



SERMON TITLE: Religion, Politics, Truth, and Jesus

DATE: March 7, 2021

SCRIPTURE: John 18:28-40; 19:9-11

PASTOR: Charlie Boyd

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## SERIES SUMMARY

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

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I know that one of the rules of etiquette in business, at the dinner table, when you are getting your haircut is—"*Never talk about religion or politics*" because obviously, these subjects are highly contentious and divisive. By the way, the saying, *Never discuss religion or politics with those who hold opinions opposite of yours* has been cited in print since at least 1840. And, the saying was further popularized by the *Peanuts* comic strip in 1961, when Linus says, "There are three things I've learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin. So, I know these are difficult issues to discuss, but when the Bible puts them side-by-side, right in front of our noses, they can't be avoided. And, in the church today, religion and politics is a *hot-lava* topic. The fact is, too many Christians, right and left, are using God's Word to prop up political agendas that promote the kingdoms of this world over the Kingdom of God. So, we really do need to see how Jesus confronts political power, how he relates to political power, and what he says to political power. We need to hear how he talks about *who he is* and *what he's come to do* so we don't allow our political opinions to keep us from hearing what Jesus wants to say to us in these troubling days. The question is: *How does Jesus relate to politics and truth? ...What does he say about those things? ...How should what he says about politics and truth shape how we think about politics and truth? ...*

READ 18:28-40 and 19:9-11 — Jesus has been betrayed by Judas. He's been arrested. He's been accused and questioned by the religious leaders and next, he will be questioned by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. What we need to see here is the posturing going on between religion and politics. The religious leaders are manipulating what's going on in order to get the political leaders to do what they want done. And they willingly, knowingly, break their own rules of jurisprudence to get Jesus sentenced to death, which was a terrible injustice done to Jesus. Jesus did not expect to receive justice from corrupt leaders. In fact, he permitted injustice to advance God's plan. To Jesus, it was not a surprise that those in power break laws in order to promote false narratives. What we need to see here is that Jesus endured injustice with grace and so must we. That means, Jesus will not always save us *from* injustice, rather he promised to save us *through* injustice. You and I can take comfort in the fact that our Savior understands our struggles with injustice. But there's something else we see here that comes out of religion trying to get in bed with politics. This was definitely not a "fair" trial. There was no effort to uncover the "truth." The trial was a mockery of justice. And, the whole thing was full of hypocrisy. On the one hand, they broke their own rules to get Jesus executed. But on the other hand, they would not enter Pilate's house because they would be defiled and therefore, unable to participate in the other events of the Passover season. So, it's okay to break laws to get Jesus convicted of a crime he didn't commit, but it's not okay to enter the home of a "dirty" Gentile to do it. The hypocrisy of people obsessed with power is that they have no problem breaking rules to make rules that fit their false-narrative agendas. So, Pilate goes outside to see what all the commotion is about. He asks them, "What has this man done? They say, "Look, if this man were not doing evil, we wouldn't be bringing him to you." What kind of answer is that? In other words, they're saying, "He's a bad guy. Don't worry about what he's done. Just kill him." What we see here is religion trying to use politics to advance its agenda and that is never a good thing. Pilate then brings Jesus inside to question him. Pilate sarcastically asks, "So, are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus asks him, "Are you saying this because you really want to know, or because you heard someone say it?" Pilate says, "Am I a Jew? Your own people have turned you over to me. What have you done?" Pilate is really

asking, "Are you a political leader? ...Are you leading a political movement? ...Are you someone who is trying to undermine Roman power? Jesus says two things in response to Pilate's question.

