



Central Peninsula Church

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Esther 10:1-3

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True Patriotism

SERIES: *For Such a Time as This: Study of the Book of Esther*

I originally thought this video would be appropriate as we approach July 4, but how much more given the events of this past week. On Wednesday a Federal Court of Appeals ruled that the Pledge of Allegiance is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion and cannot be recited in schools. Specifically, it was the clause, "one nation under God," that they said violated the constitution. To quote the court, "A profession that we are a nation 'under God' is identical that we are a nation 'under Jesus,' a nation 'under Vishnu,' a nation 'under Zeus,' or a 'nation under no god.'"

What do you think? Are we "one nation under God?" Why DO we write "in God we trust" on the very thing that we sometimes trust in instead of God?

Christians in the United States have not always been sure about the relationship between God and country. On the one hand, there are those who would prefer to have an American flag up here on the podium, right alongside the cross. They would say that to be a true Christian is to be a patriot and to be a true patriot is to be a Christian. But others disagree. They have a "I'm just passing through" mindset. Their loyalty is not to their country but to the kingdom of God alone. To be a patriot is to "sell out" and put your trust in that which is nothing more than a sinking ship.

We've been working our way through the OT story of Esther. At first glance, you may wonder what this story has to do with patriotism. But in this story we've been introduced to an intriguing character named Mordecai. I would say that Mordecai is a shining example of the right kind of patriotism. Mordecai wasn't a "wrap the flag around the cross" kind of guy, but he wasn't a "I'm just passing through" kind of guy either. Mordecai is an example of what I would call "balanced patriotism."

We see this throughout the book, but it all comes into focus at the end. We would expect the book of Esther to end with something about Esther living "happily ever after," but instead we get this brief note about Mordecai.

"Now King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. And all the accomplishments of his authority and strength,

and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second only to King Ahasuerus and great among the Jews, and in favor with the multitude of his kinsmen, one who sought the good of his people and one who spoke for the welfare of his whole nation" (10:1-3).

In a certain way, the story ends just like it started. We have the same king we started with, King Ahasuerus. His power and authority are still impressive. He still reigns over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. The fact that he could lay a tribute (tax) on both land and coastlands shows the extent of his rule. He rules from the same country, Persia, and the same capital, Susa.

But some things have changed. Vashti is no longer queen; Esther, a young, beautiful Jewish exile has won the crown. Haman, once second in command, is now gone forever. His wicked plan to exterminate the Jews has been thwarted. The biggest change is with Mordecai. Mordecai, Esther's older cousin, started out as a nobody. He's now been promoted to second in command. Verse 2 speaks of "the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him." But not only is he great in the king's work, he is also "great among the Jews and in favor with the multitude of his kinsmen." That sounds like a patriot to me, but a patriot for whom, the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of man?

I. God's people are members of two kingdoms.

Mordecai shows us that God's people are members of two kingdoms. There always has been and until the end of time there always will be the kingdom of this earth and the kingdom of God. As a Jew living in the Persian empire, Mordecai is a picture of how you and I have a kind of dual citizenship.

We're citizens of God's eternal kingdom. Jesus stood before Pilate and Pilate asked him, "**Are you the King of the Jews?**" Jesus said, "**Yes I am. But my kingdom is not of this world**" (John 18:34-37). As those who follow Christ, we're members of that kingdom which is not of this world. That's why

the Apostle Paul could say, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

But we're also citizens of an earthly kingdom. In Acts 22, Paul is preaching in Jerusalem and causing quite a stir among the Jews. A Roman commander came and arrested him and was about to have him beaten when Paul cried out, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen?" The commander said, "Wait a minute, you're a Roman?" Paul said, "Yes, I am." The commander said, "I had to buy my citizenship." Paul said, "Well, I was born a citizen." (Acts 22:22-29).

Paul wasn't above claiming an earthly citizenship. Whether we buy it or are born in to it, we are citizens of an earthly kingdom. For most of us, that's the United States of America. But how far do we go in that? Is it right to love our country? This has been a question that has challenged the greatest of Christian thinkers. Augustine believed that while Christians are commanded to love the whole world, practically speaking we can't do that. And since God has placed each of us in a particular nation, it's God's calling that we love our own nation in a special way. He said we love the world by loving the specific community in which we live.

C.S. Lewis wrote that loving our country is like loving the home we were raised in. There is a natural love of the place where we grew up: "love of old acquaintances, of familiar sights, sounds and smells." This extends out to love for our country. Just as family offers us the first step beyond self-love, so love of country offers us the first step beyond family selfishness. These kinds of natural affections can also train our spiritual muscles which, he says, "Grace may later put to a higher service; as women nurse their dolls in childhood and later nurse children."

