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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND GOD'S KINGDOM: WHICH CAUSE MATTERS MOST?

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I don't know if you've noticed this or not, but instability around the world seems to be on the rise. Just this year we've seen race riots, campus riots, and massive protests revolving around complex social issues. Additionally, two of the most polarizing candidates in history are running for president, further dividing an already fragile society while testing relationships between family and friends.

All of these movements have something in common—people are giving their very lives for a cause. You may not agree with the guy protesting for a \$15 minimum wage, but clearly he's going all in. The people who are giving up an entire year's income to volunteer for a presidential candidate are completely sold out. Older generations often scratch their heads at millennials. They wonder how anyone could be so devoted to movements like Free College Now (which advocate for tuition-free higher education). "After all, that money has to come from somewhere. Who's going to pay for it?" they counter.

I completely understand our generation's devotion to such causes. As millennials, we long to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. In fact, if whatever movement we get involved in has the potential to impact future generations, we're even more sold out to it.

What happens when a Christian is completely devoted to the Black Lives Matter movement? The movement aims to promote racial equality, but some of their tactics have alienated many people from their cause. What about Christians who spend countless hours advocating for a candidate who tramples on the values found in God's

kingdom? Maybe the bigger question in regards to politics is, “Should Christians be advocates advancing *any* political ideology?” Certainly someone labeling himself as a Democrat, Republican, Socialist, or any other label is going to make as many enemies as friends in our polarized society. Is that something with which a Christian should associate?

Consider this question: is it right for a Christian to be completely devoted to a cause at the risk of alienating those who need to hear the message of Christ? This question is applicable to any social movement and ideology. How you answer this tells others where your true values lie. In short, are you a citizen of God’s kingdom or not?

In Matthew 5–7, Jesus gives His famous Sermon on the Mount. This message contains all sorts of remarkable truths—treat others as you would have them treat you,¹ pray for your enemies,² store wealth in heaven,³ and “no man can serve two masters.”⁴ Now, the point behind this message is not simply to make oneself a good person. Being a good person is merely the result that stems from keeping these teachings, but it isn’t the reason Jesus gives them.

If you pay attention to the context of the passage, you’ll notice the primary audience is the disciples. The secondary audience is the crowd gathering around listening to Jesus teach. The disciples, like so many other Jews, were longing for God’s kingdom to come. They were expecting a restoration of the Davidic throne, with Jesus as the rightful heir. In fact, Matthew’s overall theme is squarely centered on the kingdom of God. So, this message Jesus gives is focused on answering the question, “How do citizens of God’s kingdom conduct themselves?”

A citizen of God’s kingdom is expected to be someone who is humble (one of the Beatitudes), doesn’t display unrighteous anger, doesn’t judge unjustly, and instead of hating their enemies, actually loves and prays for them. All of these characteristics and more are found within the Sermon on the Mount. In the context of Jesus being our King come the expected standards of kingdom citizenship. If you want to know how Christians are to conduct themselves and what type of character they are to take on, look no further than the Sermon on the Mount. If Jesus is your King, you *must* live by these standards. You must strive for them. There is no other option.

Kingdoms, you know, are ruled by absolute monarchs. There are no democratic liberties. You don’t get to tell the king, “I think your edict is unfair. Let’s put this to a vote.” Such behavior only warrants your imprisonment, or worse. As a citizen of a kingdom, the king dominates every aspect of your life. You exist to serve him. Fair or unfair, that’s how monarchies work.

Unique to God’s kingdom is the concept of choice. Theological discussions aside, you *choose* to be part of an eternal, heavenly kingdom. No one has forced you to be a

part of it. It is entirely accurate to say you forgo personal freedoms when becoming a citizen of God's kingdom. You voluntarily surrender your freedom to a king, but not just any king. This king holds the key to eternal life. He holds the key to giving you a "rich and satisfying life."⁵ This king is able to offer you something you can't obtain on your own.

