



First Principles Project

American Awakening | National Association of Evangelicals | Christianity Today

Full Sermon Text

PART 1. Citizens of the Kingdom

I've been a church rat my whole life; born and bred in the evangelical movement. Which means I've lived through several seasons of political divisiveness in the church over the years.

I was a teenager in the 60's and 70's, when our nation was divided over the Vietnam War. Many of our youth leaders were young men just home from their tour of duty, having risked their lives in service to their country. Meanwhile the kids they were ministering to came to youth group with peace signs around their necks and planning their next anti-war protest. We had hawks and doves in our church, and you could feel the tension, but somehow we all pressed through it and carried on a vibrant ministry.

I was a pastor in the 80's, and it was the beginning of a partisan political fault line in the church, and again we felt the tension, but still the gospel and our mission enabled us to rise above those differences.

In the 2000's, the social justice movement emerged, challenging and competing with the church's long standing commitments to evangelism and discipleship. Again there was tension, but it led to what most would say is a more balanced understanding of the church's mission in the world.

But now here we are in the midst of the most divisive, disruptive, and dangerous political season the church has ever faced in my lifetime. Not since the Civil War has our nation and the church been so starkly divided. It's not North and South this time. But Right and Left. Red and Blue. MAGA hats and BLM shirts.

And with campaigns in full swing, an empty seat on the Supreme Court, and concerns about the transfer of power, the tension and division has only intensified. Add to the mix a global pandemic, an economic crisis, racial unrest in our cities, and it feels as though there's a powder keg ready to explode on November 3, and the fuse has already been lit. We're feeling anxious, afraid, and sometimes angry. As you heard John say, 80% of Americans agreed with the statement that the nation is spiraling out of control. You can see the weariness in people's eyes. You can hear the strain in their voices. You can feel the angry energy in their social media posts.

That tension and division has found its way into every denomination, every church association and agency, and most every local congregation. It has fractured small groups and ministry teams and

friendship circles and even households. I've never known a time when believers have been so quick to attack each other, to pass judgment on each other, and even to walk out on each other.

There has to be a better way. A better way to navigate these polarized times. A better way of treating each other at the intersection of faith and politics.

There IS a better way — it's the way of the Kingdom. It's the way of Jesus. And we, His people, should be showing the world that better way. Are we doing that?

Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Is that what we're seeing, as we look across the political landscape of the church and our nation? Or is the church just as divided and divisive as everyone else?

And while some would prefer that we avoid politics and just preach the gospel, it's just not an option. For one thing, as Tim Keller observes, to not be political is to be political. He writes, "Christians who try to avoid all political discussions and engagement are essentially cast a vote for the status quo. Since no human society reflects God's justice and righteousness perfectly, supposedly apolitical Christians are supporting many things that displease God. So to not be political is to be political."

For another thing, Jesus himself spoke to faith and politics with profound and transformative wisdom. If we neglect those teachings, if we don't talk about politics in church, we surrender discipleship to the teachings of Tucker Carlson or Rachel Maddow. Or One America News or Huffpost. We need to do better. Our nation needs us to do better.

What if the Fall of 2020, with all its disruption and division, became a turning point for the church? What if it marked an awakening to the call of Jesus; the call to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, first and foremost; and then citizens of our nation, and citizens of our community?

It's going to take some time to re-discover ourselves and our calling; it's going to require some listening and learning; some repentance and renewal. But if we don't start somewhere, and some time, we'll never get there.

So let's begin with some foundational words of Jesus on the matter of faith and politics. Words that will remind us who we are, how we are to treat each other, and where we are headed, as citizens of the Kingdom.

In Mark 12, two political factions came to Jesus and asked a question.

And like most stories between Jesus and factions, what they were doing was setting a trap.

The Pharisees were often nationalist fundamentalists who resented Caesar and his empire.

The Herodians were pragmatists who had sold out to Rome. They cared about gaining and keeping political power, and hoped to get their community the best results possible.

In short, the two groups had wildly different visions for how the community should get on together. We don't have an exact parallel today to these two groups — but with respect to hatred of the 'other side' you could slice it several ways — conservatives and liberals, Red State and Blue State, MAGA, and BLM.

