

Two Spheres: Church and State

series - God & Governance

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John 18:33-40

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From the moment of Jesus's public ministry, from the moment that it began there was an argument, a disagreement, and lots of questions—specifically even among those who were closest to him. Even to the moment prior to his crucifixion there was a question that rumbled through the hearts and minds of his disciples and both those who were for him and those who were against him. And from the moment of his resurrection the church has been about a debate—sometimes it's been extremely hot, in other times it's receded into the background—to this very day. And that question, that debate has been about: OK, what is the mission of God as we understand the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, and the kingdoms of the world? What impact does one have on the other? And this debate has been had almost in every different culture. Wars have been waged over this very issue. And I will say that while I think God's word has much to say to us in this regard, it's not going to answer all, nor satisfy all, of the questions in this argument.

And to that end I want to say thank you to all of you who came last week to our Q&A after the worship service, as we've been talking in this series on *God & Governance*, as we looked at several different questions and concerns in this area—and we're going to be having another one of those. And we're looking at having regular Q&A's so that we can talk about any subject. But more on that in the weeks to come.

But this morning we look at “The Two Spheres: Church and State.” And here we find again this very question: How are we to understand these two spheres, if you will, these two kingdoms, or as Augustine put it, these two cities: the City of God and the City of Man. What is the calling of the church? What is the calling of the individual Christian? We're going to look at that this morning. You've heard it read already but let me read this portion of Scripture again. John 18:33-40.

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.” ³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man

for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"⁴⁰ They cried out again, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Now Lord, I ask that by the work of your Holy Spirit, which has already been at work in us this morning, we want to fully recognize that our worship is being held before the face of heaven, that we are not worshipping alone, but rather our worship is a mirror image of the worship that is taking place in heaven—for glory and honor is being given to Christ the Son, to God the Father, and the Holy Spirit in full glory exultation. That all the saints who have gone before us are now worshipping you, and our worship here is participating in that heavenly worship. And so we would praise as Jesus taught us to pray, that your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. And so as we are worshipping you and as your word is being brought to bear on our lives, may your Holy Spirit make us the people of God you desires to be. And help us to have wisdom and discernment from your word to be able to understand these two important spheres: the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of man. Help us, oh Lord, that we might embody the gospel in the way that we live, in the way that we worship. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning I'll be looking at three points as you see in your outline. **Christ's Kingdom, Worldly Kingdoms**; the second point is meant to be possessive [it was incorrect in the bulletin]—**The Church's Calling**; and then finally **A Christian Vision. Christ's Kingdom, Worldly Kingdoms; The Church's Calling**; and **A Christian Vision**. And so what we're going to be doing this morning is we're using this opening passage which I have read from to establish the distinction between God's kingdom and worldly kingdoms. But then as we continue to go further in understanding the nuances of that, in the application of it, I'll be referring to other passages as well. So if you're interested you can do one of two things. One, you can take notes, if you like, or two, you can go back and re-listen to the sermon. But if you can't bear to do that, you may not know that we have also transcripts of sermons that are preached here from this pulpit, and you can go to our sermon download page where you can find a transcript. Each week these sermons are transcribed by professional transcribers, and they are given to you, and they largely capture 98%. But you can't capture all that I would ever say, so God bless those transcribers. But if you're interested and ever want to find quotes or something other you can also engage with sermons there, in case you did not know that.

