

Politics

Luke 17:20-37

By [David Strain](#)

April 26, 2015

Over the last three Sunday nights we've been working our way through the first three of a five part series dealing with some of the major barriers that people have to faith in Jesus Christ. There are a number of issues that obscure our ability to see and hear the claims of the Christian Gospel objectively. Like the moon passing in front of the sun causing an eclipse, there are a number of big issues that get in the road of clear view of Jesus Christ. And so far we have thought about money, and sex and sexuality, and race. And tonight we're thinking about politics. Twice now on my way toward the pulpit as I came into the sanctuary earlier this evening, two different people came to me and said in effect, "It's been nice knowing you! Tonight's the night you're going to get fired!" It really doesn't matter what I think about the subject of politics though, does it? We are here to wrestle with what God says about it. And so I want to invite you, if you would, to take a copy of the Bible from the pew racks in front of you and turn with me to page 876 and 877 where you will find Luke chapter 17 and look down at the passage beginning in verse 20. We're going to read through to the end of the chapter to give some context but our focus tonight really will stay with verses 20 and 21. Before we read, it is our pattern to pause and pray and ask for God to help us understand and believe His Word to us. So would you bow your heads with me as we pray together?

Our Father, as we read the Bible now we do pray that we would become aware that we are hearing from You, that You are addressing us. Thank You that Your Word is living and active, that it is sharp and penetrating, useful and true. As we listen to Jesus in our passage tonight we pray that You would help us to think clearly about the kingdom of God and, more than that, that we, all of us, would come to look for salvation not in political solutions but in Your King, the Lord Jesus Christ alone. For we ask this in His name, amen.

Luke chapter 17 at verse 20. This is God's Word:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming in signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'

And he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They will be eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the day of Lot - they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all - so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.' And they said to him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'

Amen, and we praise God for His holy and inerrant Word.

Well if you're even slightly politically aware, you will know that the connection between religion and politics in American life is longstanding and complex. There are churches in our city as well as around the country, majority black churches and majority white churches, conservative churches and liberal churches, where, were you to attend their worship services the main message you would hear would be one of advocacy for a specific political and social agenda. Get your timing right and you might even hear pulpits ringing with endorsements or denunciations of particular political candidates and their party platforms. Show up at the national conventions of the Democratic or Republican parties and you will find among the various special interests urgently courted by nominees are church leaders whose endorsement it is hoped will deliver values voters or Black votes or Hispanic votes or Southern votes or whichever kind of vote they're looking for. And then there've been the strident voices advocating often for family values in important areas and yet sometimes, sadly, mixed with bizarre end-times teaching and a fondness for conspiracy theories that leave a bitter taste in many a person's mouth. It is hard to listen, isn't it, without cynicism to a television or radio personality who pushes their hearers to vote in a given direction while at the same time moral scandal or overt financial manipulation of their audiences peppers their so-called ministries.

And watching all of that there are those, maybe you're among them, who

conclude that religion is nothing more than another special interest group at best or at worst it is a power-play, an exercise in social control and they want nothing to do with it. But then there are others for whom religion is the answer; it's the silver bullet, the main method by which we will fix the ills of society. From the Christian temperance movements of the 19th and 20th centuries to the moral majority of the 1980's on the rightwing all the way through Christian socialism in Latin American liberation theology under the influence of men like Paulo Freire and Gustavo Gutierrez on the leftwing, again and again there's this perspective that appears in the church that believes that the Gospel, the Christian Gospel is about solving societal breakdown. It is the best cure for a sick culture. The kingdom of God in this view is to be established, therefore, by political action and Christians should be culture warriors entering the lists either on the left or on the right depending on your perspective.

