

# Mark 12:13-17

## Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Image of God

*Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / November 14th, 2021*

I want to start today's sermon with a quiz. By a show of hands, I want you to guess whether the following portion of tweets are about a sports team or politics. These are actual selections from tweets:

His biggest win yet.  
Let's hear it for your [blank] champion<sup>1</sup>

Sports or politics? "Let's hear it for your 2021 #NASCAR Cup Series champion. . ." Sports!

Heads, we win.  
Tails, you cheated.  
Give me a break man.<sup>2</sup>

Sports or politics? Politics! How about this one?

[Blank] is a rough old sport, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.  
But you pick yourself up and get back out there as hard as it is.  
Don't give up and don't lose faith.<sup>3</sup>

What do you think? Sports or politics? "Politics is a rough old sport..." Politics!

**PATRIOTS WIN!!! DOMINATION!!!<sup>4</sup>**

This one is kind of obvious, but you can hear it, "Democrats win! Republicans win! Domination!!!" I found these Twitter posts searching for words like win, lose, team, patriot, and victory. Politics and sports aren't so different. Imagine you're in a stadium, holding up a poster, the crowd is cheering and chanting, everyone is wearing their team's colors, red or blue. You could be at a football game or a political rally.<sup>5</sup> Are you "red team" or "blue team"?<sup>6</sup> Or maybe team purple?

At the end of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, God led the Israelites across the Jordan and into the land of Canaan, the promised land. As the twelve tribes approached the very first city, Jericho, their leader Joshua encountered a supernatural messenger, maybe an angel, perhaps God himself.

### **Joshua 5:13-14 (ESV)**

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" 14 And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?"

God called Israel to invade Canaan. So, you would think this supernatural messenger would have said, "I'm on your side, Joshua! I'm on your team, Israel." But he doesn't. This messenger says that he leads God's armies, and he has come. And the only proper response is to fall on your face and worship, to leave your side, your team, and join God's. Instead of identifying as red or blue, or like a sports team, God calls us to follow Jesus, to get on his team.

## **Jesus' opponents try to force him to pick a side.**

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, God's promised king, when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.<sup>7</sup> That's a bold political statement. But instead of driving out the Romans, instead of using his supernatural powers to free his countrymen, Jesus drives out the money changers from the temple grounds and tells parables criticizing Jerusalem's religious leaders (Mark 12:1-12). This upsets the powers that be, uniting the Pharisees and the Herodians to get rid of Jesus.

It's kind of like college football. I got my undergrad from Colorado State University, CSU. CSU is in a big rivalry with CU Boulder. Uck! Can't stand them. But here's something that both CSU and CU agree on. The Nebraska Cornhuskers are the worst. Nobody likes them. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. That's what happens to Jesus. The Herodians and Pharisees, two enemies, unite to take out Jesus:

**Mark 12:13-14 (ESV)**

And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.

14 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"

The **Herodians** supported Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. They approved of his big government over Israel, Judea, and Jerusalem. They would have reported to Herod if Jesus was anti-taxation because that would mean he was anti-Herod.<sup>8</sup> They probably admired all the good Rome did, like building over 250,000 miles of roads, increasing trade, providing security, and creating the "Pax Romana," Roman peace.

But the **Pharisees** were a much more traditional religious audience who wanted everyone to follow the Old Testament holiness laws. They wanted Israel to be free from Rome's oppressive rule. They were nationalistic. They were not Herodians. Which side are you going to take, Jesus? Which partisan identity are you going to adopt? Big government Herodians or liberty-loving Pharisees?

But just like at Thanksgiving, it's hard to be a Republican if your family is Democrats, or vice-versa; Jesus might have felt personally pressured. One of Jesus' disciples was a tax collector, **Matthew** (also called Levi).<sup>9</sup> He might have been more on the side of the Herodians. Maybe he was whispering in one of Jesus' ears, "Say pay taxes to Caesar." But on the other side **Simon the Zealot** might have been shouting, "Heck no! Live free or die!"<sup>10</sup> Being called a Zealot meant you were passionate about holiness laws, like the Pharisees, but it could have also meant he was part of a band of anti-Roman rebels called Zealots.

Which side are you going to take, Jesus? Will you identify as a pro-taxes Herodian and lose your Jewish followers? Or will you identify as an anti-taxes Pharisee and get thrown in prison? It was the perfect trap. Do you ever feel pressured to pick a side? To be a Christian is to be a family-loving, freedom-loving, God-loving Republican? Or to be a Christian is to be a justice-loving, women-loving, poor-people-loving Democrat? What if Jesus doesn't fit into either of those parties?