So let's begin. **Christ's Kingdom, Worldly Kingdoms**. It was not the invention of St. Augustine when he wrote *The City of God* as he understood the distinction between the City of God and the City of Man; it was not an invention of the early church that there is a kingdom of God and a kingdom of man. Rather it was, indeed, from God Himself who revealed it. And he revealed it when he called a people to himself, when he called Abraham, when he said, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12 and other references). And so he began with a man that became a family that would become a nation, and he called that nation to himself, and he called them uniquely a people unto himself: Israel. But they were to live in the world, and they were to be a city on a hill, the light of God's righteousness, grace to the nations and to the sojourners and aliens, as well, who would come into their midst. They were meant to be in the world, yet distinct, because they belonged to God. But Israel's disobedience did not mean that God's Kingdom had failed. Rather God was still about bringing about redemption. And so we

see that the fruition of calling forth a nation within actual national boundaries—in its failure because of their disobedience—God always intended that Israel be pointed to something greater. That their king, King David, and their other kings—both the ones that failed and the ones that were successful—always were meant to point to a greater king. That greater king is the Lord Jesus Christ. That greater nation is the body of Christ, the church. And when Jesus says here from his own words, he says, “My kingdom is not of this world,” he is saying he has a kingdom. And he's speaking to the leader of a worldly kingdom, and at that time it was the Roman Empire.

And so if we're to understand Christ's kingdom and worldly kingdoms, we can only ask, first and foremost, how are they distinct. They are distinct, first and foremost, because of who their head is. Christ's kingdom, God's kingdom, we know, established by scripture, is that Jesus Christ, before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, he is the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God, he is the King of kings and the Lord of Lords—the one who is the head of the Kingdom of God is none other than Jesus Christ. And what characterizes his kingdom is something vastly different than that which characterizes worldly kingdoms. We can look at specifically even what is inferred when Jesus responds, when he says in verse 36: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from this world.” What he's establishing there is not just historical events of what's unfolding in front of Pilate, but rather the nature and character of Christ's kingdom. It is fundamentally different. And it means this: he wages war, not with weapons, but with his body and his blood. Because his enemies are not flesh and blood; his enemy is very much Satan and the devil. And this world—because God teaches it from his word—that because the world. . . because of sin of our parents [who] have gone before us, Adam and Eve, and their natures being fallen, we have received fallen sinful natures that are bound in chains by sin, and the master of sin is Satan himself. And from the moment of the fall there has been a great war between God and Satan. But the winner of that war is God himself in Jesus Christ, so revealed through the cross of Christ, because on the cross sin and death are conquered. We see this because of the resurrection. And Jesus conquered the kingdom and became king, not through the war of weapons and the bloodshed of human beings, but the blood shed of his own life. Because he said, *If my kingdom were of this world, do you think, in essence, I would ever give myself over? Do you think my servants, my disciples, would ever do such a thing? No, of course they would rise up against and prevent it.* But Jesus said to his disciples and is inferring here, *I have laid down my life. Here is the Lamb of God.* And as the Lamb of God who would be slain he also becomes the Lion of Judah, the King.

But note this as well: There's another place where we can learn the character of Christ's kingdom. And just imagine for just a moment this is the night before Jesus would be crucified. He is celebrating the supper, the Passover meal, with his disciples in the upper room, and he institutes at the Passover meal a new meal which was to transcend the Passover meal. And this meal was what we call the Lord's Supper, where he broke bread and he gave wine and he said . . . with the bread—he broke it, and he gave it to his disciples and said, “This is my body which is given for you. Eat of it, all of you, in remembrance of me.” And he also gave the cup of wine after the supper. He says, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins.” And Paul would continue, and he says, “Whenever you eat of this bread

and you drink of this cup, as often as you do it, remember what Christ has done for you.” And when he establishes this meal, which is pointing to the character of his kingship, his sacrificial nature of being the Lamb of God for the sins of the world, his disciples erupt in debate. Because at the supper Jesus—remember he says, *Hey, there's one here at the table who's going to come against me.* And they're like, *Who's that?* And after they try to figure out who that is, then they have an argument about who's the greatest. Now imagine that. They are—you know what these disciples are revealing, they're revealing what the kingdoms of men and women are about—we're about ourselves. And they were concerned who's the greatest. And this is Jesus's response:

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors (meaning they try to benefit from those they rule over). ²⁶ But you are not [to be] like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. ²⁸ You are those who have stood by me in my trials. ²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. [Luke 22:24-30, NIV]

Jesus is saying that the greatest in his Kingdom is the one who serves, that is, the lowest place. What characterizes the kingdom of God is humility, sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. But that is not what characterizes the kingdoms of the world, the worldly kingdoms.

