



Week 6: Jesus & Our Politics

Matthew 22:15-22

GOAL:

To discover how Christians can engage politics by rejecting simplicity and putting Jesus first

CHECKLIST

- Reach out individually to anyone who did not attend last week. Let them know that you missed them and would love to see them this week.
- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Finalize the date for your Grow Group Prayer Night and send the date to Amy.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members (please include their names and contact info in the meeting notes section). Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we grieve the divisiveness and polarization that plagues our country and culture, especially in this season. Help us to reject the temptation of simplistic answers and divisive rhetoric. Forgive us for those times that we have put Christ or our Christian values in second place to politics and partisanship. As we prepare to discuss this challenging yet crucial topic with our groups, give us unity and a spirit of discernment. May all we say and do honor you and one another. Remind us of Jesus' wisdom, which goes beyond the simplicity of "either/or" choices and invites us to consider a greater Kingdom perspective. Help us to fix our eyes on Jesus, and to allow him to guide us into all truth and empower us to be peacemakers, bringing the hope of Christ into every area of life. Above all, may our conversations point us and others to Jesus, who is our true king and the one in whom we place our hope. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT, COORDINATE, & PRAY

To connect relationally and also to elicit ways to pray for one another, ask all group members to share one way they saw God at work in the past week, and one way they are praying for God to work in the week to come. Then spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today.

If you haven't already, decide on a date in October or early November for your Grow Group Prayer Night. Be sure everyone marks this date on their calendars. Email Amy with your date also. (Thanks!)

DISCUSS

Leaders: *This is tricky subject to navigate in a small group setting. But we don't have to be afraid! We have Scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide us. Remember, our goal is to dig into the Scripture passage for today and talk about what resonated in the sermon, not to wade into specific issues or candidates. We are praying for you as you prepare and lead! Here are some things to keep in mind as you lead this week:*

- **Don't assume everyone feels the same way you do (politically).** *Lead your group as if there are people on all points of the political spectrum in your group, and a lot of diversity in how (and why) they're going to vote next month. So as you prepare, ask yourselves, "How do we lead this group of politically diverse people in a way that puts Jesus first?" Make that your main goal!*
 - *As we mentioned in the Grow Group Leader Training in August, this is not the time for you to lay out your political leaning and viewpoints. **Try to remain biblically focused first and foremost.** Use the Scripture and depend on the Holy Spirit to guide your conversations.*
 - *If you want to **review the training we did in August** on navigating tricky conversations like politics in your Grow Group, please see the video and resources included in this week's leader email and on the Grow Group Leader Tools page.*
- What resonated with you from the Growth Guide readings this week?

Leaders: *Be prepared to share your own perspective first, and what you found to be meaningful or thought-provoking from your Growth Guide readings. Maybe it is how often we are tempted to make Jesus something he is not. Or how to live in a way that people know you belong to Jesus. Maybe you felt called to pray that God would grant you boldness and courage as you speak the truth in love about your Savior. Perhaps God is calling you to see those who are vulnerable through his eyes, and to seek out ways to show mercy and compassion. As a follow-up question, you could ask how each of these themes relate to Pastor John's sermon this week.*

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Read Matthew 22:15-17.

- Why do you think the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus with this question?

Leaders: *In this passage, the Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus by asking if it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. This was a divisive issue in Israel, where Roman rule was resented by many. If Jesus supported paying taxes, He could alienate the Jewish people; if He opposed it, He could be reported to Roman authorities.*

Remember what Pastor John pointed out: we think we are in a divided culture, and we are. But this is nothing new, and in fact, theirs was worse! Christians of all times seek to know how much of themselves they should give to their country, its government, and its important concerns. The leaders have been watching Jesus closely. Jesus' cleansing of the temple had been a revolutionary act against the religious authority, and of course they resented that. Now the Pharisees are hoping they can provoke him and trap him in a revolutionary act against civic authority.

One of the most famous Jewish leaders when Jesus was a boy, Judas the Gaulanite, had led a revolt precisely on this issue. NT Wright explains that the Romans crushed the revolt mercilessly, leaving crosses around the countryside, with dead and dying revolutionaries on them, as a warning that paying the tax was compulsory, not optional. The Pharisees' question is set in this political context.

