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God and Government

Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, God's kingdom of grace in which God calls sinners to faith through the gospel and God's kingdom of power in which he uses laws established by governments to control human society. We recognize God's hand at work not only in the church but also in the governments he establishes. In these days of political turmoil in our nation and the world, we are wise to review what the Scriptures say about what we owe government and what we owe God.

Sermon

Daniel 1:3-21

(The Bible verses are embedded in the sermon)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and (from) the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the 2022 winter Olympics in Beijing, a young skier by the name of Eileen Gu – who was born and raised in San Francisco – competed for China and won the gold medal in big air skiing. How does that work? It's a complicated situation, but in the Olympics, you can compete for countries that your parents or even grandparents emigrated from. Athletes can choose, to a certain degree, who they want to represent. In our Old Testament reading from the Book of Daniel, we find a complicated citizenship situation. Daniel and tens of thousands of other Israelites were taken captive by the Babylonians and transported away from the promised land and west to Babylon, and now they must choose where their loyalty lies – with their new Babylonian King and the governmental positions they've been given? Or with The Eternal King and the heavenly inheritance they have through Him? In our sermon today and through Daniel's example we will see that

Christians Live as Faithful Citizens

In God's eternal kingdom
and in the kingdom of this world.

The Babylonian Empire was the strongest Empire of that time and as it expanded and took over smaller nations it had a policy of deporting the children of the elites of those nations and taking them back to Babylon to be reeducated and put to work in the government and other roles. The poorest of the land were left to live in the ruins of their former country. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were just those types of people –

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. ⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

From the ashes of their now destroyed country, Daniel and his friends were given the opportunity to be a part of the ruling society. What would they do? Who would they serve? Daniel makes it clear who he serves, but he does it in an interesting way.

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.

¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

Daniel decided that he and his Israelite companions would not eat the rich food that they were provided by the King's palace. It was not Kosher – it did not follow the dietary laws that God had given the Israelites as a part of their covenant with Him. It may have even been sacrificed to a Babylonian idol. Daniel, young man that he was, decided that he would rather have vegetables and water than the feast prepared for them. I think we all can imagine ourselves in that situation... a mouthwatering feast laid out before us. Place yourself in Daniel's shoes for a moment... Can you imagine turning that delicious dinner down in favor of vegetables and water? Daniel made this decision with no reassurance that his Babylonian captors would take kindly to his suggestions. They could have had him thrown out of the palace or worse, simply for this act of rebellion. Daniel simply did it out of trust and a love for God and His commands. He trusted that God's ways were higher and better, and that God was ruling over all things – even in this new land of Babylon. He gave to God what was God's even when it seemed illogical or inconvenient to do so. He recognized that he was a citizen of God's eternal all powerful kingdom and that God's commands trumps all others.

Do you feel that tension, fellow citizen of God's Kingdom? Do you feel pulled between two kingdoms, two worlds? Our allegiance lies with our God, but our allegiance also lies with the government that God has placed us under, doesn't it? Do you feel like Daniel, an exile in a foreign land? Who sits on the throne of your heart, Christian? Is it a certain candidate that you hope wins it all this coming election year? Or is it The King of Kings? Who legislates the policies and laws of your life? A political party? Or Lord of All who has promised to work out all things for your good? When government does not seem to have your interests in mind and world events are full of turmoil do your thoughts turn to worry and fear? Daniel points us back to the truth. Our King, the one ruling over every ruler and authority, is reigning on His throne for eternity. He is in control, and he has promised to care for his children. As citizens of His Kingdom, we have nothing to fear and no confusion over where our allegiance lies. We can simply live our lives of service out of love for our King. We live as faithful citizens in God's eternal kingdom because Heaven is our home.

Let's look back at what happens with Daniel when he chooses God's ways over Man's. *¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. ¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. ¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

Though to Daniel it must have seemed that they were miles away from God and his temple, God shows his control and influence over all the events that take place. From the king's official showing them favor and

honoring their request to only have vegetables and water to the young men's perfect nourishment on that plain food. God further blessed them with knowledge and understanding and even the gift of interpreting dreams and visions! God is in clear control of His Kingdom and is always working all things for the good of His faithful citizens, even when it seems they are prisoners in a foreign land.

Now that we've seen how God rules over all things and We as Christians are faithful citizens of that kingdom, we will see how we should live during our time on earth. The fact remains that we live under governmental authorities. Our epistle reading from Romans laid out clearly that God has established every authority and ruler on earth for his purposes. Let's look to Daniel once again to see how he served under a government that had captured his people and yet was established by God.

You would think that Daniel would rebel or want to have no part in the Babylonian government, yet he serves right where God has placed him. When presented with the rich food that was not kosher, Daniel approached the chief official with respect and asked for permission for a change of diet. When met with a setback, he politely asked their guard to make an exception, "Please test your servants for ten days." Daniel approaches their situation with utmost confidence in God, yet clear respect for the people God had placed over them. He obeyed God yet did so in such a way that he was not disobeying the king's wishes. When we see governments that we do not agree with, what is our reaction? Do we rebel in our own ways? Maybe speaking badly of the authorities or withholding information on our taxes? Are we so loyal to God that we disobey the earthly rulers he has placed over us? Surely not. The Christian recognizes the government as established by God in his good plan.

Daniel's most well-known act of rebellion – His time in the lion's den - came when the king ordered him to do something that was directly against God's law. Daniel, recognizing this, did not obey because he knew his true citizenship was in heaven. In matters where God's Word has clearly spoken, we follow God. However, in matters that are not contrary to God's law, the government deserves our respect and obedience.

Daniel's manner of faithful service is a model for us as well. Not only did he serve in the Babylonian government, but he served well! He served until he was in his 80's and rose through the ranks to become chief advisor to the king! He used the best of his abilities and God-given talents for the good of his government and in doing so served God faithfully. How could he do this? How could he serve the government that had destroyed the nation of God's people and carried them into exile? Daniel knew that God reigns over all things, and that he sets up the earthly rulers on their temporal throne.

Living in these two kingdoms is a constant struggle for us, isn't it? God will should come first in our lives, and yet we find it so easy to make Him an afterthought. The government deserves our respect as well, and yet what comes from our mouths is often anything but that. Daniel isn't our only example of this though, we have someone greater, someone whose perfection covered over our sins of dishonor completely. In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew for this morning, Jesus lives in the two kingdoms perfectly in our place. When the pharisees came to him, wanting to trap and trick him He gave the perfect answer. They asked him, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?

Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

²¹ "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Jesus could not be tricked into dishonoring God or the government – though we may fail at this. He perfectly balanced the two – putting God first and still honoring the authorities that God has established. And because Jesus lived perfectly in our place, our sins here have been washed away. His righteousness has become ours.

Dear Christians, this frees us to live as faithful citizens in two Kingdoms at the same time. First and foremost, we live and serve the King of Kings who has the utmost authority and to whom we owe our salvation by his grace. And yet we also live under and serve the earthly authorities that God has established and has control over. In doing so, we remember the extent of God's promises to us. We have a quiet confidence that no matter what happens, our God rules eternally and will call us to our true homeland when our time of faithful service is done. Amen.

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