

Week 26

The Christian and the Social Order

Key Verses

John 17:15-19 I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but to keep them away from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ Just as You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, so that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

+ Introduction

"All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society...Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of goodwill in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth." ¹ –*The Baptist Faith and Message*, Statement 19

What do we mean when we say, "Social Order?" Miriam-Webster defines Social Order as "the totality of structured human interrelationships in a society or a part of it." ² The Social Order is the combined force of institutions, traditions, artistic expression, and political machinations that set the status quo of a society. The Social Order defines what is in and out of bounds of acceptable behavior, what should be praised, and what should be maligned in a culture or group of people. Here are a few major components for the Social Order of where we live:

1. **Political Structure** – The political system plays a large role in forming the Social Order of a society. Those in charge of political power help determine what is legal, illegal, encouraged, discouraged, or taxed in a society. Not to mention that those with political power also have a heavy hand in determining what the military will do.
2. **Educational System** – The educational system also wields significant influence in shaping the Social Order. The accessibility of education plays an important role in shaping the thought, skills, and direction of children and young adults in a society.

Some societies have little to no educational infrastructure in place, and the people suffer as a result. However, even in cultures (like ours) with a developed educational infrastructure, children and young people can still suffer if those responsible for educating them are misguided or deficient in their instruction. In short, the educational system plays a role in shaping the thought patterns and the knowledge levels of the young.

- 3. Artistic Output** - Another major component that shapes and forms the Social Order is the art produced by a culture. When we say 'art,' we are referring to what Oxford describes as "The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power."³ The art produced by a culture can be painting, sculpture, literature, movies, television, music, performative art, and many other mediums. At its best and purest form, art uniquely expresses the beauty and reality of God's world.

As far as the Social Order is concerned, art has two main functions. First, the art produced by a culture reflects the values, aspirations, and morals of that culture. Second, the art produced by a culture also indicates the direction that the Social Order might be heading in the future. One obvious example of this comes from the fact that American art has been obsessed with sexuality, gender identity, and sexual freedom in the past fifteen years. The amount of attention paid to homosexuality and transgender ideology in American art (particularly in music, television, movies, and even commercials) has been wildly disproportionate to the percentage of the population identifying within one of these groups. Ultimately, the attitude of the Social Order has followed the culture's art. Same-sex relationships, sexual liberation, and transgenderism have become accepted, applauded, and compelled by the educational and political systems. This is just one example among many in which art reflects the values of the Social Order and signals its future direction.

The Baptist Faith and Message states that Christians should seek to bring the righteousness and truth of Christ's love into every aspect of human society. This suggests that we should be aware of what is going on in each one of these spheres within our culture and encourage our culture to move in the direction of truth and love. The tricky question for us is this: How can we move the Social Order toward truth and righteousness? Following Jesus in these situations looks different on a case-by-case basis. William Wilberforce worked within the Parliamentary system of Great Britain to bring justice by abolishing the slave trade. Mother Theresa sought to bring love, righteousness, and justice by serving and caring for the people considered unclean and untouchable in India. Asking how much we should work within the Social Order and how much we should resist the Social Order is a sensitive and essential task to undertake. But before you can come up with an answer in your specific case, there are three things you need to remember.

✦ Our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God.

MATTHEW 6:33 *But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

In his memoir *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson reflects on his career as a lawyer representing men condemned to death.⁴ In most of the cases Bryan took on in Alabama, many of his clients received unjust treatment as they moved through the legal system. Stevenson had one client named Walter McMillan who was treated unjustly by the police, the courts, and the entire Social Order of his city and state. At points in the memoir, Stevenson faces unjust and self-interested opposition from police officers, prosecutors, judges, and politicians as he seeks justice for Walter. Although Walter's conviction was eventually overturned, the feeling of helplessness and frustration over the broken Social Order of Walter's town is overwhelming.

When we look at the major components of our culture's Social Order, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. The forces at play in the politics, the art, and the economics of our culture are way too large for us to understand, much less for us to change entirely. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells His audience not to worry by asking questions like "What will we eat" or "What will we drink." Instead, He says to seek first the Kingdom of God and to live out righteousness; then all these things will be provided to us.

Before we can deal with the big questions about how to live within the Social Order of our culture, we must first be aware that we are called as citizens to the Kingdom of God. If we want to live faithfully in our culture, we must remember the truth of the Gospel. We do not rely on a government, a military, or a culture to give us purpose, meaning, and direction. We are completely confident and content with knowing and following Jesus. We believe our sins have been forgiven, that God is forming us into who we were made to be, and that He is coming again to judge the world. Our first and only true allegiance is to our risen Savior Jesus. When we keep our eyes on Him, we lose the worry and anxiety accompanying the broken Social Order in which we live.

Are there areas of brokenness in our culture? Of course. Should we advocate that our culture repents and reflect the truths of God's Word? Yes. Should we love our society and the people that live in it? Absolutely. So, should we be anxious, frightened, and dismayed when we feel overwhelmed by our broken culture? No! Because our first allegiance is not to a nation, a culture, or any institution. Our allegiance is to Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

✦ We pray for those in places of political and institutional power.

