

Matthew 22:35-40

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Love God & Neighbor

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / October 17th, 2021

Tom is leaning into his computer screen as his fingers slam down on his keyboard. His brow is furrowed, and he can feel his blood pressure rising. “I can’t believe Sam believes this junk,” he mutters as he forcefully types his response to Sam’s most recent Facebook post. Sam had posted another biased, misinformed poorly-written article, and he is about to unequivocally show him the error of his ways.

Tom has been watching Sam for months now post article after article on Facebook that is completely opposite of what Tom believes to be true. At first, Tom tried to respond gently. He took his time and wrote out well-reasoned logical arguments and linked to good articles, but to no avail. Sam keeps posting, keeps arguing with him, keeps frustrating him to no end. Sam is Tom’s “political nemesis.”

Tom finishes writing his response and uses ALL CAPS in the important parts to make sure Sam gets it. As his finger is about to click the send button, he feels a tug on his heart. Is this how we’re supposed to engage? Should I be this angry? What does God want? But Tom ignores all that and clicks send.

Can any of us relate? Politics make us upset, sometimes even angry, especially when people we know do things we think are wrong? How’d we get here? Is it their fault? Or is something going on inside of us? The book of Proverbs tells us that what we put into our hearts affects what comes out.

Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.

Our heart is the core of who we are. Some even call it our “control center.”¹ And what we put into our core impacts the kind of fruit we bear. Politics, especially partisanship (picking a side and fighting for it), have a way of weaseling into our hearts. So while Tom might be right about some of the things that Sam believes, the anger he’s expressing actually flows from inside as a result of what he has put into his heart. The kind of media, news, radio, websites, and opinions we listen to shape what comes out.

Politics affect our hearts.

We saw last week in our first sermon *Faith, Not Fear*, didn’t we? Fear shapes how we engage in the world. Fear begets fear. Fear can’t produce love, but faith can. We express our faith through faithful presence—trusting Jesus and being present where he has us. The only way we can be “faithful and present” is if God has gotten ahold of our hearts.

A lawyer once asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, which is another way of asking the best way to follow God. Jesus didn’t say it’s defeating the opposing political party or making culture more acceptable to him, but loving God with everything we got.

Matthew 22:35-40 (ESV)

35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Here Jesus is quoting two Old Testament passages about loving God and others. The lawyer would have known that Jesus was first talking about the *Shema*. The *Shema* was this prayer God taught the Israelites when he brought them out of spiritual, religious, and political captivity in Egypt. Here's how it starts:

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 (ESV)

4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

Many Israelites said this prayer twice a day, once in the morning and the evening. Tim Mackie calls the *Shema* a "Jewish pledge of allegiance and a hymn of praise."² It was both a worship song and a pledge of allegiance. The *Shema* continually reminded Israel that God defined them as a people and came first. As we think about the Greatest Commandment, loving God, and its roots in the *Shema*, let's remember how God defines us, his people, the church and calls us to love him first above all else.

Love God before politics.

The *Shema* was a continual reminder that the greatest thing God wants from his people is our complete and total love. That means God wants our love for him to form and shape and control our hearts, not a political party, not a news station, but his Spirit, Scripture, and church. We foster the love of God in our hearts so that love for God will come first before our politics and will shape the way we engage in the world. Then we'll enter the public square with the goal not of winning but of loving God and bringing him glory. That's a one-degree shift that could lead us as Christians into an entirely different way of engaging in politics.

If you're feeling frustrated with the politics around you, stop and spend time with God. Commune with the Father through prayer and solitude. Seek to know Christ and be known by Christ so that Christ will protect your heart. Ask Jesus to come and change your perceptions and give you greater wisdom as you search his word and talk with your church family about difficult issues like these. Love for God is our foundation.

