

## **The Divided States of America**

### ***But First ...***

**June 16, 2019**

Good morning everyone.

Today we're continuing in our highly-inflammatory and controversial series, *The Divided States of America*.

Actually, last week wasn't all that bad. Only a few people got up and left while I was speaking but they were offset by those who came in while I was speaking. So it kind of evened out.

And the ones who left later told me they were just going to the bathroom. So it's all good.

In any case, last week we started out talking about how polarized things have gotten in recent days, illustrated by the rising tension

over changes in abortion laws. More than a few state legislatures have dramatically expanded conditions under which abortion is acceptable and more than a few (including Missouri) are dramatically limiting conditions ... all of which will likely lead to the Supreme Court revisiting the current law of the land, *Roe v. Wade*.

As I said in that message, my goal in this series is not to try and tell you what to think on that issue or any of the other hot button issues dividing us. Instead, what I want to do is ...

**To influence followers of Jesus in three areas:**

1. How we *develop* our opinions on these issues, i.e. what is shaping our thinking and our convictions.
2. How we *communicate* those opinions.
3. How we *treat* those on the "other side."

Now, that doesn't mean I'm *uninterested* in influencing those who are *not* believers in or followers of Jesus.

For example, I think what I said last week about having your eyes wide open to things like your own moral inconsistencies before you blast the "other side" for theirs is a good idea *even if you're not a Christian* because that helps to ratchet down the animosity you project. It puts a cap on how much you can horribilize "them" for being so hypocritical because you are, too.

(And if you weren't here last Sunday and you don't understand what I just said, you can check out the message on our app, website and podcast).

But what I'm going to say this week *is* pretty much directed at Christians because the key point I'm going to make – and I think this will

become obvious – the key point I’m going to make really does require that you have declared your belief in and allegiance to Jesus. It requires that He is more than just a wise sage to you – He is your Savior and your Lord, your Forgiver and your Leader.

So, if that’s *not* you – if you’re not a Christian – your takeaway from this message (I hope!) will be an increase in your understanding of how Christians are *supposed* to act. You’re going to understand what Jesus intends for His followers to be like in this world; and specifically, as it applies to the “big issues” of the day.

And that’s pretty valuable because we Christians don’t always act like we should. Sometimes if you watch what we do, you’ll get the wrong idea.

It’s sad but it’s true. We’re all a bunch of

hypocrites – at least, at some level.

So, today we're going to go back to the source, which is Jesus Himself.

## **The Big Question**

And the question we're going to look at is *where do we get our opinions about how things ought to be?*

What shapes – or ought to shape – what we believe about issues like ...

- Abortion
- And immigration
- And gay marriage
- And gun control
- And freedom of speech
- And whether or not gender is an inherent biological property or just a social construct?

- And healthcare
- And <whatever>

Now, the reason this even matters to us – and I think we overlook this – the reason this even matters is because you and I live in an incredibly unique situation compared to the vast majority of humans who have ever lived. You and I live in a *representative republic* where we get to vote for our representatives based on what we and they believe about those issues.

For most of human history (and still today in many parts of the world) that was not (and is not) the case. The king or the ruling class decided policy on *everything* based on *their* opinions and you had to go along with it – or else.

But you and I, because we live in a representative republic, actually get to have

a say.

- We can post our thoughts on Facebook or Twitter or a blog.
- We can go to a rally and hold up signs.
- We can protest.
- We can donate money to support candidates and causes.
- We can vote.
- We can even run for office ourselves.

And, in so many ways, that's far better than the alternative.

But it's not perfect because ...

- It does produce conflict – even between

family and friends, which obviously complicates relationships. Some of you experience that on a regular basis.

- And it requires us, as responsible citizens, to be wise; to become informed about the issues.
- And it also requires us to have a level of humility because, as we saw last week, the complexity of our politics and our nation is beyond the comprehension of any single individual.

And if we're Christians, living in a representative republic requires us to go even deeper than that. We have to wrestle with questions like ...

