

The Church and Politics Part 3 – The Kingdom(s)

Kingdom come.

- *Psalm 103:19, Daniel 4:3; Matthew 4:17; John 3:5-7*

Kingdom conflict.

- *John 15:19; James 4:4, John 17:15-18*

Kingdom counterfeit.

- *Matthew 4:8-9*

Kingdom of Christ.

- *Matthew 22:37-40; Ephesians 6:12; Matthew 5:43-45*



The Church and Politics

Part Three:

The Kingdom(s)

Most of you know that I grew up in Salem, Oregon, and so when it comes to college football loyalties, I have to go with the Oregon teams – Oregon State and then the University of Oregon, in that order. The Beavers and the Ducks. Oregonians are not very creative when it comes to picking mascots; beavers and ducks don't exactly instill fear in the minds of opponents. Thankfully, the Ducks are currently ranked #1 in the country, so I don't have to put up with Husky and Cougar fans this year. As a good Christian, I've endured you Washington college fans with great long suffering.

But the other day I was driving in town, and I pulled up to a light behind a car, and I noticed that the back window of that car had an "Oregon Ducks" sticker in it. There was also a ball cap in the back window that was green and yellow. The trunk also had a duck on it, and the license plate cover said, "University of Oregon." But inside of that license plate cover was a Washington License plate that had a Washington Apple on it. I suspect that the owner of the car had moved from Oregon but hadn't yet identified with his new home and had no plans of changing loyalties.

I think that's normal behavior when we move. We go through a transition of loyalties to our new home. I think it can be true for new Christians, too. When we come to Christ, the Kingdom of God is our new home. We are citizens of a new Kingdom. But the kingdom of this world doesn't always leave our hearts very easily.¹ Sometimes we still live by the priorities and mindsets of this world. This can be especially true when we think about how we engage in politics. Some of us are citizens of the Kingdom of God, but we are still more passionate about the kingdom of the United States or the kingdom of our political party. This sermon series is designed to help us live in and live out the Kingdom of God, even as we are engaged in the politics of the day.

I'm going to be honest with you: here's the problem with doing a sermon series like this. Most of us come in with our own personal political perspectives or mindset. So, some people look for clues from what I say to find out whether I'm a Republican or a Democrat so they know whether to keep listening to me or not. Or, they think I said something in opposition to their views – even though I didn't. Some people get unhappy because of what I *don't say* – they think if I am going to preach a series on the church and politics, then I should be preaching against certain parties or people or positions. Of all the sermons in this series, this one has the potential to be misunderstood. So please, listen with the ears of the Spirit, because my goal is to call us to submit to Jesus as Lord in *everything*, and then,

¹ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?query=%22Kingdom+of+God%22&sourcename=Illustrations&order=newest&type=>

call me naïve or idealistic, but I believe that the Holy Spirit will lead us in how to behave and vote as we submit to Christ and pray.

On the first Sunday of this series, we talked about the Lordship of Christ. Last week, we looked at the attitudes essential to navigating this political climate by living out the values of the Kingdom of God, specifically to love all, to pray always, and to seek peace. With that in mind, today we want to look more at the Kingdom of God, as opposed to the Kingdoms of this world.

Let's start by looking at...

Kingdom come.

Last week we began by praying the Lord's prayer – the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, asking for God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let me give us just a quick understanding of what the Kingdom of God is.

First of all, The Kingdom of God is all-encompassing – it is over everything. This is clear all through the Bible. For instance, Psalm 103:19 states:

“The Lord has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over all.”
(Psalm 103:19, niv)

...and Daniel 4:3 says that:

“His Kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.” (Daniel 4:3, niv)

God created everything and rules over everything – all of creation, everything seen and unseen.

Then there is the part of the Kingdom of God that is of most importance to us right now, which is the personal and communal Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus came to announce, inaugurate, and establish in this world. This is what we talked about last week. When you become a Christian, you are no longer a citizen of this world; you are a citizen of God's Kingdom, and you live according to his priorities and values, not this world's. So, it's okay to live by the priorities of the United States of America, unless or until they violate the Kingdom of God; then you must obey God and not people. When we as individuals and as a church submit to Christ and his authority and live that way, then we are living in the Kingdom of God. How do we enter the Kingdom of God?

After Jesus had been baptized, the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray, and it was there that he underwent severe temptations by the devil himself. We'll talk more about that in a bit. But we're told that after those forty days:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17, niv)

So repentance and submission to Jesus is our response to him and is our entry into the Kingdom. When this happens, we are born of the Spirit.

Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’”
(John 3:5-7, niv)

This is the key to what we are talking about in this series, and this is the entire Christian life – to be born again into a whole new life in the Kingdom of God.

Then, ultimately one day when Jesus returns, the work he has begun here will be consummated and there will only be one Kingdom in heaven and on earth. In fact, the Old Testament book of Daniel (2:44, 7:13-14) and the New Testament book of Revelation (chapters 19-20) address the final battle when all the kingdoms of this earth fight and lose *against* the Kingdom of God so that only God’s Kingdom remains. All encompassing, present personal and communal, and future reign.