So both groups came to Jesus and asked, "*Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*"

If Jesus were a savvy politician, he would have dodged the question and pivoted to his talking point. Instead, he turned the question back on them and caught them in their own trap. Holding up a coin, "Jesus said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him." (Mark 12:17)

Jesus completely blew up their boxes.

He refused to choose sides — a theme we will come back to in our series — as if one party was right and the other was wrong. Instead, he reminded them that God's agenda was way bigger than Caesar's. Caesar could demand a few gold coins. But God had a claim over their very souls.

He not only refused to choose sides. He refused to let them off the hook. They were going to have to make their own decisions, about paying taxes and idolatry and obedience, and how best to honor God and Caesar.

In that single stroke, he made the crucial distinction that is going to drive our discussion. There are governments of the world. And then there is the kingdom. Give to the governments of the world what belongs to them, and give to God what belongs to him and his kingdom. But when in conflict, the second one must always win.

We are calling the first part of the series, "Citizens of the Kingdom". And to further explore what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom, we are going to break it down into three parts.

First, we are going to look at what God says about who we are as his children, made in his image — and therefore citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Secondly, we are going to look at what God says to us on how we are supposed to engage with one another as citizens of the kingdom.

Finally, we are going to discuss what God says about where he is ultimately going to take us. So let's make sure, like Jesus tells us to, that we have ears to hear.

What does God say about who we are, about how we are to engage, and ultimately where we are headed? Let's try and answer those questions.

To understand who we are as citizens of the kingdom, we have to go back to the beginning — and by the beginning, I mean literally all the way back to the creation story.

In Genesis 1:26, God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”

Now pretty much everyone is familiar with this creation account.

And as someone who had grown up in the church, it was a story I had heard time and time again.

But it wasn't until recently I realized God refers to the “God-self” using the plural pronouns “us” and “our”.

Let Us make mankind in OUR image, in OUR likeness.

Brothers and sisters, I may have been late to this party, but this was a profound realization for several reasons.

One, the author clearly understands that God is all we can possibly imagine and so much more!

God is all truth, beauty, knowledge, power and beyond. Therefore, the singular pronoun cannot hold the totality of who God is because simultaneously within His oneness is also a community — ever giving, ever exalting each other in love — what we call the Trinity. So when God talks to the God's self, God has to say “us”!

Inherent within God Himself we see a God who is one, yet is three.

The whole story of God is one of community, and love in community!

And number three, and perhaps most profoundly — when God makes humanity in God's image, we reflect God best when we are a radical yet beautiful “us.”

Because, no one of us captures the image and likeness of God completely.

No one individual has “all knowledge” or possesses “all beauty.”

No one human being contains “all truth” or has “all the answers”.

And while each individual has fundamental values and dignity that come from God, no one individual — or group for that matter — reflects the best of God's creation by him, her, or themselves.

Bringing this concept down from the transcendent to the more practical...In his blazing speed, Usain Bolt, the great Jamaican sprinter, captures one facet of who God is.

Albert Einstein, with his extraordinary, abstract mind, reflected another facet.

Beyoncé's singing and dancing, artistic imagination and business building prowess captures yet another.

And so on and so on, through every single person on this planet. But as you hear about their virtues, you shouldn't just think 'wow what a great individual person!' No, the point is the differences and great expansiveness of each other means we *need each other to know more about God. What can that other person teach me?*

Sure, some of our gifts conveying a facet of God are a little more muted or less obvious than Bolt, Einstein and Beyoncé, but they are there in all of us!

Our differences can be starker than these — but the truth is, even the people you disagree with on the most important matters in life have something to teach you.

Instead of thinking 'that person is the reason our country is so terrible' what if you instead thought, 'man I really disagree with that person's view on police reform, but they certainly are asking good questions, making me think, and I'm so glad we have people who care about justice as much as they do.'

It is both the case that every person is made in God's image, and captures some dimension of who God is — and we have to see that and appreciate that, whomever it is — AND they are sinful and broken and fallen.

Like I am. Like you are. Like all of us are.

