

Separation of Church & Hate
Anti-Establishment Angst
April 17, 2016

PRELUDE – We Are

Worship Song – “You Are My Vision”

Announcements – Video
Feature – Taxman

Good morning everyone. In the 23rd chapter of Matthew’s Gospel we read that ...

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.”

Matthew 23:1-4 (NLT)

Let's pray together.

Lord, I thank you for this time we have together to worship you and learn from what has been written for us about the life and ministry of Jesus. I pray that, as we sang earlier, He and *His* Kingdom would be the vision that guides and empowers not just us during this contentious political season in our country but all of the churches and all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I pray that my words today would be effective to that end. Amen.

If you want to raise some angst and ire towards “the establishment” (at least, the establishment that is our federal government), talking about taxes will usually do the trick.

Of course, these days, talking about pretty much

any issue related to politics will produce some form of emotion resembling “down with the establishment” (to quote Shannon); so much so, that all of the 2016 presidential candidates are constantly trying, in some way, to distance themselves from said establishment and promising that they can either change it, fix it, break it, or get rid of some or all of it completely. These days, the establishment is definitely *not* cool.

Of course, defining exactly what the establishment is ... and what might happen if you were able to change it, fix it, break it, or get rid of it can be a bit problematic ... as this video from The Wall Street Journal illustrates.ⁱ

Video – Who Is the Establishment? (2.6 mins)

Begin: “Election 2016” logo w/music

End: Credits screen

That’s a great question and a great observation.

Once you get rid of the establishment, you (and your followers and your policies) become “the man.” You end up establishing a *new* establishment that other people in the future will come to loathe so much that they’ll want to get rid of it (and you) so they can establish *another* new establishment that other people in the future will come to loathe ... And the cycle will continue.

It’s a grown-up version of the children’s game *King of the Hill*. Except that it’s not a game. And “winning” may not be all it’s cracked up to be, as political commentator Joseph Sunde recently explained:ⁱⁱ

“If the toppling of the current order succeeds – if the establishment goes down – we’re still left with the same power structures but in new hands.”

Think about that. Regardless of who wins in November, all the agencies, laws, regulations, and powers will still be in place. A few may be

overturned by executive order but the vast majority of those things will not change because a president doesn't affect your life in the least; the federal code does.

The Code is over 39,000 pages of regulations which dictate every minute detail of your life, such as how hot your shower water can be. It will continue to do so whether Hillary or Trump wins the election. Those two couldn't change the code even if they wanted to – and they don't. This massive bureaucracy transcends politics as we know it.ⁱⁱⁱ

If the establishment goes down, all you get is a new group of people running the system – a new establishment.

Of course, there *is* the possibility that “*it could be even more wicked than the one you swept away,*” writes Jeffrey Tucker of the Foundation for Economic Education.^{iv} And that *could* have a profoundly negative impact.

“Think of Iraq or Libya as recent cases,” he continues. “From what we observed from media coverage the masses were struggling against despots and sought their overthrow, hoping for a future of human rights and democracy. What they got was the opposite. Only too late did people discover that these wicked establishments were all that were standing between their populations and the advent of terror.

“This is not a case for the establishment,” Tucker writes. “It is a case against *disestablishmentarianism* as an ideal.

“The ideal,” he concludes, “is *liberty*, not the overthrow of existing elite structures.”

In other words, simply getting rid of the “bad people” (as our party or tribe defines “bad”) ... getting rid of the bad people who are running the system (the establishment) is not the answer. The answer is in creating *a better system*, which

Tucker defines as one that promotes and guards individual liberty.

Truth about “The System”

Of course, that’s part of what all the current candidates are promising, too; that they’ll not only sweep away the current establishment but also change the system for the better, as defined by their particular coalition.

However, history reveals that moving the system in another direction is exceedingly difficult because power in all kinds of institutions (corporate and cultural) *but especially in governments* tends to pool and coalesce. At some point, there is simply too much political or literal gold at stake to risk dismantling the system.

For example, let’s take the proverbial “taxman.”

I said two weeks ago that I have voted in 10 presidential elections to this point in my life.

And in almost all of those elections, at least one of the candidates has argued for simplifying the tax code. I've heard about the fair tax, the flat tax, the new flat tax, the simple flat tax, the abolition of the income tax altogether in favor of a national sales tax, and the list goes on and on. In almost every case, the vision being cast is that "most Americans will be able to do their taxes on the front and back of an index card; write down a few numbers, do a little math, and send it in."

And almost everyone who actually pays taxes agrees this is a worthy vision given the cost and hassle of doing it the current way – a cost and hassle which is collectively astounding. According to Nina Olsen, the National Taxpayer Advocate at the IRS (gotta say, I don't think I'd want her job)

Americans all together spend over *six billion hours* and *\$168 billion* every year to file their returns.

