

Dual Citizenship

Lisa Scheffler, author

I remember getting my first passport. A year or two after we got married, my husband and I saved up enough money to go on a trip to Europe. We filled out all the paper work, dug our birth certificates out of storage, got our pictures taken, and applied for a U.S. passport. That passport declares that no matter where we go in the world, we are citizens of the United States.

Like everything else in our lives as Christians, how we understand our role as citizens should be guided by our relationship with God. Because even though we are citizens of an earthly country, we have dual citizenship, and our ultimate allegiance is to a heavenly kingdom and a divine king.

Yet, how many of us have thought deeply about how our kingdom citizenship affects our earthly one? Sure, we may have tried to think about issues and candidates in a biblical way, but have we gone to the Word of God and considered how it guides the way we think about our citizenship in general?

That's our aim in this series. We want to go straight to the Bible and invite the Holy Spirit to guide us as we think through what it means to have dual citizenship. We are citizens of heaven and citizens of an earthly nation at the same time. Over the next four weeks, we'll look at five key passages in the New Testament that reveal the wisdom of Jesus and the apostles.

In case you're concerned, let's address the elephant (or donkey) in the room. If you are eligible to vote in the upcoming election here in the U.S., don't worry, we aren't going to tell you how to vote. Our series isn't about a particular election. It's about how Christians at all times and in all places should relate to governments of all types in ways that reflect the character of Jesus Christ. As a church, what we want is for all of us to more closely align with Christ in how we think about our role as citizens. Our ultimate loyalty belongs to King Jesus, and we want to be people fit for his kingdom.

Week 1 | Matthew 22:15–22

One of the things every church is tasked with is helping people apply the Bible to their everyday life. So you'll see sermon series on marriage, seminars on parenting, and workshops on how to be a Christian in a secular workplace. These resources help us meet all kinds of life challenges using the Bible as our guide. But one area that is given less attention is how to live and act as citizens of a nation. Sure, pastors will sometimes discuss important issues such as abortion or express concerns about religious liberty. Outside groups will try to mobilize church-goers to achieve certain political ends that reflect "Christian values." But we need to go beyond specific hot-button issues and learn to think holistically about our role as citizens.

As we'll see over the next few weeks, *how* we engage in political activity as a follower of Jesus is as important as any political end we achieve, no matter how righteous. And how we think and interact with our political environment can have a huge impact on our spiritual health, our witness for Christ, and our relationships with other people.

This week, we're starting with a foundational text from the ministry of Jesus. As best we can, we'll need to transport ourselves back to Biblical times, because the Roman empire was a very different world from where we live now. But what we'll find is profound insight from Jesus that can help guide us through the corrosive politics of our day. We'll begin by looking at the passage as a whole, and then break it down as the week goes on.

This story appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It comes as part of a series of confrontations that Jesus had with the religious leaders during the final week of his life as they were looking for reasons to have him arrested and executed.

As you read the passage, notice the way the religious leaders try to trap Jesus and the brilliance of his reply.

Day 1

Read

Matthew 22:15–22 (NIV)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

- How were the religious leaders hoping to trap Jesus?

Reflect

Before we consider how Jesus’ words can guide us in the 21st century, let’s think about what they meant in the first.

In the three Gospels where this story appears, it is told after Jesus’ triumphal entry where he entered Jerusalem to the shouts of his followers. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The religious leaders were jealous of Jesus’ following, irate at his refusal to show them the honor they thought they were due, and fearful that his popularity could bring the wrath of Rome down on tiny Judea. In spite of all the miracles that Jesus had done, the Pharisees refused to see him as their true Messiah, and wanted to see him dead (John 11:47–53).

During Roman occupation, several self-proclaimed Jewish “messiahs” had attempted to stir up revolts, but each one had been ferociously put down. So the question the Pharisees were asking was not an academic one. Jesus’ answer mattered. If Jesus had been seen as encouraging rebellion against Rome by telling people not to honor Caesar and pay him tribute, the Pharisees would have had the evidence they needed to bring him before the Roman leaders and accuse him of insurrection.