But the religious context is similarly heated. Jews weren't allowed to put images of people, human faces, on their coins. Caesar not only stamped his image but also added an inscription to the coin that would repulse any devote Jew: "Son of God...high priest." The funny thing is – Jews had been given a special allowance to carry coins without Caesar's image, and yet here they were obviously in possession of it anyway. Jesus' request in verse 19 to show him the coin may be "tongue in cheek," pointing out their hypocrisy. When they admit that the coin is Caesar's, they are also having to admit to the fact that they are carrying it.

Note the stark contrast between verses 15 and 16. The Pharisees are "buttering Jesus up" just to bring him down and trap him. They want to disarm him with flattery so that they can snare him with a simplistic yes or no answer. What they say of Jesus is true—he is a man of integrity and truth, not a people pleaser or a chameleon. As Frederick Dale Bruner points out, "the questioners butter Jesus up, to begin with, in the hope that if they praise his straightforwardness he will be moved by vanity to speak himself 'straight forward' into his enemies' hands, to the right or to the left, and so effectively compromise his ministry." Sometimes politicians butter us up too! We have to be careful who and what we believe.

Leaders: *Be sure to read the leader notes on the following page before asking this next question. When you do ask the question, please include a few examples from the leader notes to point the conversation toward HOW we engage issues and politics, not about particular issues and stances.*

- What are some "traps" people today might face when it comes to aligning their faith with societal pressures?

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Leaders: *The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by forcing him into an all-or-nothing choice: Jesus is either an insurrectionist or an unfaithful sellout (loyal to the idolatrous Roman government). Either way, “somebody’s taking Jesus to jail,” the Pharisees or the Romans. But Jesus sidesteps this false dichotomy by affirming the necessity of giving each of our allegiances their proper place.*

Similarly, today, we might face pressure to align our beliefs in an all-or-nothing manner with political parties or issues, but we can’t allow ourselves to be trapped in a false dichotomy. How does this play out in our lives today? Here are a few examples:

- **Identity:** *As we saw last week, one trap might be prioritizing our earthly citizenship above our heavenly citizenship. Sometimes our society makes it difficult to distinguish between following Jesus and prioritizing our political identity. But Jesus reminds us that we are citizens of God’s Kingdom first and foremost, even while being part of earthly nations.*
- **Assuming Extremism:** *If I identify with one political party (or the other), I might be viewed by others as aligning with the biggest extremes of that party’s perspective. But if I hold to Scripture and Christian values as my top priority, I can recognize the complex nature of political issues, and avoid categorizing or vilifying others by the most extreme aspects of their political party.*
- **Politicizing Faith:** *Society often pressures believers to endorse political candidates as synonymous with Christian values. But as Pastor John pointed out in his sermon, “No political candidate perfectly embodies the way of God’s Kingdom. No political party perfectly promotes God’s truth. So be careful about letting yourself get painted into a corner. Be careful about attaching yourself too closely to one candidate or one party, whichever one it is! Because they’re not Jesus!” In fact, Christians can have a deep love for God and a high value of Scripture and still see political issues from different perspectives. Jesus’ teaching calls us to reject simplistic dualities and to understand that our loyalty belongs first to God’s Kingdom, which transcends human politics.*
- **Compartmentalizing Faith:** *Many today view life in separate compartments, such as work, home, church, politics. There’s societal pressure to privatize faith, viewing it as irrelevant in the public square or incompatible with professional and civic duties. Jesus’ statement to give to God what belongs to God challenges us to view all of life—public and private—as belonging to him.*
- **Moral Relativism:** *Often without even realizing it, we experience pressure to conform to society’s fluid definitions of right and wrong, rather than standing firm in the truth of Scripture. Jesus’ wisdom in addressing complex issues points to the need for discernment and holding fast to God’s truth, even when it’s countercultural.*
- **Avoiding Hard Conversations:** *Sometimes we are tempted to avoid discussing difficult or divisive topics like politics, for fear of conflict, rather than engaging them with grace and truth. But Jesus provides a model for us, engaging with tough questions without falling into traps, with humility, seeking understanding while maintaining convictions.*
- **Seeking Power Over Service:** *Our culture today celebrates leaders that prioritize power, influence, and control over those that model humility and Christlike servanthood. Jesus reminds us that Kingdom power and the ability to effect real, transformative change comes not through dominance and control but in love, justice, and sacrifice.*
- **Fear of Rejection or Persecution:** *Many face pressure to compromise their faith and conform to the world’s standards to avoid being labeled intolerant, judgmental, or out of touch. Jesus calls his followers to stand firm in the face of opposition, knowing that our allegiance to God’s Kingdom may result in tension or conflict with worldly systems.*

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Read Matthew 22:18-22.