And remember, that \$168B isn't for paying the

taxes – it's just for filing the returns!

By the way, I got those figures from an article written by House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dave Camp (R-MI) the day before he released bipartisan his tax plan back in February of 2014; an effort that required 11 bipartisan working groups of House Representatives to address different parts of the tax code.^v

Have you heard of his plan?

Of course you haven't ... because it died for the same reason that pretty much every tax reform plan in the past 30 years has died: there's just too much gold in them thar hills!

What I mean by that is that even though almost every person and institution (corporate and cultural) that pays taxes hates the system, there are far too many of those same individuals and institutions (corporate and cultural) with a vested financial interest in keeping it as it is.

I'm talking about ...

- People who pay for their kid's college tuition.
- People who have a mortgage.
- People who regularly and substantially give to support the ministry of their church.
- People who are saving for retirement in tax-advantaged accounts.

In a lot of the tax simplification proposals, one or more or all of these deductions and credits are cut, which obviously would impact the individuals who make use of those deductions (which I would suspect includes many or most of us here this morning). But it also impacts entire industries who depend on the patronage of those individuals.

I'm talking about ...

- Colleges and universities fear that the loss of the tuition deduction will scare away potential students.
- Realtors, builders and mortgage lenders worry that the loss of the mortgage deduction will reduce the number of people buying and selling homes.
- Churches and non-profits fret that people will stop giving if the charitable giving deduction goes away.
- Financial institutions and investment companies are nervous that with the loss of tax-advantaged savings vehicles, even fewer people will use their services.

And that's saying nothing about the vast number of legal, accounting and tax-filing businesses who depend on taxpayers using their services to meet the demand of the system we all profess to hate.

My point is that even with an idea with which almost everyone agrees with in principle, it's

almost impossible to change the system because, at some level, almost everyone has their hand in the cookie jar.

Or, as British history professor, Alexander Fraser Tytler, more eloquently put it almost 150 years ago.

“It is not unreasonable to conclude that a pure and perfect democracy is a thing not attainable by man, constituted as he is of contending elements of vice and virtue, and ever mainly influenced by the predominant principle of self-interest.”^{vi}

Jesus & The System

Now, if you think I am being somewhat negative (and maybe even fatalistic) about the system and situation in which we find ourselves ... you are correct.

Unless something dramatic happens like Jesus

returning, or a major terrorist attack, or a nuclear war, or a massive natural disaster like the 1930s Dust Bowl, or another Great Depression, our system – the interaction between government agencies and Congress and the President and big corporations and special interest groups (which, in many cases, actually represent a lot of us) – our system is probably not going to change in the way each of us might want it to.

Oh, the people leading it will change – and some of them might be good and some might be really bad. But the trajectory we are on, with the consolidation of more and more power into the hands of fewer and fewer people – whether they are government officials or, increasingly, boards of corporations who feel it is their duty to threaten the economy of entire states unless those states fall in line with their political will – that consolidation is likely to continue.

And history shows that when power consolidates

too much, it's usually not a good thing.

But please don't hear what I'm not saying. Even though I am negative and maybe even fatalistic about our system, I'm *not* saying I don't love our country *and* our system, at least as it was set up by our Founders who, in spite of their flaws and blind spots, had an incredibly wise perspective on history as well as human virtue and vice, and attempted to create a system that took all of that into account. But that system is in currently being overrun by human vice. And not just the vice of the proverbial "them" but the vice – the self-interest – of all of us.

Furthermore, I'm not saying you shouldn't pay attention to what's going on and exercise your right to express your opinions. You should be concerned and you should express your concerns (with humility and gentleness as Shannon talked about last week!) and, of course, you should vote.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" Jesus once

said to his Jewish countrymen who found themselves under Roman rule, meaning “do what the government requires you to do.”^{vii}

By the way, “Caesar” for you and me isn’t the President. *Our* Caesar is the constitutionally-mandated representative republic in which we live, which depends on our understanding and involvement. So we *should* be involved.

But don’t be fooled into thinking that changing the establishment or even the system is the answer to what ails us as a nation and as individuals.

And that’s not just my idea or my opinion. It’s straight from Jesus.

One of the things that’s fascinating to me when I read the story of Jesus’ ministry in the New Testament is how little He had to say about the intrusion and excesses of the Roman Empire and its system of dominance in which power over the many was consolidated in the hands of a few. It’s

almost like He was ambivalent about it, at least at the national (or international) level.

