

# Why Are Christians So Politically Driven?

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Mark 12**. If you're new with us this week, or happened to miss last Sunday, we began a **series called Question Everything**. And we spent the majority of our time last Sunday unpacking the "deconstruction" movement that is happening right now in the West—where a lot of people are asking pressing questions about their faith in Jesus, and sometimes walking away from Jesus as a result of that process.

And one of the main things we *mentioned* last week was that really, there is **good deconstruction** and there **bad deconstruction**. *Good* deconstruction is when we use the bible to analyze and think critically about what Christianity *should* be, versus what Christianity has often *become*. That's a *healthy* thing to do and, arguably, what Jesus spent a lot of his ministry doing. But *bad* deconstruction is when we use our current cultural moment to sit in judgment and critique everything else around us, including the belief system the bible has set forward. That's *bad* deconstruction. So **over the next five weeks, we're learning how to do the good type of deconstruction, and recognize the bad type of deconstruction**. And we're doing that by exploring some of people's biggest questions when it comes to Christianity.

So **the first question** that we'll be covering *this morning* is this: **why are Christians so politically driven?** Just diving in head first. My philosophy has always been "if you're going to make people mad at you, why *wait*?" Might as well get right to it. But there's a *reason* I felt compelled to tackle this one *first* in our series. And that's because, in my experience talking with people who *have* deconstructed or *are* deconstructing, *this* topic tends to come up most frequently. It may or may not be the primary *reason* for people deconstructing, but it is certainly one of the topics that *comes up* most.

And I think that's because for a lot of people, **the last couple election cycles** here in the U.S. have been quite disorienting. A lot of people have been left with a real disconnect about how Christians could support certain people that they supported. And then other people with a disconnect about *why* there's a disconnect. But one way or another, there's a good bit of confusion, frustration and disillusionment around just what exactly happened over the past five or six years in the American political landscape.

Now, just **for clarity**, I don't think the issue people are having is that Christians are *involved* in politics. I don't think *that's* the problem. **I don't think people are disillusioned because Christians are politically informed, or politically involved, or even because they have political preferences**. Best I can tell, the *issue* is actually the *degree to which* a lot of Christians are involved. The way in which some Christians have allowed political

ideologies to *dominate* their thinking and acting in substantial ways. **The critique, best I can tell, isn't that Christians are politically *involved*, but rather that they are politically *consumed*. They're politically *driven*.** So that's what I want us to get into this morning: why are Christians so politically driven?

~~So we'll just start things off here.~~ In January 2016, then **Republican front-runner** Donald Trump made a campaign stop in Sioux Center, Iowa. The appearance was at a conservative Christian college in one of the most *conservative* Christian communities in the nation. And the speech he gave was the one that included the now-famous line about how he could “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody” and he wouldn't lose any voters as a result. But while *that* line got a lot of attention, there was arguably another line in his speech that was far more important, especially as it relates to our question this morning. He *started off* that speech that day by saying that “Christianity was *under siēge*,” but that if people would elect *him president*, as a result, Christianity would “have *power* again.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I would imagine **in a room this size**, there are a wide variety of different opinions on Donald Trump, and even on that statement itself. And I don't really care to start swinging at *that* hornet's nest this morning. But I don't even know that we *have* to. Because at least best *I* can tell, that statement was just Trump *reading the room*. He and his campaign were dialed into a felt *problem* among a lot of evangelicals, and he was simply setting himself forward as a *solution* to that felt problem. **Evidently, at least for a large number of evangelicals in America, the perception is that Christianity *has lost* or *is losing* much of its cultural *power* and *influence*, and that something needs to be done to remedy that.** That's the baseline understanding by *many*. And I would say, just based on the results of the 2016 election, the indicators are that he read that room extremely *well*. That is indeed the sentiment.

Now a **couple of important disclaimers** on that. First, based on the numbers, that sentiment and that strategy largely **only resonated with *white evangelicals*** in America. Christians of color weren't all that motivated by it. And there are plenty of reasons for that—one of which is that many Christians of *color* have never *had* the *luxury* of a position of cultural power, so they don't feel nearly as threatened and paranoid at the prospect of *losing* it.