As part of my Doctor of Ministry studies, I read an author who showed that at certain times in people's lives, their politics shape their faith and what they believe about God. Typically, we think our faith in God shapes our politics; but political convictions often shape our faith in God. People often form political opinions (and take sides) earlier in life than their religious convictions. In the church, this can result in "political echo chambers" as like-minded people gather together and reinforce each other and actually create a hostile environment for those with different political beliefs.³

I don't want politics to form the church. I don't want my politics to determine how I love God and neighbor, but politics has a way of shaping God into our own image. God is on our side and votes the way we vote. Politics has a way of influencing who we're even willing to call our neighbor. This is why being a part of a church family that doesn't all hold the same opinions is so important. It helps us see our blind spots and apply God's word to every aspect of life. *Politics affect our hearts, so we seek to love God before politics.*

But how can we know if we love God first? One of the ways is to look at the second commandment. Because genuinely loving God first will lead to loving our neighbors before ourselves.

Love our neighbor before ourselves.

When the lawyer asked him which commandment was greatest, Jesus first answered with the *Shema*, love God completely, and second added "love your neighbor" from the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus 19:18 (ESV)

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

This law came right at the end of a series of commandments about how to live in community. Together they could all be summed up as “love your neighbor.” But really, who is my neighbor? Do we really have to love those we disagree with politically? And what does loving them mean?

Tom wishes he didn't click the “send” button when he replied to Sam's most recent post on Facebook. Some of Sam's Facebook friends, people Tom doesn't know, immediately jump on his case. They reply just as harshly as Tom posted and begin to attack Tom personally. It's made him feel terrible. And to top it all off, no one has spoken up for Tom, not anyone from his church, not even his pastor, who is often very active on Facebook. It quickly grows to such a point that Tom is thinking of deactivating his account for good.

Then something unexpected happens; Sam finally replies to Tom's comment. He takes a much different tone than everyone else. He tells the others to stop attacking Tom, and while they have some genuine ideological disagreements, he doesn't want anyone criticizing Tom personally. This is the last thing Tom expected. To Tom's complete surprise, Sam messages him and invites him out to coffee. Tom accepts and is surprised again when the first thing Sam does is apologize for his Facebook friends and ask Tom how he's doing.

Together Sam and Tom begin to talk. And something about looking his “political nemesis” in the face begins to soften Tom's heart. He apologizes for his ALL CAPS post, and they have a deep and meaningful conversation. While Tom doesn't agree with everything Sam says, he feels he understands him a little better. Sam even pays for Tom's coffee. Together, they leave not as enemies but as “frenemies,” okay, friends.

In Luke 10, a lawyer asks Jesus the same question, trying to validate and justify himself. “Who is my neighbor?” he asks Jesus, not because he wants to love those different from him, but because he wants to narrow the scope of those he has to love. In response, Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10:30-37 (ESV)

30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

The lawyer tries to justify his love of God and neighbor, but Jesus shows the lawyer doesn't love either as he should. The lawyer would have no problem loving the priest, the Levite, or being friends with the Jew who got robbed, but he would have hated the Samaritan. Samaritans were outcasts. They weren't considered Jewish because they'd intermarried with other nations. They built their own temple, which the Jews destroyed.⁴ Jesus' disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). The lawyer so dislikes Samaritans he won't even call him by that name; “The one who showed him mercy.”

And yet, the Samaritan is an example for us of how we're supposed to love our neighbor. When others are attacked, we defend with grace and mercy. Where others are wounded, we bring healing and compassion. Where others rob and take, we give and demonstrate unrepayable generosity. This is the politic of Jesus.

Where Satan accuses, Jesus defends with his blood, body, and perfect life. Where the world is wounded with sin and brokenness, Jesus binds and heals. Where the robber steals and takes, Jesus gives everything he has, including his own life. When Jesus died on the cross to pay our debts, he was just like the Samaritan who put his own life at risk and paid the debt of a man lying near-death in the rode.

