

Intersect Your Faith with the State

Daniel 1:3-21 (NIV)

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. 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 who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see?" 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. 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 enchanterers in his whole kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

All three of our Bible readings for today have to do with a Christian's relationship to government. I don't relish the idea of talking politics from the pulpit, but today affords us an opportunity to discuss intersecting our Christian faith with the state. How timely too, given that in a couple of weeks our nation will hold another presidential election. I will tell you upfront that I'm not going to tell you who to vote for, but I will tell you an aspect of what God wants our relationship to politics to look like so that we can live it out.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus answered the tricky tax question by saying, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21b) This means that a God-fearing person can serve a government run by unbelievers and serve God at the same time. They're not mutually exclusive. Then Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians living in Rome: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Romans 13:1) If you rebel against government authority, you are rebelling against what God has instituted. Paul writes this to Christians under the rule of Emperor Nero, a Caesar who turned Christians into human torches because it was advantageous for him to persecute them. So the principle is established by God that we do not have the right to rebel or malign our government leaders if they're unbelievers and behave as such. Our duty as a Christian under any government is: "Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." (Romans 13:7)

Then you get Daniel who lived about 600 years before these other two messages of God's Word. Daniel has just been ripped from his home, exiled to Babylon along with many other prominent and important members of Jewish society. He's a teenager, maybe only 15 years old, handsome and smart. He's immediately put into school to learn the foreign and pagan culture of the Babylonians. They even change his name to one that honors their gods. Daniel does not fight these two things; he submits to his new government, intersecting with faith with the state much in how Jesus and Paul also taught Christians to do.

Then he was assigned a portion of the king's royal food and drink. "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." (verse 8) Why did this teenager go with the flow on the schooling and the name change but not on the diet change? Well, it wasn't bad to learn the language or the culture of the Babylonian kingdom; in fact, it would be to his advantage to do so. And the name thing: people can call him whatever they wanted to, but he would still refer to himself as Daniel, a name that gave honor to the LORD and no one else. But God had given the Jews a diet that distinguished them from other cultures and religions. On top of that, this royal food was most likely used in the worship of the Babylonian gods, false gods. Daniel would be, in a way, worshiping them if he ate this - sinning and making himself unclean before the LORD. He could not eat this food in good conscience. This is where Daniel's faith intersected with the Babylonian state and hit a roadblock.

What would you have done if you were Daniel? Imagine yourself at 15 – a 9th or 10th grader, barely into high school. If you were told that you could only go to a newly created state church that isn't Christian and not Light of the Valley, what would you do? Would you intersect your Christian faith into politics like Daniel, that you would stand up for what God says over what the state says?

Daniel could have said, “Well, when in Rome...” and just eaten the food since it didn’t look like he would be returning to Jerusalem anytime soon. But he didn’t. What do we do? Do we approach and discuss politics as the rest of the world approaches it or do we approach it differently? Does politics for you boil down to “What will the government do for me?”, disregarding those iconic words of JFK, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country?”, which is really a servant-like mentality that Christ taught us. Have we made politics about me first? God tells us to not give false testimony, to take words and actions in the kindest possible way, to speak only what builds up and never what tears down. Does that go out the window when it comes to politics? But do we buy into and repeat mudslinging, tearing down the other candidates and leaders? Do I give or repeat derogatory nicknames, insult or berate people when they hold a different political view than me? Yes, give fair estimations and reporting unscrupulous activity must be done so that we can be informed and participate intelligently in politics, but how are we relaying this information? Do we speak in a way that upholds God’s Word regarding the 8th Commandment? How does our Christian faith intersect with the state and talking politics?

Daniel intersected his faith into his new Babylonian state. When he told the palace official in charge of his training that he would not defile himself with the royal food, the official pushed back saying, “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.” (verse 10) Daniel, this teenager, could have given up there and said, “Well, I tried.” But no. His God is too important to compromise his obedience to him. So, he persists. Without even using a Bible passage, Daniel respectfully requests, “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 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.” (verses 12-13)

God blessed the test as well as Daniel’s obedience. These four Jewish men looked healthier than all the others. The royal food and wine were taken away. At the end of the three year training period, these 4 18 year olds surpass all the other trainees in wisdom and understanding, and were ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the Babylonian kingdom. They were highly valued there while they also lived out their faith in that political system. What’s more is that as Daniel intersected his Christian faith with the Babylonian government, he outlasted that government to the time when the Medes and the Persians took over. He continued to intersect his faith with the state which probably led to more people knowing Christ and believing in him as their perfect substitute and Savior from sin, possibly even spurring on the wisemen who sought out Jesus after his birth.

Daniel’s life, his intersection of his faith in God with the state, show us that it is worth it to live our Christian faith in the governments that God has given authority to over us. Governments will come and go, but God is forever. Politics will not save us, only God will. At the same time, though, God gives us governing authorities for our benefit, and commands us, guides us, to give them our taxes, our honor, our respect, our help, and our prayers.

So, Lord, forgive us for when we have left you and our beliefs in you at the door when it comes to talking politics. Forgive us when we insult our president, our governor, or any politicians. Yes, we are to call out corruption and sin, but we can do this without giving up our obedience to you. We can say negative things without spreading rumors or malcontent for our governing authorities.

Thankfully, by the sacrifice of Jesus, we are forgiven even when we have divorced our faith in God from talking politics. We are covered with Jesus’ perfect obedience that he lived out to the governments of his day. He paid taxes. He did not malign Caesar, even as the Caesars claimed to be divine sons of gods. He submitted to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, even when they brought false witnesses against him at his trial. He submitted to Pontius Pilate who reluctantly issued Jesus’ death sentence. Jesus submitted to his governing authorities with his taxes, his honor, his respect, and his prayers so that he was perfectly obedient for us.

Being forgiven and covered with Christ’s perfect obedience and submission to the governments of his day, we now live as he did, as Paul did, as Daniel did. We intersect our Christian faith with the state. Speak with respect and honor to our governmental leaders, even and especially when you disagree with their decisions – sinful or not. Take words and actions in the kindest possible way. Pray for them. Pray that God would guide them to do what is best for all people. Pray that their actions and decisions would promote the ability to proclaim God’s Word and so bring more people into God’s kingdom. Make active use of the freedoms and rights afforded to us in our state, our country. Use your voice. Use your vote to guide to, God-willing, a God-pleasing government, the protection of all other, and, most importantly, the continued freedom to proclaim what our God has done for us so that all can be saved.

We belong to two kingdoms. We’re citizens of an earthly government made up of sinful people, not all of them are Christians, but yet God is the one who gave them this authority to govern over us. We also live as citizens of God’s kingdom, made so by the life and blood of Jesus Christ. The worldly governments will come and go, just as they did for Daniel. So we live as Daniel did, intersecting our faith in God with the state. Pray for God’s kingdom to come to more and more people. Pray that his will be done in all our politics. Intersect your faith in God with the state. Amen.