If he endorsed Caesar’s tax, he could have been seen as not only complicit in the Roman occupation of the promised land, but in promoting the worship of Caesar. The coin in question contained an image of Caesar and the inscription “Son of God” and “High Priest.”

As he had done throughout his ministry, Jesus answered this query in a way that spoke to the immediacy of his circumstances, and also to the eternal, spiritual significance of what’s being asked. This was not just a political question. And while Jesus knew he had come to Jerusalem to die, he would not give the Pharisees a legitimate reason for his arrest.

Jesus was no earthly insurrectionist, but the true Son of God who would liberate humanity from bondage to sin and death. His call to the people gathered in front of him was not to follow him into bloody conflict, but to one day accept that his shed blood on the cross would bring them peace with God. As we’ll discover in this series, his instructions have bigger

implications than even whether to rebel against an unjust government or live peacefully under it. Jesus is teaching us how to live as citizens in his eternal Kingdom even as we occupy an earthly nation.

Respond

- Since this is the start of a series, take some time to prayerfully reflect on your current thinking. No matter where you are a citizen, how do you think about your country and the government that runs it? How do you think about your obligation and allegiance to this nation? How does your faith affect how you interact with government?
- Now spend some time in prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you according to the Word. When it comes to issues of citizenship, invite him, over the course of this series, to search your heart and reveal to you any ways that he might change you to be more like Jesus.

Day 2

During an online interview I recently watched, the interviewer asked, “If you were to leave this earth tomorrow, what would you want the people who know you to say about you after you’re gone.”

It’s a sobering question. As Christians we don’t want to live in service of other people’s opinions. We aren’t trying to build up our reputations for posterity. Yet, we do want our lives to reflect our relationship with Christ. Wouldn’t it be lovely if the ways people described us were also descriptions that could be applied to Jesus? Not for our sake, but for his. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, we want to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

As we look again at Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees, we’ll see that Jesus had quite a reputation among the religious leaders. Although they opposed him, they couldn’t deny his character.

Read

Matthew 22:15–17

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

- What was Jesus’ reputation, even among the Pharisees?

- Do you detect any irony or bitterness in their words?

Reflect

First of all, I think it says a lot about the Pharisees that they concocted this plot and then sent others to do their dirty work! Perhaps they were hoping to catch Jesus off guard, or disguise the real motive behind their question by sending their disciples and the Herodians. But really, shouldn't they have learned from previous interactions with Jesus? He couldn't be fooled or trapped.

Commentators point out that we are likely seeing two different viewpoints represented by the groups who come to Jesus (verse 16). The disciples of the Pharisees would have found the image of Caesar and the inscription of "son of god" on the coin deeply offensive. The imperial tax was "the primary mark of their political subjection to a foreign power."¹ The Herodians, on the other hand, were likely partisans tied to the Herodian dynasty, the family who had been hand-picked by Rome to oversee the country. Presumably, they would have been "pro-Rome" and "pro-tax."

The flattery they used to bait their unsuccessful trap still reflected Jesus' actual reputation. He was seen as a man of integrity, meaning that his actions and character lined up. Jesus was someone who meant what he said and said what he meant. There was no duplicity that could be found in Jesus. He taught God's truth, which meant he taught *the* truth, no matter what other people thought about it. For Jesus, the ends never justified the means. We could never imagine him lying to achieve even a righteous outcome. Jesus was honorable and trustworthy — a man of his word. Even those who opposed him acknowledged it.

Integrity is just as important for the followers of Jesus 2000 years later. In the American political sphere, lying has become routine. News organizations from all sides employ "fact checkers," because many candidates and their surrogates can't be trusted to tell the truth. Now some may excuse this by saying "it's just politics" and "everyone does it." They can call it "shading the truth" or say it's just exaggerating for effect. They may label it "spin," or claim that "omitting facts is not the same as lying." But let's be honest — it's all lying. And its prevalence has left many of us cynical and bewildered.