So not only are we citizens of two kingdoms, but there is a kind of loyalty and love we have for both.

II. God's people are to be loyal to both kingdoms.

Look at Mordecai again. No one could argue that Mordecai was loyal to the Persian king. Early in the story, we see that as a rank and file official, Mordecai uncovered an assassination plot against the king and saved his life. That's loyalty. And later, when offered the job of second in command, Mordecai didn't turn it down. And we can assume he was good at what he did. Verse 2 even suggests that Mordecai was responsible for the King's continued success.

It might seem strange that a Jew would serve the very nation which years earlier brought his people into captivity, but that's what he did.

And yet he stayed loyal to another kingdom and another king. Throughout the story, you can see his loyalty to his people, the Jews. It's clear in v. 3 that when he finally rose to the top in the Persian Empire, his success in his work did not separate him from his kinsmen. He was their man, he was their representative, he used his position to seek "the good of his people, and to speak for the welfare of his nation."

Like Mordecai, you and I are called to be loyal to both an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom. In Mark 12 some Jewish religious leaders came to Jesus and asked him a tough question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?" It was a loaded question. The poll tax was imposed by Rome on every Jew, and they resented it. The burning issue in the minds of most Jews of that day was this: If God gave the land of Israel to the Jews, and paid their offerings and sacrifices to show their loyalty to him, how could they pay tribute to any other power, especially an idolator like Caesar? If Jesus said they had to pay, they would charge him with disloyalty to God; if he said they should not pay, they could denounce him to the Romans.

Jesus said, "Bring me a coin." They brought him a coin and he said, "Whose image and name is on this coin?" They said, "Caesar's." Jesus said, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

What was Jesus saying? He was saying there are two realms, a political realm and a spiritual realm. We have an obligation to each realm. The political realm should be given taxes and you should obey its laws. As Peter said, we should honor and obey the king (1 Peter 2:13-17). But we have obligations to another realm as well. To God we owe our worship, obedience, and service.

But what happens when the political realm tries to get from us what belongs to God alone? On the reverse side of the coin that Jesus held in his hand was an image of Caesar's mother represented as the goddess of peace the highest priest. Those words commanded more than any earthly ruler should expect; they demanded worship. What do we do when Caesar tells us who to worship or how to worship? What do we do when the government tries to take control of the spiritual realm of our lives?

III. God's people are to put God's kingdom first.

A couple of hundred years ago a group known as the Continental Congress faced the same questions. King George III

had placed demands on American colonists that pretty much put them out of business. He also tried to set up a state run church that told people how to worship. This group got together and wrote him a letter with 10 things they wanted changed. He responded by trashing their list and sending 18,000 Hessian thugs to invade our shores and teach us a lesson. The Americans got together and wrote a second letter; 10 demands were reduced to one: we call it The Declaration of Independence. Four days later in Philadelphia, when that Declaration was read in public for the first time, church bells rang for the rest of the day.

When earthly kingdoms demand what rightly belongs to God, our obligation is to God. Remember what got Mordecai in trouble in the first place? Mordecai was employed at the king's gate. The king issued a command that everyone working at the king's gate was required to bow down and pay homage to his second in command, Haman. But Mordecai refused based on his Jewish faith.

This is a very interesting case. The simple explanation is that he didn't bow down because Jews were commanded to worship only God. But some would say this was not about worship; it was more about courtesy towards one in a respected position. In Gen. 33 Jacob bowed down to Esau. In 1 Sam. 20 David bowed down to Jonathan. Why wouldn't Mordecai bow down to Haman? Was it because Haman was a scoundrel? Or because he was part of a race of people the Jews hated? We don't know. But it highlights the fact that matters of civil disobedience aren't always cut and dry. Even God's people might disagree on what's right and wrong. Some might think it's wrong to salute the flag. African-American believers in the sixties felt it was wrong to comply with segregation laws. Martin Luther King Jr. said it was love for his country that compelled him to try to change its laws.

There are some issues that are cut and dry. In Acts 5 Peter and John were arrested for disturbing the peace. They were taken before the Jewish authorities and ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. Peter and John refused. They said, **"We must obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29).

This is a real issue for many believers around the world. While he visited the United States, a pastor from Nepal told about how he was put in prison just for sharing Christ with a friend. Here's how he explained his actions: "Of course I must obey my Lord and spread his word. But even though we are persecuted, we who are Christians in Nepal pride ourselves on being the best citizens our king has. We try to be faithful to the fullest extent we can. We love our country, but we love our God more."

