

The Greatest Political Decision Ever Made

Matthew 4:8-11

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What is the most important political decision ever made? What would you say? Maybe it was when our country was first launched and we declared our independence from Great Britain. I think we can agree that was important, but was it the most important ever? Or maybe it was when slavery was abolished and we finally went after what many refer to as this nation's original sin of racial injustice and oppression that still impacts American life. Or maybe it's the decision to extend voting rights to women or some have suggested the most important decision is the outcome of this year's presidential election. They are all important, but I want to suggest the most important political decision was made 2000 years ago. I want us to look at that decision and its implications for our nation and our lives.

Jesus was beginning his ministry when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he would spend 40 days and 40 nights alone in prayer and fasting. It was during those 40 days that Jesus faced his greatest temptations which are also our greatest temptations. And the one I want to focus on today is the third and final temptation which is recorded in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Matthew. **Then the devil brought [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.** Let's pause for a moment and try to imagine this picture. This is not something that could have been accomplished in a few seconds. This is quite a view – all of the kingdoms. This is not just his hometown of Nazareth or the capitol city of Jerusalem or all of the territory between them, but this includes Roman, the entire Roman Empire, and even Asia, Africa, and North and South America that no one even knew existed. Look, Jesus, all the kingdoms of the world. **"I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."**

A word about the Devil. Most people when they think the Devil get this image of some character with horns and a goatee, wearing a red suit, and holding a pitchfork. But if I ever saw a creature like that, I would not be tempted, I'd be running away. The Bible never pictures the devil like that, never pictures him physically, but as a spiritual force. The devil is never as powerful as God but is opposed to good and is often described as the Tempter. A few weeks ago, when we looked at temptation, I said that for me temptation is usually this voice in my head or its this nudge to do what is first and foremost what I think is best for me even when it's not what God wants for me. So picture Jesus and his wisdom and character and competence and then picture the kingdoms of the world with all of their neediness and brokenness. And what Jesus is being offered seems like a good deal to me. Wouldn't we be better off living in a nation, living in a world where Jesus was in control? What if North Korea was led by Jesus? Or China? Or Syria? Or the United States? Wouldn't we want to live that world? Wouldn't this election be a whole lot easier if Jesus was one of the candidates on the ballot? Let me be clear, Jesus is not one of the candidates on the ballot – and neither is the devil.

But what if Jesus was running the country? No more gridlock in Congress. No more bickering – he'd find a way to put an end to that. We'd get tax relief from heaven. The Internal Revenue Service would be the Eternal Revenue Service. We wouldn't need a Supreme Court. Imagine Jesus running the Environmental Protection Agency. Jesus in charge of the Pentagon – no more weapons of mass destruction anywhere. But kingdoms is about more than governments. Kingdoms are systems of power, and we live in a world filled with systems of powers. Educational systems. Workplace systems. Health care systems. All systems under the power and control and authority of Jesus. The gospel of Matthew tells us there was this moment when

this option was presented to Jesus and I'm thinking – do it, Jesus. Do it! But no, Jesus rejects that kind of power. **“Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”** Jesus rejects the way of power. Jesus knew there was a force greater than power. And Jesus says, No. I have a different way. God sent Jesus into this world as a defenseless child to show us what it looks like to live in humility, servanthood, vulnerability and love. And I think this moment as Jesus stood on that high mountain and was offered all the kingdoms of the world – this was the most important political decision ever made – to choose another way. And this vision – a vision of God's kingdom still offers the hope that no other kingdom past or present ever has.

As we approach another election, I hope we look at policies and political platforms and candidates and ask how does this line up with the kingdom of God values. Do my politics and where I send my money and how I vote – do they reflect what I see in the way that Jesus lived his life?

Many years ago, Chuck Colson wrote the book, Kingdoms in Conflict. If you don't recognize his name, Chuck Colson was Richard Nixon's special counsel and got into trouble for obstructing justice during the Watergate investigation. This was in 1974. He was found guilty and spent 7 months in federal prison. Just before going to prison, he became a Christian and went on to create the Prison Fellowship, a ministry to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. He died a few years ago, but he was the author of two dozen books on the Christian faith. I agree with him on some things and disagree on others, but I value his thoughtful perspective and ministry that he launched. In his book, he says: **“There will by nature be a conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.”** There will be times when they collide. And in the book he gave some examples of this. One of the examples was Nazi Germany. 90% of Germans were Christians in 1933 when Hitler was elected. 90%! How do you say that you are a follower of Christ – to say you have chosen the way that Jesus chose - and then decide it's okay to go and conquer surrounding nations? And even if you can somehow justify that, how do you justify that Jews don't have the same rights and then consider them subhuman, if you are seeking God's kingdom? You only get there if you think faith and what Jesus was doing on that mountain top has absolutely nothing to do with politics and how people are treated. How do you get to the point where you think it's okay to take the property of Jews, put them in ghettos and then arrest them, put them in concentration camps, force them into gas chambers and cremate their bodies in an effort to eliminate them from the face of the earth. How do you let that happen and at the same time pray for God's kingdom. There was a disconnect that allowed this tragedy to happen. What would have happened if in Germany the 90% of Christians who were seeking God's kingdom had said this is not right. We will not go along with this. It would have been impossible to wage a war if 90% said No. Whether Democrat or Republican, Conservative or Progressive, how do the values that I see in Jesus line up with a political party or the politicians that I will support?

