

“Four Myths Americans Believe About Politics” // John 18:33–37 // *Flags: Living as Citizens of a Better Kingdom #2*

We’re in a series called *Flags*, and in this series I am trying to persuade you to rally behind a different flag this November.

In ancient Israel, the Israelites called God “Jehovah Nissi,” which translates literally “The Lord is my flag; the Lord is the banner I march behind.” As Christians, we live as strangers and exiles in this country--which means we belong to it, we participate in it. And that means getting involved in politics. (As we say, good politics is a way of loving our neighbors.)

But the primary flag we rally behind is not Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green Party, Constitution Party, Independent, or anything else. We may think certain candidates or even a certain party does a better job in certain situations, but ultimately we are not the party of the donkey or the elephant; we are the people of the Lamb.

John 18, if you have your Bible. I want to show you another place where Jesus taught this.

Leading up to his trial and crucifixion, *when the soldiers came to take Jesus prisoner in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter pulled out his sword and tried to take off one of their heads. He missed, though he ended up slicing off one of the soldier’s ears. But then Jesus (in one of my favorite scenes from his life), patiently reached down, picked up the guy’s ear and reattached it. (You have to wonder what that experience is like, don’t you? You are there to arrest the guy, but he just picked up your bloody ear off the ground and reattached it? I feel like that would make me lose some of my motivation to arrest him.)*

Jesus then tells Peter (and I’m reading for the moment from Matthew) --

... “[Peter,] put your sword back in its place, because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot call on my Father, and he will provide me here and now with more than twelve legions of angels?” **Matthew 26:52–53 CSB** This Kingdom I am bringing, Peter, does not depend on you bringing it in by force, nor is it sustained by your sword.

Later that night, Jesus stood before Pilate, the Roman Governor in charge, and Pilate asked him: “Are you the king of the Jews?” To which Jesus responded:

36 ... “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” **John 18:33–36 CSB**

The Savior we hope in, the Savior we adore, the Savior to whom we pledge our first allegiance, did not bring a Kingdom that would operate by the same rules as earthly Kingdoms. Political weaponry, and military weaponry, would be of little value in sustaining or advancing this kingdom.

Using this, let me address **Four Myths Americans Believe About Politics**, myths believed both inside and outside the church that make seasons like this feel dark and hopeless. For most of us, what we feel going into this season is anxiety, cynicism and despair. **RIGHT?** It's because we believe these 4 myths.

Myth 1: "Politics Are of First Importance" *(These are so ingrained, let's say them together. All the men say the myth and the ladies correct them saying, "That's a myth." All the men say the myth...)*

- This is a little bit of a repeat from last week, so I'll be brief on this one--but I want to cover it again because this is the crux of what Jesus is saying.
- Politics are important, but they are not issues of first importance. And that's because the solutions we needed were not primarily political ones; they were heart ones. Thus, Jesus didn't come offering politics; he came first preaching heart change.
- I hope you realize that this approach was unique among religious leaders.
 - Moses' ministry had a political program--we've got the Torah and its meticulous social codes.
 - Mohammad's leadership was almost primarily political. He rode in on a white horse and conquered cities.
 - I'm reading a book right now on Confucius and Buddha and even their religious reforms were largely political.
- Jesus was one of the only religious leaders who avoided that. We saw last week that when Jesus was presented with particular social justice situations he said-- **"Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter over you?"** Is that because he wasn't capable of giving an opinion? No, his task was different. God had not appointed him to play that role. His role was to preach the gospel to people on both sides of the issue.
 - As further evidence of this, I pointed out that there were plenty of political and societal reforms needed in the first-century world--arguably more than in ours! Yet we don't see the Apostles prescribing political solutions to really any of them. (Not because they weren't smart enough to think of answers. I, for one, would have loved to read a letter from the Apostle Paul outlining his planned reforms for the Roman Empire! He was certainly capable of that kind of analysis. But **in an act of incredible discipline, he chose not to so he could preach the gospel to all.**
- **Of course--and this is important, the gospel that Jesus and the Apostles preached** planted the seeds that would ultimately lead to all of these societal reforms. Believing the gospel has political ramifications.
- But the church, as an organization, we said, and the Apostles, as its representatives, kept itself focused on preaching the gospel and proclaiming those things that Jesus explicitly commanded.
- We talked about the difference between the church as organization and the church as organism. **As an ORGANISM, members of the church ought to infiltrate every dimension of society, bringing God's wisdom and shalom into it.** That's politics. **As an ORGANIZATION, (however), the church limits its platform, focusing on proclaiming the gospel and making disciples.** The two roles are complementary, but they are not identical.
- And because of that, **Jesus had a way of bringing into close community people from different political persuasions and uniting them in a more pressing cause.**
 - I've told you about Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector--when Matthew listed out the names of the disciples, he attached these two descriptions to him and Simon. That shows you they