- *Why* do I believe this is the right person?
- *Why* do I believe this is the right policy?



- What is – and *what should be* – shaping my opinions on these issues?

Now, I know that some of you are thinking, “oh come on Rick, that’s easy. If you’re a Christian *the Bible* should shape your opinions.”

Or, if you’re a little more nuanced, maybe you’re thinking “*Jesus* should shape your opinions because not everything in the Bible – especially the Old Testament which primarily records how God worked with one nation – applies one-to-one to our day and time.”

And I understand why you might think that because, whenever you’re in church and the pastor asks a question, “the Bible” and “*Jesus*” are always your safest bets.

And, to be honest, that is *kind of* the answer I'm going to give but in a way that's probably different and hopefully more impactful that you've heard before. At least, for me personally, it's been a lot more impactful.

So here we go.

## **A Radical Redefinition**

When it comes to how we should treat people – which is, in essence, what politics is all about: how should a culture – specifically, its government – deal with the people under its authority ...

When it comes to how we should treat people – which, in essence is what citizens of a representative republic are expressing when they vote for specific policies and politicians ...

When it comes to how we should treat people, there is no more uniquely *Christian* principle, no single idea that more radically departs from how human societies typically work than the one suggested by Jesus when He was asked ...

“Of all the commandments written in the Law of Moses” – and you may remember from other messages that there were 633 – “of all the commandments, Jesus, which one is the most important?”

*Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”*

*Matthew 22:37-38 (NIV)*

*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

*Matthew 22:39-40 (NIV)*

Of course, since those commandments are in the Law of Moses ... and Moses was Jewish and not Christian ... those are not uniquely *Christian* principles.

What's uniquely *Christian* – and this is so important to understand – is how Jesus goes on to redefine "neighbor."

**In the Law of Moses (Leviticus 19:18 to be exact) it says:**

*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.*

*Leviticus 19:18 (NIV)*

And since this was written to Jewish people, "your neighbor" meant "other Jewish people."

In fact, if you had asked everyone listening to Jesus that day "who are your neighbors?" everyone would have answered "my neighbors are my people, my tribe. That's who I am supposed to love like I love myself."

But then Jesus goes on to tell one of the greatest stories ever and we all know it even if we're not Christians. It's sometimes called the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And it goes like this:

A Jewish guy gets beaten, robbed and left for dead on the side of a road.

A while later, two Jewish priests walk right by him but don't stop to help because they're heading to the Temple. They have important

religious duties to attend to.

A while later, a guy from Samaria traveling that road sees the Jewish guy lying in the ditch.

- So he administers first aid ...
- Loads the guy on his donkey and takes him to an inn ...
- Spends the night there tending to his wounds ...
- And the next day he gives the innkeeper enough money for the Jewish guy to stay there until he comes back

Then Jesus ends his story with a question: "which of the three guys who came along was a neighbor to the guy who was lying in the ditch – beaten, robbed and left for dead?"

The answer is obvious: it was the Samaritan.

Of course, the kicker of the story to those who first heard it – Jewish people – was that *they hated the Samaritans* and vice versa. The Samaritans hated them back.

So, in their minds, the idea that a Samaritan would ever do such a kind, generous and selfless thing was unimaginable. Yet, in this story Jesus tells, that's exactly what happens.

So what was His point?

It wasn't to convince the Jewish people that Samaritans were better than they thought – though they were.

Instead what Jesus was doing was redefining for them – and for those who would choose to follow Him right up to this present day – who their neighbor truly was.

Whereas the Jewish Law (and, in fact, human

nature in general) defines neighbor as “my people,” Jesus was saying “no, being a neighbor goes far beyond those in your tribe.”

“It goes far beyond caring about and helping and wanting the best for people who think like you, live like you, look like you, and worship like you. It extends even to people who *don’t like you* and don’t want the best for you” – which is why He made the Samaritan the good guy in his story.

“If you want to know what the greatest commandments are,” Jesus was saying, “this is one of them.”

