

Faith in Public Life | Mark 10:35–45

Focus statement: Following Jesus transforms our use of power into service for the good of our neighbors. So we enter public life to serve our neighbors, pursue justice, and hold power accountable.

Today we are continuing our series about how we as Christians show up in different sectors, and today that is government. How might we faithfully show up in these spaces?

1. Naming the faith beneath our public lives

I suspect many of you already believe that faith impacts how you show up in the public sector, in government. Because you live that conviction. Some of you serve in local government. Some of you organize, protest, volunteer, and pay attention to decisions that affect your neighbors.

And my guess is you see your faith connected to this work.

So What language and framework does Scripture give us for understanding our responsibility? Or does it? How does following Jesus shape the purpose of our participation in government, in public service?

There are conflicting narratives about whether we are a “Christian nation” or at one time were and we need to “get back to that” and various narratives around what separation of church and state should mean.

The history of the separation of church and state is interesting because Some of its strongest advocates were Christians who knew what it meant for government to favor one church over another.

As I reflected on this I think the message I absorbed growing up was that separation meant keeping faith out of public life. This understanding came mostly from a concern for fairness. We wanted people of other faiths, and

people with no faith, to be included. So faith belonged at church. Other spaces, including politics, we were supposed to leave it at the door.

Looking back it kind of reminds me a little of the language of colorblindness: "I don't see color. We're all the same." Race and religion are different, of course. But I recognize a similar impulse: the hope that fairness will come if we try to dissolve or set aside differences.

There is another expression of this that I think also shows up in mainline churches and that is "don't bring politics into the church". Those are separate. Which is code for we don't engage with politics because we don't want it to upset the status quo nor it to challenge our political privilege as white and Christian.

Do y'all resonate with either of these framings of separation of church and state?

Then there is the White Christian Nationalist ideology, that seems to believe we need to be a theocracy. That the government would run best if Christianity was the established religion, that our schools would be better, our society would be better if we were all Christian. And thus Christian social norms were mandatory and regulated.

It is interesting because when I looked up what in particular some want from a government that claims Christianity, and it is about regulating Christian social norms and traditional social hierarchy. So that is about enshrining patriarchy as God's desire, and regulating and enforcing family structures, and its about strong boundaries about what who else can be in the country. Ie. People of other religions and ethnicities. And interestingly idealizing free market capitalism is a key component of this ideology.

Now there is a tension here that I want to take seriously. Because I believe my Christian faith has something to offer our public life. I want the convictions of my faith to shape how we govern, how we share power, and care for others.

So when I hear calls for America to be a Christian nation, Is my objection only that the Christianity being promoted is one I believe misrepresents Jesus? Or is it something else also?

What if it were my understanding of Christianity? What if the people making the decisions shared my convictions and pursued the causes I care about? Would I welcome an arrangement I now oppose?

That question helps me see that there are two issues here. What we believe matters. So does the authority we claim for those beliefs - over other people. Mandating and regulating a faith through government is never what I want. as the NCCC voter guide articulates “Democracy is a spiritual practice of shared dignity.”

I want you to think for a minute about the forces that shaped your understanding of how faith and government, or faith and politics intersected...do you find yourselves shaped by one of these streams of thought? Or something different?

Is there a framework you were shaped by that I didn't mention?

To be clear this notion of separation of church and state and how faith and government are to intersect and interact has been an ongoing discussion for a long time...Wars have been fought over this.

But I want us to now explore what does today's scripture offers us in this conversation.

Our passage does not offer a party platform or instructions for organizing a modern government. It addresses something that reaches into every political arrangement: our understanding of greatness and our relationship to power.

James and John approach Jesus with a request. They want the places at his right and left in glory. They picture themselves close to him, occupying positions of honor.

They have been imagining where they will fit. And they have some pretty good seats in mind.

I can recognize something of myself in that. Maybe you can, too.

We want to matter. We want to be heard. We want some say in what happens to us and the people we love.

And there are good reasons to want influence. If your community has been ignored, you need a voice. If you see something causing harm, you want the ability to change it.

We need people willing to take responsibility.

We want to help, and we want people to recognize that we're helping. We want to protect our community, and we can stop noticing what that protection costs someone else.

James and John are already following Jesus. And they still have more to learn about power.