- In verse 18, Jesus has a higher perspective, seeing the Pharisees' trap from a mile away. What is Jesus' wisdom here? How can we gain that perspective to think biblically about complex issues?

Leaders: *Instead of falling into their trap, Jesus uses wisdom that transcends their dualistic choices and surface-level conflicts. Here are a few ways Jesus did that:*

1. **Understanding the Bigger Picture:** *Jesus doesn't reduce the issue to a simplistic choice. He acknowledges the legitimacy of both earthly and heavenly authority but places them in their proper place. His response suggests that there are different levels of obligation, with our highest allegiance owed to God.*
2. **Avoiding False Dichotomies:** *Jesus knows that supporting or rejecting Rome cannot be the only options. He didn't allow them to define what his choices were. Instead, he refocuses the conversation on a greater issue – God's authority over everything. He seems to affirm what God has set up that is backed up in other sections of Scripture (1 Peter) – there is a role for government, but let the role of government stay in its proper place.*
3. **Discerning Intentions and Motives:** *Jesus understood their poor motives. He's modeling how we can be discerning and wise about people's motives. In this election season, everyone has motives—the candidates, your friends and coworkers, even you! Understanding these motives can help us respond in a way that disarms deception without compromising truth.*

We can apply Jesus' same kind of wisdom to complex, divisive issues in our own day by learning to think biblically and see situations from a higher Kingdom perspective. We can develop these skills by...

- **reminding ourselves that we are Kingdom citizens first and foremost** (Philippians 3:20 "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.")
 - **seeking God's wisdom through prayer** (James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.")
 - **regularly studying, memorizing, and applying God's Word** (Matthew 7:24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.")
 - **applying Jesus' perspective of 100% grace and 100% truth without compromising either** (John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.")
 - **coming to the Jesus & Our Politics event this Wednesday night from 6-7:30!** Invite your group to attend and sit together. You can take a hand count and register everyone at vrbc.net/events.
- What does it mean for something to bear someone's image? How does that inform our understanding of what belongs to God?

Leaders: *Just as the Roman denarius was stamped with Caesar's image, we ourselves are stamped with the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says so: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image*

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of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Every one of us – male and female, short and tall, Republican and Democrat, from every place and every culture, we are all made in God’s image. When each of us looks in the mirror, we are looking at God’s image. We belong to God—our entire lives: our allegiances, our priorities, our hopes, everything!

As Pastor John explained, Jesus is essentially saying, “Yes, you can give Caesar your taxes. But don’t give him your heart. Your heart is meant for something higher. Your heart belongs to God! So give it back to him.”

- In our own lives, what belongs to “Caesar” and what belongs to God? How do we know when we’re not giving to God what is God’s? What would be some clues from our mindset or our behavior?

Leaders: *Our life is God’s. Everything else is underneath that, including how we engage in our political climate. It’s not that we pledge allegiance to Jesus so that we don’t have to engage in politics. It’s that we pledge allegiance to Jesus so that we know how to engage in politics as a follower of Jesus.*

Pastor John points out that Jesus’ words were not just “give” (as a gift) but “give back (as in repaying a debt owed) to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” As Frederick Dale Bruner explains:

The state performs such multiple services for its citizens, symbolized by coinage — from water, sewage, high-ways, and defense to standards in food, buildings, business, education, and so on — that we should appreciate that the state is, in Paul’s idiom, God’s servant for our well-being (Rom 13:4). When the state thus serves, it is ingrate to refuse payment for services. A state is a system of institutionalized laws, and Plato was right, “Who would care for a city without laws?” and again, “goodness and integrity, institutions and laws, are the most precious possessions of mankind” (Crito 53A, C). Judas the Gaulanite, Jesus’ neighbor and near contemporary, was wrong: “What is taxation but an introduction to slavery?” (Josephus, Ant. 18.1.1). Respect for government is an important form of respect for God.