**“Love people who are not like you ... like you love you.”**

And, for a Christian, when it comes to where we get our opinions about how things ought to be – specifically, how people ought to be treated, which is, in essence, what politics is



all about and what citizens of a representative republic are expressing when they vote for specific policies and politicians ...

For a Christian, it is this principle taught by Jesus – the single idea that most radically departs from how human cultures typically work – that ought to shape our thinking: “Love people who are not like you ... like you love you.”

As to just how radical that idea truly is, I like how one of my favorite preachers, John Piper, puts it.

**He writes:**

“Jesus seems to demand that I tear the skin off my body and wrap it around another person so that I feel that I *am* that other person ...

“... and all the longings that I have for my own safety and health and success and happiness, I now feel for that other person as though *he were me*.”<sup>i</sup>

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Now, at this point, I’m tempted to ask an application question like “how might this principle affect what you believe about any of the big issues of the day?”

Like, for example ...

- Abortion
- And immigration
- And gay marriage
- And gun control
- And freedom of speech
- And gender issues

- And healthcare
- And <whatever>

If you thought about those situations within the framework of “loving others who are not like you (and may not even like you)” would it affect your opinions?

If you're a follower of Jesus, I hope you would at least say “maybe” because you and I are supposed to be more influenced by Him than anyone or anything else. We're not supposed to be like everyone else in how we think about things because we don't belong to this world. Our true citizenship is not the in USA or any other country. We're citizens of God's Kingdom *first*.

So, I'm tempted to ask an application question at this point ... but I won't just yet because the critical issue with “religious people” in our day (like most of us in this room

or watching online) ... isn't the same as it was in Jesus' day.

- The issue for them was they were not connecting their faith to how they treated others.
- The issue for them was that they were minimizing their responsibility to love others, especially those not of their tribe.

Obviously, that's still a concern in our day but, reality is, there has been a *lot* of teaching on this principle for Christians in recent years. And I think more and more followers of Jesus are getting it. I think more and more churches are getting it. And more and more Christian organizations are getting it. Some organizations even exist because of it.

In fact, we saw a good illustration of that earlier when Shannon and Wes talked about

World Vision and the upcoming fundraising run. The goal is to alleviate food and water issues for people on the other side of the world who we will never meet and who are, in most cases, not like us.

*That comes directly from this new and radical teaching of Jesus. Wes even said it: "to think about my daughter having to live in that situation, that's why I'm doing this."*

That's his motivation for running. And that's what Jesus was saying.

## **Digging Deeper**

So I think Christians today are making progress on this. There's still more work to do as individuals but, collectively, I think we're heading in the right direction.

But if loving our neighbor like we love

ourselves isn't the critical issue in our day when it comes to what shapes our opinions on how things ought to be, what is?

Before I tell you what I think, just another reminder that I'm speaking to Christians on this. And I could be totally wrong about it, so I encourage you, if you're a follower of Jesus, to test it with Him. Ask Him if I'm right about this.

Jesus once had something to say to a group of Christians who were outwardly, at least, heading in the right direction.

- They were working hard to do good in the world.
- They were loving people who were not like them like they loved themselves.
- They weren't being swayed by false teaching.

- They were staying “faithful to the cause” despite persecution from the surrounding culture.

But He saw something in them that concerned Him. Actually, it broke His heart.

So He said to them, “you’re doing all these good things in my name and that’s really great ...”

*“Yet I hold this against you:  
You have forsaken the love  
you had at first.”*

*Revelation 2:4 (NIV)*

Or, as the old King James version puts it “you have left your first love” which is Jesus Himself – God Himself.

See when Jesus was asked that day to identify

the greatest commandment, He didn't say it was loving your neighbor as yourself.

Now, He *did* tell that world-and-history-changing story about it – redefining what it means to love you neighbor – because that was the greatest blind spot of the people asking the question.

But He didn't move it into the number one position.

Jesus still labeled it as “second” because *the first* – the greatest commandment of all – *still is* to love the Lord (if you're a Christian, to love *Him*) with all of your heart, soul and mind.

