

POLITICAL CLARITY

I hesitate to tell you about the book I read this week. You might think it silly. But it's about someone who sees something no one else sees and believes in something no one else believes in. The Children may know this book. It's called *Horton Hears A Who* by Dr. Seuss. In the story, an elephant named Horton finds out that a tiny speck of dust is actually a small planet called Whoville. He discovers this when he hears the inhabitants. He wants to take care of them because *a person's a person no matter how small*. But Horton has a tough time because the other animals persecute him for believing in something they cannot see. In the end, Horton is proven right but along the way, he has to show bravery, integrity, and love. It's a funny story that teaches a good lesson. In a weird way it reminded me of Jesus.

This morning the true story of Jesus standing before the political power holders of his day seeing things they do not see and believing things they do not believe. The beauty, bravery, integrity, and love of Jesus, comes in part from the fact that he sees with clarity what others do not see. I wonder if we see what Jesus sees the way he sees it. We are in a time of great political passion and polarization. Do we see the most important things with clarity? This story about Jesus is especially interesting because it is *the* place in the Bible where Jesus for the first comes face-to-face with secular government. Rome was a pagan, foreign occupying power in Israel and Pilate was the ruling governor.

What do we learn from Jesus in this setting? One thing we find is that...

I. POLITICAL CLARITY BEGINS WITH THE RECOGNITION THAT JESUS DOESN'T FIT THE TYPICAL POLITICAL CATEGORIES.

In **Mark 15**, when the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, the first question Pilate asks, in **verse 2**, is, *are you the king of the Jews?* Now, from everything we know about Pilate it is first of all that he is a pragmatist and a politician. Pilate isn't asking a religious or theological question. He wants to know if Jesus is a political leader who is claiming political power and who poses a threat to the Roman government. The answer Jesus gives is mysterious and hard to translate well. ¹ The English Standard Version translates the verse this way: *And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so."* What kind of an answer is that? Pilate doesn't get it and doesn't see it as an answer you see that in **verse 4** when he says, *"Have you no answer to make?"*

The best explanation I've heard is that instead of a simple, "yes" or "no". It's more like he is saying: "yes and no".

Jesus isn't just being shifty. He is speaking carefully. If Jesus simply said, "Yes, I am a king," Pilate would think he was just one more earthly ruler who wanted to raise an army, dominate his subjects and rule over a physical kingdom that would be a rival to the Roman Empire. So he can't just say, "Yes." But he can't just say "No" either. If he did that, Jesus would be saying, *"I'm just one more religious leader who wants to help people find inner peace. I have no claims over the whole of their lives, or society."* That wouldn't have been true either.

One thing we learn here is that political clarity isn't the same as simplicity. Political clarity is seeing truth clearly. That sometimes means seeing complexity. The answers to our political questions are not always just "yes" or "no" "for or against." Does any political party align perfectly with the priorities of Jesus? I doubt it. When it comes to the kingship of Christ, I'm faced with something that transcends every political personality, party and platform. We should reflect that truth.

Illustration: On his podcast Pastor John Piper was asked the question: **How can Christians have a positive influence on American politics?** He said Christians *"-- can lay hold of that which is only seen in part by Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and Libertarians.* He is saying as Christians we can and should see things that others do not see as clearly or completely. Then he adds this: *They can then gather those biblical components together into a whole and, leaving party distinctives aside, exalt that."* He went on to say:

It seems that the Christian church should not--as a church--join partisan politics. Rather, we should be speaking prophetically to issues that relate to what Christ's will is. Then we should just let the chips fall as they may. If it sounds Republican or Democratic or Independent, so be it.

What Piper is saying is Biblical. Do you see it? Will you support it? Let's not let our priorities shift from what is biblical to what is political so that we are quickly triggered by a statement or a position, based on whether it fits into your side's familiar political talking points. The Phillip's translation of **Romans 12:1** famously says, *don't let the world press you into its mold.* Don't let your political tribe (which is part of this world) press you into its mold so that some things that are important to Jesus are left out or dismissed. We have to be clear about that.

This fact that Jesus doesn't fit easily into our political categories should be reflected in how we engage politically. In the story of King David, the prophet Nathan plays a big role. He often helps and even protects David. But Nathan was also the one who delivered a scathing message of judgment that called David out for his sins.² If we Christians refuse to speak with clarity and even critically about issues that matter to Christ, we muddy the waters and are in danger of misleading others. The world may think politics is our priority or Christian faith is hypocritical. We have to represent something different, greater. We are called to represent Christ. Jesus said, *My Kingdom is not of this world.* **John 18:36.** He isn't registered as belonging to one of our political parties. He doesn't fit into our usual political categories.

Piper ended his answer with this statement.

Ultimately we want to communicate--even while engaging in politics-- that politics are not the main issue on this earth. Knowing the Creator is the main issue, as well as being reconciled with him and glorifying him in *all* that we *believe* and *say* and *do*.³

Jesus doesn't fit our usual political categories.

II. POLITICAL CLARITY SEES THAT JESUS DOESN'T RELY ON THE USUAL POLITICAL STRATEGIES NOR SHOULD WE.

In verses 3-7, there are four actors or groups represented.

