

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Life Reimagined: Stewarding God's Truth
12 & 13 November 2022

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Scripture Text: Mark 7: 6-13

Listen up: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTdFEZhjiko>

Sermon Preamble

We continue our journey for a Life Reimagined because we are created for a good, beautiful, and exceedingly abundant life as stewards in God's Kingdom. In this message we are looking at another resource God has entrusted to us: sharing the truth of God's Word. This is a hot topic for today because Christian Nationalism in the United States has been highlighted in media coverage of recent events. The messages of some Christian Nationalists have been prominent in supporting, participating in, or enabling several troubling current events responding to a fear of decline in Protestant power in the government. Examples of such events have included the violent Washington D.C. attack on January 6th, and most recently, the attack on the husband of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. The list goes on. Protestant Nationalism in its connection with such events has not presented the biblical truth from the Words and Life of Jesus Christ. The Nationalism Movement has co-opted Christianity in the service of ethnic-cultural national power. They call themselves Christian, have religious fervor, but erroneously through their traditions distort the truth of God's Word. The remnant people of God, who follow the truth of God's Word, must correct distortions of God's commands, even from those with religious fervor.

Traditions of humans out of their heart far from God are not God's Truth

Jesus dealt with erroneous distortions of the commands of God, from regulations of the Pharisees who had religious fervor, but their regulation originated out of the traditions of men. Like the Nationalists of today, their traditions presented the antithesis of the commands of God.

“And he (Jesus) said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’, and ‘whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ Whatever you would have gained from me is that is given to God- then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father and mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.’” (Mark 7:6-13).

Jesus quoted the regulation from Moses as an example of a command of God that hypocritically, despite outward appearances of religious fervor from their lips, allowed them to behave in complete variance with the will of God to support their parents.

In Jesus's day, there were many things in which the traditions of humans make the word of God void. Isaiah faced it. Jesus faced it. And we face that same problem today. A hypocrite is someone whose worship is merely outward and not from the heart. Nationalists, as hypocrites, exhibit moral evil. Despite the outward appearance of piety, in reality, their hearts and their behaviors are opposite to the Will of God. As an illustration of that same problem today, religious fervor is out of synch with the gospel. Let's review this video of the violent Washington D.C. attack on January 6th:

The Gospel of the life and teachings of Jesus is out of synch with many Protestant Nationalists

The Gospel is not only justification by faith for matters of salvation, but the good news is also the whole life and teachings of Jesus. The Gospel is the opposite of the presentations of many Protestant Nationalists.

For example, let's compare the words and earthy life of Jesus with the latest popular book published in September 2022 by Protestant Nationalists Andrew Torber and Andrew Isker – A Biblical Guide to Taking Dominion & Discipling Nations. This quote is an example for today of who Jesus would call a hypocrite. Despite their outward appearance of piety, due to the state of their heart their statements and behavior are in complete variance with the expressed Word and Life of Jesus.

“We must prepare ourselves for what is coming by exiting their entire system.... We need to build our own political movements. This requires a multigenerational effort. The tolerance of the generations before us has led to the subversive takeover of every facet of society and even our churches by the global elite. That does not mean they cannot be defeated....So if you don't have a sword, then sell your cloak and buy one because we have a lot of work to do.” (Torber and Isker).

The Gospel means caring actions for the poor and various other diverse people

“Exiting their system,” would mean no contacts or actions for the poor, or other different people. Nationalists do not hear the response of Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19). “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?” Then he will answer them, saying, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25: 44-45).

The Church is called to be an advocate for the poor. Advocating for the poor is the hallmark of authentic Christian mission. The Church is called to proclaim the Good News to the poor. This includes respecting them as chosen by God and those with whom Christ identified. We are never to patronize them but deal with them justly and compassionately, confident of their ability to be transformed and to contribute to the Kingdom's advance. We are not merely to meet surface needs but strive to impact structures and relationships that will lead to a more just situation. Living the true “Prosperity Gospel,” is to seek justice and equity on behalf of the most vulnerable among us.

The Gospel responds to the call from Nationalists for violence and to buy a sword: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:8).

