

POLITICS + + +

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Well, good morning, King of Kings. What a blessing to be with you today. We are living in one of the most politically divided times that probably any of us have been through. Sometimes families can be divided and friendships can be strained. Even churches, when we talk about politics, can feel a little bit tense. So everybody, let's just start with one big deep breath. Doesn't that feel good? Now let's get into it.

Hey, that thing we talked about last week, social media, it's only amplified how we're feeling because, well, the old news adage, if it bleeds, it leads, is still a thing. In other words, what gets shared and what gets posted and what gets reacted to is the bloodier, the messier, the more sensational, the more conspiratory type you can make it. That's how you get people to read. And so every headline feels urgent. Every conversation feels catastrophic and gosh, every election feels like, does it not, the most important decision you'll ever make.

And somewhere in the middle of all of that noise, Christians, disciples are asking, how do I live in the midst of this? So today what I want to do is I want to tell you exactly who to vote for, what things to vote on. And I want to tell you the 10 up and comers in Washington DC to support. How's that sound? Wise? Maybe not. Instead, what I want to do is I want to press into these six words, Philippians chapter three, verse 20, which says, but our citizenship is in heaven. Come on. Those are words we got to say together. Let's do it. But our citizenship is in heaven.

I want to talk today about what does it look like to be a citizen of heaven, which you are if you believe in Jesus—that is your ultimate home. This is not, that doesn't mean we ignore what happens here, but it does mean that's our ultimate home. And so if you are a citizen of heaven, you are a citizen of heaven before you are an American, before you are a Nebraskan, before you are Republican, Democrat or independent, before you are conservative, liberal on the left, on the right, or go with the donkey or the elephant. You are a citizen of heaven first, amen.

Now that again, doesn't mean that politics aren't important and that what we do in this world doesn't make a big difference because sometimes Christians hear that and it maybe lets them off the hook for what they ought to do. But really God is the one that instituted government and he did it for our purposes. When government is done well, it is doing the things that the kingdom of heaven God is either doing or already will do. God cares about justice. He cares about truth. He cares about protecting the vulnerable, defending the needy and loving our neighbors. And when government is done right, when politics is going well, that's what happens.

And so political engagement is important because loving your neighbor is important. Where we get into trouble is when we start expecting earthly kingdoms to do what only God and his kingdom can do. The government can restrain evil, but it cannot ultimately defeat evil. A political party can shape policy, but it ultimately cannot and should not shape your life. An election may change laws, but only the Holy

Spirit can change an eternity. And so Christians, we should engage politically, deeply care about it, but never lose our soul in it.

So the question really today that I want to ask is this, how do I live faithfully in America without America becoming my primary identity? What do we do? How does that happen? Our ultimate hope has never been in a party or a candidate, or even in our nation as great as it is. Our ultimate hope is Jesus, amen?

So I think nobody modeled this tension of getting really engaged and involved in politics, but still remaining a citizen of heaven first, better in the Old Testament than a guy named Daniel. Daniel was taken along with the Israelites into captivity 586 years before Christ walked this earth. Babylon was an enemy of God's people, the Israelites, and made life miserable for them over decades and centuries. And finally they captured them and brought them into Babylon. And their goal wasn't just to bring them into Babylon, but to reshape them, indoctrinate them, brainwash into being great Babylonians.

And so they were looking for a select group of people, a select group of Israelites that would be leaders on their behalf to talk to and represent the rest of the Israelites. So that in the end, Babylon could be greater, could have more wealth, more fame, more influence. The King Nebuchadnezzar in chapter one was looking for this type of Israelite to conform and be brainwashed and indoctrinated to his ways.

Here's what it says they were looking for: young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well-informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. And I read this description, I thought, you know what? If I lived back then, I probably would have been chosen. Sort of the curse that I—wow, y'all didn't need to laugh that hard. I can feel it here, Northwest Omaha, that's just rude anyway, whatever.