- 1.) The religious leaders are like a special interest group that lobbies hard for a particular outcome. They don't hesitate to spin the truth. They pretend it is a holy cause, but it is really about political power.
- 2.) Pilate is the pragmatic political pro who watches the polls and works the angles to keep his position and power.
- 3.) Barabbas is the terrorist, insurrectionist who uses violence for political ends.
- 4.) Then there is Jesus. Jesus stands out as entirely different. Pilate tries to get him to play the game. **Verses 4-5** says, *And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you."*⁵ *But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.* That word *amazed* is a word that has a positive connotation. It means he was impressed. Pilate says, "Aren't you going to fight back?". But Jesus is calm, and Pilate sees how different Jesus is from all the rest. Pilate is anxious. The religious leaders are desperate. Barabbas is violent. Jesus is at peace. He is trusting God. Pilate is amazed and impressed.

A. Political clarity means trusting God's sovereignty no matter what happens politically.

Picture a Jewish teenager standing in front of the most powerful man in his day, surrounded by awe-inspiring and opulent symbols of political power and authority. That was Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar. What was the message Daniel spoke to him? **Daniel 2:20-21**: *“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might.²¹ He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. That’s political clarity. In **Daniel 4:17**, he said, “Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will....”* The political pundits don’t care about your peace of mind. They make bank off your fear and frustration. True, Biblical, spiritual, political clarity affirms divine sovereignty and dispels fear. Our God rules!

Does affirming God’s sovereignty mean whoever ends up in power is good? No! God moves in mysterious ways and uses surprising and even wicked instruments to accomplish his will.

Does affirming God’s sovereignty mean we don’t care about politics or show up to vote? No. *It means that as we engage in the political process we keep trusting in and relying on God.*

Does affirming God’s sovereignty influence the way we behave politically? Yes! Compare Jesus to the others in this Mark 15 scene. The religious leaders bear false witness and misrepresent him to bring him down. If we trust God we won’t do that to our political opponents. Pilate is pragmatic he just wants to know what works and how the game played. If we trust God we won’t just be pragmatic. Then there’s Barabbas. He’s willing to go lawless and get violent. If we trust God, we won't go there either. Jesus is different. His trust is in God.

How does your engagement in the political process reveal a trust in God that dispels fear and empowers godliness? One of my favorite Scriptures is the first part of **Isaiah 30:15**. *For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning and rest, you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”* The Hebrew word *returning* is for *repenting*. I like to translate it like that. *In repentance and rest, is your salvation in quietness and in trust is your strength.* Be encouraged. The outcomes that matter most, even in political realm, do not ultimately depend on pulling the predictable

levers of power, pressure, propaganda, on which the world depends but on a spiritual dynamic of dependence on a sovereign God. I said I like the first part of that verse because the second part is sobering. The verse ends with this. *But you were unwilling, ¹⁶ and you said, "No! We will flee upon horses".* I can only imagine people in those days felt the way a lot of people feel today. They were facing a national crisis. The Assyrians were threatening their nation's existence. They felt desperate. If you read Isaiah 30 and 31, you see that they choose flee on horses in order to go to Egypt, where they would seek the help of the ungodly Egyptians to fight off the danger of the ungodly Assyrians. In the next chapter, **Isaiah 31:3**, this is what the LORD says, *The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together.*

What this story and the others like it, teach us is that, if in the grip of fear, we lose faith in God and rely instead on human helpers, whether political parties or candidates or whatever, we are forfeiting what is most powerful and risking a bitter disappointment. Whenever we depend *more* on political candidates or coalitions than faith in God, we are looking to Egypt for help. Whatever benefits we might gain will prove a disappointment in the end. Guard your heart. It sounds trite to say it but we've got to believe it, our God, your God is better than any human helpers including political parties and or candidates. *In repentance and rest is your salvation. In quietness and trust is your strength.* Be glad you have a Sovereign Savior.

Political clarity means trusting God's sovereignty...

**B. Political clarity means living as God servants
no matter what happens politically.**

In the greatest days of the early Christian church, as it spread dramatically and changed the world, the predominant power was Rome. The Roman government, a government that persecuted Christians and used tax dollars to fund incredibly cruel forms of public entertainment and murder as well as for wars of expansion. Here's what Peter wrote to Christians in the days of the terrible emperor Nero. **1 Peter 2:16-17** *Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

1. One of the surprising ways we serve God is by submission to human government. Here's what Paul wrote in **Romans 13:1-2.** *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. Faithful Christians are good citizens, even under imperfect or unrighteous governments. There is a limit to the authority of government. In **Acts 5:29**, Peter tells us, *"we must obey God rather than man."* When human laws conflict with God's laws, we have to obey God. If there is a law or a mandate that doesn't require us to disobey God, then even if we think it inconvenient or unnecessary, we should be outstanding examples of good citizenship.

2. But the most important thing of all is to remember that we serve God best when we live more and more like Jesus. Jesus seems weak and vulnerable in the presence of Pilate and the priests and in complete contrast to Barabbas. But Jesus is God's surprising strategy for changing human society.