Both Republicans and Democrats look at the world and are trying to figure out how to work together for the common good. Conservatives and Progressives are doing the same thing – looking at the same problems and figuring out how to work together for the common good. If you listened to the presidential debate on Thursday, there were points where this was clear. Both candidates addressed the same issue but with very different solutions. Republicans have one way of looking at the role of government and Democrats have another way. Conservatives one way; Progressives another. And that's okay as long as we are looking at the problem and want to do something. But we can't say, my faith has nothing to do with that. Your faith has everything to do with that. Your faith helps you see what's broken in the world, and faith calls you/compels you to make this world look more like the way that Jesus chose.

I keep returning to the words of the apostle Paul who summarized the way of Jesus in his letter to the Colossians: **Therefore**, (Whenever we see “therefore” in scripture, we are meant to ask what is it there for. Paul has just described what God has done for us and how if we have chosen the way of Jesus we have turned away from the forces of this world that harm us and pull us away from God) **as God’s choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.** Love is so much more than an emotion. It is the greatest power this world will ever know. And it’s the way that Jesus chose – and kingdom that has never and will never fail.

Last week, I came across the story of Emma Daniel Gray. Her story was featured in the Washington Post. She died in 2009 at the age of 95. For 24 years, she worked in the White House and her job was to clean the Oval Office. Here’s **a photo** when she retired in 1979 being greeted by President Carter. She had worked under six presidents starting in 1955 with President Eisenhower. She was also a Christian. She worked nights, dusting, vacuuming, and taking out the trash. But the last thing she did every night before she turned off the lights and went home, she stood behind the chair of the president, put her hands on the chair, and she prayed. “Lord, bless the man who sits here. He’s going to need your help. Please guide him and lead him and bring good things in his life. Take care of him.” She said she didn’t always vote for the person who occupied the chair. Some did not support Civil Rights in the way she believed they should have, but she cared for every one of them – and she prayed for them. At her funeral, the preacher said she was someone who always saw the possibilities and when she looked at each president, she saw what he could be and might be with God’s help. He said, “She preached her own eulogy by the life that she lived.”

On November 4 or it may take us a few days or even weeks to be certain who will be this nation’s president for the next four years. Some of us will be happy. Some may be angry. And many will be indifferent. But as a people who have placed our allegiance in God’s kingdom and are committed to live the values of Jesus, let us pray for the best and continue to stand up for the kingdom values that Jesus lived – because regardless of who our next president will be, we have work to do for the sake of Jesus Christ and the way he calls us to live.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 25, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep us connected to you today and every day. In the midst of an election season that can easily pull us apart, let us be channels through whom your divine love can flow freely to bless the lives of people around us. Help us to enter each new day in grateful anticipation of being your servants to offer mercy and grace to everyone. Amen.

Monday, October 26

Scripture: Matthew 17:24-27, 22:15-22

When they came to Capernaum, the people who collected the half-shekel temple tax came to Peter and said, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” “Yes,” he said. But when they came into the house, Jesus spoke to Peter first. “What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings collect taxes, from their children or from strangers?” “From strangers,” he said. Jesus said to him, “Then the children don’t have to pay. But just so we don’t offend them, go to the lake, throw out a fishing line and hook, and take the first fish you catch. When you open its mouth, you will find a shekel coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us.”

Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism. So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion. "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked. "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

Observation: Citizens of Israel in Jesus' day reacted in two ways to Roman rule. Some went along with it to gain wealth, or at least to avoid trouble. Others hated and resisted it as an insult to them and their God. Seeing only those two options, Jesus' enemies thought they had him trapped. But he taught a profoundly different way: dual citizenship, honoring legitimate duties to the state, but giving ultimate loyalty to God as king.

Application: Jesus' enemies asked a "yes or no" question. Political campaigns often do the same to complex issues—conservative or progressive? My party or yours? Jesus knew many issues aren't that simple. Peter learned from his master, and put different imperatives all in one verse (*Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Have respectful fear of God. Honor the emperor. 1 Peter 2:17*). When you're tempted to see issues as either a yes or a no, how can you learn to identify the places where there is middle ground?

Prayer: Lord God, so many loud voices want to claim my ultimate allegiance. Keep my heart attuned to your still small voice, the voice of my true king. Amen.

Tuesday, October 27

Scripture: John 18:10-11, 33-40

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword away! Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?" Pilate responded, "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here." "So you are a king?" Pilate said. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice." "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said, "I find no grounds for any charge against him. You have a custom that I release one prisoner for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?" They shouted, "Not this man! Give us Barabbas!" (Barabbas was an outlaw.)