“If a hated Roman soldier tells you to carry his pack one mile” (which is what the Roman law allowed), Jesus said, “don’t put up a fight. Don’t be obnoxious. Instead, be gracious and offer to carry it two.”^{viii}

But that doesn’t mean that He was unaware of how messed up systems and establishments could become. In fact, that awareness is what led to the running battle He had with the Pharisees and teachers of religious law – the people who *built* the system and who *were* the establishment that had power over the most important aspects of life in the nation of Israel. As we heard at the beginning of this message, Jesus loudly and publicly accused them of not playing by the same rules as everyone else and of “crushing the people” with unbearable demands.^{ix}

Sound familiar?

Now, the thing about the Pharisees and teachers of religious law is that *they actually meant well*. They weren't trying to be hypocritical. They were doing what they thought was best and right, at least at first. It just didn't work for them or for anyone else.

The problem was with where they were focusing their attention, for which Jesus also blasted them.

In that public shaming speech he was giving (again, recorded in Matthew 23), He said:

“Hypocrites! You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

“Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on

the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Matthew 23:25-28 (NLT)

Where was their focus? It was on the *outside*. In their thinking, as long as they kept up with "the system" of religion they had created, then they thought they were doing OK.

Where should it have been, according to Jesus? On the *inside*. At the heart level. That's where it all begins. Get the heart right – get the inside right – and the outside will tend to take care of itself.

The Point

Now at this point, it would be very easy for me to get up on a preacher's high horse and say that "this is what's wrong with our country" and

“until people repent and start paying attention to God and Jesus and church; until they get their hearts right with God, we’re all going to hell-in-a-handbasket.”

And that would probably make us feel better when we walk out the doors this morning because the pastor has rightly identified the problem. The greatest problem in this culture is by far internal heart-level stuff, not externals.

However, even though there are plenty of godless people “out there” who aren’t paying attention to God and Jesus and the church, that’s not the primary message I have for us this morning.

I could also get up on a preacher’s high horse and say “until *God’s people* repent and start paying attention to God and Jesus and church; until we *Christians* get our hearts right with God, there is no hope for this country.”

And that probably would *not* make us all feel so hot when we walk out this morning even though in so many ways it's true. Far too many of us do what the Pharisees do. We focus on keeping up the external appearance of godliness but on the inside, as Jesus said, we're full of impurity and deadness. The heart problem in our culture is as much "in here" – in the group that calls itself Christian – as it is "out there" among the godless pagans.

And each of us needs to address that issue. We need to look inside and ask, "Am I the person God wants me to be? And if not, why not?"

But that's not the primary message I have for us this morning.

The primary message – the main point of all of this – is really not about us or even the people "out there" who don't claim to know God and don't really care. The message, the point, is actually more of a question – a question that

we're going to examine in detail over the coming weeks and months.

Where is the internal “heart stuff” going to come from in this nation?

If what Jesus was saying to the Pharisee was true (and I can and will make a case that the Founders agreed with him), that the condition of the heart – the moral compass; the desire to live a life that isn't primarily about getting my way – matters, then who is going to communicate that? Who is going to carry that message? Who is going to set that example?

Now, again, don't hear what I'm not saying. The system is important. If you read any of the OT prophets, you know that a lot of what they said railed against external systemic injustice in the same way Jesus railed against the Pharisees lack of internal focus. Not caring for the poor was as much of an abomination to God as any sexual deviancy they preached against. Mistreatment of strangers and aliens was akin to rejecting God.

The system, the establishment mattered and still does.

But so do the hearts of the people. You can't have one without the other and expect to be healthy as a nation. You need both.

A huge problem in our country today is that we've lost sight of that. And I'm talking about Christians in here (and other churches), not the people out there. Many of us who know and follow Jesus spend so much time talking about and worrying about the externals, the system.

- How are we going to fix the tax system?
- What are we going to do with the immigration system?
- What should be done with the military system?
- The transportation system?
- The economic system?
- The education system?

Few of us are asking “what about the internals of the heart?” What are we doing to bind up the wounds of living in a sin-cursed world? What are we doing to develop moral character and moral foundations?”

The answer, of course, is *very little* because it’s really hard to do. We live in a time when most people think “all that stuff doesn’t really matter. It’s just a different set of values from one generation to the next. Just be true to yourself and be nice to everybody else and it will all work out.”

But it isn’t working out. People aren’t even being true to themselves anymore. “Oh, this is how I’m going to live my life. We don’t need to get married. It’s just a piece of paper. We’ll just love each other.” And then they don’t. They fail.

And the “just be nice to everybody” mantra? We’ll do that ... unless ... they’re from another

political party or another race or another generation or another religion or no religion or any religion. You can treat those people like crap because they're just wrong. They're bigots. They're backwards. They're on the wrong side of history.