When we as Christians pick a side or fall prey to identity politics, where we prioritize our group, our team against theirs, we all lose. We get further away from building bridges and cultivating shalom. In my deep dive into the Twitter-verse, I ran across this insightful tweet:

Viewing politics as sport means one "team" wins and one "team" loses. But the R/D political divide misses the fact that we are all actually on the same team. When our representatives vote as a way to punish or simply "deny a win" for the other side we all lose.<sup>11</sup>

*Jesus' opponents try to force him to pick a political side. So how does Jesus respond? What does Jesus do? This brings us to "I" in "F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H."* Jesus goes to the doctrine of the image of God, the "Imago Dei."

## **Jesus shows a different way with the image of God.**

Jesus knows the Pharisees and Herodians are trying to entrap him. “It’s a trap!” But Jesus won’t fall for it.

### **Mark 12:15-17 (ESV)**

But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” 17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at him.

The Herodians and Pharisees try to box Jesus into an either/or option, but Jesus answers “yes, and ...”<sup>12</sup> “Yes, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.” Jesus goes to the image of God to find a better way. As we look at what Jesus says about the image of God, we find **four truths**:

## **1) Jesus challenges what we value and exposes our idolatry.**

When they ask Jesus if they should pay taxes, Jesus has to ask to borrow a denarius, one day’s wages. Jesus doesn’t even carry money. He lets Judas do that (John 12:4-6), which says something, doesn’t it? Money just isn’t that important to Jesus. Politics matter because people matter to God, but our positions might not be as important as we think.<sup>13</sup>

In 1896 the Presidential candidate for the Democratic party was a 36-year-old man named William Jennings Bryan. He ran against the “gold standard” because it hurt low-income workers. At the convention, he gave one of the most famous political speeches of all time, comparing the gold-standard to the cross.

If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we will fight them to the uttermost. Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.<sup>14</sup>

Bryan felt so strongly about the gold standard he compared it to “a cross of gold.” Doesn’t that seem a bit too strong? Caring is not wrong. Elevating to ultimate is idolatry. What do we value that Jesus might want to challenge and expose our idols? I stumbled into a social-media political showdown recently. My gut instinct was to unfriend the person with whom I disagreed. But when I asked why I wanted to do that, I found some self-righteous anger in my heart. I wanted to be right. I wanted to win.<sup>15</sup> What’s he revealing in your heart?

Jesus subtly exposes the Herodians and Pharisees’ hypocrisy with the denarius. To carve an image into a coin was to make an idol. So, for them to carry a denarius was a little idolatrous. Where do we carry idols, and we don’t even know it? I ran across a post on Twitter that declared “God wins!” because of a political victory. Really? God wins?! How do you know that?!

Sometimes I get **Christian voter guides** in the mail. They bother me. I believe it’s good to be engaged and informed, to love God and others in the public square. That’s what we’re trying to do in this sermon series. But when someone is bold enough to say, “This is how Christians should vote,” that makes me nervous. If you look a little closer, those guides are often one-sided. Are you for the right or the left, Jesus? Neither. Bow down and worship Jesus, not our political idols. *Jesus shows a different way with the image of God. 1) Jesus challenges what we value and exposes our idolatry.*

## **2) Jesus affirms yet right-sizes human authority.**

A denarius had a carving of Tiberius Caesar on it with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the divine Augustus.”<sup>16</sup> Tiberius was the son of Octavian, who defeated Brutus after Caesar’s assassination. And “On the opposite side was a picture of the Roman goddess of peace, Pax, with the Latin inscription ‘High

Priest.”<sup>17</sup> Here, a coin claiming Tiberius Caesar was the son of god and could establish peace encounters the true Son of God who can establish peace on earth. There’s so much irony!

Then Jesus asks, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” The Greek word for likeness is “eikon,” and in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), eikon means image, idol, or likeness.<sup>18</sup> So it’s like Jesus says, “Whose idol is on this coin? Whose image? Whose likeness?” The answer is Caesar’s, the emperor’s.

But when Jesus says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,” he both affirms humankind’s Genesis-one mandate to rule and steward the earth and yet also right-sizes Caesar’s authority. Jesus recognizes Caesar’s right to tax (see [Reign of Christ sermon](#)). And by using the word for “image,” Jesus reminds his Jewish audience of the Genesis one image of God.

### **Genesis 1:27 (ESV)**

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

Jesus is saying humankind and Caesar’s authority matters, but God’s authority is ultimate. Caesar is made in God’s image, and so Caesar belongs to God. You’re also made in God’s image, so you belong to God too, all of you. Your money, your home, your heart, your past, present, and future, everything. Wanting to give God your vote is a good thing. But God will take all of you, your whole life, every moment of every day. Pay taxes to Caesar, to Trump, or Biden. Pay yourself to God.