And while not wanting to expound on everything one could ever say about worldly kingdoms, I've summarized it in this way, though I recognize it doesn't go after all the nuances—but work with me, if you will. Pilate demonstrates this, as do the other leaders we come into contact with in the New Testament, that worldly kingdoms are described as those kingdoms of men who are about obtaining, maintaining, and applying power and authority. How this is expressed is varied. It may look like democratic republics, it may look like those who are ruled by kings and monarchies, or it may be dictatorial rule. And there are a whole lot of nuances [within] that entire spectrum, as well. But in short, worldly kingdoms are about the obtaining, maintaining, and application of worldly power and authority. As we've learned in the weeks prior, that authority has been established by God, for what—for the good of us, for punishing the wrongdoer, and providing opportunities for those who do well and do right to prosper. Now we recognize that because of sin and because power corrupts because of our sinful natures, this has led to a great deal of bloodshed, even to this very day. But we have, in contrast, the worldly kingdoms, that are characterized by the obtaining and the applying of worldly power and authority, and Christ's kingdom, that is established—and [defeat ?] and power are maintained and obtained not by trying to rule over, but by sacrifice and humility. Those are completely opposite of one another. In the world you are mighty by your position and your influence. In Christ's kingdom you and your influence is signified through your humility, in taking up the way of Jesus. And the weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of warfare among the kingdoms of the world.

And there is one final distinction. No matter how any government anywhere has ever stated it, there is only one kingdom—only one—that has as its purpose redemption, and that is Christ and his kingdom. Kingdoms try to provide utopias. They try to provide good and safe living, abundance—not all, but some do, including the one in which we live. But even the best imaginable United States of America can never redeem one human being. And the best and most gleaming version of the United States of America cannot redeem any other culture, it cannot restore peace which transcends all understanding. That alone belongs to Christ and his Kingdom.

So therefore if this is Christ and His kingdom, and this Kingdom is represented not by nation states, but by groups of people which are a part of the church of Jesus Christ, then what is **The Church's Calling**. The church's calling is this first: It is the declaration of God's Word. We hear it in Matthew 28 in the Great Commission where Jesus says I charge you to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them [to obey] everything that I have commanded you.” That phrase, “teaching them everything I have commanded you”—Jesus has just exalted everything that he has taught, and he's pointing back to Matthew 5 where he began his public ministry. That “everything that I have commanded you” now becomes the very Word of God, and it is to be the basis upon which the church finds its existence. It is the basis and the authority for the church, because it is God's truth everywhere and forever. And what we teach is God's Word. That is the church's calling.

Secondly, it is the ministry of the sacraments. We hear it when Jesus in the Great Commission says to them, “baptizing them.” Baptizing disciples. This means that Jesus exults—because of his own baptism he exults, because of his own ministry and now his own teaching—that a part of what is given to the church is first the Word, yes, but also the sacrament of baptism, to signify the bringing in of those into the Kingdom of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. The church in the New Testament has no other entrance, right, where it understands membership in the body, other than baptism. And then when you are a member of God's visible church, the other sacrament is also important, and that is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And we hear it taught as it was practiced with Jesus and His disciples. Paul takes this teaching and continues to expound it for the early church. And he says, “When you eat of this bread and you drink of this cup, as long as you do it, do so remembering what Christ has done for you (1 Corinthians 11). This is what the church's calling is: the word and it being preached and taught, and the sacraments that Christ has instituted: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The next calling is prayer. Jesus taught us how to pray. And he gave us the Lord's Prayer as the model, not the only way to pray—those actual words—but as the model for our prayer. And then that prayer is established through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we learn, in Romans 8. And that even when we don't know what to pray or how to pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us in ways that words cannot fully communicate. And Christ is also appealing on our behalf as our mediator at the right hand of God the Father. But then it would be Paul who would say in the book of 1 Thessalonians he says, *Be about rejoicing. Be joyful, and pray without ceasing.* So you have the church's calling: the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. This is what theologians have called throughout the generations ‘the means of grace.’ How does God communicate to you his presence, his grace, his power, and his love? The means of grace of the Word, sacraments, and

prayer are the three means through which and by which Christ and his kingdom, through his church, says to you, *I love you. I have redeemed you. You belong to me.*

