

# **Politics According to the Bible**

## **Jesus and Politics**

*Matthew 22:15-22*

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# Jesus and Politics

## Scripture

Four years ago, as we were heading into the final four months of the 2008 presidential election, I preached a series of messages titled, *How Would Jesus Vote?* I would like to preach a similar series of messages again, this time titled, *Politics According to the Bible*. Much of the material will be similar to 2008, although there will be some new material in this series of messages.

As we head into the final four months of this 2012 campaign season, the candidates will debate the economy, health care, immigration, social issues such as gay marriage, and so on.

The question that comes to mind is whether the Bible has anything to say on these issues. I hope to show you that the Bible is very clear about a Christian's involvement in politics.

As we begin this series today, I would like to preach a message about "Jesus and Politics." Do Jesus and politics mix? Some would say, "No!" However, let's see what Jesus himself said in Matthew 22:15-22:

**<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. <sup>16</sup> And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" <sup>21</sup> They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>22</sup> When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22)**

## Introduction

In the book *How Would Jesus Vote?* Kennedy and Newcombe note that “just a few decades ago it was reported that 50% of Christians were not even registered to vote, and 50% of those who were registered did not vote.”<sup>1</sup> That is a staggering statistic.

Why is that?

I read a story about two Christians who were discussing this problem. One of them said, “The main problems in our nation today are ignorance and apathy. Don’t you agree?”

His friend said, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

Fortunately, that attitude may be passing away as Christians realize that we are to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 2:21).

Now, as we begin this series, let me mention a few things that I do not believe.

First, I do not believe that we should have an established state church in America. The Founding Fathers were right in not wanting the state to sanction and approve a particular denomination as the preferred denomination for this country.

Moreover, I do not believe that we should have a church state. In the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church had control over many countries, and I do not believe that is biblical either.

Furthermore, I do not believe that pastors should endorse political candidates, even though it is perfectly legal to do so. Churches may not endorse political candidates, but pastors may do so—even from the pulpit. However, I do not think it wise for pastors to become entangled in partisan politics.

And lastly, I do not believe that pastors should tell people for whom to vote. Each person must decide that for himself or herself.

What I do believe, however, is that my task as a pastor is to declare the principles of Scripture that apply to every issue that confronts Christians—even those issues that are political.

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<sup>1</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?: a Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 31.

As I mentioned earlier, some would say that Jesus and politics do not mix. The misconception that Jesus and politics do not mix is reinforced by the fact that Jesus was not political while on earth—at least not in the common use of the term. Politics is often castigated as something evil and compromising—unworthy of Christians. My favorite commentator, John Stott, seeks to clear the confusion as he answers the question, “Was Jesus political?”:

. . . The words “politics” and “political” may be given either a broad or a narrow definition. Broadly speaking, “politics” denotes the life of the city (*polis*) and the responsibilities of the citizen (*polites*). It is concerned, therefore, with the whole of our life in human society. Politics is the art of living together in a community. According to its narrow definition, however, politics is the science of government. It is concerned with the development and adoption of specific policies with a view to their being enshrined in legislation. It is about gaining power for social change.

Once this distinction is clear, we may ask whether Jesus was involved in politics. In the latter and narrower sense, he clearly was not. He never formed a political party, adopted a political program, or organized a political protest. He took no steps to influence the policies of Caesar, Pilate, or Herod. On the contrary, he renounced a political career. In the other and broader sense of the word, however, his whole ministry was political. For he had himself come into the world in order to share in the life of the human community, and he sent his followers into the world to do the same. Moreover, the Kingdom of God he proclaimed and inaugurated was a radically new and different social organization, whose values and standards challenged those of the old and fallen community. In this way his teaching had “political” implications. It offered an alternative to the status quo. His kingship, moreover, was perceived as a challenge to Caesar’s, and he was therefore accused of sedition.<sup>2</sup>

So, Jesus was not primarily concerned about “the development and adoption of specific policies with a view to their being

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<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Human Rights and Human Wrongs: Major Issues for a New Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 27.

enshrined in legislation.” He was, however, concerned about the principles that direct “the whole of our life in human society.”

Kennedy and Newcombe point out that “it was from the pulpits of New England that great proclamations thundered forth concerning liberty and freedom and the sovereignty of God and the nature of man, proclamations that ultimately led to the foundation of our Constitution and the American Revolution.”<sup>3</sup>

## Lesson

With that in mind, then, let us briefly examine what the Bible has to say about Jesus and politics.