When we think about the state of politics in our nation and how we navigate that, we find hope in the all-encompassing Kingdom of God that will endure and one day defeat the kingdoms of this earth. But we figure out how to deal with politics in this life by living in the Kingdom of God in Christ – personal and as a church – being in submission to Jesus, living as he tells us to and as his Holy Spirit empowers us to do. *That’s* how we live faithfully in these divisive days in the United States. Sometimes, living for the Kingdom of God fits in well with living in the United States. But other times, and I would say ultimately, it does not. We must realize that as long as we are in this world and in the Kingdom of God, we will be in...

Kingdom conflict.

I already referenced how one day all the kingdoms of this world will wage war against the Kingdom of God. By the way, that means if the US is still around by then it will be among those kingdoms. But every day that we live in this world *today*, we are also in kingdom conflict. Our priorities and values do not line up with the priorities and values of this world. We’ve got to be aware of this, or else we will be in danger of compromising our priorities and adopting the world’s tactics and priorities.

Jesus himself made it clear that to belong to him means we do not belong to this world:

“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:19, niv)

That doesn’t sound like a very cozy relationship, does it? I’ll talk more about that in a minute, but suffice it to say that the values and lifestyle of the Christian in the Kingdom of God are counter to the ultimate values and lifestyles of this world. That very often puts us in direct conflict. So anytime we begin to think that a political party or candidate is going to be the answer to all that we are afraid of or concerned about, that ought to be a warning sign that we are getting too cozy and forget that we are in fact in conflict. Remember that the Bible says:

“Don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (James 4:4, niv)

This ought to be a reminder to us to not get so worked up about politics, and to make sure we know where our allegiance lies, and that is to the Kingdom of our God and Christ.

But please know that doesn’t mean that we don’t engage in civic duties; the world needs our Kingdom influence of peace. Remember, Jesus called us to be salt and light in this world (Matthew 5:13-16), and he prayed that we would be in the world as a sanctified or holy influence:

“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15-18, niv)

We are in conflict with the kingdoms of this world, but we are to live out the Kingdom of God *in* the kingdoms of this world. So the way we approach politics and candidates needs to reflect our Kingdom influence – and at the same time we’ve got to be careful that we don’t fall for the...

Kingdom counterfeit.

As I said, we can confuse our loyalties and kingdoms and begin to accommodate the very kingdoms that are in conflict with us. And, it’s easy to do when those kingdoms can sometimes sound similar to the Kingdom of God.

Think about Jesus when he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. There were three temptations, each designed to get him off course and to substitute his mission and purpose for lesser, more convenient means. I’m not going to read the whole section to you, but you can find it in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 and Mark 1. Remember that Jesus had been fasting for 40 days, so he was tired and hungry – and then the devil appeared to him to tempt him. The devil will often approach us when we are weakest. So the first temptation was to turn stones to bread. This was tempting to Jesus personally because he was so hungry, but it was also tempting because Jesus could solve the world’s hunger problems right then and there. But Jesus knew he had come to give people the bread of life – the ultimate Kingdom priority. So Jesus called Satan’s attention to God’s Word – our ultimate Kingdom nutrition. The first temptation is to feed our immediate hunger. We hear about things going on in this world and we want the quick political fix. So we fall for the counterfeit and think the government is going to fix things.

Satan’s next tactic was to then twist the Word of God and turn it into something it doesn’t say. He did this by quoting Scripture about how God will protect us, and telling Jesus to throw himself from a very high place so God would have to save him. But Jesus wouldn’t let Satan use God’s Word for selfish gain.

The second temptation is to twist the Word of God to fit our political agenda and desires. Every time I hear politicians quote Scripture, I don’t get excited; I get concerned. Because

bending God's Word to accomplish the politics of this world is a kingdom counterfeit. I get nervous when I hear preachers use the Bible as their proof-text for their politics, because you can make the Bible justify all kinds of things.

The Bible was meant to show our need for God and point us to Christ who can save us and transform us into his image. It is not a political playbook or proof-text. It shows us what Kingdom living is like – we are to be Christlike. A good barometer is this: when I'm being told something, is it biblical, or is it Christlike? Because listen: it can be Biblical and not be like Christ. Jordan Harrell is a Christian writer who wrote this:

Genocide is in the Bible.

Loving your enemy is in the Bible.

Only one is Christlike.

Slavery is in the Bible.

Chain-breaking is in the Bible.

Only one is Christlike.

Patriarchy is in the Bible.

Counter-cultural elevation of women is in the Bible.

Only one is Christlike.

Retributive violence is in the Bible.

Forgiveness and grace is in the Bible.

Only one is Christlike.

Segregation is in the Bible.

Unity is in the Bible.

Only one is Christlike.

Christ transforms, not the Bible. Be wary of those who know one but do not live the other.