There is a sociologist named James Davidson Hunter who wrote a book titled: *To Change the World*. In it he noted that when a society is healthy, many different spheres of life flourish, art, education, culture commerce and religion. But when societies begin to fracture everything begins to revolve around politics. Everyone begins to think the *real* way to produce change is to gain political power because then you can use coercive power to force people to give you the outcomes you want. Political power takes the place once held by culture, and yes, religion.

We have to remember that to think political power is the way to change the world is to buy into the devil's bargain. Remember what Satan said to Jesus, He showed him the kingdoms of the world and said, *"All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me."* (**Matthew 4:8-9**) Satan was offering Jesus coercive power over all the kingdoms of this world. Think of the good he could do. Jesus said, "No!". He has a different strategy. Not a flag to wave but a cross to carry.

Picture Jesus gathering us all together in a huddle. He's got something important to say. He did that with his disciple once. But it is for us also. Listen. **Matthew 20:25-28**, *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

I read a book titled *The Rise of Christianity*, by Rodney Stark. The author is also professor of sociology and religion at the University of

Washington. In this book, he addresses this question: "How was it that Christianity grew so rapidly and had such a profound impact on the Greco-Roman-Pagan world?" *What was their secret? **The early Christians followed the pattern of Jesus. They changed the world primarily through Christ-like love, service, and a purity of life noted by many in the ancient world and gave credibility to the preaching of the gospel.*** We need a profound spiritual revival far more than we need to seize the reins of political power.

CONCLUSION

What was it that inspired the Christians to change the world through Christ-like service and love? The story here in **Mark 15** shows us, in a powerful way. When you come to **verse 12**, As Jesus stands before Pilate, the priests have remembered Pilate's custom of releasing one prisoner during the time of the feast. So they ask for Barabbas, the murderer, and insurrectionist, to be released. They say, Kill Jesus and let Barabbas go. *Do you see what happens here?* They trade places, and the innocent man suffers what the guilty man should have. The gospel Mark is showing is in one man's story, a picture of the purpose of the death of Jesus. It was what he had said he would do, not just for one person but for many! Jesus said He would give his life as a *ransom* for many. Jesus, before Pilate, is not just a good example. He is a Savior preparing to go to the cross to pay for your sins. When you understand and believe that he is your Savior, that faith in Him empowers you to follow him as your king.

*This truth this gospel, believed in and taken to heart very personally is what moved the early Christians to live so beautifully they changed the world even when they had no political power. One early Christian wrote eloquently about what moved him to live like this. His name was Paul, in **Galatians 2:20**, he put it like this: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

When that is your perspective and faith, and it is integrated into your whole life, it affects how you think, how you vote, and how you live. Every human government will one day crumble and fall. *The only way to live for radical and eternal change is to live for Christ and his kingdom.*

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Gracious Father, Jesus our Savior, Holy Spirit our Lord and giver of life, grant us the clarity of your truth and the strength of your healing presence and profound compassion. You save us by your grace, as we trust in Jesus. He died and rose for our redemption. Give us now the faith to trust you as we walking into an uncertain future. We let go our feelings of fear and frustration to rest in your love and your promises. May we always follow Jesus, our only true Lord and Savior. In his name we pray. Amen.

¹ *The New International Version* translates it like this: "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. The problem with that translation is that it makes what Jesus said simpler than it really was. If Jesus had actually said, "Yes, I am the king of the Jews" that clearly. The discussion would have been over, and Pilate would not have later agonized over what to do with him or said, "I don't find him guilty of any crime." To claim to be the political ruler of the Jewish would have been a direct defiance of the Roman authorities who ruled Israel and had established their own puppet king, king Herod. The Romans didn't allow competition.

² Nathan was a court [prophet](#) who lived in the time of [King David](#). He is introduced in [2 Samuel 7:2](#) and [1 Chronicles 17:1](#) as an advisor to David, with whom David reflects on the contrast between his own comfortable home and the tent in which the [Ark of the Covenant](#) is accommodated. Nathan then announced to David the [covenant](#) God was making with him ([2 Samuel 7:4–17](#), a passage known as *Nathan's Oracle*),^[1] contrasting David's proposal to build a house (i.e. a building) for the Ark with God's plan to build a house (i.e. a [dynasty](#)) for David. Later, he came to David to reprimand him for committing [adultery](#) with [Bathsheba](#) while she was the wife of [Uriah the Hittite](#), whose death the King had also arranged to hide his previous transgression ([2 Samuel 12:7–14](#)). According to [Chronicles](#), Nathan wrote histories of the reigns of both David ([1 Chronicles 29:29](#)) and [Solomon](#) ([2 Chronicles 9:29](#)), and was involved in the music of the temple (see [2 Chronicles 29:25](#)).

In [1 Kings 1:8–45](#) it is Nathan who tells the dying David of the plot of [Adonijah](#) to become king, resulting in [Solomon](#) being proclaimed king instead. Nathan presides at the anointing of King Solomon, and his name appears in [Handel's](#) coronation anthem "[Zadok the Priest](#)".

³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/AskPastorJohn/> see "[politics](#)"