

**Philippians 3:18-20** – <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...

**Hebrews 13:12-14** – <sup>12</sup> So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

**1 Peter 2:13-17** – <sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

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## I. Introduction

### Greeting

Good morning church! My name is Ethan and I'm one of the pastors here at Union. Good to see you this morning! As we get into the message I have three important facts: (1) Tomorrow is Feb 11, (2) today is Superbowl Sunday, and (3) the sermon today is on politics. Now, how do all of those relate to each other?

Let me tell you: Tomorrow is Feb 12, and Feb 12 is Pastor Kyle's birthday! And our very own pastor Kyle, as a kid, hosted a birthday party and the theme he requested for said party was "football & politics." It's all fitting together like a conspiracy theory on Facebook!

### Intro Series & Topic

We're in a series that we've called "Faithful in Exile" where we've been asking how followers of Jesus - who the Bible calls "God's elect exiles" - navigate this world as people who have found their home in Christ. Next week Pastor Kyle is going to finish out this series, but today we're coming to the issue that - if I'm honest - was the tension that sparked the idea for our whole series: politics in exile. How can followers of Jesus faithfully live out their identity as exiles in the world in the midst of a culture that is so wrapped up in political ideology, political loyalties, political division. In an election year, as the mudslinging ramps up, as it becomes more and more confusing to discern what's true, as claims are made about which voting choices are morally right or morally wrong, as the angst gets turned up even at church, among Christians... How can followers of Jesus live faithfully?

### Our Political Moment

It's a live question for us because it's gotten pretty crazy out there, right? There was a time when people were able to talk, reason with, and work with those who had different political convictions. But

now it's as if the lines in the sand have been drawn along party lines and everything has been politicized. Think about how commercial brands feel the need to make a statement on political issues, whether it is the war in Israel or Roe v. Wade being overturned. Or - let's be real - think about how, in our culture, whether or not to get vaccinated is not just seen as a medical decision. It's seen as a political decision. Even listening to Taylor Swift is a political decision now! Isn't that crazy?

## **The Decline of Christianity**

I'm convinced one of the reasons we live in such a politically charged moment is that connection to Christianity is on the decline in our nation. Over the last twenty-five years forty million Americans have walked away from the church.<sup>1</sup> But when people leave religion behind, societies don't become more sterile, reasonable, and rational. When societies reject religion a God-shaped hole is left behind and other gods rush in to fill the void. We exchange one religion for another. When there is no god in heaven, who will bring you protection and peace? The one with the most power. So ideologies that are greedy for political dominance are the new religions of choice in our country. This is why, if you speak against them (on the Right or the Left) you can't just agree to disagree. You are shunned and excommunicated. We have cancel-culture in part because the political religions in our culture are pitted against each other and people have pinned their hopes to the dominance of their position.

Now all of that is grim, but not surprising. We shouldn't be surprised when the godless act in accordance with their godless religions. But the problem is that the Church in America often looks and acts like the surrounding, increasingly godless culture. We have too often looked past our God in heaven and toward a god in Washington. (More on this as we go on...)

## **Set Up the Main Point**

And so the question I want to answer today is, *How do we live as worshippers of Jesus Christ, when the current of our culture is constantly pulling us toward pinning our hope for peace, our hope for joy, our hope for victory on political candidates and political platforms?* As we look at The Book, here's the position that I want to try and plant into our hearts: **Christians in exile have a political identity that must rule over every lesser loyalty and connect all our hope to the better kingdom.** And I'm going to unpack that argument in three points that build on each other: (1) Christians in exile have a political identity. (2) Our political identity must rule over every lesser loyalty. (3) Our political identity must connect all our hopes to the better kingdom.

And before we go any further, I need to pray for God's help. *King of kings, glorify your name through the preaching of your word. I pray that you would take back ground that has been surrendered over to lesser kingdoms in our hearts. Help me, Holy Spirit. Help us. Amen.*

## **II. Christians in exile have a political identity.**

### **Philippians 3**

The first truth we need to see comes from all over the NT, but I've chosen one example from Philippians 3.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Great Dechurching"

<sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...