were divided on what to do about one of the most pressing political issues of the day--what to do with Roman occupation (one thought that...; the other that...). Both brought their perspectives onto the team. And I'm sure they had some pretty incendiary discussions around the campfire. I think Jesus probably made them **room together!** And I'm sure when Jesus gave out room assignments Simon was like, "Aw, not that pink-hearted-Commie Matthew;" and Matthew was like, "Not that MAGA-hat-wearing, knuckle-dragging Neanderthal Simon." And you'd pass by their tent late at night and they'd have their fingers in each other's faces going at it. But here's the point: the unity they found in Jesus superseded their differences, and they would end up loving each other enough to die for each other. And the cause they rallied behind superseded those agendas!

- Jesus **wouldn't let Tax Collector politics** or Zealot politics define his disciples. Their mission was more essential; the gospel flag flew higher.

As a pastor, I don't talk about many of my political views, not because I don't have them or because I don't think they're good ones. My calling is different, and I know that if I discuss these things from the pulpit, what I say will be interpreted as representing the authority of the church, even if I give disclaimers about these being my own views. And **what would happen is the Summit Church would get identified with my politics**, and that would keep me from being able to preach the gospel to all of the people in the Triangle.

- Like I've told you, there are some things we have to be clear about: the wrongness of discrimination, the wickedness of abortion, but I **might be wrong in my opinion on the War in Iraq** and I might be wrong in my perspective on **global warming**, or **nationalized health care**, but, friend, I'm not wrong about the gospel! And I don't want to let my opinion on the former keep people from hearing me on the latter.

So, the first myth is that ***Politics are of first importance***. Friend, not only has our nation, as a whole, bought into this myth, the church has too. And that's shown by the fact that, functionally, we care more about how our neighbor votes than where they spend eternity.

- How do I know this? I get more angry emails about politics, from both sides, than all other issues put together. I wish we had more emails about how to double our missionary force, plant more churches, raise up volunteers to help care for single moms and protect the unborn, and recruit more mentors for our prison ministry. But sadly, most angry emails regard something I'm not saying enough about the race in November, or you think I should talk a little bit more about some issue. Our churches aren't dividing over theology or the Bible, but emphases in politics, and for that we should grieve.
- Let me ask you: When you walk by your neighbor's house, and they have that sign in their yard promoting the wrong candidate, is your 1st instinct, "How could they be so dumb?" And thinking about whether you could slip into their yard at night and remove it without being caught? Or, is your 1st thought, "I wonder if they know Jesus?" and you pray for them?
- Listen, most of us can't be close to someone who doesn't share our political views. Almost 70% of Americans say they don't have any close friends who vote differently than them. That's because for us ***Politics are of First Importance***. So that's the 1st myth.

Myth 2: “Politics Are of No Importance” (This time you ladies say the myth and gentlemen you correct them.)

- In reaction to the 1st myth, some Christians just avoid politics altogether. But this is not right either, because “good politics,” as we say, “is a way of loving our neighbor.” The gospel has political implications. **God has called his people to be salt and light** in all spheres of society, bringing his *shalom* into every dimension. “The *earth is the Lord’s and all the fullness thereof!* The *sea is his, for he made it*, and his hands formed the dry land.” “There is *not one square inch of the entire cosmos* over which Jesus does not declare ‘Mine!’”
- Christians as **members of the church-as-organism** should seek to apply the Christian worldview into all spheres of society.
- This applies, btw, to **more than just advocating for the sanctity of life and marriage**--as important as those things are!
- In fact, you can make an argument that the greatest social benefits the Christian worldview have bestowed on the world are its teaching on the respect for individual liberty and freedom of conscience; the dignity and equality of all people; the importance of the rule of law and the insistence that all people should be equal before it; the inherently corrupting power of authority and the need for checks and balances--these things were largely unheard of before Christians and Jews introduced them.
- There’s a fascinating book called ***The Poverty of Nations***, co-written by a Christian economist and a Christian theologian, that demonstrates that certain kinds of governments create poverty because they come from a flawed view of man. To understand how economies thrive, they demonstrate with facts, you have to understand how God made people and the governments that operate according to a biblical view of man end up seeing the greatest economic flourishing!
- The **freedoms we have today came from Christians** who got involved in politics. So, we can’t sit idly by and watch those freedoms go and say politics don’t matter. We need to urge people to apply God’s wisdom to all of creation--business, economics, care for the poor, education.
- So, our second myth is that politics are of no importance.
- That’s why 1 Tim 2 tells us to **... [Pray] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life ... 1 Timothy 2:1–2 ESV**
- (BTW, it stands to reason, if Paul commands us to pray, then we who have experienced the answer to the prayer and now have that freedom surely should pray for, and advocate for, its preservation. Paul **used any chance he got to advocate for it**: you see him do that before Roman governors in Acts 16, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 26.¹ It was a major theme.)
- **Jeremiah 29:7 NIV**, which Pastor Bryan preached on a few weeks ago, tells us to **“... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”** Seeking the peace and prosperity of the city means working for justice, equality under the law, the promotion of education, business, security and defense and many other things.