The question is, then, if this is the calling of the church as the Kingdom of God on earth, is there anything else we can say collectively or individually regarding our calling? And I believe this is where all the debate has been throughout the generations. Some believe that the church is not to say anything else. We're simply to be about preaching the word, giving of the sacraments, and prayer. As it relates to the kingdoms of the world, some believe that simply we are not to allow the pulpit or the church to be a place where we go about dealing with issues in the world or among the kingdoms of men. I respect that position, but I humbly disagree. Because if we believe that the gospel goes about changing human beings, changing our hearts, changing our attitudes, changing our relationships—that means that what emanates from human beings, and that is culture and that is institutions, then the church has a prophetic role in the world. And I do believe there is a place for the collective church and individually as Christians to be engaged in Christian, gospel-shaped social thought and discussion. The gospel calling is for us in some way to unpack the gospel in word and in deed. What I mean by this is the church has had in the past and ought to have in the present and in the future, by way of hearing and applying its calling of the word, sacraments, and prayer, to have a prophetic role in the world. But if we misunderstand that prophetic role, if we believe [the church] doesn't have a prophetic role, then we will oftentimes be silent.

An example of this, and I say this as a Southerner who grew up saying 'y'all,' that my Presbyterian forebears in the south, and even the formation of the denomination in which I was ordained, was not only culpable in establishing and maintaining and propagating segregation, it was absolutely silent from the pulpit regarding the scourge and sin of slavery and the scourge and sin of segregation. Because many of my Presbyterian forebears—though there is much that they have said which I respect and agree with, and I recognize my own fallibility in this day and time—I can look back, with hindsight being 20/20 and with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I see where the church failed in its prophetic role. It refused to speak about the way in which black families and black individuals were being mistreated by the government, by the law, and underwent great injustice. And then in the church it became the most segregated hour in the south. That is sin. But many of my forebears believed that they were not to speak to these things, because that was not the church's role. I humbly disagree, recognizing we cannot allow the pulpit nor the church to become overtaken by political agendas. I recognize that that requires a level of nuance and wisdom and discernment for the church and its leaders, and for the congregations of Christ's church to be wise in how we function in this prophetic role. We still struggle with this very issue today. Though it is only permitted and not forced, does the church still have a role in this culture when it relates to the issue of abortion? Ought we to be prophetic in our preaching that the taking of a life is abhorrent to God, and at the same time recognizing—even [as] there may be some here who have experienced abortion—that God's forgiveness and grace is for you, but that the establishment of this being legal is an abomination to God. We still have a prophetic role, but we must be wise in how we use it.

But let me put one more before you, and I recognize my time is short. Here I want to expand our minds to a hypothetical. Can we imagine a United States someday—out of fear, maybe perhaps in a time of open warfare—where a government of the United States might agree with