While we may not be able to change our political culture, we can strive to reflect Jesus' integrity as his representatives when we engage in it. Christians must be honest and speak only what we know to be true, even if it's difficult or inconvenient. And that includes our digital speech. We should think carefully about what we share online. Even if it supports our views, if we have any reason to doubt the truthfulness of a claim or a source, we shouldn't promote it. Better to say nothing than to spread a lie.

Of all people, those who follow Christ should be known as truthful people. Our witness to those we want to reach with the love of Christ might depend on it. Why would people trust us to help them answer life's most important questions if we "shade the truth" when it comes to politics? Why would they believe what we say about the saving love of Jesus if we are sharing

¹ France, 318.

hateful speech, crazy conspiracy theories, or outright lies in support of our preferred candidate?

Like with Jesus, those who oppose God's will may not like what we have to say, but we shouldn't give them legitimate reasons to attack our integrity. By the power of the Spirit, we should speak the truth with the same love, mercy, and integrity that Jesus showed.

Respond

- What does it mean to you that Jesus is always trustworthy and truthful? Praise him for his integrity!
- Are you ever tempted to shade the truth or exaggerate to promote a cause or candidate that you believe in? Do you ever promote sources that use over-the-top or inflammatory language to make a point? What could be the negative consequences, even if you believe your cause is righteous?

Day 3

Think of hot-button issues of our day. Things like the Corona virus, protests for racial justice, and immigration. These are topics that everybody seems to be talking about.

For the Jewish people in Jesus' day, they were discussing and debating the hot-button imperial tax. Was it right for a country to demand taxes from those in a land it was occupying? Many in Judea said no. Some even tried to start a revolution over it.

When Jesus was a boy there was a man named Judas who led an uprising because of this very issue. "The Romans had crushed it mercilessly, leaving crosses around the countryside, with dead and dying revolutionaries on them, as a warning that paying the tax was compulsory, not optional."²

The Pharisees were hoping that engaging Jesus on such a high-stakes, political topic could discredit him, or even bring about his death.

Read

Matthew 22:17–21

¹⁷Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

² Tom Wright, [*Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 87.

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

- What do you think Jesus meant when he said, “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s?”

Reflect

So far this week, we’ve considered the motives of the Pharisees. Today, let’s imagine what the crowds who were following Jesus might have thought about this exchange as we consider what it means to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

According to John’s Gospel, not long before Jesus enters Jerusalem and is hailed as a king, he performed the most extraordinary miracle — he raised Lazarus from the dead. For three years Jesus had done miraculous things — he’d fed crowds, calmed storms, healed the sick, and restored the injured. Jesus had also shown tremendous compassion to those on the margins of society. He’d openly challenged the powerful, the wealthy, and the religious elite. He affirmed the dignity and worth of all people. He’d also taught about his coming kingdom.

With all this in mind, what do you think those watching this exchange expected Jesus’ answer to be? They’d heralded Jesus as their king. They were anxious for the restoration of Israel as a land of prosperity, goodness, and justice. In their excitement, it might have been easy to dismiss some of the difficult or challenging things that Jesus had said about his death. It’s not hard to imagine the crowd waiting for Jesus to denounce Caesar and his wretched taxes. Let the revolution begin!

Like the crowd, we can sometimes have high expectations for our leaders, particularly political ones. We can look to them to solve society’s problems, bring us prosperity, and generally make our lives better. Those aren’t bad things to want, but we need to be wary of those who promise beyond their ability or position. Unlike Jesus, no human political leader has the power to save the world.

Jesus could have done what the crowd wanted. He could have commanded a battalion of angels to evict the Romans and bring the nation of Israel to such glory that King David would have been amazed. But Jesus often zigs when we expect him to zag. His agenda is frequently different from our own. But it’s always better.

In due time, Jesus will bring heaven and earth together for all time and we will experience the fullness of his reign. Justice will “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). All people will flourish and prosper. And while Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit to work towards those ends right now to better the lives of those around us, we won’t ever create heaven on earth. No human government will either. Sin

dominates this world, but it's dominion is limited and temporary, and the clock is ticking down.