*Jesus shows a different way with the image of God; 1) Jesus challenges what we value and exposes our idolatry; 2) Jesus affirms yet right-sizes human authority.*

### **3) Jesus affirms human dignity and worth.**

Even though Jesus challenges Caesar, he also shows respect to Caesar by going to the doctrine of the image of God. He establishes that Caesar, and all human beings, should be treated with dignity, respect, and civility. Jesus treated the Herodians and Pharisees like they were made in the image of God, even though they were trying to get him. What would politics look like today if all the Christians changed from identity politics to image-of-God politics?

**Partisanship** – I listened to [an interview with Bill Haslam this week](#), who served as two-term Governor of Tennessee for eight years (2011-2019). He tried to practice “[faithful presence](#)” while in office, and one of the ways he did that was by constantly reminding himself of the image of God in people. In his book, he tells the story of a woman approaching him to say how upset she was that he had recently gotten rid of learning cursive in public schools so that school children couldn’t read the constitution anymore. But he hadn’t done that. Yet, no matter how much he tried to explain, she wouldn’t believe him. Haslam appreciates C.S. Lewis’s quote on the image of God, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . .”<sup>19</sup> Whether it’s Nancy Pelosi or Mitch McConnell, AOC or Benjamin Shapiro, Biden or Trump, they are all made in the image of God, and we need to treat them with dignity and respect even as we disagree.

**Immigration** - What would politics look like if when we encountered refugees at the border, the first thing we did was remember they are made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect? While we would still have a border, would we put them in cages? Would we divide up families? If this is a sliver of the divine, a mirror of God himself, in all his glory, how should that change how we run our border?

**Abortion** – What would politics look like if, when we addressed mothers and their unwanted pregnancies, we remembered the mom is made in the image of God, and this tiny preborn baby is being knit together into

the image of God? Wouldn't that make us want to provide protection and care for both the mother and the preborn baby, even at deep cost to ourselves? I can adopt a child made in God's image? Amazing!

How would politics look different if we didn't start with Republican or Democrat, but with the image of God? Jesus went to the image of God, and so can we. *Jesus shows a different way with the image of God. 1) Jesus challenges what we value and exposes our idolatry. 2) Jesus affirms and right-sizes human authority. 3) Jesus affirms human dignity and worth. And finally...*

#### **4) Jesus unites us in the perfect image of God.**

Satan loves to drive wedges and divide, to make people pick a side. That's his strategy, but Jesus does something entirely different. He unites believers as one:

##### **Galatians 3:28 (ESV)**

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, [there is neither Republican nor Democrat,] for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Where Satan and the world want to divide Jesus' followers up into partisan groups, Jesus unites us in himself in a brand-new humanity not marked by division but unity. As believers, we're made in God's image, and we're united as children of God, which is a far stronger bond than anything the world offers. Our unity in Christ doesn't mean we'll be uniform in our beliefs. But as Christ-followers, we strive to not find our identities in the team-sport that politics has become, but in Christ Jesus, who is the perfect image.

The Jews living in Jerusalem owed Tiberius Caesar a denarius. But as people made in God's image, we owe God everything. But who can pay that tax? It's far too steep. There's a story in Matthew where Jesus doesn't have enough money to pay a local tax, so he asks Peter to catch a fish, and inside its mouth, Peter finds the coin to pay the tax.<sup>21</sup> That's what God does for us. We owe God everything, but God provides the payment for us. Jesus is our coin. He is our treasure. "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature . . ." (**Hebrews 1:3a**) *Jesus unites us in the perfect image of God.*

God accepts Christ's life as a substitute for our own. He trades a perfect image for a dirty, broken one. To become a Christian is to believe, "I'm not enough. I fall short. I need Jesus. He is enough." So when you and I get all upset and start arguing about policies, politics, money, immigration, and abortion, remember our treasure is above. And as we worship our king, the true image bearer, we find our unity in him.

*Jesus' opponents try to force him to pick a political side, but he shows a different way with the image of God. 1) Jesus challenges what we value and exposes our idolatry. 2) Jesus affirms and right-sizes human authority. 3) Jesus affirms human dignity and worth. 4) Jesus unites us in the perfect image of God.*

##### **Benediction - Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)**

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

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

## Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my seventh sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, the *Image of God*. The image of God (Imago Dei) is foundational to how we engage in politics. It not only gives us the right to rule and reign over our world for its good but gives us all, no matter our nationality or political party, immense value and worth. Here are a few ways to continue reflecting:

**Journal:** What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Take time to journal about what this means and how your perspective is changing on this doctrine. Think about your politics. How might the image of God change your political interactions and positions? Where do you think you do a good job of recognizing the image of God in others, and where could you recognize it a bit more?