Nationalism is very different from Patriotism

How does nationalism, including violence, militarism, and boundaries that exclude groups of people viewed as less, fit with celebrating our history as a nation? Patriotism is love of your country, but patriotism is different from nationalism. Nationalism varies greatly depending on how we define the boundaries of tribal groups. In many instances, nationalists exclude diverse groups of people.

Symbols and holidays celebrate achievements in our nation, including some in war and violence. Some churches have adopted “Celebrate America Services.” In these services of a “civil religion,” it is clear that devotion to country is equal to devotion to God. The services merge the civic celebrations of the nation with the religious service.

The Church, not America, is God's chosen people

Throughout American history, even today, nationalists regard Americans as a chosen nation. Americans regularly viewed themselves as “a New Israel,” God's chosen people. Going back at least to the 18th Century, Americans, including US Presidents, routinely cite 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Psalm 33:12.

“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Psalm 33:12).

Christian nationalists today claim America’s status as a chosen people and a Christian nation. Christianity teaches that God worked through a specific national community, Israel, to reveal himself and work out his plan for redemption. Professor Paul Miller notes, “Through Jesus, all people, Jews and Gentiles, Americans and Mexicans, are invited into fellowship with the God of Israel, the ground for God’s global purposes. Indeed, the true “Israel” is now the collection of all people who trust in the promises of God through Jesus.” This is made clear in the New Testament Romans scripture: “It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Romans 9:8). The “people who are called by my name” and the “nation whose God is the Lord” is the gathering of God’s people in Christ across all cultures and in all times. 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Psalm 33:12 are about Israel. In the New Covenant, they are about the Church. They are not about the United States or any other secular institution. God commissions nations to uphold justice and order. No nation is righteous; only God is sovereign and just.

Nationalism promotes political idolatry

When we elevate nations or leaders to do more than God intends, the result is strange worship and idolatry. The Bible says much about the danger of political idolatry. The Bible speaks about seductive, deceitful political leaders with godlike pretensions. The Prince of Tyre in Ezekiel 28 claims godhood and grows arrogant in his wealth, power, and self-perceived wisdom and beauty. For this, he is cast down and punished, like Satan was cast out of heaven for rebelling against God as King and object of worship. Similarly, the city of Babylon “glorified herself” like a god because of her vast wealth.

In Judaism, idolatry is an improper conception of God in the mind of the worshiper. “There shall no strange god be in thee; neither shalt thou worship any foreign god.” (Psalm 81:9). We are entering “political idolatry,” when we invest any government or its leaders with sacred meaning. We then place expectations that they be and act godlike to carry out the divine mission God gives to each of God’s followers. This takes over our theological thoughts, distorts our knowledge of God, and leads us to what ancient Jewish Rabbis’ called “strange worship.”

As an example now of political idolatry, let’s view one minute of a CNN video on the current advertisement for Governor Ron Desantis:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIVCFkOSXGA&list=PL8p-0x-7Q8t-44s>

Nationalism adopts an object of religious loyalty other than God

In the January 6th video who were the insurrectionists praying to “in Christ’s holy name?” The MAGA Jesus fabricated in their mind provides power, privilege, and freedom to its American worshippers. The MAGA Jesus is a cultural fabrication in their mind only but is without biblical support. The Christian Nationalists on January 6th displays religious fervor. However, the object of their worship is a fabrication cast by a grievance towards a perceived loss of cultural, racialized power and influence.

By the time of Jesus, it was common to worship powerful warrior kings as a god. The prescribed biblical metaphor for worship is binary, solely between humans and God. But in political idolatry, the political, other institutions or its human leaders are the threatening third party competing to be regarded as godlike. When nations or its leaders co-opt religious sentiment, they take over the churches and other religious institutions. In most cases, Nationalism does not fight religion, but it co-opts and merges with traditional religion to create a new object of religious loyalty. This occurred in

Russia with the Orthodox Church, some Latin American countries with the Catholic Church, and in the United States with Nationalistic Protestantism.