*First, his answer to Pilate is ambiguous.* In v36 he says—"No, I'm not a king because I'm not of this world." But in v37 he says, "I am a king. That's why I've come into the world." ...*What's up with that?* ...Jesus is being deliberately ambiguous because the answer is a bit complex, a bit abstract. Really, there was no simple answer to Pilate's question. Jesus did not come to lead the Hebrews in a military or political uprising. But at the same time, the coming of God's kingdom would, in fact, change everything. *So, on the one hand* he says, "I am not a political leader. If I were, my servants would fight for me." By the way, when Jesus says, "My servants would fight," he's not just talking about physical aggression. When Jesus says to Peter back in 18:11, "Put away your sword. Don't draw the sword in my name." You have to keep in mind that in the Bible the word *sword* means political power. The power of the sword is the power the magistrate has to pass laws and to penalize you for breaking those laws—like—throw you in prison or put you to death if you don't do what the magistrate says. What Jesus says here is this: "I don't want anyone drawing the sword in my name. My kingdom is not being moved forward through political power so I don't want my servants to become obsessed with political power or try to use political power for their own agendas. I don't want them to fight in my name." ...*So, first of all*, Jesus says—"No, I'm not a political leader. I don't want people ruling and going to war in my name because my kingdom is not of this world. The second thing he says is, "But, yes, I am a King and I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth." Jesus says, "I've come to change the way people actually live in the world." He's saying—"I'm not *otherworldly* in the sense that Christianity is something that just gives you *peace* and *joy* and warm fuzzy feelings in your private life. No, he says, I've come to show you the truth about how God has designed life to be lived in this world he created." He says, "I've come to bear witness to the truth"—*truth is what actually influences the way people live in the world.* For lasting life-change to occur, truth has to change people's hearts before laws can change their behavior. Of course, today, we are told and our students are taught in secular universities that there is no such thing as a truth that applies to everyone. No, "my truth is my truth; your truth is your truth." "Truth" is a matter of perception and opinion. That held true for a long time, but now we're hearing something different. The post-modern idea, "*My truth is my truth and your truth is your truth*" is no longer accepted truth because today, those in political power are saying, "There is no truth but our truth and you'd better get with the program because if you don't, we're coming for you." I truly believe that in the near future, Christians who believe and teach what the Scriptures say about God, life, faith, gender, marriage, abortion will be labeled as bigots, haters, racists. It's already happening, but it will get worse. We will be cancelled. Christian books will no longer be able to be published. Online worship services will be removed. I hope and pray I'm wrong, but I don't see anything happening right now that will stop the direction things are headed. Listen, the Kingdoms of this world are founded on power: military might, intellectual prowess, greed, corruption, arrogance, political cunning, financial abundance, social advantage. The Kingdom of Heaven is founded on Jesus who is *the way, the truth, and the life* and only he can bring the changes we need in our world today. We must choose which kingdom we will serve—the kingdoms of this world or the Kingdom of God—kingdoms founded on power or God's kingdom founded on truth. Everyone has to decide. ...After questioning Jesus, Pilate walks back outside and announces to the religious leaders, "I find no guilt in him"—meaning, "Jesus is not a threat to me or to Caesar." ...That's not the end of the story, but it's where we'll stop today.

Mark it down—this passage is about religion, politics, truth, and Jesus. ...It's about how, all too often...*Religion*—tries to use political power to advance a kingdom agenda. ...*It's about Politics*—how all those in positions of power and leadership are there only because God put them there and they will be held accountable for how they govern. ... *It's about Truth*—Truth is not what I say it is or you say it is or what powerful politicians say it is. Truth is what God says it is. And only God's truth can change hearts which can ultimately change lives and change societies. *But most of all, this story is about Jesus.* Jesus stood falsely accused before terrible injustice. He suffered at the hands of horrifying injustice. But he knew, it was all part of God's plan to redeem this world and set it to rights. He endured injustice with grace. And that causes me to anchor my faith and confidence in him, now, more than ever.

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Discussion Starters — Begin by reading John 18:28-40 and 19:9-11 —

1. Ask the question: What does this passage tell us about religion, politics, truth, and Jesus? ...Start with religion. What are the religious leaders trying to do when they bring Jesus to Pilate? ...How are they breaking their own rules to get Jesus executed? ...How are they being legalistic hypocrites in what they're doing?
2. What does the passage teach us about how Jesus confronts political power?
3. What might Jesus say if he were dragged before a kangaroo court in our nation's capital if he were being questioned by people who thought they possessed all power and authority? ...What would he say to those in power? ...
4. Why should we not try to advance God's kingdom agenda through politics? ...
5. What does this passage teach us about "truth?" ...

6. What is the most amazing thing you learned about Jesus in this passage?