

Aug 25, 2018

Luke 20:20-26

The Certain Gospel: Where Jesus Stands Politically

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Today I'm going to preach one of those sermons that I hope you will **talk about** on the drive home or at dinner afterwards with your family. Today I'm preaching on **politics**. I didn't choose this topic because I thought, "You know what would go well with my **son's baby dedication**? Politics!" No, I chose this text a while ago. Now this isn't the first time I've preached on politics, but I think it's good to have a refresher before we head into the **midterm elections**. But since politics can be a touchy subject, let's **stop and pray**.

I want you to stop for a moment and think of the **political positions** you **associate** with **Jesus**, the **Bible**, and **Christians**. Some of the political issues that pop into your mind are probably pretty **controversial**, like **abortion** or **gay marriage** or the **death penalty**. Maybe you also think of immigration and **refugees** or **feeding the poor**. As you think of these political issues you associate with Jesus you also may assume Jesus lands on a **certain side** of the issue, maybe the side you're on. But some of you may **never** have associated Jesus with politics, so this is a completely **new idea**.

If you could ask Jesus **one political question** what would it be? Jesus, should we build a **wall**? Jesus, what do we need to do to get out of the **deficit**? Jesus, what should we do with our **military**? Should we **have** a military? Jesus, what should we do about **pollution** and **global warming**? What should we do about **Israel** and **Palestine**? Jesus, who should I vote for during the **next presidential election**?

What would your **motive** for your question be? Is it a **competition**? Ha! Jesus really is for **green energy**! **Told you so!** Or? Jesus, I want to know how to **follow you better** in all aspects of my life, even my politics? In our passage today some people ask Jesus a **political question**.

Luke 20:20-22 Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. 21 So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. 22 Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (NIV®)

What are their motives for asking Jesus this question? Are they good? No. They're **bad**. They're trying to catch Jesus in a **trap**! You can almost hear **Admiral Ackbar** yelling, "**It's a trap!**" **Star Wars**. But because of this trap we actually **learn something** about what Jesus thinks of politics. Some of us might think we know where Jesus stands politically. He's standing firmly in my camp! Right?

But what if we're **wrong**? What if when we **try to trap** Jesus in our politics he's really **standing somewhere entirely different**? Jesus calls us **to examine ourselves when we think he is on our side**.

When you think you know where Jesus stands politically...

The spies want to entrap Jesus with a **politically charged** issue—**paying taxes** to Rome. Now I know we **don't argue** about taxes today... but what made this issue especially charged **back then** is:

1. **Rome** was an **enemy state** that was occupying Israel by **force**, **not** by the **will** of the people.

2. A few years earlier in **A.D. 6-10** a rebel named **Judas** (different Judas) lead a revolt against Rome and called anyone who paid taxes to Rome a “**coward**” since they must not trust God.¹

As Jesus **responds** to this question he **reveals** that he doesn't stand where they think he stands. From this story we can draw out **three things** we can do to **examine** if we are **actually** standing **with Christ** in our own politics or if we're trying to get Jesus to agree with our own **political opinions**. First...

1. Test your motives. (v20-22)

Verse 21 says they, the Pharisees, teachers of the law, and chief priest,² sent spies to Jesus who “**pretended** to be **sincere**.” This word for “pretend” is the Greek word **hypokrinomai**, which means to “be a hypocrite.” It means to act a certain part.³ To be something you're not. Don't come to Jesus, **pretending** to be **sincere**, but really trying to get Jesus to say what they want him to say. I'll come to you with my questions Jesus, but only if you give me the answer I want. **Be** the Jesus I want you to be, no other. In verse 23 it says, “He saw through their **duplicity**...” Duplicity means **craftiness** or **deceit**. When we try to **twist** Jesus and his politics into our own likeness that's duplicity.

I'm **not saying** we all approach Jesus this way. Jesus **doesn't say** everyone has **wrong motives**, just them. I think there would have been a way to ask this **same question** the right way. Just because we want to know Jesus' political position doesn't mean we're bad, but we should test our own **hearts**. **Why** are we asking? So that we can win an argument against our family members and coworkers? So that we can feel **superior** to those on the **other side** of the **aisle**? Or so that we can live life **God's way**?

Think about **Jesus' audience**, those in the crowd and asking him this question. There were some there that day who wanted Jesus to answer **one way** and others there who him to answer the **opposite way**.

a. Herodians & Matthew = Pro-government pro-taxes

Mark's gospel tells us the **Herodians** were some of those spies who came to question Jesus (Mark 12:13). The Herodians were named after Herod because they supported Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. They supported the big government that was over Israel, Judea, and Jerusalem, and would have reported to Herod if Jesus was **anti-taxation** because they were pro-taxation.

And lest we're too quick to judge them remember Jesus had at least one **disciple** who was also a tax collector, **Matthew** who we also call **Levi** (Mark 2:13-14). He worked for the Roman government, perhaps because it **benefited** him **financially**, but he also may have done so because he saw all the good Rome did for the nation of Israel. Rome brought peace, the **Pax Romana**, which was about **200** years of **social** and **economic stability** and **prosperity** for much of the ancient world. Rome built over 250,000 miles worth of roads and **50,000** of those were **paved** with **stones**, increasing trade and wealth for everyone.