By the same rationale, as citizens and residents of this country, we have a responsibility to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7) where we live. That means that we should be regularly praying for and consistently engaged in civic life. But we do so in a way that puts Jesus first and demonstrates that we are citizens of God’s Kingdom above any earthly citizenship.

As we engage in civic life and politics, here are some clues that we are not putting Jesus first:

- *If we can’t sit in the same room or have a conversation about politics with people who feel differently from us, or we get angry just thinking about it...*
- *When we put all of our hope into who wins or doesn’t win...*
- *When we speak disrespectfully, rudely, hatefully...*
- *When we give ourselves permission to be absolutely unChristlike because we think the end justifies the means...*
- *When we find ourselves doomscrolling and getting angry...*
- *When we are tempted to disengage from politics completely... (“I’m not going to vote...”)*
- *...It’s because we’ve lost perspective that God is bigger than all of this.*

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- Why are we tempted to give too much allegiance to earthly powers, authorities, or ideologies (e.g., political parties, social movements, national identity)? How does this passage challenge us to place our ultimate allegiance in Jesus?

Leaders: *There are many reasons we may be tempted to give too much allegiance to earthly powers. Brainstorm with your group and talk about the ones that most often affect your group members. Here are a few ideas:*

1. **Desire for Security and Stability:** *People often place their trust in earthly powers—whether political parties, governments, or social movements—because these structures promise security and stability. We want to feel safe and believe that aligning with a certain ideology or group will protect us or guarantee our well-being. This need for security can become so overwhelming that we give too much loyalty to systems and authorities that appear to offer solutions to our fears. But consider these Scriptures:*
 - Psalm 4:8 “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”
 - Psalm 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”
 - Psalm 91
 - Psalm 118:8-9 “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.”
 - Proverbs 1:33 “but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.”
 - Ephesians 6:10 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”
2. **Need for Belonging and Identity:** *Many people find their sense of belonging and identity in political parties, social movements, or national affiliations. These groups provide a shared sense of purpose and values, creating a sense of “us versus them.” But as we discussed last week, our primary identity is as citizens of God’s Kingdom (Philippians 3:20). This allows us to take an us-for-them rather than an us-versus-them approach.*
3. **Control and Influence:** *Aligning with earthly powers often gives us a sense of control. People are tempted to believe that if they support the right party, ideology, or movement, they can shape the world according to their beliefs. The pursuit of influence and power can drive us to place our hope in political leaders or systems, even when they are flawed or corrupt. Read Psalm 146 for a great reminder about putting our trust in the Maker of heaven and earth rather than in earthly leaders!*
4. **Immediate, Tangible Results:** *Earthly powers provide visible, tangible results that seem more immediate than the often slower, less obvious work of God’s Kingdom. It can be tempting to trust in human institutions that offer quick fixes or apparent solutions to societal problems, even though they may not align with God’s purposes. But as Matthew 6:33 reminds us, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

We’re NOT saying to disengage from politics and just go hide in a hole somewhere. As Christians, we are supposed to impact the world around us for good. We have the opportunity to make a difference through our words, actions, and also through our vote. And we have an obligation for our vote to be informed by Scripture and by seeking out truth over propaganda and clickbait.

WEEK 6

And we're also not saying that if we'll just all read our Bible, we will all agree. Giving our highest allegiance to Jesus doesn't get rid of our differences. But we never have a pass to disrespect, devalue, denigrate, or hate others. Giving our ultimate allegiance to Jesus helps to alleviate the tension we feel between one another. It allows us to put our differences into perspective, to listen with greater understanding, and to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

- How do you find yourself convicted? What steps can you take to ensure that your ultimate allegiance is to Jesus in your daily life, work, and community?

Leaders: *Don't miss this last but important question! Let your group wrestle with how Jesus' challenging teaching can bring about conviction and change in their own lives. Encourage and pray for one another as you seek to live out what each of you share.*

PRAY

Spend time in prayer as a group, asking for wisdom and courage to give your ultimate allegiance to Jesus. Pray for clarity in balancing earthly responsibilities with a heart focused on God's Kingdom.

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