But **second**, it's important that we point out that the Republicans aren't the only ones capitalizing on that fear or that narrative. The Democrats are too—they just use different language for it. For instance, one of the favorite catch phrases on the *Left* is telling

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<sup>1</sup> Full speech available [here](#).

people not to be “on the wrong side of history.” You may have heard something like that before. Now notice that even though **the language of power isn’t** in there, the *idea* very much *is*. The implication in that statement is that history is moving in a particular direction, and that if you don’t vote for a certain person, or support a certain policy, or update your beliefs in a certain way, history will leave you *behind*. You *won’t* be respected, you *won’t* have influence, and you *won’t* have *power*. So turns out, both parties sometimes motivate people with the *fear* of losing *power*. **And for whatever reason, they especially employ that tactic in their dealings with Christians.**

The only **difference is** found **in the solutions** that each party *proposes* to that fear. The *Right* tells Christians that **we are losing power and influence, and we need to *fight* to take it back. The Left tells Christians that we are losing power and influence, and we need to *update our* beliefs so we can *share* in the power once again.** Same diagnosis of the problem; different proposed solutions. Are you with me so far?

Okay. So **what does Jesus think** about all of this? That’s the question we always want to ask as followers of Jesus, right? Not just what *seems* right, or what is *practical*, or what is *expedient*. But what would *Jesus think* and *do*, when it comes to issues like these? *Conveniently*, that’s sort of what **Mark 12** is all about. For the next little bit, we’re going to work through a story about a time that Jesus was presented with a similar problem, and similar *solutions*—but then proposed an altogether different response. So let’s take a look together in Mark 12, starting with v. 13:

**[13] Later they** (which in context, is the religious establishment of Jesus’ day...) ~~they~~ **sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.**

Okay, let’s pause briefly there for **some context**. To understand what happens in this passage and how it connects to our question this morning, you need to know who these two groups of people were. So I need to give you the briefest of history lessons.

The **Pharisees** were the **religious conservatives** of Jesus’ day. They held to a literalist interpretation of the bible and held very strict, moral standards. And because of all that, they had a tendency towards some self-righteousness at times. **Don’t know if that reminds you of anybody you know.** But their response to the Roman world around them was equal parts *separatist* and *antagonistic*. They felt like the occupying government infringed on Israel’s independent status as God’s people, so they didn’t like it. They were *against* it. And they were regularly looking for ways to get their cultural power and influence back. In fact, that’s what they believed the *Messiah* was coming to do. That’s the *Pharisees*.

Now, the **Herodians** were more like the religious *progressives*. They were on the *other* side of the political spectrum. Their approach, when it came to the ways and customs of Rome, was more “go along to *get* along.” They tended to throw their lot in *with* the Romans, in large part because it gave *them* more power and influence by *association*. And because political *expediency* was their *goal*, their morality was a little more, shall we say, *flexible*. It wasn’t that they didn’t *have* moral standards, it’s just that those things could be *adjusted* when needed. They knew if they wanted to maintain some level of cultural power and influence alongside the Romans, they needed to *live* as the Romans lived, as the saying goes.

So **ladies and gentlemen**, I give you the *Pharisees* and the *Herodians*. Now, while it’s important to point out that these two groups are **not the same** as the political Right and Left of our day—there are certainly many *differences*—there are also at least a few striking *similarities*, right? And particularly, there are some similarities **in their approaches to power**. Each of them understood the *power* of the Roman government as being in competition to their own power and influence. But they *responded* to that belief in *different ways*. One responded with *antagonism* towards that power, and the other responded by *accommodation* to that power. **Not unlike the responses of the two political camps of our day**.

Now, because of all this, these two camps **didn’t often agree on much** of anything. They despised one another, avoided one another, and were often driven by *contempt* for the other group (not that modern America knows what *that* dynamic is like at all): The Pharisees and the Herodians could not work together on much of anything. But in *this moment*, we find them in a rare moment of unity, because they’re both trying to trap Jesus with a question. Keep reading with me in v. 14:

[14] *They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. (just a bit of empty flattery there). Is it **right** to pay the **imperial tax to Caesar** (the Roman emperor at the time), **or not?** [15] **Should we pay, or shouldn’t we?**”*

**The tax they’re asking about** was the tax paid for the “privilege” of living under Roman rule. The Pharisees weren’t fond of paying it because it was perceived as symbolically *consenting* to Roman rule over them (the very thing they were passionately *against*). Herodians generally had no problem paying it because again, “go along to get along.”