So some in the audience probably wanted Jesus to say, “Pay your taxes.” That would benefit them and line up with **their worldview**. But others wanted the exact opposite.

b. Pharisees & Simon = Anti-government pro-freedom

The **Pharisees** are the more traditional religious audience who want everyone to follow the Old Testament **holiness** laws. They're serious about God's word and want **Israel** to be **free** from Rome's rule. One of Jesus' disciples was called **Simon the Zealot** (Luke 6:15). It could have been that he was a **sympathizer** or even a **member** of a band of rebels called the Zealots, which was started by that **Judas guy** over this very issue of taxes. The *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says this:

The Zealots were the extreme wing of the Pharisees. In contrast with other Pharisees they believed only God had the right to rule over the Jews. They were willing to fight and die for that belief. For them nationalistic patriotism and religion were inseparable.⁴

The Pharisees and Simon might have pointed at the tax and said, “Look how Rome is using our taxes to fund their military, which they’ve used to crucify **thousands** and **thousands** of Jews.⁵ It’s immoral to pay the tax.” We should be using that money to fund the **temple** and feed the **widows** and **poor**. Fight back!

Now let’s take a moment to bring these **two groups** into **today**. Who do they sound like? At a **very basic** and **oversimplified level** the Herodians and Matthew seem to line up with those who are more **liberal** or **Democrats**. The Pharisees and Simon seem to line up with those who are more **conservative** or **Republicans**. Maybe as I was even describing one of those groups you thought, “Sounds good to me!” Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus was **clearly** in one of those camps? If he was clearly liberal or conservative? Maybe you think he is, but then why do both the **liberal Herodians** and **conservative Pharisees** band together to **eliminate the real Jesus**? It’s because his **teachings** are **threatening** their **beliefs** and **power**.

Lifeway Research just released a new study they did on **churchgoers** and **politics**.⁶ They found **46%** of **Protestant churchgoers** in America **under the age of 50** prefer to attend a church where people share their **political views**. But it’s not my generation that likes diversity in politics. As it **questions** people **over 50** they seem to prefer more diversity. But no matter your age there’s still a significant portion who don’t expect agreement. The executive director of **Lifeway Research** drew this conclusion, “Politics doesn’t seem to be a high priority for most Protestants when choosing a church to attend. But for a small group of churchgoers, it’s really crucial.”⁷

Another question showed that **51%** believe their **political views match those of most people at their church**, but there’s another **49%** who either **disagree** or **aren’t sure**. A previous study found that “only **1 in 10** would consider leaving their church over political views.” I hope that’s none of us!

There’s a great deal of **diversity** and **expectations** in the church around politics. We all bring our own **thoughts** and **motives** that we should take the time to **prayerfully examine**. *When you think you know where Jesus stands politically... First, test your motives. Second...*

2. Look for idolatry. (v23-24)

Idolatry isn’t a word we use very often. Idolatry is **two things**. It can literally be worshipping a **statue**, like the **golden calf** in **Exodus**. But at a more **basic level** idolatry is anything we **value more than God** (Exodus 20:3-6). So idolatry could be a **statue** you worship but also **money**, a **career**, **family**, **fitness**, **television**, **food**. It’s whatever we **love the most**. The people who ask Jesus this question are **committing idolatry**.

Luke 20:23-24 He saw through their duplicity and said to them, 24 “Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied. (NIV®)

When they ask Jesus if they should pay the tax Jesus asks them to show him the **coin** they would pay the tax with, a **denarius** which is worth **one** day’s wages. Here’s a **picture** of it.⁸ On one side is an **image** of **Caesar August** and the other has a **female figure** seated on a **throne**. Just like our **dollars** say “**In God we trust**” these say “**Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.**”⁹ Essentially they say, “In Caesar we trust.”

Remember how Jesus framed his question, “Whose **image** [is] on it?” The Greek word for image is **eikōn** and it can be **translated idol**.¹⁰ By carrying that coin in his **pocket** at least one of the spies was carrying an **idol** with an inscription that declared **Caesar** to be the **divine son of god**. Where is Jesus right now? He’s

standing in the **temple courts** (Luke 20:1). They've brought an idol into God's temple. It's like they've brought a **Yankees** hat to a **Red Sox** game! They've brought a **Starbucks frappuccino** into **Dunkin Donuts**! They think **Meryl Streep** is a better actor than **Mark Wahlberg**. It just so disrespectful.

Are your politics **more important** to you than Jesus? If you spend more time invested in the politics you **can't control** than **developing a relationship** with the living God, then you're committing idolatry. I have the **tendency** to do this but Jesus **deserves** to be **first** in our lives. Back in the Old Testament when **Joshua** was leading the invasion of **Jericho** he encounters **God's presence**.¹¹

Joshua 5:13-14 Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

14 "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" (NIV®)

Joshua is leading a **military engagement** that **God himself** has **approved** but when he asks this **divine messenger** if he is for them or against them he says, "Neither." He's for the Lord! We don't choose God to be on **our team**. He has his **own team** that we **can join**.