So no one person is alone the "image of God"— but together, collectively, we are made in the image of God. If you can fully wrap your heart and head around that, it has the power to change everything. I am not fast, but I can glory in Bolt's speed; I am not wired like Einstein, but I can in some way enjoy and participate in his intellectual firepower; and obviously, I don't have Beyoncé's skills, but she shows all of us a part of who God is.

And here's the big question: do we truly want to know more about God and who He is or not? If so, we'd better start leaning into *all* of those around us.

This leads us into part two of our exploration of what it means to be a citizen of heaven -- How we are to engage with one another. From the Genesis creation story, let's fast forward all the way to Matthew. In Chapter 22, two experts in the law are testing Jesus with a question, "What is the greatest commandment

in the law?” Jesus replies first by saying, “Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”, echoing Deuteronomy 6. Then he says, “And the second greatest commandment is just like it — love your neighbor as yourself”.

In Luke’s account, one of the experts of the law followed up by asking Jesus, “well then, who is my neighbor?” Is it someone who has the same skin color as me? Or perhaps those with whom I share my political ideologies? Jesus uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain that our neighbors include those most different from us.

And he models that in his own approach to the Samaritan woman at the well — breaking all the cultural rules and crossing all the divides.

As citizens of the kingdom of God, Jesus tells us that all the ethical principles of all time are summarized in loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

And this love for neighbor expresses the fundamental truth that each person bears the image of God.

If you truly saw your neighbor — regardless of the deepest divides in political ideologies or party alignments or pain they have caused you — as an image bearer of God, picking up some aspect of God that you do not, it would be *impossible* not to love them.

Each person across the aisle from you — that feminist, that conservative, that socialist, that fundamentalist, that republican, or that democrat, that person you think is the problem — well, Jesus tells you that “yes, as much as you don’t want to hear it”, that person is your neighbor. You are called to love them.

Why? Because that person, that Biden or Trump voting neighbor of yours — bears the image of God as much you do.

In that same vein, recall Paul’s mind-blowing, world-changing words — “in Jesus, we are neither Jew nor Greek, not slave nor free, not male nor female”.

Can you imagine how CRAZY that must have sounded to status/hierarchy/cultural divide-minded folks of his day? The first century didn’t have the same exact group boundaries we do — but their boundaries were even sharper and harder than ours now.

We can hardly stretch our imaginations to conceive of how radical that sounded, and how it still sounds.

We love our neighbors as ourselves because the truth is we are all joint and equal participants in God’s transcendent and forever storyline. Each of us is a God-purposed contributor to God’s bigger reality. Now like we said earlier about Beyonce, she and she alone can bring her unique combination of charisma, artistic imagination, and passion — and therefore she has her own role to play in God’s plan.

Which, of course, like all of us — she may or may not be doing it, that is beyond our pay grade to decide.

If we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves and fail to take being made collectively in the image of God seriously, we lose sight of our need for one another. I love you, care for you, am patient with you, and show you grace, but at the end of the day, I know that I need you, regardless of your political leanings. We need each other.

The third and final portion of our time together will be examining what God says about where we are ultimately headed as citizens of heaven.

Because destination absolutely matters to the current situation. You can't live well today, if you don't know where you're going tomorrow.

In Revelation 7, John writes, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the lamb."

God casts a vision for all of humanity, this is his end game. That every nation, tribe, people and language — black, white, asian, latino; rich and poor; Democrat, Republican, Capitalist, Socialist, whatever-ist — that ALL would be together standing before his throne.

There we would see the fullness of our identity, the fullness of God's image represented in the collective. And we would see a love of neighbor, a commitment, care, and love for each other, made possible by a shared allegiance to the one true king of all.

What a beautiful vision, isn't it? And what a vision to be invited to pursue with our God, don't you think?

But I know that to some, this concept may sound hopelessly pollyannaish in the world we all live in. A kumbaya dream scenario, that will forever remain just that with fracture lines everywhere we turn, and the division, pain, and disagreement that seems to consume our reality.

Amid this ordinary state of affairs, in the day-to-day, we have sacrificed the radical us for the radical me, or the radical "this group I am in that is better than the others".