¹ <https://answersingenesis.org/religious-freedom/religious-freedom-addressed-scripture/>

So, myth #1 is that politics are of first importance; myth #2 is that politics are of no importance.

Myth 3: "I See Everything Clearly" (you to me)

In the Garden, Jesus said to Peter, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52) The sword has a role in society--the Bible says so²--but the point is, its use is limited and it will fail you eventually.

'Sword' here would not just be limited to military power; it would mean any earthly weaponry. The 'sword' of our intellect or political perspective is limited and will ultimately fail us.

I am humbled when I realize where some of the greatest Christians have gotten politics wrong.

- Several great British pastors were wrong on the justice and helpfulness of British imperialism in the world
- Billy Graham went on record late in the Vietnam War endorsing both it and the trustworthiness of Nixon
- A Southern Baptist leader whose name you may not know, W.A. Criswell--who was a kind of godfather of the CR in the SBC--not only failed to support the cause of civil rights, he opposed it! He said it was all Marxist in origin. He would later go on record saying, "I've never been so wrong in all my life."

Policy always looks so clear in the moment, and it's ok if we get stuff wrong sometimes. We're human. But the point is, we have no business tying THE CHURCH'S reputation to things we are neither called nor competent to adjudicate.

Last week I told you how a **committee I was a part of got the helpfulness of the Iraq War wrong**. Here's another: Maybe you remember the situation with the **kid from Covington High School**. Sometime around January 2019 the Washington Post and other prominent news outlets circulated a picture of what looked like the epitome of a smug high school kid in a MAGA hat arrogantly and disrespectfully staring down a grieving Native American man in what looked like a mocking posture. It seemed like the perfect illustration of white condescension, so I took to the social media airwaves. "This is not acceptable, an example of hate and bigotry, etc." The only problem was that the narrative wasn't true. **The truth turned out to be the opposite.** The kid was minding his own business and had been provoked by the man. He and his family ended up several million dollars in settlement for defamation from the WaPo and other news outlets.

- Again, I want to tell you, it's ok that we get things wrong. We see through a glass darkly. **But as a pastor**, I will do all that I can not to tie the church's reputation and the integrity of our message to that fallibility. As someone commissioned to preach the gospel, I should not encumber our message in areas I am neither called nor competent (from my vantage point) to adjudicate.

Now, for you, since most of you don't work for the church, you can be freer in expressing your perspectives, but please don't let the smug and historically naive assumption that you see EVERYTHING clearly make you look down on other believers who see things differently.

² E.g. Romans 13:1-4

- By the way, if you're POSITIVE that someone's perspective on one of these secondary issues is wrong, realize that it's usually still not a first order issue. Their faulty perspective, in your view, shouldn't make you look down on them or separate you from them!
- Listen: if Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector could get along, so can you and your political opponents here. These things should not cause division.

Myth 4: "My Party Is the Party of God"

- If Jesus' Kingdom is not an earthly Kingdom, it follows that no earthly party is going to be his party, either. I want to say that again...
- The left and right are both earthly parties. They are both going to get things wrong. BTW, I'm not saying both parties are equally right and equally wrong or there's never a wiser or more righteous choice. Just that earthly institutions are always shaped and corrupted by sin. Both left and right have political idols they fall into.
- We should be, in one sense, above both sides, willing to affirm them where they get it right and critique them where they get it wrong, giving our soul to neither of them.
- The wrong question to ask is, "Whose side is God on?" Which party does God belong to? We should be asking, instead, what does God say on every issue? **Tony Evans says we're like Joshua when he encounters the angel of the Lord's presence** and he says, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" And the angel says, "Neither, but as COMMANDER of the Lord's army I come." "Jesus did not come to take sides, he came to take over--He rides not on the backs of donkeys or elephants," he walks on his own 2 feet.

Listen, I feel like a big part of my job in this season is simply to undermine your confidence in both parties. Both are earthly; both get things wrong. I want to undermine your confidence in both of them, and, if I can be honest, your confidence in America in general. America is an earthly kingdom! Fallible and tainted with sin.