This political idolatry arrangement between church and state has the name: Caesar-o-papism. The emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Caesar Augustus, had high official roles in the Orthodox Church. In this arrangement, the church was subordinate to the state. Since that time the church often becomes the propaganda arm of the king. The manipulative use of religious sentiment for the state's purposes has been a common arrangement because politicians recognize they can benefit by harnessing the tremendous power of religious fervor. Some of the founding fathers in the United States, including Thomas Jefferson, were deists. They acknowledged God as creator like a watchmaker, and then humans run on their own like a watch, with no involvement of God and no accountability to God. Thomas Jefferson felt it necessary to write the "Jefferson Bible" eliminating all miracles and accountability of humans to God. However, Thomas Jefferson, a primary author of the separation of Church and State and other foundational national documents wanted the church to be subservient to the state and serve the purposes of the government and its institutions.

Protestant Nationalism cannot go together with Biblical Christianity. Nationalism is a false religion that puts the nation in place of the church, and the political leader as godlike competing with God for loyalty.

Protestant Nationalists are seeking power while misrepresenting the biblical Christian message to the world. They seek to "Make America Great Again" through exclusion and not respecting diversity in America. How should we respond to resist Protestant Nationalism in America, especially since our group could be one of the groups excluded if MAGA has success?

Share The Gospel with fellow human beings with listening, empathy, and love

Silence is not an option. Share the Word of God and the earthly life of Jesus as you know it. Develop relationships with proponents of Protestant Nationalism as fellow human beings made in the image of God based on listening, empathy, and love.

How can we help Nationalists reorient to the life and teachings of Jesus? Dr. Howard Thurman was one of the top pastors in the world and mentor to many pastors worldwide, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. Thurman in Jesus and the Disinherited wrote on how to best reconcile disagreements among humans and, in that reconciliation, how to biblically handle fear, deception, hate, and love. Following is a summary of the essential message conveyed by Dr. Thurman in that book.

Fear only God

You abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. Fear is behind the threat of violence. The threat of violence is a weapon by which others are held in check. Nationalists will continue to make public displays of threatened violence eliciting fear in others. Do not fear the Nationalists, only fear God.

No deception

You must not indulge in any deception or dishonesty. Deception is often a defense mechanism. Honest communication can break down barriers. Substitute sincerity and authenticity for hypocrisy. Practice sincerity and authenticity in your relationship with God, including lament prayers, then apply them in your relationships with others. One example of a lament prayer is Psalm 44:23- "Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself. Do not reject us forever!" In the prayer, the psalmist is expressing honest feelings and frustrations, but looking forward to partnership with God. Similarly, in our relationship with others, we express honest feelings, not deception, in looking forward to partnership with them in the mission of God, based on the words and life of Jesus.

Do not allow hate to develop

Hatred is destructive to both the hated and the hater. How do we not allow hate to develop? Hatred often begins when there is contact without fellowship. Fellowship only on your own terms can be simply sentimentality; having sentiments for another is not real fellowship and still allows hate to

develop. True fellowship that combats hate is genuinely feeling for your fellow human being. Go beyond saying you understand to real empathy; I can empathize only when I see myself in another's place. Contact with unsympathetic understanding activates hate, acts of ill will, and then destructive hate that spreads to others.

Love neighbors and enemies

Jesus said "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Every man and woman is potentially every other human's neighbor. "Love your enemy that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven." Humans must love their neighbor, permitting no barriers between, including those who you would normally hate, which is the biblical definition of the word enemy.

The first kind of enemy is someone who was a part of your primary group, but conflict enters. A reconciliation process that includes listening, empathy, and love, followed by the truth from God's Word is the goal. We should deal first with the rifts in our own world. In dealing with Nationalism, start within your own church congregation. Then expand your contacts to fellowship with others.

The second kind of enemy is the person whose activities make the tribal group live with shame and humiliation. In Jesus' day, this was the despised tax collector who did the bidding of the Roman authorities. They unfairly collect taxes for the Roman treasury. To love such people requires eliminating your bitterness from feelings of betrayal. Listening is required. There must be some understanding and empathy for how such people become who they are. Relationships need to be human-to-human, regardless of race, culture, role, or title. A fellow human is made in God's image. Awaken that awareness in him or her, and that other person will attack the betrayal from the inside.