### **Shocking Sentences**

Sometimes we read the Bible and we miss how shocking it is. So we read a line like, "...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ..." and we might think, "That's a good line. Let me underline that. And then be distracted by what's for breakfast?" But what we miss is that the truth behind that line turned the Roman Empire upside down. In a city like Philippi, Roman citizenship was a matter of deep pride. Cities located in Italy had special privileges in the Roman Empire. They didn't have to pay the Roman tax. Now Philippi wasn't located in Italy, but it had been given the status of an Italian city. Citizens of Philippi held tightly to their Roman citizenship. And Roman citizens revered the Emperor above all else. Do you know what Romans called their emperors? Lord and savior. And here is Paul saying to them, *Christian - your citizenship isn't in Rome. Your citizenship is in heaven! And your savior isn't Caesar, it's the Lord Jesus Christ.* That's a politically subversive statement! Why do you think the Romans eventually threw the Christians to the lions?

### **Religious Freedom in America**

One of the first things you learn about American history is that a desire for religious freedom played a huge part in the founding of our country. And that unique emphasis on religious freedom in our history has created a space where we are able to think of our faith and our life lived under the rule of a human government as spheres that don't touch each other. Our privilege has skewed our perspective so that we don't naturally hear this political language in the Bible as coming up against anything in our lives.

### **Christianity is Essentially Political**

But in reality, the Bible is trying to teach us that a life of following Jesus includes a fundamental change in your political identity. Think about this: Jesus Christ came to Roman-ruled Israel preaching the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. How do you think the Romans felt about some Rabbi teaching about another Kingdom that was coming? Meanwhile, the Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah are all assuming he's coming to make a political change because the Messiah is a clearly a political deliverer. And while Jesus didn't overthrow the Roman oppression, he conquered the grave and rose again and sits on the throne. He's not just king in Israel in 33 AD, he's eternal King over every kingdom. Friends, a king is a political leader! And we are taught throughout the New Testament what Paul says here in Philippians, we are citizens of another kingdom - the kingdom of Heaven. We have a different political home! This is why Peter writes to the church and calls them exiles. Because we have a homeland, and it's not America.

Friends, you cannot think of Christianity as politically neutral. Christianity is essentially political at its core, but it is not Democrat or Republican. It is not even American. We are citizens of another kingdom, we have another political leader, and his name is Jesus. And this is a reality that cannot just be acknowledged in our spiritual lives while we give the rest of our lives to other things. King Jesus

demands that every aspect of your life - your work, your play, your family, your politics - be devoted to him.

### **The Root System**

Now that doesn't mean that we throw away our respect and appreciation for the United States. It doesn't give us license to be so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good. It does mean that our identity in Christ has to be a part of the root system that feeds every branch of our lives. Our Christian political identity is master over the branch of our life that is "citizen of the USA in 2024."

So that's the foundation. Christians in exile have a political identity. The next step is that our Christian political identity has to rule over every lesser loyalty.

### **III. Our Christian political identity must rule over every lesser loyalty.**

#### **Matthew 10**

Jesus said in Matthew 10,

<sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. <sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Now that doesn't mean that following Jesus necessarily divides families. It means that love for Jesus Christ must take precedence over every relationship; even our deepest, most fundamental, most intimate loyalties. Our identity as Christians has to overshadow everything else that we are tempted to identify ourselves with. Our belonging to Jesus changes our family identity, our ethnic identity; how we think about our gender, our sexuality, our vocation, our friendships... and, yes, our political loyalties. And when our loyalty to King Jesus rules over everything else, that makes us a culturally unique people.

#### **Right & Left Are Not Unique From Each Other**

You know, the Right and the Left may have different positions in their platform, but they are really not unique from each other at their core. They rise up out of the same soup. They have the same cultural roots. Here's an example of what I mean: The Left argues for radical sexual freedom. People should be able to sleep with whoever they want to sleep with, marry whoever they want to marry, have children when they want and terminate pregnancies when they want. They would say, *How dare any person or government tell me what I can and cannot do with my body?* Now, the Right argues for a different kind of freedom. They favor the private sector. They support their right to own a firearm. They would say, *How dare any person or government tell me what I can and cannot do with my stuff?* Different policy preferences, but at the core you have radical individuals who don't want to be told what to do. There's a pastor and cultural commentator named Mark Sayers who said something that struck me. He said:

I would guess that if you took ten interns from MSNBC... and you took 10... interns from Fox News and sat them down and said, *What's your opinion?* They'd have very different divergent opinions. They would mouth... the left-wing talking points and the right-wing talking points. However, if you then studied them - looked at their spending habits, looked at the view of how they interact with time, sexuality, even their sexual practices... I reckon it'd be almost identical.