But our Lord instructed us in the prayer he taught us — thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Yes, pollyanish, yes, unrealistic — but our Lord tells us to participate with God in drawing forward into this world the heaven that is ultimately to be realized.

The scriptures make clear this vision, this community, this reality was not possible without the the execution — one might even say state-sanctioned “lynching” — of God Himself, and the power of that same God in Christ walking out of the grave three days later.

This community is bought with blood. It took the cross to get it. And it will require us taking up our crosses to get there.

As we close, one final note, about how our Lord saw the division we are experiencing, and warned against it 2000 years ago.

He brings his group of friends, his disciples, together, for a final Passover meal. He is nearly out of time. . In a few hours, he’s going to be unjustly arrested and tried and crucified.

In that moment, Jesus begins his final sermon by saying.

“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

And then he closes that final sermon four chapters later, with this prayer.

“I will remain in the world no longer (that part must have made no sense!), but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11)

At the very end, the thing Jesus was most concerned about was their unity and their oneness. He knew that as long they were united with each other and with his Heavenly Father, the world would change.

But you know, Jesus didn’t stop there.

He prayed for you. He prayed for me. He prayed for us.

All of us, every one of us that are believers — that we be one.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (John 17:20-21)

What is this word — “that we be one”? Do we ever talk about it?

Do we believe Jesus on this?

What was the last time you asked God for this very request that Jesus asked him for? What is on the top of your prayer list? Health, job, family. All of these matter.

But the first thing on Jesus' prayer list was the unity of the church, the oneness of his people.

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.”

Those words are so BIG they don't even seem possible — Jesus gave US the glory that God gave him — so that we may be one as God/Jesus are, living in community . . . Jesus in us, as God is in Jesus.

And then he dials it up even one turn further.

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you loved me.”

Jesus seems to REALLY mean this — he is praying it over and over again, and layering more and more on top of this.

Now he is saying that not only do we have the glory of God in us — as it is in Jesus — to be one . . . But somehow that we need to be brought to “complete unity” in order for the world to know that God sent Jesus/they are loved by God/God loves Jesus.

The whole redemptive story of the world, and our participation in it, somehow turns on whether we are unified or not?

Jesus tells us that it is.

Our collective creation as expressions of God's image — and therefore our need for each other — is deeply wired into our beings.

We are citizens of heaven, whose allegiance first and foremost belong to the God of the universe. It's who we are. And loving our neighbors, it's what we do. No matter the obstacle — a global pandemic, an economic meltdown, social unrest, political polarization and extremism — we ultimately survive and thrive when as citizens of heaven we realize how desperately we need one another, including and especially those we don't like or agree with--and how it is absolutely imperative for us to bring that heaven down to earth one day at a time, right where we are.

There aren't many places in our culture today where you can see the power of this principle, but here is one . . . the wonderful and unique relationship of two former Supreme Court Justices, the late Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia.

They were deep ideological rivals, with radically different views about how we should live together in this country, forming what would be considered to be a radical relationship in today's climate.

It wasn't a friendship of 'oh let's just not talk about our disagreements.' It was their literal and specific job, to argue about those disagreements!

For decades.

These disagreements were not trivial. They affected real lives — millions of them.

Take this example. In a landmark 1996 case, Ginsburg wrote the majority opinion which struck down Virginia Military Institute's all-male admissions policy —but only after Scalia offered her an advanced look at his dissent so her opinion could be sharper. They believed they could help each other, and needed each other, to get a fuller life for themselves, and a deeper and more flourishing life for the nation. Their friendship was deep and lasted until death. They vacationed together and spent New Year's Eves together with their families.

One of Scalia's sons shared a story about their friendship, and about how his dad brought his friend Justice Ginsburg two dozen roses on her birthday.

One of Scalia's former clerks was puzzled by this, and pulled the justice aside to ask why he would show her such affection, since she never gave him the vote he needed on cases that mattered.

Scalia — a man of great Christian faith — said, "Some things are more important than votes."

For those of us who follow Jesus, being a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven — with all that implies — is one of those things.