- Listen, I am a huge America fan. I grew up, and remain, very patriotic. I don't take the unique achievements of our Constitution for granted for one, single second.
- But for me, that love and appreciation became idolatry. I invested all my hope in it.
- And so politics became a first level issue to me. I couldn't stomach those who saw things differently from me. *When politics are a first order issue, you can't stomach those who see things differently.*
- **Jesus said to me, "Put away your sword.** My kingdom is not of this world, the weapons of my warfare are not earthly ones."
- After I embraced that, a **big change came over me.** I haven't given up on America--I'm not down on it, but I don't look at it as my ultimate home, my ultimate Kingdom, and I don't look at the USA as the world's main hope. And because of that, I can be unflinchingly honest about America's faults, both past and present.
- **Yes, America has many great virtues.** I get teary eyed reading some of the old stories about great battles. I love patriotic songs. But she also has grievous sins, past and present, because she was built by fallible, sinful people. Our Founding Fathers were so screwed up that Jesus had to die to redeem the sorry lot.
- The hope of the world is not found in the stars and stripes of our flag but the scars and stripes on our Savior. I seek a Kingdom not headquartered in Washington D.C., but one with Jesus "**whose foundations cannot be shaken**, whose architect and builder is God."³

³ Hebrew 11:10

And here was the great thing: After ceasing to worship America, I was able to **love her again--only differently**, Christ-centeredly. I can love her as "my city," even though this is not my ultimate home! It's where I'm exiled for a while.

No party is God's party; both are earthly parties; both are going to get things wrong.

- And different ones of us are going to think different positions should be prioritized. Some of you are going to say, "Because candidate 1 gets issues A, D, and E right, I should vote for him." And others will say, "Because Candidate 2 gets issues, B, C, F, and G right, I should vote for him." You might agree on every issue but rearrange the priority!
- And **this is where we should give each other space.** We can agree on issues even if our political calculus looks a little different. And you should talk about it! One of your approaches may be wiser than another's. But it shouldn't be a source of division.

So, to return to where we started--as we go into this election: **What emotions are you feeling?** Anxiety? Cynicism? Despair? If you understand what **Jesus said here to Pilate**, and disabuse yourself of these myths, those emotions will be replaced by 2 feelings: **HOPE and URGENCY.**

HOPE: Friend, at the end, Jesus wins! When Jesus went into this trial there was only one vote that mattered and it was God's and he cast it through the resurrection. When your candidate resurrects from the dead, you win. Our kingdom wins! That is not contingent on what happens in November.

That's not to say it's not going to hurt sometimes. We're going to get knocked down; it's going to get discouraging. Our country makes wrong turns, we choose bad leaders, but friend, **Jesus still wins!**

- **A few years ago I went with a couple of our black pastors** to watch the movie *Creed*, which was where Rocky Balboa trained up Apollo Creed's son, played by Michael B. Jordan, to box. At the showing I went to, literally everybody in the theatre was AA except for me and Curtis Andrusko, and I'm going to tell you it was the greatest movie experience of my life. You would have thought we were in an **actual, live fight**. People were cheering and groaning like it was happening in real time. I remember once when Creed got knocked down--It was real quiet and slow-mo as he hit the mat; the whole theatre was silent. And the woman behind me yelled out, "Lord Jesus, help him."
- **It was so much fun.** Here's the thing. **We all knew who was going to win.** But we could still enter into the pain and disappointment of the moment, but because we knew who was going to win in the end, we could sit through the whole movie.
- **That's how we should feel with politics.** We may get punched from time to time, even knocked down. But Jesus stands victorious at the end.

*Instead of cynicism, we should have hope. Instead of despair--***URGENCY:** People need Jesus. At the end of the day it doesn't matter if they are Democrats, Republicans or Independent. It only matters if they know Jesus!

There's a story I told you at the beginning of the lockdown: Lumberjack story...

Friend, everything in this world will crumble, but Jesus remains. That's why the gospel is first and always will be our one priority, our one message. I don't know where everything is headed in our world. I don't know where culture or society is going. But I know where Jesus is going.

So, sure, let's talk about politics. But here's our main talking point: Both **Democrats and Republicans** need Jesus, and the ultimate salvation we are looking for is not found in an office in Washington; it hung on a cross outside of Jerusalem. Sure, **let's talk about the economy**. But our main message is that both the rich and the poor need Jesus. And yes, **let's talk about race**. But our main message is that people of every race need Jesus, and Jesus came to make one equal, unified family of brothers and sisters out of all of us. And yes, **let's talk about COVID**--but let's make clear that whether we take a vaccine or not, we're all going to die, and we all need Jesus. **These subjects matter, but Jesus matters most of all.**

Jehovah Nissi--he's my flag; he's my victory. **Is he yours?**

Let's pray. Let me put back up **1 Timothy 2:1-4 ESV: ... [Pray] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life ... who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

- **By the way, can I just ask--Do you pray for your President**, and Governors and Senators and Mayors? Do you pray for God to bless them and lead them to the knowledge of the truth as often as you post about them?
- **Let's pray for them**; for this Supreme Court Justice, that God would appoint someone who would protect freedom, protect the innocent, to deliver us from this scourge of abortion; and uphold peace...