So this is **not two groups of people asking** Jesus for tax advice (as odd of a story as that would be). This is them trying to pin Jesus down to a *political ideology*. **It wouldn't be unlike a group of Republicans and Democrats going up to Jesus today and asking him where he stands on gun control, or abortion, or immigration. They're asking Jesus this question because they want to know where he stands, politically speaking.** They're hoping that based on his answer, they can put him in a political *category*. **They can figure out, once and for all, how Jesus thinks the Jewish people should relate to the political power dynamics of their day. Is he a "get our power back" kind of guy? Or is he a "go along to get along" kind of guy?**

Well **let's see** how Jesus responds, second half of v. 15:

[15] **But Jesus knew their hypocrisy.** "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a **denarius** and let me look at it." (a denarius was one of the more common forms of currency in Jesus' day) [16] **They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription (on the coin)?" "Caesar's," they replied.** **The coins had Caesar's image on them, much like ours have former presidents on them.** But in Jesus' day, that's because these coins were literally minted out of Caesar's personal treasury. [17] **Then Jesus said to them, [Okay...] "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."** **And they were amazed at him.**

So **what is Jesus' answer?** Well, read **at a very surface level,** it could seem like he picked the side of the *Herodians*, right? Because he encouraged them to "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's," i.e. pay the tax. But **when you read a little closer, you realize he actually just confronted both sides.** On the one hand, he says (likely staring right at the Pharisees), "pay the tax. Don't be difficult just for the sake of being *difficult*. You are *effectively* Roman citizens. You *benefit* from Roman culture and customs and conveniences, and everyone else who is a Roman citizen pays the imperial tax. So pay it. Don't be antagonistic for no reason, and don't set yourself against the Roman government just because you don't like or disagree with *aspects* of it."

And I'll just add to this: **whatever you currently think of our government here in America, however overbearing or overreaching you may consider it to be: it is nothing compared to the Roman empire of Jesus' day.** They literally *crucified* people who set themselves against them. So you can bet that if Jesus said *this* to the Pharisees of his day, he would also say something similar to *us*. If he said to *them*, "don't be difficult just for the sake of being difficult," the *same advice* would apply to us in 21st century America. That's his challenge to the *Pharisees*.

But there's **actually a challenge in there for the Herodians, too**. After saying "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus says "...but give to *God* what is *God's*." The coin has *Caesar's* image on it, so then what has *God's* image on it? According to Genesis, *we do*, right? *People* do.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is saying, essentially, "pay taxes to Caesar. It's his money anyway, so give it back to him if he asks for it. *But you* belong to *God*. As in, your entire life and every part of it. Every part of how you live belongs to God, and so you should rightfully give the entirety of your life to him."

**And when spoken to a group** of people that often played fast and loose with how God said to live, that would've likely been heard as a word of *correction*. **Jesus knows that when the world secures your allegiance**—when you start to take cues from them on how you live and what you value and what you prioritize—and even *how you relate* to those who are *different* than you—**you actually cease to be a part of God's kingdom**. He made you, he *created* you, and so *he* rightfully claims authority over every part of your life. And **that is a much higher authority than any king, emperor, or president will ever be able to claim. So do not give any person, any party, any ideology, or any nation, your allegiance.**

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**So the question all of us should be asking** as followers of Jesus at this point is **how do I know if I've done that?** How do we *know* if we've given a political party or ideology more authority than they rightfully deserve? How do we *know* when our *allegiances* are off? Well this will be far from *exhaustive*, but I'll give you two *significant* ways.

One sign that you've given a political ideology your allegiance is having **a tendency towards package-deal politics**. Now here's what I mean by that term. **Package-deal politics is when you find a party or a candidate's position on one issue compelling, so you feel like you have to buy into their entire platform as a result.** So **hypothetically**, let's say as a follower of Jesus, I find the Republican platform on sexual ethics compelling. Maybe I'm not 100% on-board, but I think overall, they get it right. Package-deal politics would have me believe that if I find their stance on *that* issue compelling, I *must* find their stance on *all other* issues compelling too. So people end up concluding "well if I agree with the Republicans on ethics or sexuality, I guess I also have to agree with them on guns. I guess I *also* have to agree with them on economic policy." That's package-deal politics. Or on the other side, "if I agree with the Democrats on caring for the poor, I guess I have to also agree with them on issues like abortion, or on the redefinition of gender and sexuality." Thinking that way is what we might call "package-deal" politics: feeling like we have to agree with *everything*, to agree on one thing.