Jesus and the Pharisees

But whether you are repulsed by some of the more egregious and cynical abuses of religion in service of a social or political agenda or you think of Christianity mainly in terms of its social and political impact, either way I think you will find Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees in the passage we read together a moment ago particularly challenging. Would you look at it with me? We're simply focusing on verses 20 and 21, although the wider context will be helpful and important as well. You did notice the two questions asked in our passage - one by the Pharisees at the beginning and one by the disciples at the end. The Pharisees, verse 20, they're asking when the kingdom of God will come. And the disciples, verse 37, ask, "Where Lord? Where is it going to take place?" Both the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples are essentially concerned with the same set of issues. They want God to fix the world and they're pushing Jesus to explain when and where and how that is going to take place. The Pharisees, as you may know, were the custodians of Jewish religious and social life. They were, I suppose, the culture warriors of their day. And they have largely lost the battle in their own context. The province of Judea was a shadow of its former glory by this time, now greatly reduced in size and utterly subjugated by its Roman masters. The puppet monarchs that Rome installed to rule them were debauched and twisted men, and Pilate, not unlike Roman governors around the empire, was a ruthless and calculating politician. The fortunes of the nation were failing. But the Pharisees had hope. They believed that God would one day undo all of that. They were waiting for Messiah to come who would smash Roman dominance and lead Israel to global power and usher in finally a reign of societal peace. For them, the coming of the kingdom of God was very much a political fix for the problems plaguing society as they understood them. "So when is it coming, Jesus? How much longer do we have to wait?"

That's not an unfamiliar perspective. I'm sure you recognize it. Don't we find ourselves also longing for our culture to be the way it was always meant to be rather than the way it is now? And I suppose that's why this impulse that we see

here in the Pharisees is so incredibly tempting for Christians in every generation - to begin to conceive of the kingdom of God solely or primarily in terms of social renovation and political solutions; to think that the kingdom of God must mean a particular approach to legislation and schooling and healthcare and taxation and so on and so forth. The Pharisees defined the kingdom in terms of social and political and moral transformation and it's tempting to think that the presence of the kingdom of God is visible mainly in those very same things in our own day and context as well.

I. What the Kingdom of God Is Not

But do look carefully at Jesus' answer to the Pharisees in verses 20 and 21. Look at it. "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." Notice first of all what Jesus tells us the kingdom of God isn't; what the kingdom isn't. It isn't coming, He says, with signs to be observed. That's what the Pharisees wanted. That's what some of us want too if we're honest. We want observable, measureable social changes as the great marks and proofs of the coming of the kingdom. Jesus even warns us here about people who claim to be able to identify the kingdom in particular events about there in the world saying, "Look here!" or "Look there!" He's talking about that peculiar brand of Christian eccentric who watches the news as though it provided the interpretive key to the books of Daniel and Revelation. Some years ago you will remember Harold Camping, confidently predicting the end of the world on September 6, 1994. When his prediction came inevitably to nothing, he shifted his calculations to a far more obvious and certain date, October 21, 2011. He was saying, wasn't he, "Look here!" or "Look there!" He was looking at the signs that he thought he could see comparing it with his understanding of Biblical data and coming to completely wrong conclusions. That's not how it works, Jesus says. The kingdom of God does not come by observable signs. It is not measureable by the number of times your candidate gets elected. It can't be tracked by dollars in the campaign war chest or votes as the polls. What the kingdom of God isn't.

II. What the Kingdom is like

But then secondly notice what Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is like. Verse 21, "Nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." Where is God's kingdom? Not marching at the head of an army to defeat evil, whether that's understood as ancient Rome as the Pharisees hoped or as perhaps we are tempted to hope dealing with Islamic terror.

