

Whose Side is Jesus On?

Well good to see you guys. If you have a bible, go with me to [Mark 12](#). Well so glad you guys are here—I was nervous that [after one week of a series about politics](#), nobody would even show back up for the second week. Last Sunday, if you weren't aware, we kicked off a teaching series we're calling *Jesus & Politics*, where we're doing our best to sort through the partisan craziness of our day through the lens of the Scriptures.

And [last week specifically](#), I just laid out my case biblically for why I think we, as followers of Jesus, should *care* about what happens within politics. Not that it should be *all* we care about, or even that it should be the *main* thing we care about. But that we should at least be aware of what's happening in that world and concern ourselves with it from time to time. And the reason for that is simply that we care about the common good of our society, and politics is a piece of that puzzle. We care about people, and politics affects people, so that means we care, to some degree, about politics. That was what we covered last Sunday.

Now with that established, today I want us to move on to a [whopper of a question](#). And that's the question *whose political "side" is Jesus on*, anyway? I told you it was a whopper of a question. That is a question that a lot of people have wondered, speculated about, and sometimes quite confidently stated their answer to: the question of whose side Jesus is on.

In *some* circles, it's assumed that Jesus would be a [Republican](#). I think in general, people get there due to some combination of what *they think Jesus thinks* about things like abortion and gay marriage. And then, I think sometimes in *reaction* to that first perspective, more and more people have become convinced that Jesus is a *Democrat*. And they base *that* on things like Jesus' emphasis on the poor, the foreigner, and maybe some of his radical-sounding teachings on money.

So [which is it?](#) Would Jesus be a *Republican*? Would he be a *Democrat*? Is he somewhere in the *middle*? Is Jesus entirely *apolitical* to begin with? Whose *side* is Jesus on? I want us to attempt an answer to that question today. And I want us to do that by looking at a [passage from Mark 12](#). Because in this passage, two "camps" of people from *Jesus' day* ask him a question, also to determine whose side he's on. And although their perspectives are a little different from *our* political camps today, I think we can learn a lot from how Jesus responds to *their* question.

So let's **take a look**. Mark 12, starting in v. 13:

[13] And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.

So first let's wrap our minds around **who it is that is asking Jesus** this question. Because knowing that is going to help us understand *why* they ask him what they ask him. We're told that it is two distinct groups of people: one group called the *Pharisees*, and another group called the *Herodians*. These two groups **were two major factions of ancient Jewish society, that were often at odds with one another**. The Pharisees for the most part, very anti-Rome: they felt Roman occupation infringed on Israel's independent status as God's people. The Herodians, on the other hand, were for the most part very pro-Rome (mostly because it gave them more political leverage and power).

So as you can imagine, **these two camps did not usually play nice** with each other. Each camp saw the other as the problem with the world, each saw the other as a barrier to something they wanted. So there was a lot of name-calling, a lot of accusations thrown at each other, and overall just a lot of bad blood between these two camps.¹ If only we could relate to such a polarized situation, right?

But in the story, **both** of these two groups of people **approach Jesus** to ask him a question. And it says they ask him this question "in order to *trap* him." In other words, to pin him down as being either *pro-Rome* or *anti-Rome*. As belonging to either the Pharisee party, or the Herodian party. This is a question about *where Jesus' allegiances* lie.

But before they get to their question, they pile on **some empty flattery**. Look with me at v. 14:

[14] And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God."

Alright, so do you see **what they're doing here**? They're setting up Jesus as a completely objective third party, so that whoever's side he ends up taking has more credibility as a

¹ You can read more about the Pharisees and the Herodians [here](#).

result. So imagine if my wife and I are having an argument about something, and we approach *you* to help us settle it. And imagine we start off the conversation by saying “hey, we know that you you’re a very *impartial* person, and you’re very insightful and thoughtful about things.” The hope there is that if I paint you as a completely neutral third party, and you then take *my* side, it gives *me* more credibility. It’s a trap! That’s similar to what’s happening here.