So we have these... opinions we chuck out, but the actual life script across the political spectrum when you get behind [it]... actually looks very similar... It's actually this western life script of radical individualism masked by ideology.<sup>2</sup>

### **Christians Have a Different Operating System**

So Right and Left are not really unique from each other. Different fruit, same root. But friends, Christians who are citizens of God's kingdom and ambassadors of King Jesus should have a whole different operating system! The way we think and the convictions we hold and the actions we take should be taken from a different script than that of the world! Which means that Christians shouldn't fit neatly into the categories of Right or Left.

And when I say that I don't mean that we should necessarily be splitting the difference from both sides or sitting in the middle. I'm saying, it's a matter of belonging to something that's older, something more expansive, something longer lasting. Imagine a teenager asking their great grandfather who fought in wars, loved his wife, raised a family, knows deep joys and deep sorrows... imagine a teenager asking them whether he preferred iPhone or Android." It's not an incoherent question, it's just a silly question for someone who knows what really matters. That's what it should feel like when a Christian is asked, *are you on the Right or the Left in American politics?* It is a small and silly matter compared to the vastness of the realities of God's eternal kingdom.

### **Engage As Exiles**

Now, you're probably thinking, *but Ethan there are real issues that are important! It's all well and good to talk about being neither Right or Left, but laws change peoples lives and Christians need to engage with these issues.* And to that I would say, you're right. But we have to come at these issues as exiles. People from a different culture. Christians are citizens of God's kingdom, which means we have to be a people ruled by God's culture. And the only way we know the culture of God's kingdom is by knowing the bible. We have to be a biblically responsible people, a biblically thinking people, and biblically moral people.

### **Biblically Responsible People**

As citizens in God's kingdom, we are a biblically responsible people. Remember God's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29? "...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Even though God's people are not at home in the world, God commands us to seek the good of the place where he has us. That means that every Christian in every culture, under any form of government has a God-given responsibility to engage with culture for its flourishing. That means that in our country Christians should leverage the privileges of democracy we have, like voting, to seek the good of our city.

### **Biblically Thinking People**

But as we engage in the political landscape, we aren't allowed to swallow what Right or Left tell us hook line and sinker. We have to do it as biblically thinking people. Here's what I mean by thinking biblically. Let's take an issue like abortion. As biblically thinking people, we come to the issue of

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Sayers, Podcast: This Cultural Moment: "Millennials at Fox News, Satanists, and the Fallout of Deconstructionism"

abortion and we think about the biblical doctrine of the Imago Dei - every human being is made in the image of God, precious and valuable. We remember scriptures that tell us we are fearfully and wonderfully made because God knit us together in our mother's womb. We bear in mind the sixth commandment, "you shall not murder." We think about commands throughout scripture that call God's people to care for the widow and the orphan. And with the weight of the culture of the kingdom of God behind us, we can say that God's people should champion the cause of Life because God's word overwhelmingly pushes us to do so.

But what about another live issue in our culture, like immigration? As biblically thinking people we need to think through some of the same categories. Every human being is made in the image of God. Alongside the commands to care for the widow and the orphan come clear commands to care for the sojourner, the oppressed, and the vulnerable. Christians are called to remember the poor and care for them. We're also called in scripture to give cheerfully and not covet wealth. To love our neighbor. Now, we're also called to obey our governing authorities, which would mean caring about the legal process of immigration. So the issue is not as black and white. But one thing that's clear is that the way many on the Right talk and treat the people coming over the border in derogatory ways flies in the face of the culture of God's kingdom! It's not my goal to give you an answer about this issue. It is my goal to illustrate how both Right and Left operate with policies and attitudes that should not have any place among God's people. I'm not arguing who you should vote for; I am saying that these Biblical factors are the things that have to control our thinking; not which party has signed off on which bill.