**Listen (sermon):** Listen to Pastor Timothy Keller preach on Mark 12:13-17 in “Arguing About Politics.” Let’s be honest. His sermon is way better than mine! It adds perspective and depth to how to think about the image of God in politics. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/U79Eef6U9nw> (August 10, 2015; 46 minutes).

**Listen (interview):** Listen to Collin Hansen interview Bill Haslam about faithful presence and what it means for believers to bring the doctrine of the image of God into their political engagement. As a retired governor of Tennessee, he can speak to this in a really insightful way: “Faithful Presence in the Tennessee Capitol” by Collin Hansen and Bill Haslam (*TGC*, September 21, 2021). Posting: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/gospelbound/faithful-presence-tennessee-capitol/>

**Article:** How can we know if we’ve made an idol out of politics? That’s something writer Joe Carter tries to answer in *The Gospel Coalition* (*TGC*) article: “How to Know if You’ve Made an Idol of Politics” (February 13, 2020). He’s come up with a list of 21 questions meant to help us each reflect on our political engagement and discern if our politics have become idolatrous.

**Worship:** Listen and enjoy the song “We Are Messengers – Image of God (Official Lyric Video).” Take a moment to thank God for being made in his image, and ask him to help you treat others with the dignity and respect they deserve by being made in God’s image too. Think of someone you disagree with politically. Take a moment and praise God for them having so much value and worth as images of God.

With love,  
Pastor Jonathan Romig

## Sermon Slides

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

## Discussion Questions.

Discussion questions for Sunday school or small group coming soon.

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## Endnotes

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1. Hendrick Motorsports (@TeamHendrick), Twitter, published November 7, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://twitter.com/TeamHendrick/status/1457495074686873613>.
  2. PoliticsGirl (@IAmPoliticsGirl), Twitter, published November 5, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://twitter.com/IAmPoliticsGirl/status/1456769111350910981>.
  3. SamShirazi (@samshirazim), Twitter, published November 2, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://twitter.com/samshirazim/status/1455698258936963078>.
  4. Boston Diehards (@Boston\_Diehards), Twitter, published November 7, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 [https://twitter.com/Boston\\_Diehards/status/1457452279762755593](https://twitter.com/Boston_Diehards/status/1457452279762755593).
  5. Dr. Mike Brooks, “How Politics Is Like Rooting for Our Favorite Sports Team,” *Psychology Today*, September 24, 2020, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/tech-happy-life/202009/how-politics-is-rooting-our-favorite-sports-team>.
  6. Michael Devlin and Natalie B. Devlin, “Voters are starting to act like hard-core sports fans – with dangerous repercussions for democracy,” *The Conversation*, published January 21, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://theconversation.com/voters-are-starting-to-act-like-hard-core-sports-fans-with-dangerous-repercussions-for-democracy-153175>.
  7. 1 Kings 1:38-39; Zechariah 9:9; Mark 11:1-11.
  8. Originally published in “The Certain Gospel: Where Jesus Stands Politically | Luke 20:20-26,” self-published August 25, 2018 <https://cornerstonewestford.com/sermons/the-certain-gospel-where-jesus-stands-politically-luke-2020-26/>.
  9. Mark 2:13-14.
  10. Luke 6:15.
  11. Chris Strobel (@chrisatnku), Twitter, published November 7, 2021, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://twitter.com/chrisatnku/status/1457360591572570115>.
  12. David Krahlung, “Averting A Sucker’s Choice: Choosing “And” Instead of “Or,” *Interstates*, published November 7, 2017, accessed November 8, 2021 <https://www.interstates.com/suckers-choice/>.
  13. Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of our Neighbor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020) 2, Kindle.
  14. Paolo E. Colletta, William Jennings Bryan, vol. 1: Political Evangelist, 1860-1908 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) quoted in Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester, England: Eerdmans, 1994) 151, Kindle.

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15. Jesus is the embodied word of God. He is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

16. Crossway Bibles, *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2007) 1869. See Matthew 22:19 footnote.

17. Crossway Bibles, *ESV*, 1869.

18. LXX “idol” - 2 Chronicles 33:7; Hosea 13:2; Isaiah 40:19. Image/likeness: Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, 3, 9:6.

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 45–46, quoted in Bill Haslam, *Faithful Presence: The Promise and the Peril of Faith in the Public Square* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2021) 105, Kindle.

20. See Eugene Cho, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: A Christian's Guide to Engaging Politics* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2020), 74, Kindle.

21. Matthew 17:24-27.