So after setting it all up this way, they finally get to **their question for Jesus**. Here it is—look with me at the second half of v. 14:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"

So it gets a little lost in the translation here, but what they're asking about isn't taxes *in general*, but whether or not they should pay **one particular tax**—called the *imperial* tax. It was the tax you paid simply for “the privilege of being a Roman citizen.” If you *paid* the tax, you were in essence *accepting* and *consenting* to Roman occupation over you. But if you *didn't* pay the tax, you were setting yourself up as a *defector* and a *rebel against* the Roman empire. So **their reason for asking Jesus about this tax, is that it was one of the hot-button political issues of the day, and specifically was a hot-button issue between these two political camps.**

So it's not a *perfect parallel*, but in our society today, it would be *kind of* like a group of Republicans and a group of Democrats coming up to Jesus and asking him where he stands on gun control. Or where he stands on universal healthcare. **They're asking him about one particular issue, because his answer will likely allow them to assign him to one camp or the other. They're asking in order to figure out *whose side he's on*.** So let's see how Jesus responds, starting in v. 15:

[15] But, knowing their hypocrisy [in other words, Jesus sees right through their motives, and...], he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius [in other words, a coin] and let me look at it." [16] And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this [whose image is on the coin]?" They said to him, "Caesar's."

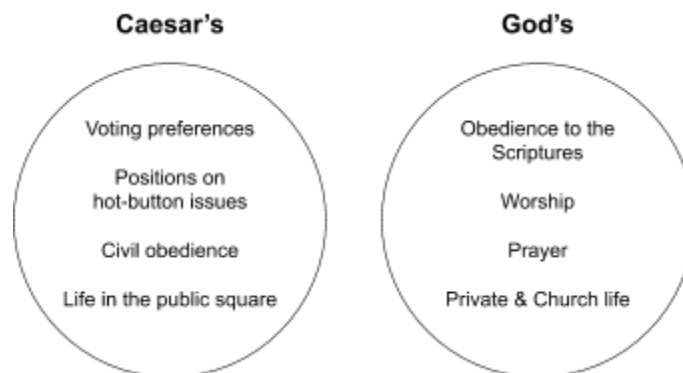
Now just a quick word on **what's happening here**. Jesus asks them for a denarius—which was a common type of currency in that day. So first, notice that Jesus *himself* doesn't have one. That's interesting. But he asks *them* if *they* have one, and they *do*. So he

looks at it and asks, “whose likeness and inscription” is on the coin, and they answer “Caesar’s.” **The denarius had Caesar’s image on it because it was actually money minted out of his own personal wealth. So it was, quite literally, Caesar’s money.** So in light of that, Jesus says, v. 17:

[17] Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.

So **Jesus’ response** is that they should “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and render to *God* the things that are *God’s*.” Caesar’s image is on the coin—it’s from his own treasury, so *give* him the coin if he asks for it. *But*, Jesus says, using that same logic, you should *also* give God what belongs to *God*. Quite the cryptic answer, isn’t it?

So **what does all of that mean**? Well, *one* way to read this is that Jesus is saying we should be give to Caesar what is Caesar’s—doing things like obeying laws and paying taxes—because those things are in a different *category* than things that are *God’s*—things like prayer and worship. In other words, **you could read it as saying that the physical and the spiritual are two different realms of life, and they don’t really ever have to interfere with one another.** So if we wanted to *visualize* this, we could essentially separate life into two mutually exclusive “spheres.” Something like this:



So the belief at work is that there are things that are *Caesar’s*, and there are other things that are *God’s*. That each person has a public, *civic* life, and then they have a private, *spiritual* life. And that those are really two very different things. That’s **one way to read** what Jesus is saying here, and **I would argue that’s how a good many people tend to operate, whether they get it from this particular passage or not.**

Unfortunately, **I don't think that's what Jesus is saying at all.** And here's why. Because remember Jesus' logic: he says the *coin* has Caesar's image, so give *it* to Caesar. But then he says that we should "give to God what is *God's*." So that of course raises the question: **what has *God's image* on it?** Well according to the book of Genesis, *we do*.² Our very *lives* do. As in, *all* of our lives and everything *in* them. So I don't think **Jesus' point isn't that we should give the public, civic parts of our lives to Caesar and the private, *spiritual* things in our lives to God. His point is that we should give *all* of our lives—everything completely, politics *included*—over to God.**