He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians again, because they're indoctrinating into a Babylonian. And so Daniel steps onto this really tense scene and operates with wisdom from the get-go. Daniel and a few others were chosen and rather than fully giving into the Babylonian way and rather than rejecting them, he was met with a difficult decision early on. They were to eat the King's food and who wouldn't want to eat the King's food, by the way, that sounds lovely. But rather than eat the King's food, he gave a different idea because by eating the King's food as a good and faithful Israelite, he would have been sinning and eating unclean food and that wasn't right for him.

And so he said rather, test us, let me and my friends only drink water and only eat vegetables for 10 days and see if at the end of that we're healthier. And so the King took him up on that. And sure enough, after 10 days of drinking water and eating veggies, they were healthier, which is a miracle because I've tried to go 10 minutes on that diet and I don't feel physically, emotionally, or mentally healthy. He stepped in and navigated with wisdom and this wisdom would continue. Not only was Daniel healthier, but he was wiser. And it turns out that when you follow the law of God and you follow closely into who God calls you to be, you end up becoming a very wise person.

Maybe just keep that nugget that when you follow the laws of God and follow closely with God, you turn into a pretty wise person. And that was Daniel. In fact, by the end of chapter one, it says this, in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the King questioned them, Daniel and his

associates, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole kingdom.

Daniel would continue to serve in government and influence politicians and kings and shape policy and interpret dreams and move up the ladder. And as his story continued, it progresses into Daniel chapter six, which is one of the most famous stories in the world where Daniel is thrown in what? The lion's den.

Daniel had moved up and well, let's just say sometimes politicians get a little jealous of other politicians. Not all were happy about this. It says this way in chapter six, verse three, that Daniel had so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the King planned to set him over the whole kingdom. And so because of that, higher ups, politicians were really jealous of Daniel and really competitive against him.

Thank God we don't deal with that with our politicians today, right? So they plotted against him. Verse four says they tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel and his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so, man. They hired private investigators. They had everybody looking and they just couldn't get the dirt on Daniel. They could find no corruption in him. Finally, these men said, we're never going to find any basis for charges against this man, Daniel, unless it has something to do with the law of his God.

And so you likely remember the story that these politicians tricked Darius that if any human being prays or worships another God or another human being, that that person would get thrown into the den of lions. Sometimes laws and edicts go against the kingdom of heaven. And when that happens, we are a citizen of heaven first, and we stay faithful to what God has for us.

And that is what Daniel did three times a day. We know that Daniel prayed on his knees. He continued to pray in spite of this law. And of course, the ones that plotted against him found out he was doing this and he was thrown into the den of lions. And we know how the story goes, that even though he was thrown in and the den was open, the mouths of the lions remained shut. It was a miracle. And the next day he was rescued.

And here's the really cool piece about it. The edict originally was that no human being should pray to another God or human being, but that one that ends up praying to the God of Daniel ends up being the King Darius himself. How cool is that? And then we have a very Old Testament-like finish to the story where the people that plotted against him, they, the wives and the children were all thrown into the den. And let's just say they didn't eat last night. So they were hungry. In fact, the text says before they reached the floor, these lions overpowered them and crushed their bones, which gives me evidence that these lions were likely not from Detroit. Thank you. Thank you. I feel like walking off, but we've got a lot more damage to do today.

Daniel was engaged politically, but a citizen of heaven first. And I want to talk today about how he never let Babylon get to be his primary identity, because that's the tension that modern-day Christians struggle with in America: how does America not become my primary identity?

If I could define the two guardrails for you, I would define them in this way, that there are two. And one of the guardrails that we should not cross over is to completely withdraw. And the other guardrail

that we should not cross over is to completely become consumed. These are the two. Where would you know more naturally fall?

Daniel shows us that we can live in the middle and we can be a citizen of heaven and we can be faithful and hardworking and trustworthy and excellent in what we do and still influence the kingdom that we live in, in this world. And that's what we are called to be and to do as Christ followers: to influence the kingdom, right? Your kingdom in heaven on earth now, but we never lose sight of being a kingdom or a citizen of heaven first, amen.

Daniel lived in complicated times and we too need wisdom. And that's why he prayed three times a day. We need wisdom to navigate. Where do you naturally fall in the guardrails? Do you tend to completely withdraw? I don't know what to do or what to say. And so it's easiest just to stay out of it. Or do you tend to become completely consumed and ultimately place your hope in a lesser kingdom or a candidate or a party? And that if this happens, then all will be made right. This feels like the two guardrails. Where do you fall?