Part of understanding what it means “to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's” is recognizing the temporary nature of our current circumstance. As James reminds us, we “are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” and so are the governments that preside over us. We should give them what they're rightfully due, but no more.

Jesus isn't making an all-inclusive, definitive statement on the relationship between his followers and their governments. But if we're going to extrapolate from what Jesus says based on the rest of scripture, we could say something like this: as citizens of our nation, we should pay our taxes, pray for our leaders, obey our laws, and strive to live at peace with those around us.

When we have the right to vote and advocate in a democracy, we should engage in the political process in ways that honor Jesus, including obeying the greatest commandments (which Jesus defines just a little later in the chapter we're studying). He says we are to love God with all our heart, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–39). As citizens, we demand just laws and fair treatment for all people, because they are God's image bearers, and because that's what we want for ourselves.

As we will see in the coming weeks, human governments are instituted by God to keep order and restrain evil. Those of us who live in democracies have influence over those governments. Yet, we must keep our expectations of political leadership in check, because no human institution can save us, only Jesus can. Our truest and most fervent allegiance belongs to him.

Respond

- How can you “give back to Caesar what is Caesar's”? What does that look like in your life?
- Are you ever tempted to expect too much from human leaders? Have you ever been disappointed by one who promised much, but couldn't deliver? If your primary allegiance is to Jesus, how might that help?

Day 4

John Calvin famously said, “the human mind, so to speak, is a perpetual forge of idols.” In other words, an idol factory.

God has placed within us a need to find meaning and purpose. We also long for a sense of identity and security in a chaotic world. If we do not allow God to meet these needs, we will manufacture idols to try and meet them. In the ancient world, people would invent gods. In our modern world, we will turn all kinds of things into gods — wealth, success, status, and yes, even politics.

Let's ask ourselves some hard questions. Are we spending a lot of time fretting about the outcome of an election? Does the idea of our political opponent's victory fill us with hatred or dread? Have political differences soured relationships or are we avoiding friends or family who support the "wrong" candidate? If we are answering yes to any of those questions, we might be looking to political solutions for the peace and security that only God can provide. We need to prayerfully consider if politics has become an idol.

How can we break the hold of an idol? Jesus helps us in our passage for this week.

Read

Matthew 22:19–21

*¹⁹Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius,
²⁰and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"*

²¹"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

- What do you think Jesus meant by "give back to God what is God's"? What do you think he had in mind?

Reflect

We owe everything to God. All our blessings come from God as gifts of his grace. He is our true benefactor and Lord. God also created us, loves us, and knows how to meet our needs even better than we do. So not only do we owe everything to God, it is to our benefit to seek him, honor him, and obey him. No one loves us more.

So what does it mean to "give back to God what is God's"? I'd like to propose a few ideas backed up by verses. See if you would add anything else.

1. We must give him our allegiance, loyalty, and commitment. Jesus is the Messiah – our true Savior and Lord. Our primary allegiance should be to him above all else.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:34–35)

2. We must give him our faith and trust. God will never fail us. His goodness, mercy, and steadfast love know no bounds. He is worthy of our ultimate trust.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5–6)

3. We must give him our obedience. As our divine designer, there is no one who knows better how we will flourish. Not only do we owe God our obedience because he is our Lord, we will thrive when we obey his Word.

“Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” (Jesus speaking, John 14:21)

Complete allegiance, faith, and obedience is what we owe God. These are all acts of devotion. They’re given to whomever or whatever we worship. And only God is worthy of worship. To give to people, things, or human institutions that which belongs to God is idolatry.

Idolatry can easily become our undoing because idols are insatiable. They will demand more and more of our time, money, energy, effort, thought, and emotional investment, but leave us increasingly disappointed, deprived, and distraught.