So I think **a better representation** of what Jesus is saying would be something like this:



The point isn't that we would separate our life into two different spheres. The point is that we would **bring our entire life, including our politics, under the good rule and reign of Jesus.** To use a term we're somewhat familiar with, **what Jesus is talking about in this passage is the idea of *allegiance*:** that we would give what what is *due* the government to the government³—to Uncle Sam, or to Donald Trump or to the IRS—but that we would give our *allegiance* to God: which means our entire life and every square inch of it. **Jesus' point is that we should give *taxes* to Caesar, but we should give our *allegiance* to God.**

Now **there are some people in our society who would argue that there's no need to even separate out those two things, because they're one in the same.** These people believe that since America is a "Christian nation," giving your allegiance to God *is* giving your allegiance to America, and the other way around too. We hear people say often that their allegiance is to "God & country." The belief there is that there's never any real tension between the two.

² See Genesis 1:26-27.

³ See also Romans 13:7.

We see this belief at work *often in the church*. So in the church I grew up in, once a year, usually around the fourth of July, we would have a “patriotic” service on Sundays. During these services, we would sing songs like the national anthem, and *America the Beautiful*, instead of songs about Jesus. And I remember on those Sundays, you would look around the room and see men and women who, on any other Sunday of the year, weren’t the slightest bit interested in worship. But as we sang these *patriotic* songs, they would actually lift their hands up in the air as they sang about how beautiful *America* was. We would’ve never called it this, but it was, quite literally, the worship of America.

And the term for that is **nationalism**. Nationalism is the elevation of your particular country over and above all other allegiances. Nationalism is actually a very common thing in our country, and tends to be *especially* common among self-proclaimed Christians, and *specifically white Southern* Christians. And within the *Church*, it often looks like taking an allegiance to Jesus and allegiance to America, throwing them in a blender together, and operating as if they’re the same thing.

The problem, though, is **that’s not how allegiances work**. The word “allegiance” literally means “undivided devotion.” If your allegiance is to *two* things, that necessarily means it is *divided*, which means it isn’t allegiance at all. Jesus actually says this explicitly when it comes to *money*. He says “you can not serve (or we could read that as “have ultimate *allegiance to*”) both God and money.”⁴ Notice he doesn’t say “you *shouldn’t* serve both God and money.” He says “you *can’t*.” As in, it *is not* possible. Your allegiance cannot belong to two different things.

And your allegiance **cannot be to both God and country, either**. **Allegiance to the kingdom of God and allegiance to America are not the same thing**. Now, you can have an allegiance to God and a profound *appreciation* for America. You can have an allegiance to God and a *commitment* to America. But you cannot have an *allegiance* to both God and America. And if you think you can, there’s a good chance your allegiance is actually just to America, and to America’s modified version of God. Because God will not share the stage with nationalism.

So **when it comes to this question asked of Jesus**, these two groups of people want to know about Jesus’ *allegiance*. The Herodians want Jesus’ allegiances to be to *Rome*, and the Pharisees want Jesus’ allegiance to be to *Israel* (or more accurately, to their

⁴ Matthew 6:24.

personal *version* of the nation of Israel). To which Jesus says “no, my *allegiance* is to God.” So **the answer to “whose side is Jesus on” is “neither.”**

And so in the same way, **when it comes to us today**, the answer to “whose side Jesus is on,” is also *neither*. **No one party fully embodies the values and message of Jesus.** I’m gonna say that again because I don’t think it gets said enough in American churches: **no one party fully embodies the values and message of Jesus.** Both parties probably reflect *aspects* of the kingdom of God, but neither one captures it. I love the way author **Brett McCracken** put this in his article for the Gospel Coalition:

*...consistent faithfulness to Scripture will never square with total alignment with 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.*⁵ [Man I wish I would’ve written that. Isn’t that good?]

So **we talked last Sunday about how one common response** to politics is to just decide not to care about politics at all. To just conclude that since the political world is so broken, so divisive, it’s best to just withdraw from it altogether. That’s one response. But *another* common response is what we might call **“package-deal” politics**. Package deal politics is *when you find a party or a candidate’s position on one issue compelling, so we feel like we have to buy into their entire platform* as a result.