If I lay my cards on the table, I tend to be more on this guardrail. I tend to want to withdraw, especially as a Christian leader and as a pastor, because sometimes it's hard to know exactly what to say or what to do or what not to say or what not to do and make everybody happy. And so easiest just to kind of stay in my little bubble when it comes to politics.

When you tend to withdraw, what ends up happening is you can become apathetic and you can appear and be unmerciful to those that are in need. In what theology we call, you might be guilty of sins of omission, where you miss the mark on doing things that God calls you to do. You just don't do them. This is where I tend to more naturally fall.

Maybe for you, you tend to more be on the other guardrail where you get completely consumed by it and your hope again goes to a party or a candidate or this particular law moving in my favor. And you put so much stock in that, that you end up confusing your primary identity and you have misordered loves. Perhaps you might even see those that don't think like you as an enemy. And sometimes that leads to lots of fighting and leads to in theology, what we would call sins of commission, where you miss the mark and you simply do things that you should not do as a child of God.

These are the two guardrails. Where do you fall? And it's so confusing. And I feel for you because pastors and church leaders have so many different perspectives on this and it's never been more public as it is now. And it's really challenging to know what to do, how to do it, what to say, what not to say, especially in politically charged moments in a climate that we live in.

A recent case in point is nine months ago when Charlie Kirk was assassinated. Because I tended to be more on the withdrawal side, if I'm honest, I didn't know who Charlie was before his assassination. Come to find out, this is obviously very tragic and very sad that this happened and I was deeply saddened by it.

Charlie had very vocal Christian views and because of that, Charlie had a lot of fans that were Christian and he had a lot of enemies that were non-Christian. Charlie also had very strong political views and because of that, Charlie had a lot of fans that aligned with him politically and a lot of enemies that

didn't align with him politically. And the loss of Charlie Kirk and what ended up happening ended up being really divisive even amongst the church.

Immediately, as he was assassinated on a Wednesday, I began hearing pastors and church leaders on social media talk about what to do this coming Sunday. Some were saying that if you don't change everything in your church and make this Sunday about this man, Charlie Kirk and the martyr that he is, then you're not doing it right. Others were saying, hey, if you talk about Charlie Kirk, then you better say the names of others that were killed unjustly. And what about some of his political views that maybe our church doesn't fully align with? And so what do you do? What do you say? What do you not say? It's really tough and challenging to know.

And Sunday came and went. And what happened after that is even more sad when pastors, church leaders, and I'm bringing up pastors and church leaders to show that we struggle with this. And so I get the struggle that you go through because pastors and church leaders, some of them actually opened up social media campaigns that said, if your church did this X, Y or Z this past Sunday regarding Charlie Kirk, or if your church didn't do this X, Y or Z regarding Charlie Kirk, then you should find another church. And it seems to me like that is misplacing priority. And sadly, a lot of churches lost people to some of these churches. We call that sheep stealing in our business. And it wasn't fair.

And I, nine months after, still couldn't tell you legitimately what the right time balance could have, would have, or should have been for Charlie Kirk. I know at King of Kings, we prayed for his family and our nation at all of our campuses. But what I can tell you is that the church, our number one kingdom, is the kingdom of heaven, not America, as great as it is. And if your church did or didn't say the name Charlie Kirk, I don't know. But here's what I know: your church ought to be a place where every Sunday, the name Jesus Christ is spoken out loud and talk of his death and resurrection and coming again ought to be at the forefront. And if it is, that's a church I would want to be a part of. And I would want all of you to be a part of whether it's here or elsewhere.

Now if we step back, the reason I think politics becomes so consuming is because politics promises control. And as human beings, we like control, don't we? But church Christian, you have less control over what you think you have. Let me just put it that way. And that's okay because we believe in the one that is confidently and squarely seated in his throne right now, that the Bible says holds all things together and is sovereign. And so maybe it's okay to let go of a little bit of that control that we want.

So in my time left, let me share with you what I think is one negative example and one positive example from the New Testament of what it looks like to be a citizen of heaven. And we'll get real practical at the end.