Do you want to be a part of the way of Jesus? We're most like the priest, the Levite, and even the robbers in the story. We're sinful and broken. But we can invite Jesus to come and heal us and make us new. Only through him working in us can we ever truly love God and love our neighbors. We love Jesus and our neighbors because he first loved us (see 1 John 4:19).

Who's your "political nemesis?" Whose your Sam or Tom? Who does Jesus want you to love at a cost to yourself? Politics shape how we love our neighbor or who we are even willing to call our neighbor. Jesus takes our definition of neighbor and expands it way past our comfort zone.

Voting is one way to love our neighbors. So often, I think we use voting and legislation as a way to defeat our neighbors or protect ourselves from them.⁵ But if we're so satisfied with our love for God, what do we have to fear from our neighbor? Nothing, which then frees us to pray for them, to show kindness to them, and maybe even to vote for things that disadvantage us but benefits them.

We can also love our neighbor when election season is far away.⁶ How are we loving our neighbors then, especially in our towns and churches? How are we living the politic of Jesus every day? The Samaritan got close to his enemy; he got "proximate."⁷ We have to get close to those different than us if we're ever going to love them. *Politics affect our hearts, so we love and neighbors before ourselves.* Ultimately, we...

Love our enemies like Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, Jesus' political manifesto, he says this:

Matthew 5:43-44 (ESV)

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Did you know this verse was like "the John 3:16 of the [early church]"?⁸ The church fathers quoted it all the time as they experienced real suffering and persecution, even death.⁹ We're not being burned at the stake or thrown to the lions, so I don't know what excuse we have not to love our enemies. One author writes:

Our ideological opponents are not enemies to be destroyed. They are peers to be persuaded. It reminds me of Abraham Lincoln's retort to an older woman who was criticizing him for being too soft. She felt that Lincoln wasn't using strong enough rhetoric about the Confederate Southerners, whom she considered irreconcilable enemies who must be destroyed. Lincoln calmly replied, "Why madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"¹⁰

How many of us have thought of our ideological opponents as our "enemies" at some point? When we're tempted to believe our political opposites are our enemies, let's remember:

Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and Socialists are not our enemies. They are people made in the image of God worthy of dignity and honor. They need rescue from our real enemy, Satan, sin, and death. Jesus

came to rescue them and to rescue you. Sometimes we forget that before Jesus saved us, we were God's enemies (Ephesians 2:1-10). But God, at cost to himself, sent his Son to rescue us. Jesus showed us mercy.

We love God and neighbor, even enemies, because Jesus first loved us.

In our power, we can't do this. But if we are communing with Christ and loving God, it's possible for him to love our political enemies through us. In Christ, we can love our neighbors before ourselves, even at cost to ourselves. In Christ, we can even love our enemies, our political nemesis on Facebook or across the picket line, or at church. *We love God and neighbor, even enemies, because Jesus first loved us.*

I want to close by reading you a closing story from *Jesus Untangled* by Keith Giles. It's "the story of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution" and illustrates loving God, neighbor, and enemy.¹¹

In the book, *The Grace of Giving*, author Stephen Olford tells the story of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution. The pastor, Peter Miller, lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and one of his dearest friends was General George Washington. (Maybe you've heard of him?)

In the town of Ephrata there also lived a spiteful troublemaker named Michael Wittman who did all he could to oppose and humiliate Mr. Miller.

One day, Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to death. When he heard the news, Peter Miller set out to Philadelphia to plead for the life of his enemy.

After walking seventy miles—on foot—Miller petitioned his friend, General Washington, to spare Wittman's life.

"No, Peter," General Washington said. "I cannot grant you the life of your friend."

"My friend?" exclaimed the old preacher. "He's not my friend. In fact, he is the bitterest enemy I have."

"What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon."

And he did.

That day, Peter Miller and Michael Wittman walked back home to Ephrata together. When they arrived home, they were no longer enemies. They were friends.¹²

We love God and neighbor, even (political) enemies, because Jesus first loved us. Let's pray.