That still is number one.

“Seek God, keep God, want God, treasure God, let nothing ever come before God” as Andrea sang earlier.<sup>ii</sup> LOVE GOD *first* before



anything and anyone else.

And my observation is ... my concern is ... and, again, I could be wrong about this, but *I think we're forgetting that*, especially when it comes to how we form our opinions about all of these controversial issues.

See, I hear a lot of Christians talking about the need to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I even hear some who realize that "neighbor" goes beyond people who are like them; that it includes people who are not of their tribe.

- I hear a lot of Christians crusading for justice and compassion.
- And I hear other Christians arguing for rights and freedom.
- And I hear other Christians advocating

for biblical values and traditional morality.

Everyone has their “issue.”

- It’s all about preventing abortion.
- Or it’s all about preventing unnecessary deaths from guns.
- Or protecting the sanctity of marriage.
- Or protecting our borders.
- Or protecting the environment.

I hear liberal Christians and conservative Christians and libertarian Christians talking about all of those things with *passion*, convicted about the rightness of their position. And a lot of times they are right.

But what I *don't* hear a lot of – and maybe I'm just missing it – what I don't hear a lot of is “you know, as I think about all of these controversial issues – and not just how they play out politically and culturally but personally, *in my own life* and *how I myself live...*”

“As I think about all of these issues, I want to be guided most and first by my love for Jesus.”

I'm not hearing that from Christians. I'm hearing passion over issues but I'm not hearing a lot of passion for God.

Maybe I'm just missing it.

But just in case I'm not, let me say that *there's a reason why loving God comes first.*

When our cause becomes our first love ... when loving others – even those who are not

like us – becomes our first love ... things get out of whack.

Here's why:

- First, as important as justice and compassion, rights and freedom are, when they become detached from and take precedence over our love for God, they start to mean whatever we want them to mean. And we start blessing things and condoning things and loving things that God doesn't bless or condone or love.

And as loving as it might feel to do that for others, it's not ... which is why God doesn't bless or condone or love those things in the first place!

- Second, as important as biblical values and traditional morality are, when they

become detached from and take precedence over our love for God, when they become first priority, they become weapons and wound the very people God wants them to help.

- Finally, when our love for others and our causes get detached from and take precedence over our love for God, we become shortsighted. We focus on the here and now and forget that there is an eternity awaiting everyone.

We forget that as important as it is to care about the suffering caused by disease or malnutrition or disability or mental illness or injury or abuse or assault ... as important as it is to care about unborn children and pregnant women ... we forget that the greatest need men and women have in this life is to come to Christ and to follow Him and

believe in Him.

We forget that our greatest task as Christians is the spread of the gospel not the spread of our political brand.

My point is this: one of the reasons – not the only reason – but one of the reasons God tells us to love Him first and most is because ...

**When we love God first and most, we will love others best.<sup>iii</sup>**

So the real application question for today is “how would this principle affect what you think about how things ought to be?”

Like, for example ...

- Abortion
- And immigration
- And gay marriage
- And gun control

- And freedom of speech
- And gender issues
- And healthcare
- And <whatever>

If you thought about those situations within the framework of “loving God first and most” how would it affect your opinions? And, again, not just politically, but personally – how you live your own life.

Honestly, I don’t know what the answer should be on all of those issues. I have a pretty good idea on some of them but I’m not going to say because that isn’t my purpose in this series.

But I do know that if you’re a Christian and you’re passionate about any of those issues, this *is* the right question to be asking. And maybe wrestling with that question ought to be your project for this week ... maybe before

your next post on Facebook.

## Loving God

Of course, maybe a more important question to ask right now since we've raised the issue is "how do you know if you're truly loving God?"

**One answer might be to go back to something that Jesus said to his disciples.**

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." John 14:15 (NIV)*

If you take that at face value it sounds like love is simply obedience. It's not necessarily *feeling* any particular emotion for Jesus. It is just doing what He tells us to do.