Jesus answers their request by talking about a cup and a baptism—about the suffering that lies ahead of him.

They are imagining places of honor. He asks whether they understand the road they are walking with him.

Then Jesus gathers all of the disciples to talk with them. This is something they all need to hear.

He talks about rulers who lord their authority over people.

And then he says, "Not so with you."

Following Jesus is going to make a difference in how they treat people. Including what they do when they have influence over someone else's life.

And that has everything to do with government.

A decision made in meeting can affect whether someone can afford to stay in their home. A transportation decision can affect whether someone can get to work. A budget can make help available—or leave someone waiting.

Political power gives us the ability to affect other people's lives. Jesus teaches us that greatness is measured by our willingness to serve the people our decisions affect.

That's quite a responsibility.

The point is that authority creates obligations toward others. A position is never simply an achievement for the person who holds it.

Jesus transforms our use of power by directing our attention toward the people whose lives it touches. Their wellbeing becomes central to our understanding of greatness.

Did y'all get that? Following Jesus transforms our use of power into service for the good of our neighbors.

That matters for our political life—

Because the politics is actually how we make decisions together, distribute resources, and determine whose needs receive attention. Now government exercises power in each of these areas, and our participation helps shape how that power is used.

I remember taking some kids on a youth trip several years ago. I think they were probably 6th graders, so perhaps one of their first “trips” without parents. They all brought snacks for the bus ride, And I remember this group of 4 boys were all sitting together and were comparing snacks. And someone had the idea of what if we all share ALL the snacks. And so They each dumped all their bag of snacks into a pile together. And I still remember the look on their faces - “look how many snacks to we have”. One kid definitely contributed fewer, and one kid definitely contributed more... but it was watching them discover together that pooling our resources has its benefits! look how much we have as their eyes lit up. They also did this at the restaurant for lunch. One of the specials was like get 2 entrese and a dessert and an appetizer or something for \$20 (that tells you how long ago that was). Each of the kids didn’t have \$20 on their own, but I watched them discover again - oh wait if we each contribute we have more!

Now, a government budget is more complicated than four boys sharing snacks. But that little moment has stayed with me—the discovery of what they had together.

And I wonder how often I think that way when I look at my pay stub.

When we think about the power government has over our lives, one of the first things we think about is its power to tax us.

I don’t know about y’all, but when I look at my pay stub, I notice that number. I have some feelings about that number.

But do I notice, with the same attention, all the things those taxes help pay for?

When I drive across a bridge, am I thinking about who maintains it? When someone calls the fire department, or checks out a library book, or sends their child to public school—do I make that connection?

The amount coming out of my paycheck is right there in front of me. What we make possible together is spread throughout our lives. Some of it I use every day without thinking about it. Some of it I hope I'll never need. And some of it matters enormously to someone whose circumstances are different from mine.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't ask how our money is being spent. We should. Holding power accountable is part of our responsibility.

But I wonder what happens when the question "What am I getting for my money?" becomes "What are we making possible for one another?"

I may have a car, but my neighbor needs the bus to get to work. I may never need a particular public service, but someone else's ability to live safely depends on it.

This is why we say budgets are moral documents.

A budget tells us what we're willing to pay for together. It shows whose needs receive attention, what we're willing to protect, and what we're willing to leave undone.

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Jesus' teaching to the disciples about power and greatness is directly connected to serving others. This is applicable to both the conversation about how an individual who identifies as a Christian shows up in political leadership-how they are to inhabit places of power. And there it also informs our conversations about how the church-more generally - shows up in places of power.

Following Jesus transforms our use of power into service for the good of our neighbors. So we enter public life to serve our neighbors, pursue justice, and hold power accountable.

It is absolutely the role of people of faith to look leaders in the eye and say - have mercy. True greatness is measured in how we serve others. That may put us at odds with those who love to dominate everything. But Christians, we understand greatness and power through how one serves other.

It is absolutely the role of people of faith to notice those most vulnerable to harm and bring that to the powers that be and advocate for their safety and protection. Not to dominate and force adoption of Christian ideology but because it transforms our use of power into service for the good of our neighbors. Which it calls us into the public square to hold power accountable, and to pursue justice.

So I want to hear your thoughts...