

JESUS-SHAPED ETHICS

Jesus and politics, *Matthew 28:18-20*

It seems the last few years have witnessed a dramatic increase in the politicization of our nation. The expected patriotic response to the sight of our nation's flag or the singing of our national anthem has been joined by a growing tension in our country, a tension built on the belief that the future of our nation hangs in the balance. That tension has resulted in distrust and fear that enflames existing political and social divisions in our country and has engendered a rising suspicion of those who hold differing opinions. And, as we have all seen (and probably even experienced), that distrust has broken relationships and even festered into violence.

Given the political climate in our nation, we should ask ourselves, "How should following Jesus shape my politics?" This lesson will consider Jesus and his kingdom to prepare us for our group discussions this evening that will explore practical applications of Jesus' kingdom in our nation's current political setting.

King Jesus and his kingdom

- Jesus focused his ministry on announcing the arrival of God's kingdom in the world (*Matthew 4:17, 23*).
- Jesus also revealed his authority to rule that kingdom by identifying himself as the figure in Daniel's prophecy about God's kingdom (*Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 9:1-8; 28:18*).
 - Building on Nebuchadnezzar's dream in *Daniel 2:31-45*, Daniel's vision featured God issuing judgment against world empires as punishment for their violent, evil behavior (*Daniel 7:1-12*).
 - After stripping the nations of their dominion, God established a world-encompassing, never-ending kingdom and entrusted its rule to "one like a son of man"¹ (*Daniel 7:13-14*) – the title Jesus used throughout his ministry to identify himself (*cf. Matthew 26:57-66*).
- Even though he believed his kingdom and his rule fulfilled God's promises (*cf. Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44-48*), Jesus fulfilled them in unexpected ways.
 - His kingdom arrived in an unexpected way and exists in the midst of the world's kingdoms (*Luke 17:20-21*).
 - His kingdom does not operate like any of the world's kingdoms (*John 18:33-36*).
 - Jesus' rule also does not look like the rule of any of the world's kings (*Matthew 20:20-28; cf. John 18:33-19:19; Ephesians 1:15-23*).
- The unusual nature of Jesus' kingdom and rule anticipates the unusual behavior of its citizens in the world.

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- Followers of Jesus give their allegiance to him as the one to whom God has given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (*Matthew 28:18-20; cf. Acts 5:27-32*).
- Despite possessing authority over every kingdom on earth, Jesus nevertheless commands his followers to honor and respect the governments and under which they live (*Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-18; cf. Matthew 23:1-3; 22:15-22*).
- He even instructs his followers to pay taxes to those nations, funding their imperialistic agendas (*Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:7*).
- At the same time, he taught people to reject the patterns of the world’s kingdoms to instead follow his example (*Matthew 20:25-28*).
- Jesus’ kingship and kingdom thus exist in the world, offering an alternate reality to the one put forward by the world’s nations. His kingdom citizens act as agents of his rule within the kingdoms of this world; peaceful dissidents who practice submission and seek revolution through loving, selfless service to people and the governments under which they live.

Applications

Most people can readily understand the unusual nature of Jesus’ kingdom. However, understanding its nature does not answer every question one might have about citizenship in it. For example, many complexities quickly come to mind when one considers the responsibility of obeying Jesus by submitting to the world’s governments. We will discuss practical applications of that expectation this evening (see the questions on the remaining pages). Consider the following applications in preparation for our discussions:

- **Recognize that it proves easier to rely on the world’s systems of power rather than to entrust oneself to Jesus’ rule.** For example, legislating one’s beliefs seems a ‘safer’ path than compared to the radical selflessness of Jesus (*Philippians 2:1-8; Romans 13:1-10*).
- **Do not rely on political methods to create moral change.** Because we have the privilege of involvement in government and can influence its policy, a tendency exists to seek moral change through politics rather than through the method Jesus offered – “make disciples...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” (*Matthew 28:19-20*).
- **Do not confuse politics and religion.** Politics has taken on a distinctly religious character in our nation over the past half century. In fact, politics and religion have become so closely tied together that a tendency exists in Christian circles to assess one’s Christianity by their political beliefs. Remember, Jesus calls us to follow him, not politicians or a political party. We are to define ourselves by how we think and act like Jesus, not simply by the way we vote.



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Discussing Jesus and politics

Daniel and Babylon

Daniel chapter one introduces readers to Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, four royal, Jewish youths taken captive when their nation fell to the foreign nation of Babylon. The young men were forcibly deported to the city of Babylon where they were instructed in the “literature and language of the Chaldeans” in effort to secure their allegiance to their captors (*Daniel 1:4*). At the end of three years, Daniel and his friends were added to the group of “magicians and enchanters” who advised the Babylonian king (*Daniel 1:19-2:16*).

Babylon’s “wise men” were special group of advisors trained in the nation’s pagan religion. They gave the king instruction in political matters by seeking to divine the will of the kingdom’s gods. God had forbidden the Israelites’ involvement in such practices (*Leviticus 19:31; 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14*), yet Daniel and his friends spent their adult lives serving in that capacity. Despite their involvement in Babylon’s “magicians and enchanters”, the Bible offers the four individuals as examples of faithfulness.

Where did the young men draw lines and why do you think they drew those lines (*cf. Daniel 1:8; Leviticus 11; Genesis 14:22-23*)? How might their boundaries offer guidance for us?

What might learn from Daniel and his friends about how to make faithful compromises with government?

What additional insights do you think we can take from the stories of Daniel and his friends?



Peter and Rome

Peter instructed his audience to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution”, which included “honor[ing] the emperor” (1 Peter 2:13-17). Peter most likely wrote his letter between AD 60-62, during the time of Roman emperor Nero, a ruler Romans widely believed to be compulsive and corrupt and who is credited with callously and viciously targeting Christians in effort to distract people from his shortcomings. Peter’s instruction offers readers no ‘exception clause’ for honoring the emperor. Instead, he described it as “the will of God”, as a “good” thing that would “silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:15).

How do you think we can honor ungodly political leaders? What does it look like to dishonor them?

How do Peter’s instructions in 1 Peter 2:13-17 compare to his actions in Acts 5:27-29? What additional insights do you think the two passages reveal about the relationship we should have with government?

What additional insights do you think we can take from Peter’s instructions?



Paul and the Corinthians

Writing to a divided church in the Roman city of Corinth, Paul instructed the Christians to “be united in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). However, later in his letter he told the Corinthians that differences of judgment regarding food were permissible, if they did not become a cause of division (1 Corinthians 8-9; cf. Romans 14:1-23).

Given Paul’s instructions about unity and freedom, how should we deal with differences of opinion in the contentious area of politics?

What role does love occupy in balancing unity and freedom in areas of difference (cf. Galatians 5:13-15)?

What additional insights do you think we can take from Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians?