First the negative example: perhaps nothing more tragic and the danger of political idolatry than what happens in Matthew chapter 27, particularly in the trial of Jesus, where Pontius Pilate as a custom is allowed one prisoner to be released. And there are two candidates on that day. One of them is Barabbas and one of them is Jesus. And the crowd of course chooses Barabbas. Barabbas was a revolutionary. He was an insurrectionist. He was anti-Roman and willing to go up against the government.

We also know about Barabbas. He was a murderer. In Mark's account, it tells us that likely the murder was committed in the uprising. And so many scholars believe that the murder was likely on or to a

Roman official, which is interesting because in the crowd that day were mostly Israelite, Jewish people, the people that Jesus came for, the people that misunderstood why Jesus came.

They wanted Jesus to be a political savior. They wanted Jesus to restore the nation of Israel to be like it was in the times of King David. We want Jesus to be the one. It looks like he's got the power to overthrow Rome, to go up against the government, to help us ascend to the place where we ought to be right here and now.

And yet Jesus appeared to be silent on those fronts. When you've got another guy named Barabbas that appeared to be the one to go up against the Roman government and to fight and even murder if I have to, to restore Israel. And ultimately the crowd chose to release this insurrectionist, this revolutionist. The crowd became so consumed with defeating Rome, their political enemy, that they missed the savior standing right in front of them. That was not here to offer a temporary one-time-for-now we're going to reign again like it was in the time of King David, but was bringing an eternal kingdom of heaven that they missed.

And we should ask ourselves, how often do we miss? How often do we forget that we're a kingdom of heaven citizen first, that we stopped choosing political parties and candidates to be saviors. They make terrible saviors. And no party can carry the weight of ultimate hope that only Jesus can carry.

Like many of you, I was listening to a recent interview with former Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse. How many of you saw that interview? Quite a few. And tragically at a really young age, he's diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and has months to live. And in that, he's getting a lot of that wisdom that you and I are reading about in the Proverbs and we see in the Psalms, that it's so important that we remember we're here for only a short time.

The way Ben says it is this, that we're all always on the clock. Some of us just have the benefit of knowing our time is finite. When you only have months left to live, that's a real realization. And all of a sudden you realize, I don't know if I want to spend the last few months of my life fighting with people on Facebook about politics. Or Ben, in the interview, he talks about things that are more important now that he knows, now that he's got this new diagnosis, family, friends, church, Jesus, purpose to use our days in this world.

When you get clarity about what matters most, you realize that there's no election, no party and no movement that can carry the weight that only Jesus can. And on that day, they chose a side, but Jesus didn't come to take a side and to set up something temporary. He came to establish the permanent and eternal kingdom of heaven. As he says in John 18, my kingdom is not of this world.

The crowd became far too consumed. And if I left it there, I'd leave half of you feeling guilty and the other half off the hook. Because yeah, you read about those things and what you see, but there's also something in Matthew 27 that you don't see. And the more I sat with it, the more I thought this is actually more a picture of how I can get.

Nowhere in Matthew 27 do you see any mention of the 11 disciples. Not in the trial, gosh, not in the events leading up to the crucifixion, not even the crucifixion, not even the burial. You have a few other people coming in, but never do you see the 11 disciples. I mean, these guys were a wreck and they completely withdrew at a time when Jesus was bringing his kingdom to this world like never before.

Where were they? Completely withdrawn, denying, betraying, and hiding—the two guardrails. And thank God that that wasn't the end because those 11 disciples that made a mess of things are also going to be the positive example in getting another chance.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended and then the early church began. And the early church is the positive example of what it looks like to follow Jesus and to be a citizen of heaven.

You know, in this history, the time that they were living in, the disciple Peter and the apostle Paul and the other disciples, they were at that point under the Roman emperor Nero, who is one of the most horrible, corrupt, vile, unjust kings that this world has ever seen. And he persecuted Christians because it was fun for him to do that.

In other words, in all objectivity, it's a far worse political climate then than today when we're complaining like that the gas prices are a little high. Let's put it into perspective.