So **hypothetically**—and hang with me for this next part, I know I’m about to **paint with some broad brushes**. But just for the sake of illustration, let’s say as a follower of Jesus, I find the Republican platform on sexual ethics compelling, or I find the Democratic platform on caring for the poor compelling—whatever it might be. **The easy lie to believe is that if I find their stance on that issue compelling, I must find their stance on all issues compelling.** 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 gun control. I guess I also have to agree with them in being *against* universal healthcare.” Or on the other side,

⁵ You can read the entire article [here](#).

“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.”

And increasingly, candidates and parties are *fueling* this type of “all or nothing” thinking. Instead of making room for a variety of different perspectives *within* their party, they are now convincing their supporters that to defeat the “evils” of the *other* party, everyone needs to buy in *completely to this platform*. In other words, the political world wants to create *tribes*. And you know why? Because tribes are *easy*. With tribes there are common “friends” and common “enemies.” There are people I’m *with*, and people I’m *against*.

And that’s because *tribes are fueled by* the idea of *allegiance*. Allegiance, *by definition, can only be total*. It’s all or nothing. It’s either “be just like us” or “be completely against us.” It’s “embrace our perspective on every single issue, or find yourself a different party altogether.” **Increasingly, political parties don’t just want your support—they want your allegiance.**

But *if we’re thinking biblically, that should be a non-starter* for us as followers of Jesus. Because we should be of the belief that **the only person who gets our allegiance is Jesus**. And if we’re operating *that way, there are going to be quite a few times where we find ourselves at odds with both major political parties*. Because *neither party has a monopoly on “Christian values.” Neither of them*.

I’ll put it this way: neither party is actually trying to help you know how to engage in politics well as a follower of Jesus. They’re both trying to co-opt you and your voice and your *allegiance* to their side of the aisle. But **as followers of Jesus, our posture should be that our allegiance is not for sale**. Our *vote* may go to one party or the other, sure. But **our allegiance is and always will be to the kingdom of Jesus**.

Now, my guess is that *if you call yourself a follower of Jesus, you wholeheartedly agree* with that statement. Right? Like who’s gonna disagree with the statement “our allegiance is to Jesus”? Yes and amen to that. But here’s what I want us to do: for the next little bit, **I want us to take an extended look at our lives to figure out whether or not we functionally operate that way**. Whether or not we *live* as if that’s true. Because agreeing with an idea and living in *light* of it are actually two different things.

So for the rest of our time together, I’d love to just walk us through a handful of *investigative questions* to help us discern if *Jesus* has our allegiance, or if maybe we’ve

inadvertently given our allegiance to a political party or platform. And as a warning, these are designed to be a little invasive and a little convicting, so I would encourage you to press in and to try and answer them as honestly as you possibly can, so that they can be as helpful as possible to you. Let's work through these together.

Do you find it hard to criticize your party of choice?

So let me clarify *one* thing from earlier. **Though neither political party has a monopoly on the way of Jesus, that doesn't mean you can't have a platform of choice.** I think **it is still fine** for a follower of Jesus to say "I generally gravitate towards the Republican party." Or "I generally gravitate towards the Democratic party."

But that said, **there is a vast difference between gravitating towards a party, and believing that that party can do no wrong.** So let me just ask, are you *able* to speak critically about parts of your party's platform? Are you able to say easily "yeah, I vote Democrat, but I honestly think they get it wrong on *this* issue"? Are you able to say "yeah, I tend to vote Republican, but I fundamentally disagree with their approach on *this*?" Are you able to vote one way, while simultaneously not having to sign off on every part of their platform? Can you speak easily and readily about areas where you differ, where you *break* from your preferred party's way of thinking? If you *can't* do that, or if it makes you terribly *uncomfortable* to do that, that's a good sign that that party has stolen your allegiance. Second...

Are you able to speak well of the other party?

So if you do gravitate towards one particular party, can you speak *well* of the other one, across the aisle? Can you say "I **really admire this** about their platform"? Can you say "I really think they do an incredible job of *this*"? Can you speak *well* of them, even though you see things differently?

