

## “How Far With Patriotism?”

This is the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend! There'll be lots of fireworks, celebrations, and displays of patriotism. I'm thankful I live in the U.S. I'm grateful to God for the blessings and freedoms that we have. I still feel strong emotions when I hear America the Beautiful or The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

I have a deep appreciation for all who've served in the armed forces to defend our country. When I was a young pastor a pastor friend of mine joined the Army Reserves as a chaplain. He encouraged me to do the same, but I declined. To be honest, if I had to do over again, I think I would have signed up with the Army Reserves.

Of course, our country is far from perfect. There are some quirky things about the good old U.S.A. This piece, titled “*Only in America*”, suggests some of these oddities:

Only in America can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance.  
Only in America do drugstores make the sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions, while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front.  
Only in America do people order double cheeseburgers, large fries and a DIET coke.  
Only in America do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our junk in the garage. Hello!  
Only in America do we use answering machines to screen calls and have call-waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.  
Only in America do we buy hot dogs in packages of 10 and buns in packages of 8.

I believe it was comedian Johnny Carson who defined democracy like this: “Unlike communism, democracy does not mean having just one ineffective political party; it means having two ineffective political parties. Democracy is welcoming people from other lands, and giving them something to hold onto--usually a mop or a leaf blower.”

Well, seriously, I'm so glad I'm an American! ***There is something natural and legitimate in loving one's country.*** We see this sentiment portrayed in the Bible in Psalm 137. This Psalm was written when God's people were exiled in Babylon, far from their native land. "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4). Can you sense the wistful, painful longing for their homeland which was in ruins? Then there is Nehemiah. Even though he was in a high position as cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes, he loved his homeland so much that he got permission to return to Judah, to supervise the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. It's quite natural to appreciate and love your own country!

But as a follower of Jesus, I struggle sometimes with this whole matter of “patriotism”. Patriotism is defined as: “Love of country; devotion to the welfare of one's country”. But how do we balance love for *our country* with a broader love for *all peoples*? Are there times when being loyal to *our country* conflicts with being loyal to *Christ*?

***What does the Bible say about “patriotism”, about our loyalty to the nation and our responsibility to the state?*** Actually, we find an uneven witness and different perspectives on this in Scripture! In the early history of the Hebrews, loyalty to God and loyalty to the nation Israel were identical. Israel was a “theocracy” – it had no prime minister or president – *God was Head of state!* Later, Israel became like other nations and had an earthly king. By the time of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, being faithful to God sometimes meant *opposing* national policies and *criticizing* the nation and its leaders and people. Prophets like Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Micah spoke out against their country – and as a result were sometimes looked upon as being *unpatriotic*. Some of the prophets suffered greatly because of this. .

***What did Jesus say about one’s obligation to the nation or state? How did He act towards governmental authorities? How patriotic was Jesus?***

The incident that probably best summarizes Jesus’ attitude toward this is found in Matthew 22:15-22: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor’s.' Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

Some Pharisees get together with the Herodians to try to trap Jesus. They ask him a baited question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" Any other time, these 2 groups wouldn’t have passed the time of day with each other! The Pharisees were devout Jews, sworn enemies of Rome. They were against paying the Roman taxes. On the other hand, the Herodians were the party of Herod, the wealthy and privileged class who gladly collaborated with the enemy in exchange for status and power. They had no problems paying the tax! And the tax here was probably the *poll tax*, which was especially hated by Jews. That tax was paid directly to Caesar, and had to be paid with the denarius, a coin which bore the image of Caesar on it, and the inscription describing him as “son of a god”.

*Jesus is cornered.* If He says, “Don’t pay taxes”, He could have been reported to Roman authorities and arrested for treason or sedition. But what if He says, “Yes, pay taxes”? Then Jews would be angry and Jesus might lose credibility with them, because Palestine was an occupied country, under Roman rule. Jews resented it. And they felt God alone was king – not Caesar. So what does Jesus do? He asks for a coin. Then He says, "Whose inscription is on this?" "Caesar's," they say. Then these classic words of Christ: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”.

What's Jesus' point? There are certain duties and obligations we owe to the state and nation: paying taxes, obeying laws, etc. After all, government provides order and protection for life.

We ought to give a certain amount of loyalty to the state and nation. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” But..... “render to God the things that are God’s.” For a *Christian*, there is a *higher loyalty and devotion* than that which we give to the state or nation, and that is to *God*. We can’t make a god out of a nation. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”, including our country!

Let's think more about this tension between love of God and love for one's country. As I said, the Bible includes differing perspectives on this. ***On the one hand, the Bible tells us to obey the authorities, to be loyal to the state.*** God has placed people in power for our good. Look at what it says in Romans 13:1-4a: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer." This says that leaders are God’s appointed servants for our good. A similar theme is found in 1 Peter 2:13-14: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.”

We can see truth in these Scriptures, can't we? Imagine if there were no government, no police, no civil authorities? There would be chaos, anarchy. Trusted leaders of the state and nation can be a gift of God, for the wellbeing of the people. We can see how they may be placed in positions of power by God to do His work.