the rounding up indiscriminately of those who practice Islam. If that were to happen, does the church of Jesus Christ have a prophetic role? What ought we to say were that to happen? We can simply look at our past and say this: If that were to happen, where any people group were indiscriminately—simply because of their race, their gender, or their religion—were being rounded up for fear that they were a threat to the nation state of the United States—were that to happen, the church of Jesus Christ has a prophetic role. Because we recognize if we are not prophetic in saying that that is unjust, that that does not reflect the grace of Christ, we must recognize that that same rule could be turned on us. Because it has already happened in our neighboring state, in Virginia, it was illegal to practice any other religion other than Anglicanism at the founding of this nation. To preach in the Colonies one had to get a government license to preach. And if you didn't fit with the governing approved practice of religion, you weren't given a license. But it was specifically Presbyterians in the Hanover Presbytery near what is [now] Virginia Beach—it was their protesting to the state government of Virginia that would finally lead, (ten or eleven years later), to what would become the basis for the right and freedom to practice religion however we see fit. They struggled with whether they should do that. But they believed they had a prophetic role, and they spoke to power—not to a particular leader, but to power. And so they were allowed to practice Presbyterianism and not just Anglicanism. I do believe the church's calling is the means of grace, but embodied in the preaching of the gospel means we have a prophetic role.

But finally—and I'll end with my last sub-point, otherwise this sermon will make no sense—there is **A Christian Vision** for the Kingdom of God among the kingdoms of men, and that is this: God's purpose has. . .he has a redemptive mission. The question is: Does God only care about redeeming individuals and bringing them into the church? Some believe so. But as you've heard from this pulpit and in our Sunday schools and otherwise, we believe God's redemptive mission is best seen in what we call the four chapter gospel: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. That God is not just about redeeming those who are sinful, those who have fallen. Because the world began by the word of his power in creation, and yes, we have fallen because of sin and yes, through Jesus Christ we are redeemed and only through Christ are we redeemed. It is never less than that. But to suggest that God is only interested in redeeming individuals and not seeing what comes from humanity, that is, culture, and [to] believe that God doesn't want the church and Christians to be involved in the restoration of all that is around us for the sake of his glory—we will have missed the fourth chapter of the gospel: Restoration. Otherwise the church simply becomes a salvation station. We want the lost to be saved, but we turn a blind eye to brokenness in the world and the institutions around us. I'm not saying how that's always to be done, but God's mission is more than just that your sins might be forgiven and you [are] brought into right relationship with God. But it is something even more profound, and it is an embodied salvation.

I say it this way: If all that we are about is simply receiving forgiveness and being redeemed and being brought into right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, through the power of His Spirit, then our faith merely becomes vertical: you and Jesus. But what we recognize is that the gospel is not just vertical; it is profoundly horizontal. Because Jesus would say himself in Luke 6, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." What he's saying is: Mercy we have received, and mercy we are to give. That our relationships horizontally, our work in the marketplace, our play, our sport—all of these things that are in the horizontal sphere are meant to be touched and

transformed through the gospel power of God working through the church collectively and individually. Because as one writer said, “When the mercy of God goes from our vertical relationship with him and is lived out horizontally as far as the curse is found, then the mercy of Christ and Christianity has landed.” It is meant to be embodied in the way we live, in the way we work, in the way we govern, in the way we relate. It isn't just about me, myself, and Jesus. It is about what God is doing in the world, which is why we send mission teams, which is why God has called you wherever it is you work or live or play. He has a redemptive purpose for you. Those relationships that you have are not by accident. They are there for a purpose. The gifts and talents he has given you, they are not just for providing for you and your family. They are for using them rightly with excellence for the glory of God in Christ, because our Father has created. And in our fallenness we are redeemed through Christ, so that the world—in small steps, waiting for Christ return—might taste of the restoration of the mission of God.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I want to thank you for your word. I want to thank you for the calling that you have given to us as the church. And Lord, it requires a great deal of wisdom and discernment. But we do so, humbling ourselves before you, asking that you would guide us in living out our prophetic role both as individuals as well as corporately. That we would speak when we need to speak, serving we need to serve, and to be merciful. Lord, help us to do this, because unless you go before us, we cannot. We cannot lean on our own understanding. And so we would ask you for the guidance of your Word and for the power of your Spirit. Now make us, the church of Jesus Christ, a part of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the worldly kingdoms. I pray that you would make us more and more into your image, that we might be a blessing to those around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.