The third type of enemy is exemplified by Romans. Romans were also the political enemy. In today's society, you may have to love someone who is in the opposite political camp and is treated as an enemy. You must engage this type of enemy in a face-to-face relationship of equality. The requirement is that the Roman and the Jew, or the Democrat and the Republican, find mutual validation, with respect for the diversity of each individual. Each must make efforts to emerge as a human being, without the handicap of the race, culture, role, title, or enemy status of their tribe.

Humans must work in an environment that fosters true fellowship. The church can offer an environment of mutual worth and valuing one another. The church needs unity across barriers while respecting diversity. The church is one place that human relationships with God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, political affiliation. Jesus demonstrated this principle. A Roman captain came seeking help for a servant. The Roman captain put aside the pride of race, title, role, status as a superior oppressor. Jesus put aside that he was a Jew oppressed by the Romans. Jesus intended to come to the Roman's home. In an environment of worship bringing true fellowship, the Roman responded with faith: "Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed" (Matthew 8:8, Luke 7:7) The Roman captain scaled with Jesus the height of listening, empathetic fellowship, and love.

Summary of application for activation to know, feel, and do

In summary, what should we take from this message for life reimagined in sharing Christ?

Know: Biblical Christianity is incompatible with Protestant Nationalism that merges nationalistic devotion to the state with religious fervor.

Feel: Necessity of sharing the Word of God and earthly life of Jesus

Do: Have contact with proponents of Christian Nationalism as fellow humans made in the image of God. That contact must have true fellowship with listening, empathetic fellowship, and love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS

Sermon Preamble

-Which current events have disturbed you the most as the antithesis of the Words and Life of Jesus Christ?

Traditions of humans out of their heart far from God are not God's Truth

-Isaiah, Jesus, and the remnant people of God today face hypocritical actions of some with religious fervor, but from their heart and traditions far from God's truth. What examples have you seen of religious fervor applied in support of human traditions, not the words and life of Jesus Christ?

The Gospel of the life and teachings of Jesus is out of synch with many Protestant Nationalists

-What is the underlying meaning of the following quotes from the September 2022 book by Protestant Nationalists Torber and Isker? In what way is each underlying meaning not presenting the full Gospel of God's truth?

"Exiting their entire system"; "build our own political movements"; "subversive takeover of every facet of society and even our own churches by the global elite"; "if you don't have a sword... buy one because we have a lot of work to do".

The Gospel means caring actions for the poor and various other diverse people

-How would you describe the teaching common on media outlets about the "Prosperity Gospel?" In what ways is that not the Full Gospel of truth that requires justice and equity on behalf of the poor and the most vulnerable?

Nationalism is very different from Patriotism

-In what ways are the positive acts in patriotism different than nationalism?

The Church, not America, is God's chosen people

-In what ways does God's truth assert that, in the New Covenant, the Church (with unity in diversity), not America or any other nation is the "New Israel" of God's chosen people?

Nationalism promotes political idolatry

What brings about strange worship and idolatry as warned against in Psalm 81:9?

Nationalism adopts an object of religious loyalty other than God

What have been characteristic arrangements between church and state? In reality, what are the underlying arrangements between some of the church and the state today in America, despite professions of separation of church from the state?

Share The Gospel with fellow human beings with listening, empathy, and love

-How can we help Nationalists and others with whom we disagree reorient to the life and teachings of Jesus?

-Do you think we should remain silent? Why or why not?

Fear only God

-How should we feel when some Nationalists continue their threats of violent confrontation and war?

No deception

-Why should we substitute honest communication, sincerity, or authenticity for deception or hypocrisy? Similar to the lament prayer to God in Psalm 44:23, why does human to human sincerity look forward to future partnership towards God's mission?

Do not allow hate to develop

-In what circumstances can hate continue to develop even in contacting the other? In contacting another how can you proceed past fellowship on your own terms, sentimentality, saying you understand to real empathy of seeing self in the other's place?

Love neighbors and enemies

-Why does loving neighbors permit no barriers to relationship even to those you would normally hate?

-What are the benefits of starting reconciliation first with any perceived enemy within your primary group or local church congregation, and then expand to fellowship with others?

-Why should loving neighbors and enemies also apply to those who bring shame and humiliation to your group? Why is it so important to empathize with how such people become who they are?

-What are some environments most helpful in respecting diversity in human to human relationships, without the baggage of class, race, power, status, wealth, or political affiliation?