But doesn't that raise some questions in your mind? Do you believe Vladimir Putin has been sent by God to govern the Russian people? Can we agree that God has appointed Kim Jung-un to be President of North Korea for the good of the people of North Korea and the world? Or that Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is a servant of God appointed to govern that nation for the wellbeing of that country? Those of you who are Democrats: Can you believe Donald Trump is God's appointed servant sent to govern the U.S.? Republicans, do you believe Nancy Pelosi and some of the other Democratic leaders in Congress are God's appointed servants for your good?

***While some Scriptures tell us that authorities are put there by God to do His work and therefore we should obey them, other Scriptures present a different perspective.*** For example, Romans 13, the passage that says civil authorities have been put in place by God and need to be obeyed, presents a very favorable view of government and its purpose. However, if we turn from Romans 13 to *Revelation 13*, there is a reference to *the Beast*. Many Bible scholars believe that this was a veiled reference to the Roman emperor and Rome itself. Here, in its historical context, government and government leaders are pictured as evil, satanic!

The Book of Revelation was written during a time of terrible persecution of Christians. Once year everyone in the Roman Empire had to appear before authorities, burn a pinch of incense,

and say “Caesar is Lord.” This was not a *religious* thing – but political – it was a way you annually declared your loyalty to the nation. You could do that, then go back home and worship as you pleased. But some Christians chose not to do this. How could they say “Caesar is Lord” when they believed only *Jesus* is Lord. Those who refused to do this were often persecuted mercilessly, horribly. *Out of a Christian conscience, they disobeyed the laws of the state.*

I believe there is a Scriptural basis for civil disobedience on the part of Christian believers - if we believe national policies, state laws, local ordinances are unfair, or unjust, or *in* some ways violate God’s laws and will. There is a higher authority than the laws of the state – they are the laws of God!

In our nation there were those who protested laws which kept women from voting in our country. Women like Susan B. Anthony and others in the Women's Suffrage Movement stood up against the laws of the land, and finally in 1920 women were granted the right to vote. It was civil disobedience, peaceful protest, that won for African Americans the human rights and freedoms which they had been denied. When the Nazi Party rose to power in Germany under Hitler, the State eventually took control of the Church. It began to dictate what would be preached. By and large, Christians were silent. A few spoke out. One was a Lutheran minister named Martin Neimoller. But it was too little, too late. Neimoller wrote: “In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up.”

Speaking out against our country’s actions or policies does not mean we are *unpatriotic*, or don’t *love our country*. I hope and pray we can always be a nation where is freedom of dissent. Sometimes I don’t like other peoples’ views. But the alternative is to live in a country where we have little or no freedom to speak out.

What does all this mean? I think it means that ***our patriotism and our love for our country – if we're a follower of Jesus – has to be held in tension with our primary commitment to Christ and His kingdom.*** The Bible says, if we're follower of Jesus, our real citizenship is in heaven. “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). The day I was *born*, I became an American citizen. But the day I was *born again* I became a citizen of heaven (the kingdom of God). My citizenship in *that kingdom* has priority over my citizenship in the U.S.

***Are some today (even Christian believers) who tie religion and patriotism too closely together.*** Sociologists and social critics point to the existence of “cultural religion” or “civic religion”. This is a blending of American ideals sprinkled with Christian teaching. "God, Country, Apple Pie and Chevrolet." Unfortunately, this civil religion is often mistaken as Biblical faith. Chuck Colson once said people who mix religion and patriotism have a “God and Country, wrap the Flag around the Cross” mentality. For instance, there are people who have no personal commitment to Christ or involvement in a church - yet they will stand up for God, country, flag,

old-fashioned values, etc. They may even consider themselves “Christians” because they live in the U.S. They might be the ones with the “God Bless America” bumper stickers. We see some of this in politics – where a politician who is not particularly religious or a church-goer may somehow throw God into the mix when making a speech.

Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). One more thought on this: ***for Christian believers, patriotism doesn’t go far enough.*** It is not wrong, in itself, to love our country, to be thankful for the land in which we live. But the gospel presses us to move beyond *nationalism*, to a love and concern *for all people*.

If my love for my own country makes me dislike, distrust, and discount people of other nations, then my patriotism has an evil dimension to it. The vision of the *kingdom of God* is for *all people* to enjoy the blessings and benefits of the Lord, for all to feast at His table. Time and again, in the Old Testament, God’s people Israel *lost sight of that vision*. They were convinced that God only loved *them* and was only concerned about *them*! When Jesus said God longed for *everyone* to be part of His family and kingdom, He clashed with the Jewish religious leaders.

George Bernard Shaw had a biting comment. He once quipped, “You’ll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race.” One of the interesting things is that we can take pride in our country and see it as a noble thing, but if a Puerto Rican takes pride in *her* country, or a French citizen swells with pride for their French homeland, we sometimes resent it.

In one church I served, there was a man whose hobby was to collect miniature flags of all the countries of the world. Several times when we had World Communion Sunday, I asked this man if he would display all his flags in the church lobby as a visible sign that the kingdom of God embraces all nations and all peoples. Many of us regard it as a special moment when we stand and salute the American flag, or we see old glory waving in the breeze. But perhaps my friend’s display of his flags of all the nations better represents the Christlike perspective. For God loves people of all nations and Christ died to be the Savior of all peoples and all nationalities.

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