The message that your party will try to sell you is that anyone on the other side is an enemy of yours, and an enemy of America. That they are trying to tear down everything that we hold dear. And if I could just speak bluntly for a second, that is such a *lazy* lie. What they are trying to do is convince you that a friend is an enemy, so they can *weaponize* that belief in their favor. Now, are there people on the *edges* of each party that are trying to do real damage to our country? *Absolutely.* But **the bulk of the people on the other side are people who love our country just like you do, and want the best for it just like you do—they just have different ideas than you about how to get**

us there. And that's *fine*—there's room for that...or at least I hope there is. There *used* to be room for that.

I think one person who embodied this sort of *generous* posture towards people across the aisle was the late Senator **John McCain**. There's a clip online⁶ of him, when he ran against Barack Obama in the 2008 election. And in the clip, he was doing a town hall, and a woman in the crowd gets up to ask a question into the mic. She starts off by saying "I don't trust Obama—he's an Arab" (implying, like many people did at the time, that Obama was connected *to* terrorists). And right when she says it, John McCain takes the mic away from her and says "no he's not. He's a decent family man, and a citizen, whom I just happen to have fundamental disagreements with." That's an example of the posture we should have towards the other side in politics. And listen: John McCain was a man of *deep* political conviction—nobody would've *ever* accused him of being wishy washy on anything. He just didn't think he had to *dehumanize* his opponent every time they disagreed with him. Sadly, a lot has changed in American politics since 2008.

But I want you to ask yourself, **could you take the sort of posture** that John McCain took? Can you hold political convictions, while not constantly demonizing the other side? Do you have the ability to speak well of the other side, even while you disagree with them on things? Next...

Do you evangelize more for your party, than for your faith?

This one might get a few of us. If I were to just **take a survey of your conversations** with other people, would they say that you talked as much about your faith as you did about your politics? Would they say you're just as clear about the gospel as you are about your political preferences?

And let's just **throw this in the ring** too: this includes **social media**. If anyone who follows your posts on Facebook is clear on what *candidate* you voted for, but is *unclear* on whether or not you follow Jesus, that's a problem. If someone who follows you on Twitter knows exactly how you think they should vote on political issues, but doesn't have any idea what you believe about Jesus, that's a problem. Do you more readily evangelize for your party or candidate than you do for Jesus?

⁶ <https://youtu.be/JIjenjANqAk?t=28>

Jesus once said “out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.”⁷ So if what overflows out of your mouth is far more often about politics than it is about Jesus, that’s a pretty good indicator of where your heart allegiances lie.

Do you jump to your candidate’s defense any time they’re criticized?

When someone speaks critically or negatively about the candidate you voted for, or are going to vote for, do you feel an immediate need to refute whatever they said? If you’re a Republican, and you hear someone critiquing **Trump’s** character or his foreign policy or his views on whatever it might be, do you feel this gravitational pull to chime in and argue with them about it? If you’re a Democrat and you hear someone speaking the same way about **Biden**, do you find it extremely difficult to resist the urge to defend him?

Or **do you feel the freedom**, as we should, to say, “yeah I don’t love that about him either.” “Yeah, I disagree with the platform on that issue too.” “Yeah, I definitely understand that concern.” Can you respond that way, or do you feel a compulsive need to defend them? Because **if you feel the need to defend your candidate of choice every time they’re criticized, there’s a good chance that they have successfully co-opted your allegiance.** And lastly...

Do you have more in common with those who share your politics, than those who share your faith?

Do you feel **more at ease around fellow members of your party**, or around fellow followers of Jesus, from all over the political map? Do you feel like you have more in common with fellow *Republicans*, or with fellow *Christians*? With fellow *Democrats*, or with fellow followers of *Jesus*? When you are researching a particular political issue, are you more interested in knowing what other members of your *party* think, or what followers of Jesus you trust think, regardless of their political leanings?

If we identify more with people who share our politics, than we do with those who share our faith, that’s a good sign that we have been more formed, disciplined and shaped by a political party than we have by the kingdom of Jesus.

So **there we have it.** Five questions to help evaluate where our allegiances truly lie: to a political party or candidate, or to the kingdom of Jesus. I would encourage you this week,

⁷ Luke 6:45

on your own or maybe with your LifeGroup, to spend some time working through those questions openly and honestly.