Footnote - just let's pause for a second. Do not misunderstand me. It's not that the state should not take a stand against evil or that Christians should not participate in that. The state should uphold justice and promote equity and serve the common good and Christians ought to be involved in that, of course they

should. But civil action should not be confused with the kingdom of God. So where is the kingdom of God? Not swept to power by a landslide victory at the polls or occupying Wall Street or picketing the United Nations or even marching in protests on the streets at racial abuses by the police. And again, it's not that Christians shouldn't play a part in the political debates of the day or defend the weak or protest against injustice. They should. But Jesus is teaching us not to confuse the advancement of a party political platform or a social agenda, however important or valid those things may be, with the advance of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the Kingdom

So where is the kingdom of God, Jesus? Look at what He says to the Pharisees. Verse 21, "It is in your midst." Now some versions translate that phrase, "The kingdom of God is within you," meaning that it is a spiritual thing dwelling in your hearts. But remember Jesus is talking to the Pharisees here. And if you scan through the gospel of Luke you will quickly realize the Pharisees are vigorous opponents of Jesus and His vision of the kingdom of God. They utterly reject Him and His message. Jesus isn't saying, "The kingdom of God is in your hearts, Pharisees." He's saying something else entirely. I think our version, the English Standard Version that we use here in church, gets it right. Jesus is saying to them the kingdom of God is already in their midst, although they did not notice it. With His arrival among them, do you see, the kingdom of God had already come incognito, as it were. Quietly and humbly the kingdom of God crept onto the scene of history when the Baby was born of the virgin that day in Bethlehem. Origen, a theologian of the Early Church, once said that Jesus was *autobasileia* - "the kingdom in Himself." Where He is, there God's kingdom is to be found. He is the King and His kingdom is simply shorthand for His personal rule in the lives of those who follow Him.

Now just think about what He's saying to these Pharisees for a moment. Standing before them is the King Himself, the personal embodiment of the kingdom of God in the world. In the preceding passage to this one, Jesus has miraculously healed ten lepers. If ever there was a sign that with Jesus' coming the kingdom of God had come, surely this would be it - right? With a word, He cleanses this horrific disease from these ten lepers. But the Pharisees completely overlook it. They don't recognize it. It does not qualify in their minds at all as a sign of the kingdom of God, not least, notice, because only one of the ten whom Jesus cleanses comes back to Jesus in worship and devotion and he isn't Jewish; he is a hated Samaritan. "What kind of sign of the kingdom is that, Jesus?" The Pharisees only have room for a kingdom that fits their narrow, social, political, cultural agendas, do you see? How easy it is to make the kingdom of God conform to our own prejudices.

Now it may be that you have never seriously considered the Christian Gospel because whenever you hear from those who claim to follow Jesus all you've

heard is them remake the kingdom of God to fit their prejudices and co-opt Jesus as a tool in their own political agenda. Maybe you've never really listened to Christ before because the only Christ you've been exposed to is a puppet on the lips of those who want your vote. And so perhaps understandably you've dismissed this Jesus out of hand altogether. But I hope you begin to see from our passage tonight that the real Jesus, the one who confronts exactly that kind of thinking as He meets it in the Pharisees, the Christ who will not be a mere means to a social or political end, a tool in someone else's agenda, I hope this Jesus has made you begin to reconsider.

A Different Kind of Kingdom

You see what He's saying about the nature of God's kingdom? It is altogether resistant to worldly attempts to manipulate it as a means of social control. In fact, in John chapter 6 at verse 15 there's actually a moment when the crowds, who have been listening to Jesus, resolve to make Him their king by force. So here it is. Surely if Jesus was interested in exercising political power He's sweeping to a landslide victory in this moment. "This is what you've been waiting for, Jesus!" As they threaten to take Him and make Him king by force, we're told He withdrew to a mountain by Himself. He has no interest in an earthly kingdom of political power advanced by means of violence. No, His kingdom is built by different means altogether. Or listen to Jesus' interview with Pilate as He stands before him on trial for His life in John 18 verse 36. Jesus tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews but my kingdom is not of this world." The kingdom of God isn't like other earthly political power. It is not from the world; it's established on different principles and proceeds by different means. And when the powers that be finally arrested Jesus and the Pharisees and the priests held a rigged trial and then Pilate had Him crucified to placate the electorate, it really did look like Jesus' kingdom has been snuffed out completely, once and for all. It looked as if Jesus' spiritual kingdom has been utterly destroyed by political power. If He will not be their puppet, they will remove Him.