But that's not what Jesus said. He's actually talking about two actions here.



He says “if you love me” (action one) THEN you will do (action two) this other thing called “keeping my commandments.”

But it’s possible to try and keep his commandments without loving Him ... which is what Jesus had to say to that really active and committed group of Christians. “You’re doing lots of good stuff but you have forsaken what you loved at first, which is *Me*.”

My point is that loving Jesus is also a matter of the heart.

Remember, the greatest commandment Jesus said is to love God not just with your strength – with what you do – but with your heart and soul and mind.

**As Piper puts it, “the essence of loving is not doing. The essence of loving is delighting.”**

“The heart,” he writes, “is not an organ of performance; it’s an organ of preference. The heart prefers, *and then* we act in accordance with our preferences. The first commandment is loving with all your preference. Prefer Him, value Him, treasure Him above everything.”<sup>iv</sup>

So what do you treasure? What brings you delight?

Well, here’s one way to look at it ...

- If you get up in the morning and check media feeds filled with partisan voices
- If you mainly read books or listen to talk radio that affirms your political leanings,
- If you mainly discuss politics with those who agree with you,

Then those practices reveal something about your heart and what you treasure.

For you, Fox News or MSNBC are the source of your daily devotionals, the platform of the Republican or Democratic party is your confessional statement, and evangelism means calling others to “Make America Great Again” or to “Feel the Bern.”

On the other hand ...

- If you get up in the morning and you read God’s Word and pray
- If you read books and listen to teaching about following Jesus
- If you contribute to the people and causes Jesus loves
- And if you make it a priority to gather

each week for corporate worship at church

Then those practices also reveal something about what you treasure.<sup>v</sup>

## Conclusion

So, question ... have you left your first love? Has your heart moved away from its attraction and devotion to Jesus and all He stands for?

If so, here's what he said to do.<sup>vi</sup>

*"Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."*

*Revelation 2:5 (NIV)*

"Consider how far you have fallen." In other words, remember what it used to be like.

Remember what it was like when you first believed.

Do you remember that? When God first awakened your soul? Do you remember the excitement you had when you realized that you were forgiven of every sin? That you were loved just as you are?

Go back to that place in your mind. Dwell on that. Remember that. That's the first step.

Then Jesus said to repent. Tell him you've grown cold. Tell him you've put other loves before Him. Confess you have not loved God as He deserves to be loved. Admit that this is not the way you want to be living. You want Him to be first in everything in your life.

Finally, Jesus says, start doing those things you did then when your heart was first connected to His.

I don't know what that looks like for you but I suspect it had something to do with spending time with Him, worshipping Him, being with others who followed Him, giving your time, talent and treasure to the things that matter to Him.

Whatever that was, do that again.

Let's pray together.

Lord, we believe you are the greatest possible object of our love. You are the most worthy treasure there is.

And we believe we'll never be happier than when we love you first and most. And we believe loving you first and most will help us to love others best.

So, more than anything help us to love

You with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Revive our love for you, O Lord, whatever it takes.

And we ask this in your name, Jesus, and for your glory. Amen.<sup>vii</sup>

Invite you to worship and express your love for God, then I'll come back for a very brief close out.

1. Offering @door or online.
2. Book drive for Teacher Supply need 5,000 books. For the past five years, North Heartland has hosted a FREE Teacher Supply Giveaway for hundreds and hundreds of teachers. Donations of new and like new school and office supplies, decor, craft items and more can be delivered to the carts across from the North Heartland front desk.

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/love-your-neighbor-as-yourself-part-1>

<sup>ii</sup> She sang Lauren Daigle's song First.

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/if-we-love-god-most-we-will-love-others-best>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-is-it-like-to-enjoy-god/excerpts/the-heart-of-love-is-delighting-not-doing>

<sup>v</sup> From <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/are-we-listening-good-news-or-fox-news>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/have-you-left-your-first-love>

<sup>vii</sup> Based on longer prayer at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lord-revive-my-first-love>