Wow. Even the devil can quote Scripture, but he'll never be Christlike. We are in danger anytime we read or use Scripture out of the context of Christlikeness.

Finally, and here's a key one – let's read this one:

The devil took (Jesus) to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8-9, niv)

Don't miss this: essentially the devil said, "I have authority over the kingdoms of this world, and I can give them to you." And Jesus said, "No thanks! That's not why I've come!"

And what have we Christians often done? We've said, "We'll take that deal! We'll take the Kingdom of the United States, and we'll make it comfortable with our faith."

The last temptation was to take the kingdoms of this world rather than the Kingdom of God. Notice the progression: settle for a more convenient kingdom, use Scripture to justify the counterfeit kingdom, and then bow down and worship the counterfeit.

It happens without our realizing it. Politically speaking, the church has gotten very cozy with candidates and causes and counterfeits. Let me give an example from our history:

Back in the 1970s, politicians knew they were missing a very significant voting block – the evangelical Christians. So they began to meet with Christian influencers of the day – people like Jerry Falwell – and promised them power. Thus the Moral Majority was born. I'm not saying their motives were wrong – it seemed like a great way to get the world to look more like the Kingdom of God, and they did do some good. But they bought into the temptation that the way to the Kingdom was through power – power in the ballot box, power through special interest groups and lobbyists. Politicians knew they needed our votes, and we got way too cozy with the counterfeit kingdom. We adopted the methods of this world and all its splendor. Don't forget what happened to Falwell with his PTL power plays and his hate-filled rhetoric toward those who didn't fit the legislated morals of the Kingdom.

Again, I'm not saying some good things didn't happen, but the Moral Majority should serve as a warning to us when we get too comfortable with counterfeit kingdoms. Charles Colson said, "Never confuse the will of the majority with the will of God." We live in a counterfeit kingdom. Yes, there are good things about it. But don't fall for the temptation. Notice that Satan has the power to give us the kingdoms of this world. The Bible didn't say, "I have the power to give you the kingdoms of this world – except one called the United States." Any alignment with *any* kingdom other than Christ's is a dangerous thing. Don't become comfortable with the counterfeit, because when we become so comfortable with the values and violence and rhetoric of this world, we begin to switch our loyalties and don't even realize it – taking the more convenient route, misusing Scripture, and worshiping the counterfeit. Like Jesus would have done if he'd given in to temptation in the wilderness.

This can happen to us pretty easily, especially when we're led to believe that something is a threat to our way of life. So politicians warn us of "existential threats" – everything from the other party being a threat to democracy, to the threat of communism, to globalism, to racism or homophobia or climate change...rhetoric all designed to get us to give in to fear and join them. And in the process, we trade the Kingdom of God for security in the counterfeit kingdoms of this world.

If you are a Christian, you belong in the...

Kingdom of Christ.

The Kingdom of Christ is not about power; it is about giving up power for the sake of someone else's salvation. It is not about riches; it is about becoming poor for Christ's sake. My friends, the Sermon on the Mount is a manifesto of life in the Kingdom of God. It is about humility, meekness, mutual mourning, mercy, love, peacemaking, even though it means persecution. Go home and read Matthew 5-7. Christ's Kingdom is a Kingdom of love, not of fear or hate or power. Jesus said the greatest command in all of the Bible is to love:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, niv)

We love God supremely and we love others equally. That means that everything we do is motivated by our love for God and loving others. Any political battle we might engage in is a battle against systems and powers but never, never, never against people. The Bible is clear:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12, niv)

When it says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, that means that human beings are never our enemy. Besides, for those who we think are our enemies, Jesus removed all doubt in the sermon on the mount: he said we are to love them.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:43-45, niv)

Anything that diminishes our love for others is sin. Any fear about kingdoms of this world, or any passion that displaces the primacy of the Kingdom of God, is accepting the counterfeit kingdom instead of the Kingdom of Christ.

Think about this: if the devil has power over the kingdoms of this world, then devotion to any kingdom ahead of Christ’s is a vote for the devil. Devotion and vote come from the same Latin root, which is to vow or to love. So we must be prayerful with our devotion and our votes.

So my goal is not to tell you how to vote, although I encourage you to vote if you are able. Remember, too, that we have brothers and sisters in Christ in our church who cannot vote – some are immigrants, and some are felons. I praise God that we have folks like that who feel safe in our church! But your vote is a voice for those who can’t. Remember what we said last week: a vote is not a play for power; a vote is a prayer for peace.

We are citizens of the Kingdom of God. That immediately puts us in conflict with the kingdoms of this world. So let’s not settle for a counterfeit kingdom; let’s live wholeheartedly devoted to the Kingdom of Christ. And then pray for our country – particularly the people in it. Pray for our community – particularly the people in it. That they may know the love of Christ.

Prayer

Reading in Old Testament Ezekiel. God moves the Kingdoms of this world to accomplish his purposes. But every one of them has come and gone. Only his will remain.

Benediction

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6)