At his second inaugural address in **1865 President Abraham Lincoln** spoke about the differences and similarities **between the North** and the **South**. The **civil war** was almost over and somehow he needed to bring **healing to a nation**. In his **speech** he said how each side asked God for the same thing:

"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."¹²

Even as **Lincoln condemns slavery** he calls on his **audience**, the **victors**, to **examine** their **own hearts** and to **admit** that God's ways are **higher** than our ways. God is on his **own side**. *When you think you know where Jesus stands politically... First, test your motives. Second, look for idolatry. Third...*

3. Give God everything. (v25-26)

Luke 20:25 He said to them, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

26 They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent. (NIV®)

Jesus says to give earthly rulers what they are **due**. Caesar is due the **thing** with his **image** and **name** on it, so **money** and **taxes**. But then Jesus **contrasts** this with what God is due, "Give God what is God's." What belongs to God? **Everything**! God is Lord of all the universe. He owns every **coin** every **king** and every **kingdom**. If **putting** his image on a coin makes that coin Caesar's is there something God has put his **image** on that makes it his? **You!**

Genesis 1:27

So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (NIV®)

If you as a human being are made in God's image, if you reflect his **creativity** and **goodness** and ability to be in **relationship**, it means you belong to God. Caesar can have his coin and his politics. God wants **you!** It's not that he wants to **own** you. He wants to be in **relationship** with you. He wants to **love** you and for you to **experience** his love. He wants to give us **life** and **joy** and **happiness**. But there's a **problem**, sin. .

In **Genesis 3** humans broke what it means to be made in God's image by **disobeying** God. We became **broken images** that **dimly** reflects God's goodness, like a **cracked** and **tarnished mirror**. That's what **sin** does. It **breaks us** and our **ability to love God** and **others**. And for the longest time the **story of humanity** was of one broken **generation** passing their **brokenness** onto the next generation. Until one day a **baby was born** who wasn't broken. A baby was born who perfectly reflected the **goodness of God, Jesus**. The book of Hebrews calls Jesus, the Son of God, the **exact representation** of God.

Hebrews 1:3a The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...
(NIV®)

Jesus lived a **perfect life** so that one day he could go to the **cross** and pay the penalty for our brokenness. **He** who was not broken **became broken** so that you and I can become **whole again** (2 Cor 5:21). If you **confess** your sins and **believe** in Jesus he will make you whole too. He will **pick you up**, **dust** you off, and begin to **repair** the cracks and **shine** the dullness and pretty soon you'll **reflect** God's **goodness** and **holiness** too.

As the **Herodians** and **Pharisees** are trying to get Jesus caught up in a **silly little debate** about a **tiny little man** on a **small little coin**, the **fullness** of God's **glory** and **perfection** is standing right in front of them and they miss it. They miss their **opportunity** to encounter the **one true priceless image** of God! But you and I don't have to **miss him**. Today, you can **encounter** the living God. You can encounter the **perfect image**. You can encounter your **Savior**. You can encounter **Jesus**.

When you think you know where Jesus stands politically... First, test your motives. Second, look for idolatry. Third, give God everything. If you do this, I think at the end of the day you'll be **less interested** in having Jesus standing in your camp and **more interested** in **Jesus himself**.

*Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church.
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Jul 14, 2018

¹ Wilkins, Michael J.. *Matthew, Mark, Luke: Volume One (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Book 1)* (Kindle Locations 14857-14859). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² See Matthew 22:15 and Luke 20:19.

³ MGD, s.v. “ὑποκρίνομαι,” paragraph 15256. https://accordance.bible/link/read/Mounce_Greek_Dictionary#15256 Accessed 8/23/18.

⁴ Clayton Harrop and Charles W. Draper, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “JEWISH PARTIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT,” paragraph 9439. https://accordance.bible/link/read/Holman_Dictionary#9439

⁵ Josephus’ References to Crucifixion by Dr. James Tabor. <https://pages.uncc.edu/james-tabor/archaeology-and-the-dead-sea-scrolls/josephus-references-to-crucifixion/> Accessed 8/23/18.

⁶ Churchgoers Views - Politics by LifeWay Research. <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/American-Churchgoers-Political-Views-2017.pdf> Accessed 8/25/18.

⁷ Smietana, Bob. *Few Churchgoers Attend Services With People Who Hold Opposing Political Views*. LifeWay Research. <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/08/23/red-and-blue-churches-many-churchgoers-prefer-politically-divided-congregations/> Accessed 8/25/18.

⁸ Wilkins, Michael J.. (Kindle Locations 8646-8648).

⁹ *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. NIV. Zondervan. 2016. Matthew 22:19-20 footnote. Page 1656.

¹⁰ MED, s.v. “IMAGE,” 353. https://accordance.bible/link/read/Mounce_Expository#5793 Accessed 8/23/18.

¹¹ I believe this is not an angel because he doesn’t stop Joshua’s reverence, which could be taken for worship. The divine being also says something similar to what Moses heard when he encountered God at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5-6; Joshua 5:15).

¹² Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address. Wikipedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln%27s_second_inaugural_address Accessed 8/24/18.