To use the biblical language, we as a people have “cast off restraint.”

But again, that's not my main point. My main point is that you simply cannot divorce the internal moral character of a people from its external system without inviting disaster. Jesus thought so.

And so did the people who created our Constitution.

To illustrate, I want to read you a portion of a letter written by John Adams, our second president, in 1789. The language is paced a bit differently than we write and speak today but it's

worth the read.

He wrote:

Should the people of America ... become capable of [expressing] the language of justice and moderation while practicing iniquity and extravagance ...

And displays in the most captivating manner the charming pictures of candor, frankness, and sincerity, while it is rioting in rapine and insolence, this country will be the most miserable habitation in the world.

In other words, just like Jesus said, if we focus on externals and neglect the internals, not only are we hypocrites, we're doomed.

Why would Adams say that? His letter explains.

Because we have no government armed with power capable of contending with

human passions unbridled by morality and religion ... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.^x

Now, Adams is not arguing for the government to establish a church and make everybody go.

Instead, what he and many others realized – and what has been lost in this culture – was the value of religion in producing virtuous citizens which by definition are necessary for a government “of the people” and “by the people” to actually do virtuous things instead of selfish things.^{xi}

One historical commentator describes it like this:

The Founders’ support for blending religion and politics was based on the following syllogism:

Morality is necessary for republican

government;
Religion is necessary for morality;
Therefore, religion is necessary for
republican government.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” Washington wrote in his Farewell Address, “Religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

He then went on to say that it would be self-deception for a person to believe himself to be a patriot while at the same time working to subvert “these great Pillars of human happiness.”^{xii}

Bottom line – *if you want a better country, you have to have better people, internally. Character matters.*

I’d love to hear just one politician say that. I’d love to hear one politician say, “hey folks, getting your own house and heart in order is just as important as getting the White House in

order.” I think I’d vote for him or her regardless of any other policy or position.

So, back to my question ... back to the main point of all of this ... where is the internal “heart stuff” going to come from in this nation?

It’s going to come from us, the church. We together – those of us who are Christians and who know Jesus – are the church. Through us God intends to build the hearts of people, beginning with our own.

Jesus put it like this:

“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”

Matthew 5:14-16 (NLT)

Before Jesus returned to Heaven (as we saw in the first week), his disciples wanted to know if he was going to assume political power over the Romans and “restore the Kingdom to Israel.”

And Jesus said no. Instead, he said, “I’m going to use you to change the world through the power of the Holy Spirit and your testimony. You’re going to be the light. What God does in you will lead others. That’s the plan.”

Obviously, we can’t control how others respond to the light but really, that’s not our concern. Jesus isn’t going to ask us about that. He’s going to ask us if we took seriously and gave effort to knowing Him and growing in Him and following Him so that we could be the best lights we could be, together.

Lately, I’ve been wondering ...

- Will future generations be worse off if we elect Donald? Who knows?
- Will future generations be worse off if we elect Hillary? Who knows?
- Will future generations be worse off if we elect Ted? Who knows?
- Will future generations be worse off if we elect Bernie? Who knows?

But the real question I've been pondering is this:

Will future generations be worse off if we collectively fail, as the church, to be the light?

There's no doubt about it. Absolutely.

And so over the next few months we're going to talk about what it looks like for us to shine as individuals and as a church. I'm going to ask you during that time, to go all in this. Our nation needs us to be the light. Jesus calls us to be the light.

Let's pray together.

<prayer>

Communion Feature – Mighty Is the Power of the Cross

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Offering promo
2. Ladell “prayer pastor”

Congregational Song – We Are / Offering

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.wsj.com/video/in-the-2016-elections-who-is-the-establishment/44E86077-31D3-4AA7-8F41-635702A93DE7.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://blog.acton.org/archives/85497-liberty-anti-establishment-angst.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ James Newcomb, <https://outsidethemusicbox.liberty.me/things/>

^{iv} <https://fee.org/articles/hating-the-establishment-is-not-the-same-as-supporting-liberty/>

^v <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303426304579403252458098042>

^{vi} Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, Alexander Fraser (1854). *Universal History: From the Creation of the World to the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. I. Pettridge and Company. p. 216. <http://bit.ly/23G4glg>

^{vii} Matthew 22:21

^{viii} Matthew 5:41

^{ix} Matthew 23:1-4

^x John Adams, To the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts, 11 October 1798.

<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/adams1798a11.htm>

^{xi} See

<http://www.lawcourts.org/LPBR/reviews/kramnick-moore1105.htm>

^{xii} <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2007/12/the-meaning-of-religious-liberty>