Benediction - Matthew 5:43-44 (ESV)

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my third sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *Love God & Neighbor*. Here are several follow-up spiritual exercises for continuing to learn and grow this week:

Pray: Ask the Lord to help you identify those places in your politics that are shaping your understanding of God. Follow-up by asking God to help you love him first and foremost and that he would shape the way you engage with the world. Next, ask God to help you better love your neighbor and your “political nemesis.” Identify any the Holy Spirit brings to mind and take time to pray for their faith and wisdom.

Listen (sermon): Listen to “[Tim Keller | What a Minor Prophet Teaches Us About Nationalism and Race, Grace, and Mission](https://youtu.be/Uj8j03TadOg)” (April 3, 2019; 62 minutes). YouTube: <https://youtu.be/Uj8j03TadOg>. Pastor Timothy Keller preaches the book of Jonah and helps us see how Christians and the church should prioritize preaching the gospel but also care about our world’s needs.

Read (article): Read the four-page article: “[Why We Need the Church to Disciple Our Politics](#)” by Matthew Hawkins (March 23, 2021 – *The Gospel Coalition*). Hawkins explains why it’s good for churches to address politics and how best to do so. This article helps frame why we as a church are doing discussing politics.

Read (article): Read the four-page article: “[When Politicians Determine Your Religious Beliefs](#)” by Michele Margolis (July 11, 2018; *The New York Times*). I mentioned how partisan politics sometimes shape what we believe about God. Margolis studied whether this is true or not from a researcher’s perspective. Here she summarizes her book and some main highlights of her findings.

Thank you, and may you love Christ and love your neighbor this week.

In Christ,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

P.S. In case you missed it, here’s a link to last week’s extra sermon on [The Politics of Fear](#).

Sermon Slides

See this week’s [sermon on our website](#).

Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small groups are coming soon.

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Endnotes

1. Tedd Tripp’s *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* inspired some of my thoughts in this section. Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), chap. 1, Kindle.
2. Tim Mackie, “What is the Shema?” BibleProject, 2018, accessed January 18, 2021, <https://bibleproject.com/blog/what-is-the-shema/>.
3. Michele Margolis, “When Politicians Determine Your Religious Beliefs,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/opinion/religion-republican-democrat.html>.
4. “Don Carson | The Parable of the Good Samaritan,” The Gospel Coalition, YouTube, posted December 1, 2019, accessed October 5, 2021.
5. For example, listen to *Holy Post* podcast “Episode 473: Did Texas End Abortion? & Drug War Casualties with Christina Dent,” publshd September 8, 2021, accessed October 12, 2021 https://youtu.be/INS_9VtoEyM?t=1192. Start at 19:52.
6. Skye Jethani, *The Voting Booth: A new vision for Christian engagement in a post-Christian culture* (self-published) chap. “Act 3,” Kindle.
7. “Grace, Justice & Mercy: An evening with Bryan Stevenson & Tim Keller,” Center for Faith & Work, May 21, 2016, accessed January 18, 2021, https://www.redeemer.com/r/grace_and_race.
8. Preston Sprinkle, “Nonviolence: The Rhythm of Christianity,” YouTube, published January 24, 2017, accessed October 16, 2021 <https://youtu.be/sITAH1d1Yk0>. Sprinkle originally said “the John 3:16 of pre-Constantine Christianity.”
9. Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013) 162, Kindle.
10. Bruce Riley Ashford, *Letters to An American Christian* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2018) chap. 25, Kindle.
11. Keith Giles, *Jesus Untangled: Crucifying Our Politics to Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb* (Orange, CA: Quoir, 2017) 85, Kindle. Story taken from Stephen Olford, *The Grace of Giving: A Biblical Study of Christian Stewardship, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000).
12. Giles, *Jesus Untangled*, 85, Kindle. See previous endnote.