I would like to do so using the following outline:

1. The Political Question Put to Jesus (22:15-17)
2. The Political Answer Given by Jesus (22:18-22)

### I. The Political Question Put to Jesus (22:15-17)

First, I want to look at the political question put to Jesus.

On the Tuesday before Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion, his enemies tried to trap him using a series of loaded questions. They had been embarrassed by several parables Jesus told in which he exposed their hypocrisy and warned them about the coming judgment.

And so Matthew tells us that **the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians** (22:15-16a).

We should note that **the Pharisees** and **the Herodians** were usually opposed to each other. **The Pharisees** opposed the payment of taxes because they did not want to submit to Roman authority. On the other hand, **the Herodians** supported the payment of taxes because Herod’s government was funded by the taxes that were paid to Rome, which was resented by the Jewish people.

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<sup>3</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?: a Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 32.

But **the Pharisees and the Herodians** joined together because of their common desire to get rid of Jesus. They tried to trap Jesus into choosing sides regarding the payment of taxes. If Jesus opposed the payment of taxes, he would be in trouble with Rome. And if Jesus supported the payment of taxes, he would be in trouble with the Jews.

Notice how carefully they set the trap with the use of flattery. **“Teacher,”** they said, **“we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances”** (22:16b). This statement was designed to cause Jesus to drop his guard and not put any “spin” on his answer. They wanted him to take sides so that they could trap him.

Then the political question was put to Jesus, **“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”** (22:17).

Taxes are important in any developed society because a government cannot function without taxes. But taxes are also a constant point of contention because citizens often question why they are so high and so poorly spent.

The question that was put to Jesus dealt with one particular aspect of politics, namely, the payment of taxes. However, Jesus’ answer shows us that he set down a principle that applies not merely to taxes in particular but to politics in general.

## **II. The Political Answer Given by Jesus (22:18-22)**

Now, let’s notice the political answer given by Jesus.

Jesus immediately saw through their scheme. He knew that their real purpose was not to get an answer to their question, but to trap him into choosing sides.

**But Jesus,** Matthew tells us, **aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?”** (22:18). A **hypocrite** is someone who says one thing but means something else. The Pharisees and the Herodians were **hypocrites** because they were

not sincerely seeking truth but, rather, they were trying to trap him.

Jesus could have refused to answer the question. But he knew that the people gathered around him would not understand his reluctance to answer. Further, here was an opportunity to silence his enemies and, at the same time, teach the people an important principle regarding their relationship to the government.

And so Jesus said, **“Show me the coin for the tax”** (22:19a).

**And they brought him a denarius** (22:19b). A **denarius** was a silver coin, minted expressly by the emperor, and was the only acceptable currency for the payment of taxes.

**And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”** (22:20).

**They said, “Caesar’s”** (22:21a). All coins that were minted by the emperor, including the **denarius**, bore an engraving of the emperor on one side and an identifying inscription on the other.

**Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”** (22:21b). This is a simple statement, but it is truly profound.

The word **“render”** (*apodidomi*) means “to make a payment, with the implication of such a payment being in response to an incurred obligation.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus was saying that it was entirely lawful and right to pay taxes to Caesar, because that tax belonged to Caesar. It was something that was under his control and oversight, and he had a right therefore to require it.

It is important to note that Jesus did not say, as the Pharisees had in asking their question, that they were “to pay” or “to give” taxes to Caesar. But rather, as John MacArthur states in his commentary, “For them, as for most Jews, paying any tax to Rome was not considered a legitimate duty and was done only with the greatest reluctance. Now Jesus declared that the payment not only was perfectly legal but morally obligatory.”<sup>5</sup>

Matthew notes that **when** the Pharisees and the Herodians

<sup>4</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 574.

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 325.

**heard Jesus' answer, they marveled. And they left him and went away (22:22).**

So, in this encounter with the Pharisees and the Herodians Jesus declared that citizens have a divinely ordained obligation to pay taxes to their government. Notice that Jesus did not make any qualifying exemptions or exceptions. He did not say, for instance, that taxes were only owed to good governments. No. The state has the divine right to assess taxes, and citizens have the divine obligation to pay them.

The apostle Paul, following the teaching of Jesus, gave a universal principal of submission to governing authorities in Romans 13:1, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

Jesus teaches that with regard to the sphere of the state, its citizens have an obligation to submit to it. That is not to say that there is no place for conscientious objection. If the state requires its citizens to do that which is opposed to the law of God, then its citizens may refuse to submit, but they must then be prepared to suffer the consequences of such actions.

