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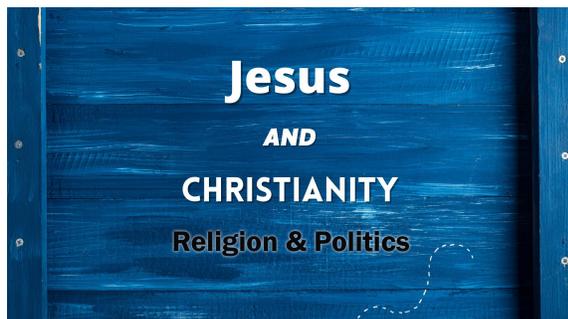
Title: Jesus and Christianity #4: Religion and Politics

Preaching: Danny Gulden, lead pastor, Promise Road Campus

Text: [Matthew 22:17-22](#)

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I ran for office in the 7th grade. I attended an elementary school that ran through 7th grade, and the 7th-graders would make up the student council. I decided to run for president of the Student Council. We had a 7th-grade assembly where all the candidates for offices would come and give a speech, lay out their platform, their vision for the school year. I don't remember exactly what I said, what my platform for office was, whether it was liberal or conservative or somewhere in between. What I do remember is that after I spoke, one of my opponents for office, a friend, well sort of a frenemy, got up to speak. She promised the class that if she were elected president, we would get a Coke machine in the cafeteria, so that we would have options for drink during lunch other than milk and sour milk. She promised that if she were elected president, we would get a candy machine in the cafeteria, so we would have dessert options other than old ice cream bars. I remember thinking at the time that these are some of the most outlandish claims I'd ever heard. If anyone stopped to think about it for a moment, how would a 7th-grade student have the power to put a Coke machine and a candy machine in the cafeteria? She received thunderous applause, the 7th grade voted, and Rebecca won in a landslide. I've never ran for elected office since, but I did learn a lot that day about entering the political arena.

We are concluding our series *Jesus and Christianity* today. We have been looking at some of the ways in which the church has gotten it wrong and strayed from the message of Jesus. We have explored the ideas of:

1. Commitment vs. Convivence
2. Others vs. Self
3. Inclusion vs. Exclusion
4. And today we conclude with Religion *and* Politics.

If one wants to get uninvited from any future party, just go to one and start talking about religion and start talking about politics. Today, we are going to talk about both of those. Now stick with me here.

There are two typical approaches when it comes to talking about politics in church. One is to say that any church should not talk about anything going on in the world. The church is where we come to “get away from it all,” and the church should stick strictly to religious things. I don’t want to hear anything about it. Another approach is what we would identify with Christian nationalism, which in the United States means that the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation. Christian nationalist churches and pastors have political candidates who share their political views come and speak at their churches and they are active on behalf of these political candidates.

Neither of these approaches are correct, and, in some cases, they are harmful to both the nation and the practice of Christianity.

I do want to add something said by the great Baptist preacher, Tony Campolo, "Mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure. It doesn't do much to the manure but it sure does ruin the ice cream."

As those seeking to follow Jesus, we are made in the image of Jesus. We seek to pattern our lives and our life together after Jesus’s life. However, we fall into the trap of remaking Jesus into our own image. One example of this is raised in Kristen DuMez’s book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, where she makes the argument that some streams of American Christianity have tried to make Jesus a macho cowboy, a warrior figure like John Wayne.

What does the Gospels tell us about being remade in the image of Jesus? In his day, Jesus would have understood politics as “the affairs of the city.”

At its core, politics simply describes how we organize our life, how we make decisions together.

Given this, Jesus was political.

Based on the Gospels, based on what we know about the earliest Christian communities, it is hard to argue that they did not care about the affairs of the city. It is hard to argue that they did not care about how life was organized, how they made decisions together.

Two groups in Jesus’s day, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who were both political and religious, wanted to trap Jesus. They asked a question where, depending on how he answered, he would get in trouble with either the Roman authorities or with the public. It’s important to note that in Jesus’s day, there was no separation of church and state. Political leaders were religious leaders and vice-versa.

They asked him a question about a poll tax, which was a very unpopular tax among the Jewish people. I guess it’s hard to say that any tax is popular with the people, but this tax was really unliked. This tax was levied on people who were already taxed beyond measure. This was the tax that funded the Roman occupation. This was a political question.

“Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know that you are genuine and that you teach God’s way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people’s opinions, because you don’t show favoritism.’¹⁷ So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’

¹⁸ “Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, ‘Why do you test me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used to pay the tax.’ And they brought him a denarion. ²⁰ ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ he asked.

²¹ “‘Caesar’s,’ they replied.

“Then he said, ‘Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.’ ²² When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.” (Matthew 22:15-22 CEB)

This is what the coin would have looked like, with the image of Caesar, the Roman emperor, the son of God to those who followed the Roman Empire. Jesus uses this moment to issue a challenge to those who heard it and those who hear and read it today.

The image on that coin is an image in which those who were loyal to Caesar claimed divinity in Caesar, that Caesar could give them everything they needed. You want to believe you have been made in the image of Caesar, then go right ahead.

Jesus says to them, and to each of us today, “You are made in the image of God. You bear God’s likeness. You take part in caring for God’s world.”

Jesus calls his questioners hypocrites because they are living a lie. They are carrying a coin with a graven image and giving divinity to a false god. They have forgotten in whose image they have been made as well. They have forgotten that God made all of creation in God’s image. That is our primary identity as God’s child and as stewards of God’s creation.

So, what does that mean for our daily life, our decisions, our actions?

Jesus was political, but he was not partisan.

When we say partisan, it means fervent support for a particular person or party. But Jesus calls us back to that image of God, that image of God’s world.

It’s why Jesus cared for and was an advocate for the poor and the marginalized. He knew they were made in the image of God. This is a value of Jesus.

That's the power the church has in the world: to hold the truth that all are made in the image of God.

We need to stand up for what is right and true. We need to be true to how God would have us live. As people of faith, we can't compromise values, most especially the values of God's kingdom. Jesus never compromised the values of God's kingdom. It is what he was passionate about. It was what he gave up his earthly life for.

Let me give some examples:

As people of faith, we can have different opinions and different policy ideas when it comes to immigration, but as Christians, we cannot fail to welcome the stranger.

We can have different opinions and different policy ideas when it comes to creation care, but as Christians, we cannot deny that we have a role to play in caring for God's creation.

We can have different opinions and different policy ideas when it comes to the loss of life through any form of violence, but we cannot deny that God weeps at the devaluing and the loss of life.

We can have different opinions and different policy ideas when it comes to racism, but we cannot deny that racism in any form is a sin.

We can have different opinions and different policy ideas around healthcare, but as Christians, we cannot leave the sick on their own.

I believe these are just a few examples of the values of God, the values of the kingdom of God. And we can't simply stand by and cede the affairs of the city without bringing the values and the love of God into the conversation.

When people and the community look to the church for leadership and guidance, when someone asks you, "What would Jesus have to say or do about this?", or when the world desperately needs the healing that the church at its best can provide, we can't simply throw our hands into the air.

Friends, Jesus was concerned about the affairs of the city.

Jesus was concerned about the way we live life together.

As followers of Jesus, we should be as well—in a way that upholds the values we see Jesus live.

Let us pray.