplay Jesus uses. Note the original question in v.17, “is it lawful to pay to Caesar.” But Jesus doesn't answer by saying “pay to Caesar what is Caesar's, pay to God what is God's,” he instead uses the verb “render.” And it's the word “render” which can be translated as “giving your rightful due and honor.”

All this to say, in just a few sentences Jesus says, “Listen when it comes to things that bear the image of Caesar, show him honor in those things. BUT when it comes to you, who bear the Image of God, you are to show Him honor in all things.”

Jesus says it's not one or the other - Caesar or God. It's both AND one takes precedent over the other.

#### **1 Peter 2:13-14, 17**

**13** Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, **14** or to governors... **17** Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

So then the call for followers of Jesus a higher way, it's not cultural accommodation like the Sadducees. Or to be in this Christian subculture and ignore the world around you like the Pharisees. The way of Jesus is a different way of looking at culture that transcends party lines, or as pastor Jemar Tisby calls living by a "third way" of approaching things:

**Jemar Tisby**

"Third-way" politics are characterized by letting God's Word lead in our political preferences, which will mean sometimes we're in line with Republicans, and sometimes we're in line with Democrats, and sometimes neither party represents us.

**1. Follow a third way**

Third-way politics helps us to live and think and vote in the public sphere and recognize this tension. As followers of Jesus we live in two worlds. We are citizens of two places. And are called to serve both. And the only way to navigate being citizens of both is through understanding that God's kingdom takes precedence over whatever earthly government we find ourselves in. To know we are **Christians first, and Americans second.**

And let's be honest, it's really easy right now to get caught up in this **idolatrous** thinking when it comes to politics right now. To posit all of your energy and all of your care molecules towards the political system as though the weight of the world is on you to pick the right candidate, the right party, the right stance on certain policies, and to go evangelize on social media to your viewpoint. **But "third way" politics** reminds us that Jesus is on the throne forever, we bear his image and likeness. So come what may, followers of Jesus live for an eternal kingdom and that frees us up to do use wisdom and engage with a healthy distance, knowing it doesn't define us because Jesus defines us.

And while some of us lean towards this, others of us see the world on fire right now and lean towards **apathy**. Where you see how intense everyone gets about their political party and it just weirds you out and feels like one big joke, and so you choose to not even vote. You're like, "Oh man, these are the two candidates? They will tear each other to pieces, this will be fun." Hamilton reference number two for you.

But third way politics - love for God and love for neighbor - ought to fuel us and motivate us to be faithful citizens and to be engaged with what's going on in the world.

**2. Trust a perfect God with imperfect options**

When Jesus says "render to Caesar what's Caesar's" he's saying that though we live in this third way, we're still called to engage in the public sphere. So if you feel compelled to vote come November, we want to prayerfully weigh out our decisions before the Lord **and recognize** that every candidate will more than likely have moral flaws and ideological flaws. And that means in *almost every* election there are valid reasons you'd vote for any of the candidates. Everyone will have strengths and weaknesses.

And at the same time, there will never be a candidate where all Christians will agree upon because there are lots of issues on which Christians can reasonably disagree so long as we are appealing primarily to Scripture. The Bible doesn't say what economic policy countries should have. It gives some principles

that should be thought through, like caring for the poor. But practically there are lots of different ways to implement systems for that. And we might disagree on which is best. That's ok!

That doesn't mean you won't look back on who you voted for and say, "Oh well I was wrong with that pick," but being a Christian first means we're freed up to do the best we can knowing that our voting history doesn't define us, Jesus' righteousness defines us.

### **3. Let Jesus' voice be louder than your newsfeed.**

By this I mean, if you don't prioritize your discipleship to Jesus, then you will be disciplined by someone else. You need to realize that news organizations and outlets are in fact discipleship organizations.

They are designed to shape how you ought to think and feel and act according to how they interpret the world and events and they are designed to make you pick a side.

Not only that - but news organizations and outlets on top of being discipleship organizations are also **businesses** that seek to monetize your time and attention. They make money off of your data to sell to advertisers based on how often you like, or comment, or scroll. And so social media, and especially news outlets are designed by algorithms to get you to view their content for as long as humanly possible. And this often means those outlets will say things in the loudest possible way for you to click on it, with no nuance whatsoever so that you can come back for more and more.

Combine these aspects and it becomes so easy over time to get **inoculated** with a particular party or worldview and not bat an eye or think biblically through issues and holding them up to Scripture. You'll constantly be left whip-lashed by your newsfeed without an anchor to ground you. After all, "if you stand for nothing what will you fall for?" Ok, that's the last Hamilton quote I promise.