Nevertheless, as a general rule, Jesus teaches that citizens have an obligation to submit to their government.

Now, before I leave this point, I want you to notice that Jesus said, "**Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's**" (22:21b). In other words, we have a responsibility to the state (such as paying taxes), and we also have a responsibility to **God**.

What is our responsibility to God? Or, to put it in the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Question 39, "What is the duty which God requires of man?" And the Answer is, "The duty which God requires of man, is obedience to his revealed will."<sup>6</sup>

God requires obedience to his revealed will, which is given to us in the Ten Commandments. Now, have any of us fully and

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<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

completely obeyed God's Law? No, of course not. You have not perfectly obeyed God's Law, and neither have I.

God says that the penalty for disobeying his Law is death (Ezekiel 18:20). That is not only physical death but also eternal death, that is, separation from God in hell for all eternity.

No one wants to spend eternity in hell. We all want to spend eternity in heaven. But the Bible teaches that people who break God's Law will not enter into heaven (Galatians 5:19-21).

That is why God sent Jesus to earth. He perfectly obeyed God's Law. He then willingly and voluntarily took our punishment for disobeying God's Law upon himself. And so, if we want to go to heaven, we need to repent of our sin and believe that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

If you have never done so, I urge you to repent of your sin and believe in Jesus today. Ask God to forgive you all your sin and grant you the gift of faith.

### **Conclusion**

So, if Jesus were alive and living in the USA today, how would he vote?

I suppose we should first ask if Jesus would even vote.

I believe he would vote. He would do so because of the general principal to submit to the government.

This government requires certain responsibilities from its citizens. The responsibilities listed in *The Citizen's Almanac* are as follows:

- Support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic,
- Stay informed of the issues affecting your community,
- Participate in the democratic process (by voting),
- Respect and obey federal, state, and local laws,
- Respect the rights, beliefs, and opinions of others,
- Participate in your local community,

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- Pay income and other taxes honestly, and on time, to federal, state, and local authorities,
- Serve on a jury when called upon, and
- Defend the country if the need should arise.<sup>7</sup>

We live in a highly politicized and partisan society, and especially so with the approaching general election in November. There is a tendency to ask, “Whose side is God on?” For millennia people have asked that question.

Even Joshua asked that question when he had an encounter with a person who turned out to be a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, which is recorded in Joshua 5:13-14:

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?”

And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?”

Joshua asked, “Whose side are you on?”

Jesus, the commander of the army of the Lord, answered by saying that he was on no-one’s side. He commands not only his people but all people and the host of heaven as well.

What Jesus was saying is that it is not that God is on our side but that we need to be on God’s side.

If you remember your Civil War history, you may recall that Abraham Lincoln said as much during the War. In 1863 he overheard someone say that he hoped that “the Lord was on the Union’s side.”

The president responded: “I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I

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<sup>7</sup> *The Citizen’s Almanac* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Office of Citizenship, 2007), 5-8.

and this nation should be on the Lord's side.”<sup>8</sup>

Does Jesus care how we vote? I believe he does.

He has given us principles in his Word to guide us as we think about each of the various issues.

It is not always easy to find a candidate that will support policies that are in accordance with biblical principles on each political issue. It takes hard work to think through the positions of each candidate with respect to biblical principles. Many people vote a straight party line for all candidates, but I don't think that is always the best way to vote.

Your homework assignment is to register to vote, if you are not registered. If you have recently moved, register to vote. If you have never registered, do so this week.

On July 4, 2008 I became a citizen of the United States of America. I was one of 704 people from 90 different countries in Tampa, FL who took the Oath of Naturalization to become a citizen of this country. It was a wonderful ceremony, and you would have enjoyed watching people from all over the world become citizens of this country.

The very first action I took as a naturalized citizen of the United States of America (apart from giving my wife a congratulatory kiss!) was to register to vote. I did that because I believe that is what Jesus would have me do.

And I invite you, if you have not yet done so, to register to vote this week.

Then, come back next week as we learn how Jesus would vote on abortion, stem cells, suicide, and euthanasia. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote?: a Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 10.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
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**PRAYER:**

O God, thank you for your Word. Thank you for what we learn about Jesus and politics.

As we think about the upcoming general election and our responsibility (and privilege) as citizens to vote, help us to understand politics according to the Bible.

Lord, it will be easy to discover biblical truth regarding some issues. It will not be easy to discover biblical truth regarding other issues.

In all instances, we pray that you, by your grace, will make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to your will in all things, as the angels do in heaven.

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.