IV. God's people make the greatest difference when they

balance their loyalty to both kingdoms.

But most of the time we don't have to make a choice between the two. We can love and serve our country, and we can love and serve our God as well. And it's in this balance that we can make the greatest difference. Those who love their country but could do without God, end up investing in something that in the end will mean nothing. But those who love God and could care less about their country, end up with their head in the clouds and making no difference at all. It's in the balance that we make a real difference.

Think about Mordecai. He did not come from a priestly line. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. He wasn't a prophet. He never claimed that God was speaking through him. He never said, "Thus saith the Lord..." Instead, he was a civil servant who rose through the ranks and gained a position of influence. But, having gained that position, he didn't get so consumed with the affairs of the Persian Empire that he forgot about his people. Instead, he used that position to work for the good of his people, to speak for their welfare; in short, to make a difference for the kingdom of God.

Today we have it totally backwards. We think that if you want to make a real impact on the world for Christ you have to go into full-time ministry. Some people say you have to be ordained. To be ordained is to be set apart for sacred ministry. Pastors talk about when they were ordained into the ministry. Let me tell you who we should ordain. We should ordain people into their secular jobs. We should set people apart for sacred ministry in business and politics and education and the trades. Because it's as people are called by God into those arenas that they can make the biggest difference for God.

You are the ones who have to really be on your toes spiritually. Honestly, sometimes I think about why I'm a pastor. I mean, in so many ways my job is a piece of cake! I go to work and every single person I interact with on staff is a committed believer. We have a problem and they say, "Let's pray about it." Do they say that to you at your work? I mean, you have to fight and scratch to get time in the word. The guys I work for, the elders, say to me, "Hey, Mark, are you getting enough time in the word? Do we need to adjust your schedule so you can get some more study time?" Does your boss tell you to do that? I've got it easy. You guys are the ones on the front lines! You guys are the ones getting shot at!

But before you sign up for seminary, let me say this.

You're the ones who can really make a difference. Like Mordecai, you're the ones who while you serve your country in the secular realm can make the biggest difference in the sacred realm.

CONCLUSION

Maybe an example will help. William Wilberforce was born in England in 1759. He entered politics and became a member of the parliament at the age of 21. When he was 25 he went on a tour of Europe and during that time he read a book called, The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul, and he became a committed believer. But he remained a member of the Parliament for the next 40 years. He said, "My walk is a public one: my business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the part which Providence seems to have assigned me."

Wilberforce was part of group called the Clapham Sect, which wasn't a sect, but a group of wealthy believers who lived in a village a few miles outside of London, called Clapham. They would meet together regularly to discuss the wrongs and injustices of their country and the battles they would need to fight to establish righteousness in the nation. They established The Church Missionary Society, The British Foreign and Bible Society, The Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, and the Society for the Reformation of Prison Discipline.

But the greatest efforts went into the campaign against slavery. The British had entered the slave trade in 1562. By 1770 British ships transported about 50,000 slaves a year from West Africa to England. Most Englishmen considered the slave trade a divine right and essential to the commerce and national security of England.

Wilberforce was quite a speaker. He was barely five feet tall, but when his first biographer, James Boswell, heard him speak, he said, "I saw what seemed a mere shrimp upon the table, but as I listened the shrimp grew and grew and became a whale." But Wilberforce didn't become a pulpit preacher. He used his speaking skills to campaign against the slave trade, both in the Parliament and in public speeches. In 1789 he gave his first speech against the slave trade. From that time on, he put before the Parliament motion after motion to abolish slavery. Finally, after defeat after defeat, in 1807 the slave trade was abolished in England.

But Wilberforce still wasn't through. He fought another 18 years for the total emancipation of existing slaves. Poor health forced him to retire in 1825, but he continued his work for reforms in prisons, among the poor, and in the workplace particularly for children. Finally, on July 29, 1833, three days after the Bill for the Abolition of slavery passed in the House of Commons, sounding the final death blow for slavery, Wilberforce died. Before he slipped into his final coma, he whispered, "Thank God that I should have lived to witness a day when England was willing to give 20 million sterling for the abolition of slavery."

I would add, thank God that Wilberforce didn't become a preacher or a missionary. Thank God he stayed at his post. Thank God he loved his country enough to try to change it. Thank God he loved his Lord enough to give his life for the establishment of his kingdom, "on earth as it is in heaven."

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