Every ideology, political system, and worldview has kernels of beauty, truth and goodness because worldviews are created by Image Bearers of God. So there should be, in most cases, instances where we can agree in part with their ideologies....but at the same time those same ideologies, both right and left, are created by sinful human beings and if, as a Christian, there are not parts of each of the current major parties that deeply bother you, you have been over-disciplined by your political party and under-disciplined by Jesus

All this to say - as Christians we need to be aware of what's going on. As image-bearers being transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus - so we need to see above what's being fed to us, to be a people who practice wisdom and holy discernment. Or as Jesus says puts it:

#### **Matthew 10:16**

Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

By God's Spirit we need to test the spirit of the age, test the news cycle, and have a biblical framework and filter through the issues at hand that you can see right through it while also not spiraling into cynicism and pessimism, but with a spirit of patience and understanding who is able to not only articulate a third way but to embody it.

So we need to let Jesus be louder than your newsfeed - or else, if you continue down that trajectory, you may not be a follower of Jesus five years from now. And that's not to say you don't like or repost, but what it does mean is we need to ground ourselves and remind ourselves over and over again with the good news of King Jesus and His kingdom by daily being in His Word or else we will get swept up in the idolatry and rivalry of our current age.

Maybe for you that means you check your newsfeed once a day. Or the first thing you look at each day is Scripture and not social media. Or the last thing you do before bed is not catch up on current events but spend time in prayer. Or if you fast from social media for a couple of days each week. And when you do approach a political issue or news article, to train your thinking to ask,

- "What are the values implicitly articulated in this piece?"
- "How might someone who is on the other side of the political line respond to this and why?"
- "How might I appropriately respond as someone who bears the image of Jesus?"

That leads us to point four...

#### **4. Learn to listen.**

In this cultural climate we find ourselves in, it's easy to villainize the other party or person who holds to that ideology. To be caught up in your echo chamber and put on blast anyone and everyone who disagrees with you, and you're just unwilling to have a conversation with someone else on the other side. And when we do we create rivalries and divisions and dissensions, and actually stifle the Spirit when we are caught up in that current.

And yet neighbor love fuels us to model James 1:19, that says we are to be slow to speak and quick to listen. Or to put it more modern vocabulary, slow to retweet, regram, slow to post on social media publicly and quick to ask questions privately. Exercising the spiritual practice of listening and empathizing. To do your homework and read up on people who disagree with you to understand their line of thinking, to hear about their experiences, and what really matters to them. So rather than blasting off in the comments like the rest of the world, neighbor love fuels us to ask, "Hey can you help me understand how you got there?" Or "I'm unfamiliar with your position, what are your thoughts on this topic?"

And here's the thing - it could very well be, potentially, that after humbly listening and asking questions and looking into specific issues and policies that you still come out the other side realizing you still really disagree with them. And yet, as a follower of Jesus your call is not to cancel them out and have nothing to do with them. The way of Jesus is not a cancel culture but a grace culture that says even when you disagree with someone, you still love them and seek the best for them because Jesus doesn't cancel us. He bears patiently with us so you can bear patiently with them. That while we were still enemies against God,

God lovingly emphasized by taking on flesh and reconciling us to Himself. Therefore you can assume the best in them and give them the benefit of a doubt.

Because if Jesus doesn't unite us together, by the time November gets here our church will get torn apart. We don't see each other face-to-face hardly at all anymore, and for most of us our only form of contact with people in our Family of Churches is through social media. All we might ever hear from one another are the things we're reposting.

And listen, politics have their place, but when they're ultimate or when we judge people based on how involved they are or not - we're actually unable to be the church God calls us to be. We lose sight of Jesus, we don't look like a family, we can't live on mission because we're just canceling people left and right. And what if in this polarizing political climate - when our country wants to rip each other apart - we become this strange picture of peace and love? If people in our LifeGroups who hold to different views, rather than calling them the enemy, we called them friends, our eternal brothers and sisters. If people in our Family of Churches who come from different backgrounds economically and politically, we chose to listen and to love because Jesus is better. What if we come out of the pandemic whenever that is, and out of the election cycle, and we're actually more united than ever? More on mission. More in love with Jesus. This is only going to happen when we see we are Christians first, but Americans second.

My hope for us is that we pledge our allegiance to a King before we pledge allegiance to a flag. As followers of Jesus who belong to an eternal kingdom, we already know who wins. And when November rolls around, come what may, whoever that may be, we know that the arc of history bends towards Jesus and Kingdom reigning and ruling forever.