We must give ourselves to God first, let him fill us with his Spirit and satisfy us with his love, and then we can put everything else in proper perspective. Elections will still be important, but our faith in God will allow us to face any outcome. We will still disagree with others about which candidates to support and which issues matter most, but Christ’s love can overcome our differences. The decisions that our government makes will sometimes concern us, but they will send us to our knees in faith-filled prayer, not in fear or dread. We will still admire some political leaders and advocate for them, but we will feel free to admit their flaws and hold them accountable, because our identity isn’t tied to their reputation.

Let’s not let our political climate seduce us into putting our trust in the wrong things. Let’s not let others drum up fear and anxiety in our hearts. Let’s give to Caesar what we owe, but to God let’s give our undivided worship. It’s the first commandment for a reason.

Respond

- What would you add to the list above? What else do we owe to God?
- Invite the Spirit to search your heart for idols. Is there anything that challenges God for your worship? Your allegiance, faith, and obedience? If so, confess it and receive God’s forgiveness. Meditate on the scriptures above, and ask the Spirit to speak to you through them. How can you grow in those areas?

Day 5

Happy Friday! In our modern world, we are quick to consume information and then move on immediately to something else. You can’t do that with the Word of God and be changed by it.

It takes reflection, meditation, and the power of the Holy Spirit. So on Fridays we slow down and take some extended time with God in prayer.

Reflect

Read [Matthew 22:15-22](#) one more time.

Reflect on what you learned from this passage.

Connect

A politician stands in front of a packed arena with American flags flanking him on either side. In a booming voice he proclaims that voters are not merely selecting a president — they are taking sides in a conflict over America’s identity. The election “is about who we are and what we stand for as Americans.” The conflict was, in fact, a *war*. “This election is a war for the soul of America! If we lose, there may be no turning back.”

This is not a scene from 2020, but from 1992. And the language of war has dominated political conversations in America and abroad even longer than that. It seems like every election is portrayed as a fight to the death with the future of the country hanging in the balance. Every political opponent is an existential threat and mortal enemy. There can be no compromise and they can be given no quarter. The opposition must be utterly annihilated, or the nation may not survive.

Fear of an enemy, loyalty to one side’s, and extreme urgency are powerful motivators, and rulers and politicians of all stripes, from every type of government have used them throughout human history. It’s no wonder that politics can make a nation more and more tribal and less and less accepting of dissent. How can you tolerate dissenters if the fate of the nation is at stake? What hope do we have if our side loses? “None!” the booming voice from the platform declares.

Christians know better. Or we should. God is our hope!

Our faith is not in political parties, but in Jesus Christ. Our allegiance is not to a candidate, but to our King. Our obedience is not to political talking points, but to our Creator. We can be lights in the political darkness and ports in the cultural storm. Full of Christ’s love and a willingness to serve, we could make a real difference in people’s lives during these chaotic times. But not if we’re giving to Caesar what belongs to God.

Let’s worship God alone and give him all that we are and all that we have. Then we’ll be able to resist the call to go to “war” with our neighbors, and see them instead as people to love. We can stand for what we believe without every political disagreement becoming a battle.

Christians, let’s commit to engaging in politics in a way that honors God, blesses our community, and reflects the character of Jesus.

Respond

What is your biggest takeaway from this week's passage? How is the Spirit prompting you to respond to Jesus' command to "give to God what is God's"? Is there a change you could make this week?

This will be a question that we ponder throughout this series, but begin thinking about it now: How can we engage with our government in ways that honor Jesus and show love to our neighbors? You might want to write down your response for now, and see how it develops as we move through our series.

Although our Table series has concluded, our desire to help people feel known and loved is not! We are still pursuing our vision to reduce loneliness, anxiety, and addiction by having meaningful conversations where people experience Christ through us.

Conversations about politics can be tricky, but what a wonderful way to discover someone's thoughts and concerns about the future and meet them with the love of Christ by offering a listening ear and a caring heart. Is there someone from a different political perspective that you could have a meaningful conversation with? Not to persuade, but to seek to understand? To listen to their concerns and fears.