

## Heaven's Secrets: Allegiance

What kind of person should I try to become as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven?



As we reach the half-way point in this sermon series here is a quick review of the Bible's secrets to entering the kingdom of heaven as a Christ-like follower.

We should be forgiving; generous; repentant; fruit-bearing; inviting; and this week we add 'allegiant'.

Allegiant is an adjective of the noun 'allegiance' meaning loyal or faithful, especially to a person or cause.

We all understand the word allegiance in the context of the Pledge of Allegiance, meaning we state our loyalty to a country. Some people are allegiant, or swear allegiance to one candidate or party, others to the opposing camp.

But is that the right approach for Christians, to be loyal, faithful, allegiant to a political leader? Yes. No. It depends.

When I pose the question that way it is a 'gotcha' question. No matter how you answer it, your answer could get you in trouble. We had to learn 'gotcha' in law school. Questions like, 'When did you stop robbing banks?' No court should

let a lawyer ask that question, but lawyers hope they might catch a judge napping. You see, no matter how the witness answers that question he admits guilt.



When did you stop robbing banks? “Never!” Ah hah! Guilty, your honor.

‘Gotcha questions’ are a favorite of lawyers, politicians and journalists.

Think back to the presidential debates and the Supreme Court nomination hearings. They were full of questions to which any answer would create a storm of controversy. To be a politician or judicial nominee today you need to learn the art of the dodge. How to give a non-answer.

That is what some people accuse Jesus of doing when he was asked a ‘gotcha question’ by the religious leaders of his day. Two of the political parties in Jesus’ day were the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees hated the Romans, their Caesar, and their taxes. The Herodians were Jews loyal to King Herod and the Roman government who appointed him to rule over the Jewish people.

The Pharisees and the Herodians despised each other, not unlike the Patriots and Tories during the American Revolution. The Patriots hated the British

occupiers and their taxes; the Tories supported the English King. The two sides despised each other.

There is a story about one Colonial preacher who rose one Sunday in 1775 to preach in support of the Tories position that God demands loyalty to the government of England and thus against the idea of American independence. As he went to his pulpit, he carried his sermon and his pistol for protection from the Patriots in his congregation. This may be why I do not rise today to preach for or against either candidate. I do not own a gun.

Seriously, though, the Pharisees and the Herodians were bitter enemies, but there was one thing they agreed upon: Jesus had to go. He was a danger to the causes of both sides because he supported neither side. He just taught the truth without regard to who might be offended.

So, the Pharisees and Herodians come up with a gotcha question. Should we pay taxes to Caesar, that is, to the Roman occupying government? If Jesus said 'no', then the Herodians would have him arrested for sedition. If Jesus answered 'yes', then the Pharisees would preach that Jesus was a Roman sympathizer and opposed freedom of the Jewish nation. This, then, is one of the greatest 'gotcha'

questions ever asked. When Jesus answers he will be revealed as either a Roman sympathizer or a treasonous Jew. Either way, he will face judgment, even death.

Jesus though is the best debater, the best witness, ever. He is not falling into their trap. But Jesus' answer is not dodge. It is wisdom in its purest form.

Jesus asks to see the Roman coin used to pay the Roman taxes, the denarius. On one side was the graven image of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Printed on the two sides of the coin are the words: "Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest."

To the Jews this was blasphemy, to claim that anyone other than God is divine. The Roman emperors tried to claim that they were in fact gods. Would Jesus thus condemn Caesar's idolatrous coins? Or would Jesus tell Jewish people that they should be loyal to God?

Yes. And yes. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Caesar's image is imprinted on the coin, so go ahead and pay the taxes using Caesar's coin.

But what belongs to God? On what bears God's image? Human beings. You and me, all human beings, we are made in, we bear the image of God. So, what was Jesus saying?

‘Of course you should pay your taxes due to the ruling government and you do well to live in peace with the kingdom of earth for the good of the kingdom of heaven. But everything else belongs to God. Your conscience, your time, your possessions, and, yes, even your ultimate allegiance which is shown in whom you worship. Pay taxes to Caesar, the politicians, but never let your allegiance to the government or politicians become worship of them. Worship God and God alone.’

To whom then do Christian’s pledge allegiance? Not to any human being, not even a candidate for president. No, the depth of allegiance which results in worship is pledged only to God. Let our actions in the kingdom of earth create no doubt. Our first loyalty is to the kingdom of heaven and its ruler, to the one to whom we are faithful above all other loyalties, to Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Think of it this way. We live in two kingdoms: the kingdom of this earth, a physical kingdom; and the kingdom of heaven, a spiritual kingdom. Often these kingdoms are in a parallel peaceful state, each leaving the other be what they are supposed to be. But when the kingdoms come into conflict Christians are loyal not to their governments and politicians, be they kings or presidents, but we are loyal to God and God alone.

If there is a danger for Christians, it is that we allow our allegiance to the government to create a civil religion. I read a sermon by Todd Wilson which clarified very well this truth: Civil religion happens when we infuse our political ideologies with religious zeal. This is the beginning of turning politics into idolatry. Be careful that you do not make your candidate or party your god so that you worship more than the One True God.

In other words, no human leader or government or party is ever to be worshipped, that is, made to be a 'god' who is given unquestioning allegiance. No politician is a messiah who deserves the praise reserved for God.

Which is all to say, we should be good citizens in the land we call home. We should pay our taxes honestly. We should swear allegiance to our country as opposed to foreign nations, meaning we should not be traitors. We should vote in our elections, for that is our primary way of influencing the government to put into place policies which protect the church and its people from oppression.

But I do not believe any preacher is wise to suggest to you for whom you should vote. There is no way that Jesus would do that. He would not fall for the trap of that gotcha question. Christians should seek to put into office those who align with their values and the values of God's Word as best as you can

understand them. But the minute the church tries to control the government by installing those it claims are 'God's candidate', that is the moment the government will turn right around and try to control the church, demanding the allegiance that is reserved for God.

Don Ratzlaff puts it this way: In the Church of Jesus Christ there is One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, but not one political party or candidate for office.

Yet the church has a role in society and politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently instructs the church with these words: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool."

In these words, I see the point that Jesus was making. Jesus taught the truth that guides the church under every political system and in every age: be allegiant to your government up to and until the allegiance it demands compromises your allegiance to the kingdom of heaven.

So, wouldn't it be better then if Christians just took a pass on politics altogether? No one answers that question better than the popular Scottish professor, William Barclay, whose comments on Jesus' words include this counsel:

“Untold troubles can descend upon a country or an industry when Christians refuse to take their part in the administration and leave it to selfish, self-seeking, partisan, and unchristian (people.)”

I concur. Christians are called to be salt and light, even, maybe especially, in the worlds of government and politics. But we do so with our priorities in place.

Jesus’ disciple, Peter, whose faith the church was built upon, heard Jesus talk teach about this concept often. Here is how Peter summarized Jesus’ teaching in his first letter:

“Revere God. Respect the government.” I Peter 2:17 (MSG)

That is really the Big Idea for today, so simply put. In these next two weeks, as you go to vote, do so maintaining reverence to God and respect for the government. Don’t confuse the two.

Show your respectful allegiance to your nation by voting; show your reverent allegiance to God by reserving your worship for no human being, but worship God and God alone.