Now once you do that, **the question becomes**, *if some of us have realized through these questions that our allegiances are off, how do we go about changing those allegiances?*

First you need to know that *allegiance*, at the end of the day, is a **worship issue**. If your allegiance is to a political party, what is happening there is that that *party* has become the object of your worship more than *Jesus* being the object of your worship. So I'm sure most of you guys know this, but *worship* is way more than what Eric and Sara lead us in up here on Sundays. **Worship is about where our time, energy, resources, and efforts go, most instinctively and naturally.**

Which means, chances are, **you worshiped your way in** to your allegiances. Chances are, it was due to your selection of friends to hang out with, your consumption of certain types of media, the people you follow and don't follow on social media, the articles you read and don't read on the internet. **Through some combination of those types of things, you worshiped your way into your political allegiances. And so the only way to change your allegiance, is to worship your way out.**

So **maybe this week**, instead of listening to NPR all the way to work, you listen to a bible podcast or some worship music instead. Maybe you instead spend that time *praying* for God to shift your allegiances to the kingdom of God instead of the kingdoms of this world. Maybe instead of waking up each morning and flipping through the News app filled with articles about everything Trump just rage-tweeted or everything Biden just mispronounced, you leave your phone in another room and spend that time in the Scriptures before you do anything else. Or maybe for you the political stuff has an *even stronger* grip on your life, and you just need to do an outright *detox* for a season. Maybe for a few months you need to *delete* the News and social media apps off your phone completely, stay away from the newspaper or the news, and just replace all the time you gave to those things with things that actually cultivate and deepen a love for Jesus in your life.

I **don't know what exactly** it needs to look like for you. That's something you'll have to determine with the help of the Holy Spirit and the other followers of Jesus in your life. But one way or another, if you worshiped your way into political allegiance, formulate some kind of plan to start worshipping your way out. But **whatever you do, do not buy the lie that you can give your allegiance both to a political party, and to Jesus.** **With every**

day that you allow your allegiance to *cling* to a political party, your allegiance to Jesus will fade.

You know **what's fascinating** to me is that in Jesus' day, it was in many ways these two political perspectives that worked together to have him *crucified*. It was the Jewish religious leaders (which included the Pharisees) who conspired together with the Roman government (of which the Herodians were a part) to have Jesus arrested, tortured and killed at the end of his life. Jesus wasn't *anti-Rome* enough for the Pharisees, and he wasn't *pro-Rome* enough for the Herodians.

So evidently, **the only thing these two groups had in common**, was a distaste for Jesus. And that's *because the more you give your allegiance to a political perspective, the more your distaste for Jesus will grow*—the more you will drown out the voice of Jesus in your life. **And that happened with the Pharisees and Herodians to the point that they eventually decided to silence Jesus for good.** It was in many ways, quite literally their tribalism that put Jesus on the cross.

And quite often, it's ours too. When Jesus died, **he died for our tribalism**. He died for the *divisiveness* of it all. For the *harm* it causes to others and our world. For the *bitterness* and *resentment* it stirs up in our hearts. For the careless things we say in the heat of the moment that disregard the image of God in the other person. All of those are sins that Jesus died for.

And he died not just to forgive us *for* them—he **also died to give us freedom** from them. To anyone who will trust and follow Jesus, he will offer you a better way forward than anything that either party has on offer. **Jesus busts the door wide open** to a new reality. To a life marked by finding common *humanity* with other people, not common *enemies*.

The Scriptures tell us that one thing the death of Jesus *accomplished* was that it **"broke down the hostility"** between people groups opposed to one another, and "made peace" by the blood of the cross.⁸ So Jesus' death and resurrection were not just about us and our personal relationship with Jesus—that's only where it *starts*. Jesus' death and resurrection were about setting *relationships* right. They were about setting *things* right between *groups* of people in our world. And about setting things right in the world at large. And so through taking this posture towards something as divided as politics is, we have the ability to put his good news on display to the world around us.

⁸ See Ephesians 2, specifically v. 14-18.

And it all starts with what we worship. So let's set our *worship* continually on Jesus, and as we do that, let's let him realign our allegiance and set the world right as a result.

Let's pray together.