So, if Jesus is your King, then you're expected to take on the character and conduct of a citizen in His kingdom. It means you now serve Him. It means you allow this King to dominate every aspect of your life. You have voluntarily given up your personal freedoms for a better life under King Jesus.

The tension that exists in all of us, especially millennial Christians, is the desire to select which situations will require kingdom conduct and which situations will not. We want to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of God's kingdom at the local food bank. We're helping the poor, and that's noble. It feels good. It looks good. On the other hand, we may choose to conduct ourselves differently as we protest vehemently against Syrian refugees entering our nation. We consider ourselves "American." We're protecting our American way of life.

We forget that we aren't Americans first. We're citizens of God's kingdom first. It's our job to love and pray for our enemies. We forget we're citizens of God's kingdom first when we join ranks with social and political movements that belittle and physically or emotionally abuse others to carry out their agenda. Except we're not supposed to have an agenda. Citizens of a kingdom don't promote someone else's agenda. They advance and promote the king's agenda.

We must remember as Christians we're citizens of God's kingdom. If I recall, He invites everyone into His kingdom. It's our job to go to the "highways and byways"⁶ to proclaim the good news and make disciples. If we're alienating those we should be reaching out to because our social movement demands it, then are we conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of being a citizen in God's kingdom? Not likely. We are, instead, conducting ourselves worthy of being part of the income equality movement, the Democratic Party, or the Republican Party.

The reality is that there is no greater cause than to live your life as a citizen of God's kingdom. In fact, it's the only cause on this planet that is eternal. The argument could be made, then, it's the only cause that truly matters. To devote oneself completely to anything else is tantamount to renouncing your citizenship. You are no longer advancing God's kingdom; you are advancing a temporary, flawed agenda advocated by an inferior social movement or political ideology.

Perhaps no better example exists of someone advancing another ideology over God's kingdom than Judas Iscariot. We vilify Judas, don't we? He's a scoundrel. He's

evil. He's the guy who betrayed Jesus for a lousy thirty pieces of silver. Yet Judas resonates with people more than they'd like to think. He was likely a zealot, passionate about restoring Israel to its former glory as an independent kingdom. If Judas were alive today, he'd likely be someone you would call a true patriot or nationalist. Why Jesus chose him to be a disciple is a theological debate for another day, but the selection wasn't by accident. Jesus intentionally chose Judas, just like He intentionally chose another nationalist named Simon.

Judas and Simon may have shared similar backgrounds, but they took very different paths. If both shared nationalist ideologies, then why didn't Simon betray Jesus? Perhaps Simon truly gave up his freedoms to become a citizen in God's kingdom. Perhaps he removed himself from the nationalistic ideology of the day and considered himself to be a citizen of God's kingdom first, and a Jew second. All the apostles likely did—except Judas. Judas couldn't face this fact. Perhaps his nationalistic fervor in part led to his betrayal of the Son of God. If so, the advancement of the Jewish nation was more important than the advancement of God's kingdom.

Is protesting Target over their bathroom policy more important than advancing God's kingdom? Is advancing the Black Lives Matter movement more important than advancing God's kingdom? Is subscribing to nationalistic passions more important than advancing God's kingdom? Is advancing the Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump political platforms more important than advancing God's kingdom?

These movements and ideologies are temporary. When you stand before God, He will not ask you if you were part of any ideology or social movement. How sad it would be to learn we wasted our time on Earth advocating and advancing every kind of agenda and social movement except that of God's kingdom.

None of this is to say it is inherently wrong to advocate for a social movement or political ideology. However, we must keep eternity and the Kingdom of God in mind when choosing which social movements and ideologies to align ourselves with and how devoted to them we become. It is possible to advance God's kingdom and support a social movement or be active in a political campaign. Yet, we must be wary our devotion to movements and candidates does not replace our mission—advancing the Kingdom of God. —*Andrew Bullard*

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NOTES

- 1 Matt. 7:12.
- 2 Matt. 5:43–44.
- 3 Matt. 6:19–20.
- 4 Matt. 6:24 KJV.
- 5 John 10:10 NLT.
- 6 Cf. Luke 14:23.