

Under Construction
Week 2: Jesus and Politics
Matthew 22:15-22

For the last 2 months, the pillar that I removed from our home, that I talked about last week, has just been sitting off to the side of our driveway. I had no idea what to do with it. But, after setting up our new series last Sunday, I decided it was time to take care of it once and for all (show picture), so, I busted out the sledgehammer and went to work. It was oddly satisfying breaking that thing apart!

What about you? Did you spend some time last week thinking about the pillars you've put up or torn down in your faith? Pillars that aren't in the blueprints, but you've put them in and made them front and center. Or, pillars that are in the design, but feel outdated, or in the way, so you've taken them out.

My guess is that we all have them. And, as we look at the topic of deconstruction in this series, my hope is that we can have the courage to look at the pillars we've put up or taken down to see if they actually belong.

As a reminder from last week, deconstruction is the process of rethinking your previously unquestioned beliefs. It's typically triggered by some kind of spiritual crisis or life event that makes us look at our faith and ask, "Do I really believe what I say I believe? Does Scripture uphold my beliefs, or have I bought into the ideology or the Church I grew up in, assumptions I've made, or the cultural influences around me?"

Today, we're looking at a topic that has caused so many people to rethink their previously unquestioned beliefs. A topic that is keeping many others from even exploring the Christian faith because of how they've seen the Church handle it, especially over the last 8 years. Today, we're talking about politics...(thunder and lightning).

It almost feels that way, doesn't it? I've had several people over the years tell me, "Shawn, you can't talk about politics in Church!" It's like *the* cardinal sin. It's almost as bad as bringing it up around the dinner table on Thanksgiving! It's not going to end well. But, my prayer leading up to this week is that we can talk about politics today without getting political. That we can talk about the topic and let Scripture guide us without getting into the weeds of the issues.

And so, we're talking about politics today because Scripture talks about it. And, if Scripture talks about it, then we must talk about it, too. But, we're also talking about politics in this series because it's an issue that is driving people away from the Church. More importantly, it's keeping them away from Jesus because of how they've seen the Church handle it. Especially the younger generations.

In many cases, the younger generation is not leaving the Church because they're more liberal, or because they've rejected certain Biblical doctrines. They're leaving because of the way

they've seen the Church sidle up to politics and politicians in a way that feels hypocritical. A recent Barna study found that, of those in the younger generations who have left the church, only 21% left because they no longer believe in God. 48%, nearly half, have left because of how the Church has gotten into bed with politicians.

As Russell Moore puts it in his new book, *Losing Our Religion: An Alter Call for Evangelical America*, "They've seen the generation that told them character matters decide later that it doesn't. They've witnessed their leaders disgraced, scandals covered up, racial injustice minimized, and culture wars prioritized over theology."

People young and old have seen all the ways the Church and politics have co-mingled, often times at the expense of the social issues they care about the most. Issues that our faith says that we should care about, too. And so, yes, there are theological reasons why we should care about the life of unborn children. That is good and it is right.

But there are also theological reasons for why we should care about global warming and how we use the natural resources God has entrusted to us. Why we should care about *the immigrant* behind immigration policies. Social injustice and the pain it causes.

People have seen the way the Church and politics have mingled together around **certain** theological issues at the expense of **other** theological issues and it's made them question if **WE** actually believe the things we say we believe. Or, if we just pick and choose the issues we care about based on partisan lines rather than the totality of our faith.

So, as Christians, how should we engage in the politics of our day? What should that relationship look like and our priorities be? I'm going to answer all of those questions and more in the next 15 minutes. Probably not! But, I do hope to give us some guiding principles from the life of Jesus. So, if you have a Bible or Bible app you like to use, turn with me to Matthew 22.

When it comes to politics, I've talked to both liberal Christians and conservative Christians who feel like God is on their side. Like they have the moral high ground. But, as one article puts it, "Unless a human system is fully centered on God (and no human system is), Jesus will have things to affirm and things to critique about it. The political left and political right are no exceptions."

Jesus would have good and bad things to say about both sides. But, this idea of co-opting God to be on our side isn't new. In fact, even before his birth, people have been trying to politicize Jesus and claim that he's on their side. But, in reality, what we see in the life of Jesus is that he constantly frustrated the political leaders on all sides. He refused to fit into their teeny-tiny, little political boxes.

There were essentially three parties in Jesus' day. We call them religious groups, but with this weird blend of a Theocracy, controlled by the Roman Empire, there was a whole lot of politics mixed in.

And so, you have the Pharisees on the far right who wanted to keep God central to their politics. On the far left, you have the Sadducees and Herodians who were ultra-liberal in their theology and diplomacy and would shout out to the Pharisees, “Roman LIVES matter!” The third party were the Zealots, and they were passionate about Israel and its prosperity. Scholars refer to them the MIGA crowd because their motto was “Make Israel great again!” ☺

And, what we see in the Gospels is that Jesus absolutely frustrated all of them! To the Pharisees, he was too liberal. To the Sadducees and Herodians, he was too conservative. And, to the Zealots, he didn’t care enough about restoring Israel and defeating its enemies. Jesus frustrated all of them because he wasn’t interested in advancing **their** political agenda. Instead, he came to build HIS Kingdom. A Kingdom that transcends human politics and is not confined by a nation’s borders...let alone, its political parties.