Observation: John 6:15 (*Jesus understood that they were about to come and force him to be their king...*) showed that, after feeding 5,000 people (and no doubt at other times, too) Jesus could probably have taken political power if he'd wanted to. But he hadn't come to create that kind of kingdom. Jesus baffled Pontius Pilate, a typical Roman political climber, who asked him,

“So you are a king?” Calmly contained, Jesus asserted his kingship—but said it came from, and ruled over, a totally different realm.

Application: Pilate, the tough, cynical Roman politician, thought he knew how kings behaved. In his opinion, Jesus didn’t act like a king—he was probably mocking the Jewish leaders more than honoring Jesus when he called him “the king of the Jews.” What makes Jesus the kind of leader you want to follow? In what ways does his character affect the ways you choose which human leaders win your allegiance?

Prayer: Dear God, your kingdom is not of this world—but lots of my day-to-day life is. Teach me more each day about your kind of power, shown in your Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Amen.

Wednesday, October 28

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-24, 43-48

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don’t commit murder*, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, ‘You idiot,’ they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, ‘You fool,’ they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.

“You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Observation: Using today’s political language, we’d say the Sermon on the Mount was Jesus’ “platform.” In it, he defined his kingdom’s principles. A striking part of that platform, especially when we are being barraged by campaign ads, was the unusual way Jesus taught his followers to relate to enemies. Avoid contemptuous, angry words or attitudes, he said. Instead offer God’s love to everyone.

Application: In verse 22, the word translated “you idiot” was the Aramaic word *raca*. People didn’t use it for friendly bantering, but to express deep-seated contempt for another person. What tempts you to feel contempt for candidates or people you know who see political issues differently than you do? How would campaign ads and personal conversations change if we all lived by Jesus’ standard?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your “platform” challenges and inspires me. As I take in your love, help me to better understand the many dimensions of the love you pour into me—and want me to extend to others. Amen.

Thursday, October 29

Scripture: John 17:20-23

“I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I’ve given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.

Observation: John told us Jesus prayed this prayer the night before he went to the cross. As the Jewish leaders, afraid of losing their human power, plotted his death, Jesus prayed that his followers would have a divine unity not even politics could disrupt. His disciples included a Zealot (a radical Hebrew nationalist) and a tax collector (a Roman agent). But in his kingdom, those different backgrounds no longer needed to define or divide them.

Application: Jesus’ prayer gave a truly cosmic basis for God’s people living in unity: “I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (verse 21). Political debates usually highlight our differences, not the many things—in faith and love of country—that unite us. Try this exercise: what would appear in an ad for a candidate you support, and then for one you oppose, that would draw on Jesus’ values and seek to unite rather than divide.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for praying for me, for us, even at that intense moment of crisis for you. Gather me with my Christian brothers and sisters, however we vote, in unity around you. Amen.

Friday, October 30

Scripture: Romans 12:9-13:1

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don’t try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord. Instead, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God.

Observation: First-century Rome was a lot like Washington, D.C.—a city obsessed with politics. So it was especially striking that, in his letter to Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul called them to live as Jesus, their true king, did. They were to seek peace, and overcome evil

with good. Like Jesus, Paul virtually ignored human power struggles (Nero was probably emperor when Paul wrote this letter), and focused on living as citizens of God's invisible yet supreme kingdom.

Application: These verses can be hard to live into even in everyday settings: *“Be the best at showing honor to each other... If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people”* (verses 10, 18). What inner fears and drives make it hard for you to honor and live at peace with people who are different from you? How can God's eternal love for you provide a foundation on which you can set aside the need to climb above others?

Prayer: Lord God, I like being right. It's hard to accept that good people can reach different conclusions. Keep teaching me how, in your spirit, to live at peace with all people. Amen.

Saturday, October 31

Scripture: Ephesians 4:29-5:2

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children. Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God.

Observation: Ephesians 4:15 (*Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ*) called on readers to grow in Christ by “speaking the truth with love.” That set the stage for today's passage, which outlined Jesus' values. God's people, it said, can live in unity without anger or insults —being kind, compassionate and forgiving toward each other. That principle wasn't limited to realm of political disagreements—but it certainly didn't exempt them, either.

Application: Perhaps the most challenging part of the verses we've read this week is that they are not just about how we behave outwardly. They don't say, “Behave nicely toward others —no matter how much inward contempt you feel for them.” No! God offers to transform us inwardly, in ways that our outward behavior will then reflect. How can you open yourself to God in the next few weeks (whether your preferred candidates win or lose) to allow the Holy Spirit to shape you into a person who can more fully live out the call to “Live your life with love, following the example of Christ”?

Prayer: Lord God, I ask your Spirit to speak to the hearts of all the people seeking to serve our country in political offices. I ask you to transform my heart so I can see people, politics and government as you do. Help me follow the example of Christ. Amen.