In our world today we are trained to think in tweets and slogans. There is less and less thoughtful engagement and more and more temptation to simply separate ourselves into tribes and tow the party line. And I'm trying to get you to see that our Christian political identity has to rule over our lesser loyalties so that we might not be swayed by small perspectives, and short-sighted visions for lesser kingdoms of men. We have to tie our hopes to something better than that!

#### **IV. Our Christian political identity must connect all our hope to the better kingdom.**

##### **Hebrews 13:12-14**

Let's refocus on the Word. Look at Hebrews 13:12-14 again with me.

<sup>12</sup> So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

##### **Fear of Suffering**

Friends so much of the political squabbling that takes place in the Church today seems to me to be rooted in fear of suffering. We worry about whether we will lose our freedoms, whether our nation's laws will be morally just, whether people with ungodly values will win the day, whether Christians will be persecuted in our country. We're nervous for what we might lose. And when we are motivated by that kind of fear, we can so easily fall into the temptation of putting short-sighted trust in the shallow

promises of earthly politics. We see that happening too often in the church today. There are too many Christians flaunting their trust in candidates whose character we should instead be grieving over.

### **Remember Our King!**

But, brothers and sisters, do you remember the kind of king we have? The text says that he suffered outside the gate. He endured discomfort, he gave up his freedom, he submitted to unjust judges, he was persecuted by unruly crowds. He was beaten, mocked, and scorned. But he did it because, like it says just one chapter earlier, there was a joy set before him. And this passage is telling us the joy that was set before him was the joy of saving and setting apart his people by shedding his blood and paying for our sins.

Do you know what God said to Israel in the OT when they asked for a king like the nations had? He said basically, "He will take your sons, and your daughters, and your crops, and your employees, and the best of everything you have." And that's what they did. Even the best kings in Israel did this. Every human leader and human will take from you. Even the most virtuous nation will call upon you to give of your life, your loved ones, your resources to preserve your freedom. But look at Jesus! He gave up his riches in heaven and became poor to live among us. He made himself low and endured our shame. He gave up his life on the cross for our freedom from sin. And he is the better King of a better kingdom because he rose again from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of God and he will come again to fully and finally restore all things.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. Since Jesus has purchased so much for us, and guaranteed so much to us, we can lift our eyes above whatever suffering comes with courage. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

### **The City That is to Come**

Think of the fact that the whole NT was written during the reign of the Roman Empire. Think of it: the United States has existed for just under 250 years. The Roman Empire lasted over 1,000 years and ruled most of the known world. And yet, we can walk through its ruins today. But do you know what isn't standing in ruin? The Church of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God.

Friends, we don't put our hope in candidates or countries, but followers of Jesus do have a political hope! Here we have no lasting city, but our hope is in the better city that is to come and the King over all kings who has come and is coming again.

### **Peter's Instructions**

So what does this mean for us here and now? It took all that time to get to Peter's instructions to the church.

<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good... <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Friends, since we're citizens of the Better Kingdom we can be subject to our government without squirming; so long as it allows us to obey King Jesus first.

Peter tells us to honor everyone. Brothers and sisters of Union Church, no matter what happens this election year, no matter what happens in the coming years, let us be a people who honor everyone. Even those whose convictions are different than yours. Because the priorities of the kingdom are bigger than the priorities of our national politics.

We can love the brotherhood. Union Church us be a church that is marked by our unity in the gospel and our love for one another, rather than our political squabbling.

We can Fear God... let us put the rightful king on the throne of our hearts.

Honor the emperor. No matter who our governing authorities are, we can pray for their discernment, their wisdom, their repentance.

### **We Are Not of this World**

Friends, I guarantee you these are not the ways you will see the world responding to the madness of our moment. But we are not of this world. We have a higher political authority. We serve the King of kings. So we won't freak out. We will have courage and hope because we are citizens the kingdom of heaven, cared for by King Jesus.