But the truth is, the moment of the kingdom's triumph was the moment of the death of Jesus Christ. At the cross, you remember inscribed on a sign over His head in mocking letters, in Latin and Greek and Aramaic so that everyone everywhere could understand, Jesus was proclaimed "King of the Jews." What was intended as a cruel joke was actually a declaration of profound truth. It's here that the kingdom of God triumphs. It's in this way that His rule is established. In Hebrews chapter 2 verses 14 and 15 we're told that Jesus died "to destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." In Colossians 2 and verse 15 we're told that Jesus has made "a public spectacle of the principalities and powers, triumphing over them by the cross." He wins as the nails are driven home into His hands and feet. He is a King who came to die, that by His cross He might save rebel sinners like me and like you who reject His rule

and His kingdom. He came to overthrow all the enslaving powers that hold us in bondage and give us spiritual liberty. His kingdom is not one that is advanced by power plays and political gains. His kingdom is not established by means of the sword. God's saving rule in the world is a kingdom that is altogether unimpressive to those who are looking for power, inaugurated when a baby was laid in a cattle trough in Bethlehem. It's King, consistently rejected by those He came to serve, climaxing when He was crucified by brutal political powers.

A Different Kind of Motivation

What a strange kingdom it is! And yet built on His self-giving love, all who bend the knee to the mastery of King Jesus rather than finding themselves bound in a new slavery discover that His rule sets them free. The great irony is that actually when a person comes to know Jesus Christ for himself or for herself not as the political puppet of a particular ideology but as He really is, we begin to live differently in the world. We begin to imitate Christ who is now our King. We begin to serve others. We stand for truth. We oppose evil. We give ourselves in sacrificial love. That's Jesus' point later on in the chapter in verse 33 when He says, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it but whoever loses his life will keep it." There's a new sacrificial character that breaks into the life of those who come to know this King and bend the knee to this Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. We go about our vocations now in politics and in education and in business not living for ourselves anymore, not promoting our own agendas, but living for Christ with His values informing our decisions and His Gospel animating our lives.

Do you see the irony of that? When you try to co-opt Jesus in service of politics that you might bring the kingdom in and make the world better like the crowds who tried to make Him king by force in John chapter 6, when you do that you get neither Jesus nor the kingdom. But when you simply come to Jesus on His terms as a King who rules by dying for us, who wins by giving Himself for us, when you trust Jesus to forgive and cleanse and govern your life you get both Jesus the King and you begin to make a real difference in the world. I wonder if you have, perhaps, dismissed Jesus because the only Jesus you've heard about has been a tool in the hands of a political agenda. I wonder if you've decided that Christianity is so thoroughly wedded to a particular party platform and so you've decided that you want nothing to do with it. But I also wonder if you've ever really listened to the real Jesus, the Jesus who will not be used as a mere means to a social or political end, the Jesus who has no interest in earthly power, the Jesus who rules hearts by Gospel love and who builds His kingdom by the cross. That is a Jesus worth knowing and He invites you to come to Him for yourself tonight and to enter His kingdom simply by trusting Him to rescue you and forgive your sin and reconcile you to God. He's not offered to you as the cure for every ill of our culture or society. He is offered to you as God's response to the deepest need of your heart. You need your sin forgiven and only Jesus can accomplish that. Won't you trust Him? Let's pray together.

Our Father, how we praise You for our King, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world, not from this world, not advanced by the sword, not resting on political power, a spiritual kingdom that renovates the world one heart at a time, one life at a time. We pray, our Father, that His kingdom would advance among us by bringing men and women, boys and girls to bend their knee in surrender, in repentance, in faith before King Jesus. Would You do that even tonight, for His glory and praise? Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).