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<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 1:26-27.

The **problem with** package-deal politics is that **no political party—present, past or future—will ever have a monopoly on the kingdom of God.** Author **Brett McCracken**, writing for the Gospel Coalition several years back, put it this way:

*..consistent faithfulness to Scripture will never square with total alignment to any political party. A gospel agenda is not set by partisan think tanks in Washington, D.C. It's set by Scripture. A gospel agenda may align with some aspects of one political party and some of another—and should spur us to engage in those areas—but it also decidedly rejects some aspects of both. God's agenda is better, bigger, and more glorious than any one party, nation, culture, or time. The mission of Jesus will outlast every White House tenure. It will outlast America itself. For the Christian, the "right side of history" is always the side that places faithfulness to the eternal God above loyalty to a temporal tribe.<sup>3</sup>*

God is too good for package-deal politics. **And if you ever find yourself in a place where you are unable to critique or diverge from aspects of your preferred political party, that's a pretty good sign that you've given them your allegiance.**

Now, **another indicator** that you may have given a political party your allegiance is found in **who you identify most with.** Put another way, it's **when you have more in common with those who share your politics, than with those who share your faith.** Do you identify *more* with fellow *Republicans*, or fellow *followers of Jesus* who are Democrats? Do you identify *more* with fellow *Democrats*, or fellow *followers of Jesus* who happen to be *Republicans*? ~~If we are in complete consensus with someone who shares our politics and doesn't follow Jesus, but can't agree on anything with someone who shares our faith but not our politics; that's a pretty good sign that we've been more formed and disciplined by our politics than by Jesus.~~

Now it is **worth acknowledging** that, especially **here in the South**, there are plenty of people who *claim* to be Christians, who *very obviously aren't*. But when you take *those* people out of the equation, who do you most identify with? And to add to that, if you *decide* whether or not a person is a "real Christian" *based* on their political affiliation, that's a dead giveaway. If you discover the political affiliation of another follower of Jesus, and immediately conclude in your heart, "oh—you must not *actually* follow Jesus then," that reveals a heart that is more aligned with a party than it is with God's kingdom.

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<sup>3</sup> Full article available [here](#).

So if you are here and are *at all* politically *inclined*, I would encourage you to really reflect on those indicators, and others like them. I would encourage you to truly consider whether or not you've given your allegiance to a political ideology. **It's completely fine for followers of Jesus to have political preferences and even political leanings—but no follower of Jesus should give a political perspective our allegiance.** When we give over our *allegiance*, that's a good indicator that we've yielded into the allure of worldly power.

But in our passage from Mark 12, Jesus displays an altogether different approach to power. He first rejects the notion of *antagonizing* and *vilifying* the world in order to take power back. But also rejects the notion of *accommodating* to the world and following its lead in order to *regain* their approval. His approach *confronts* both of those, and chooses *neither*.

Now let's just be honest: that's *troubling* to a lot of us, isn't it? Like, is Jesus not *bothered* by a worldly Roman government exercising power over him and his people? Does he not understand the *threat* posed to him? I mean, surely he sees how *immoral* they are. Surely he sees how *cruel* and *oppressive* they are. Surely he sees how their values and their priorities are not aligned with the kingdom of God in any way. Doesn't he see that as a *threat* to his "religious freedom"? So why doesn't he feel like that's a *problem* that needs to be solved? So why isn't he *bothered* by the loss of cultural power like many of us are?