And though the disciples got it wrong, and though they would continue to make mistakes along the way, the early church became known not for, let's take Rome back, but became known for Jesus as Lord, and we're going to follow him. And the early church did, and they did the things that good governments and good politicians help do today. They took care of the needy and were generous towards one another. They crossed racial boundaries. They loved and cared for their neighbors. They served widows. They adopted abandoned children. They cared for the sick and they remained joyful under pressure.

And when the Roman empire looked at them, they were like, who are these people? They're different. And a lot of people wanted to be a part of them.

And amazingly, when we can look back at 2000 years of history, we can see that, yeah, there was a strong empire of that day that appeared like it couldn't be stopped. That is no more. And there was another empire that looked as small as a mustard seed that was growing and building something called the kingdom of heaven that, by the way, is still quite strong today through the church, amen.

Might this be a time for us to live like the early church, to not panic, certainly not to withdraw. It's time to enter in and to shine the light of Jesus. And as we shine the light of Jesus, certainly not to become too consumed, where we ultimately put our hope in a lesser thing, a lesser person, a lesser kingdom, but to come inside the guardrails and say that this God is worthy of my praise. I'm a citizen of heaven first, and I will do what Jesus called me to do, and I will live in his kingdom, and I'll be a participant where I can bring the kingdom that is in heaven in Omaha and beyond, a kingdom where love defeats evil, a kingdom where grace triumphs over sin, a kingdom where truth spreads more than propaganda, a kingdom where Jesus is still seated confidently and squarely on his throne and holding all things together, holding you and I together, holding you and I together, even when we go over the guardrails and when we make a mess of things and lose our way.

Holding us together when we go over the guardrail and withdraw and forget who we've called to be. We live by the blood of Jesus. If it bleeds, it leads. That's the leading story that we all live with. His blood, shed for me, shed for you, opened up an entrance into a kingdom that is not right now, for a little bit of time, where you get a little bit of fame, a little bit of wealth, and a little bit of influence, but

rather a kingdom that lasts forever, where you are co-heirs, where all the evil of the world will be no more, and only the light of Christ will shine.

Let's take a deep breath again. I need it. I know this is heavy, and I know there's lots of opinions, and I don't even know what you'll think of my message today, but what does heavenly citizenship look like on a Monday morning? Probably a lot less dramatic than what you'd see on social media. A lot less dramatic than you might think it is around the Thanksgiving or Christmas tables when you're with your family.

A citizen of heaven wakes up, gets on his knees like Daniel and prays, and says, before I belong to anything of this world, I belong to you, Jesus.

And let me skip to my final slide. The best thing that you can do as a citizen of heaven, as a citizen of America rather, is to be a faithful citizen of heaven, because when you're a faithful citizen of heaven, you are bringing and doing the things that good governments and good politicians do. You are bringing God's kingdom to this world. You're caring about this world which God created, but you're not losing your soul and attaching too much of your value and worth to it. You're involved. You're informed. You vote. You defend the needy, stand up for the vulnerable, care for the poor. You bring justice. You don't panic. You stay calm. You be courageous. You do it all remembering that even when you go over the guardrail, his kingdom still operates by grace through faith, and because he bled for you, you've got a place in his kingdom.

Don't ever forget that. Your time is finite. Your days are important. Be engaged, but please don't lose your soul to it.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for who you are, and we thank you that at the end of the day in these complex issues that your Holy Spirit is here to guide us. Your word can give us wisdom, and your community can make us stronger, and so do that today.

Lord, if anyone is feeling convicted today, I pray that they would hear your words of forgiveness. For those that have gone over the guardrail and have withdrawn and have not been the people that you've called them to be, that have been fearful, that have stayed off to the side and not shined the light of Jesus, God, we are sorry.

For those that have gone over the guardrail and been too completely consumed by this, have put our hope in lesser things, have placed our value and worth in more of this world than the kingdom of heaven, God, we're sorry.

Thank you for your grace and for the cross. Thank you that you've forgiven us. You who have sinned, you who have lost your way, you who have gone over the guardrails, have been forgiven in the name of the Father, by the blood of the Son, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, and whoever the Son has set free is a free citizen of heaven. Amen.