In Matthew 22, we see these different politicians coming at Jesus, trying to trap him. They disagree on all sorts of issues, but the one thing they can unite around is that this guy’s got to go. Matthew sets the scene like this...(READ Matthew 22:15-17)

So, we see the Pharisees and the Herodians, these two political enemies, become allies in their attempt to trap Jesus. After they butter him up, like true politicians do, they try to bring Jesus into a political hot topic of their day. Jewish families were paying as much as 50% of their income to Roman taxes and it was oppressive.

So, if Jesus says it is good and right to pay taxes to Caesar, then it’s going to stir up the crowd against him. If he says no, don’t pay them, then they had evidence that he’s telling people to disobey Roman law. If he says yes, but they should be lower...well now he’s taken a political position. No matter how he responds, he could end up in hot water. So, what does he do
...(READ Matt. 22:18-22)

They bring him a denarius, which would have had an image of Caesar on one side. In that time, image implied ownership, and so Jesus is like, “If Caesar wants his little coin back, then give it to him.”

But, just like Caesar’s image on that coin implies ownership, God’s image on us implies that we belong to Him. Their taxes belonged to Caesar, but we belong to God. And so, Jesus is saying, “give your taxes to Rome, but give yourself to God.” Trust in Him, not in your government. Don’t let your heart and mind be consumed by the things of this world, but the things of God, the One to whom you belong.

With this one statement, Jesus rises above **the** political argument of his day that everyone else was getting sucked into. And, I think he’s able to do it because he understands just how limited politics really are compared to the Kingdom that he is ushering in. How foolish it is for us to get worked up over politics and put our hope in politicians, when we belong to God, are citizens of Heaven, and our hope is only found in Him.

So, what does all of this mean for us? To answer that, I want to look at another group that's in our text today. They're not mentioned by name, but we know they're in the crowd, taking it all in.

We talked about the politics of the Pharisees and Herodians that came to trap Jesus that day, but I think it's just as important to remember the politics of those who were listening to him respond. Right there, in the middle of Jesus' inner circle of disciples, you have Simon the Zealot, who would have worked *against* the government, and Matthew the tax collector, who worked *for* the government. These guys are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. They would have disagreed on just about everything.

And yet, these political enemies have come together, not to trap Jesus, but to follow him. I think they show us that **Our alignment with Jesus and his Kingdom must always exceed alignment to our political party.**

Our primary allegiance is to Jesus, and no matter how hard we try, he doesn't fit nicely into any of our political boxes. He never has. Both Matthew and Simon had to make political concessions in order to follow Jesus. And the same should be true for us. There ought to be places where aligning with Jesus means going against your political party. And if there aren't, then you've probably created a god in your own image who looks like you, votes like you, and is against all the same people and issues you are

There are times when alignment with Jesus ought to cause misalignment with our political party. So, which one will you choose? It might mean that you vote one way, but then allow your faith to inform how you think and act and feel about those issues where Jesus doesn't tow the party line. You choose to align with him and his Kingdom over aligning with you political party.

So, vote your convictions, but don't give your allegiance to anyone or anything other than Jesus. In other words, **Care about politics without being consumed by them.**

Care about politics, but don't let them become the first pillar that people see when they look at your faith. Care about politics, but not at the expense of the people and issues that Jesus cares about, too. Care about politics, but know that God's throne is not threatened by the person who sits in the Oval Office.

We think politics are massively important, as if the fate of our nation and world...***even our faith...***hangs in the balance of the next election. But, Jesus is building his Kingdom through His Church, not your party, so care about politics, but don't be consumed by them.

King David, who was pretty involved in the politics of his day, writes in **Psalms 20:7...(READ)**

I think what has caused so many people to write off the Christian faith is the way they've seen us trust in chariots and horses more than the name of the Lord our God. The way they've seen

us get absolutely consumed by politics, as if they are the hope of the world, and not Jesus. And, maybe most of all, the way they've seen us treat those on the other side. How we've become more interested in winning an election or winning an argument than winning a person to Jesus.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but don't forget to give to God what is God's. His identity is firmly impressed on you, and so let THAT be the first thing people see when they look at your faith. Let God's image in you be seen in the way you engage in politics, in the proper weight of importance you give them, and, most of all, in the way you treat those on the other side.

I'll close with this... Our 5th grader, Norah, is learning about government in school right now. A couple of weeks ago, she had an assignment to write a letter to people who disagree about politics and give advice on how they can get along. I love what she wrote...(show picture)

Dear Elephants and Donkeys (*we'd just talked about that*), There are a lot of things that you disagree on, like who should be president, how money should be spent, and the laws that should guide our nation. Some ways you could figure that out are by talking about it, or even listening to what one another has to say. Jesus said to love your enemies and treat others the way you want to be treated. So, you could pray for one another. Sincerely, Norah Green

I can't think of better words than that.

So, may your attitude and actions reflect Jesus in all things, including the way you engage in politics.

May your alignment with Jesus and his Kingdom ALWAYS exceed alignment with your political party.

May you strive to bring God's Kingdom into this world more than you fight to bring your party into office.

And, may you give yourself fully to God, whose image is firmly impressed on you.