I think we get *that* answer in the gospel of John. There, Jesus is being *questioned* by a governing authority just a matter of hours before he is *crucified*, and he utters these words. John 18, v. 36—we'll put it on the screen:

*Jesus said, "My kingdom is **not of this world**. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now **my** kingdom is from **another place**."*

Jesus says, "my kingdom," or if you want, you could read that "my *kingship*, or my *power*," "is not of this world." Jesus says, "my power is not a worldly kind of power. If it were, my servants would've fought." Jesus says 'if I was here to set up a worldly kingdom with worldly power, you would've known it. My servants would've gone to war, and would have used worldly methods and worldly means just like everybody else to protect and preserve my power. But that's not what happened. *And*, at the same time, part of the reason I've caused such a *fuss* is that I simply *refuse* to throw my lot in with *worldly* power, to gain their approval. I refuse to just 'go along to get along.'"

You see, *this is the nature* of God's kingdom. On the one hand, it *refuses to unnecessarily antagonize* worldly power. It refuses to use worldly means and methods to *win that power back*. But on the *other* hand, it also refuses to be *absorbed and acquired* by worldly power. It refuses to be flexible on truth just for the sake of regaining power. *Because worldly power is not its goal. Jesus does not fear worldly power or kingdoms or authorities. And because he doesn't fear them, he can't be co-opted by them. The power of Jesus is category-defying. It doesn't attack, and it doesn't accommodate.*

His power is a *different type of power entirely*. It's a power that is made perfect in weakness. It's a power that is displayed precisely in *how it handles* being forgotten about, mistreated, and neglected. It's a power that endures the *loss* of all things and considers that *gain*.

Listen: there *were some good things that came out* of Christianity being somewhat respected in our country for many years. I'm thankful for some of the things God did *through those years*. But I hope we're not foolish enough to think that God is *dependent upon that* to move. I hope we're not foolish enough to think God needs *us to be respected and culturally powerful to do great things through us*. At some point we've got to remember that the message of the gospel has often spread the fastest when it is most attacked, hated, and cast aside. Let's not think so *lowly* of God and his kingdom, to assume he is reliant on political machinery to get the job done. He doesn't need us to be powerful and he doesn't need us to be liked.

Have you ever *considered* that the *universal symbol* for the Christian faith is a *cross*? Not a chariot, not a trumpet, not a mighty warrior. And not riches or fame or glamour. A *cross*. Can you think of a *less* powerful and impressive symbol to represent our faith? Do you know what a cross *meant* in Jesus' day? It meant "I lost. I was conquered. I was defeated." And *that is what separates the way of Jesus from every other belief system, ideology, or worldview that there is. In every other one, victory comes through conquest or power or achievement or coercion. In the kingdom of Jesus, victory comes through defeat. Life comes through death. Power comes through weakness.*

In *Colossians*, it says that Jesus conquered rulers and authorities by "*triumphing over them...in the cross.*" *Victory, by defeat.* In the book of *Revelation*, it says that God's people triumph by "*the blood of the lamb*" (i.e. Jesus' death) and "*their testimony,*" because "*they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*" *In the kingdom of Jesus, you don't need guns, chariots, horses or campaigns; you need a cross.*

Here's why that matters. **Right now, both narratives in our world—the Right and the Left—are dependent upon you as a follower of Jesus fearing the loss of cultural influence. They're counting on you** fearing that. *They need you to feel threatened enough, or desperate enough to buy their agenda, and give your allegiance to it. So when you don't fear the loss of worldly power—when you're not motivated by that, when you don't fear that?* Then political ideologies start to lose their leverage. They can no longer demand our allegiance because we're not *buying* what they're *selling*. We're not even in the *market* for it. **I long for the day when followers of Jesus realize power isn't something the world can grant them, and it's not something it can take away.**

As followers of Jesus, we serve a **crucified, Messiah**. A *king*, who was *conquered*. And that did not change the fact that he was king. In fact, it *confirmed* it. So when we act as if we *need* worldly power for Jesus' sake, we don't just come off looking desperate; we don't just come off looking threatened. We actually contradict the very message we claim to believe. *And* when we *refuse* the allure of power, we tap into the power made possible by Jesus, *through* the Spirit. And that's the only power that *lasts*. So **the invitation** to all of us who follow Jesus is simple, yet world-altering: pick up *our cross*, and follow him.

And finally, if you're in the room and **you've been disillusioned** by how *consumed* Christians have been with politics: I would just invite *you* to consider that maybe the problem is not *Jesus*, but in a complete misunderstanding of the type of kingdom he came to bring. His kingdom is *not of this world*.

Let's pray.