ROMANS 13:1 *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.*

In Romans chapter 13, Paul tells the church in Rome that they should respect and be subject to the authorities. Keep in mind that the Christians in Rome faced intense opposition and friction with those in power. They were living in the political capital of the greatest empire of the history of the world, and they were suffering because of it. We know that many Christians were threatened to participate in the Emperor cult, in which they were required to proclaim that "Caesar is Lord" or else face financial, physical, and social consequences.

Later, when a portion of the city of Rome burned down, Emperor Nero would blame the Christians for the fire. Eventually, many of the Christians in Rome would be killed for their belief in Jesus as the world's true king. Despite this, Paul says that God has established the authority of those in power and that Christians should respect them!

Paul is pointing out the obvious truth that if someone has power and authority in your life, it has in some way been allowed by God. He has appointed them to that position, and He expects them to punish wrongdoers and to rule justly. We know that human rulers rarely behave righteously, but God is the one who will judge them for what they do with their responsibility.

In the meantime, we are called to be subject to those who govern over us, and to treat them with respect and dignity, even when we disagree with them. It is a wise practice to pray for those in places of institutional and governmental power, especially those with whom we disagree. The first impulse of the Christians should not be toward becoming a political revolutionary. Every human leader is broken, and every political system is broken, so we can be confident that the problems of the world will not simply vanish if we get rid of the institutional leaders that we do not like.

Even if you view those in authority over you as enemies, Jesus raises the bar even higher than Paul in Matthew 5 as He is speaking.

MATTHEW 5:43-45 *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."*

We want to see God's truth and righteousness lived out in our Social Order, so we pray for those in power, and we encourage them to do what is right in the sight of God.

✦ We do not conform to political, cultural, or economic powers when they go against the truth of God's Word.

EPHESIANS 4:13-16 ... *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

While we pray for those in power and respect their authority, we also must remember that we are accountable to the more fundamental authority of Jesus. When the Social Order goes against the truth of Christ's character and of God's Word, we must ultimately remain faithful to what we

know is true. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus calls His followers the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Why does He use these two metaphors? Because salt and light illustrate the way that God's people ought to relate to the world.

Anyone with taste buds can attest to the fact that salt makes food more delicious. But flavoring was not the primary function of salt in the ancient world. The primary use of salt was as a preservative for foods to help them last longer and avoid rotting. Unfortunately, Jesus and his contemporaries did not get to experience the glory of a freezer or a refrigerator, so they had to rely on salt to preserve their food. When Jesus says, "*you are the light of the world*," He is telling us that we can "preserve" and protect the Social Order in which we live. How do we do that? We act as a preservative by living out the truth of God's Word, even when it goes against the powers of our Social Order.

The function of light is to illuminate so we can see in places where we previously could not. Imagine what it would be like to do anything at night in a world without electricity – it would be almost impossible! Light allows us to see where we are going and what we are doing. When we live faithfully to the Kingdom of God, we serve as a light illuminating a dark world. We can reveal the truth of what is going on to those who cannot see, and we can give an example of what it looks like to live in the truth. This often means running into friction with the world around us and experiencing opposition, but it is worthwhile and good to serve as salt and light to the world around us. If we are living out the truth of God's Word in our lives, we will no longer be conformed to the patterns of our culture, but we will be transformed with a new mind and new way of looking at the world.⁵ When we find ourselves transformed, then we can live faithfully in a manner that God can use to transform the world around us.

+ Conclusion

The night before Jesus was crucified, He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for His disciples, which includes us today, as recorded in John 17.

JOHN 17:15-18 *I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but to keep them away from the evil one.¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.¹⁸ Just as You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world.¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, so that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.*

The reality is we are in a world that is broken, distorted, fallen, and spiraling downward in many ways. Jesus knew we would face these challenges both then and now. He also knew our anchor would be the truth.

Until the day that Jesus returns to judge and set the world right, there will always be brokenness, sin, and rampant injustice in all human cultures. We will not be able to fix or transform these issues by our own power. Just a cursory look at our Social Order shows an obviously broken attitude toward sex, life, racial and cultural conflict, and a thousand other areas. When we remember that our first allegiance is to Christ and His Kingdom, when we pray for our leaders and those in power,

and when we taste and shine like salt and light in the world, then we will have the opportunity to speak into the broken areas of our social order.

Who, if not Christians, will illuminate the horror of the over 62 million abortions in the United States since 1973? ⁶ Who, if not Christians, will tell the truth about the power and destruction of any sexual activity outside of a marriage covenant. And who, if not Christians, will live out the love of Christ that overcomes the various types of racial and cultural hatred that plagues our culture?

We have been saved by grace through faith in Christ, and now we have the opportunity to preserve our culture from sin and destruction by shining brightly with the righteousness of Christ. It is time to get to work.

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¹ *The Baptist Faith and Message*, statement 19.

² Social Order | Definition of Social Order by Merriam-Webster

³ ART | Definition of ART by Oxford Dictionary on Lexico.com also meaning of ART

⁴ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: a Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York :Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

⁵ See Romans 12:2

⁶ FS01AbortionintheUS.pdf (nrlc.org)