

Session Eight: Gathered as God's Holy Nation

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Date: 01 January 2018

Preacher: Bryan Hart

[0 : 0 0] Hello, I'm Brian Hart. Welcome back to Gospel Growth. We have been talking in the last few sessions about this amazing thing called the church. And the Bible gives us lots of pictures to think about what the church is. She's a body, a family, a temple, a bride, a flock, a priesthood. And today we're going to look at another one of the metaphors or word pictures that we find in the Bible for the church. And so I'm going to start by reading to give us some context for this, reading out of 1 Peter 2, verses 9 to 12. It says this, but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners or travelers and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. So what we see here is that the church is gathered as God's holy nation. That's another one of the pictures the Bible gives us.

Now, Peter is saying that these people who've experienced new life in Jesus, they are not from a specific race or a specific nation. This is not about one particular group of people tied to one geographic place. He's saying people in Christ have been brought from all over, from many different places, many different nations, many different races. He's actually speaking to a very ethnically diverse church. He's writing to Jews and Gentiles, Romans, Greeks, Middle Easterners from all over the place. Everyone who's in Christ, they've now been brought together. And so it's a good reminder for us that Christianity is not an American religion. It's a good reminder for Christians in South Africa that it's not a South African religion. It's a good reminder to Christians in India that it's not an Indian religion. And this explains, by the way, that's something that I think a lot of us cherish, which is that unlike most other religions, Christianity is always on the move, meaning it's not tied to one specific culture or geographic place, because that's not what it's about. It's about Jesus, and in him we are formed into a new nation. Now, this picture calls to mind some different things. First, it suggests that we have a new ultimate allegiance. There are many allegiances that lay claim to us and that we may be subscribed to. We define ourselves by all kinds of things. Our political affiliations, that would be a big one. That would contend to be divisive. And there's other ones that maybe don't seem so divisive, but can be significant, like our income class or even our profession, or even things that can seem a little more trivial, like our hobbies or our favorite sports teams. Those distinctions continue to exist when you are a Christian. It makes sense that as a Christian, you may identify with people who have a shared kind of experience in your profession or even shared interests. You may still participate in a certain brand of political activity. But when you're a Christian, those things become very small. You now have a new allegiance that really dwarfs all those things, and it's your allegiance to Jesus. Our primary identity is now to him. It's no longer about where we're born or what the color of our skin is. It's the fact that we collectively, we are a people who used to be in darkness, but now we're in light. We're God's people. That's the language that Paul uses in Colossians. He says that he, Jesus, has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Paul says that being a Christian is like being transferred from one kingdom into a different kingdom, a different place, a different nation with a new ruler and new laws. It's like renouncing your old citizenship and getting a brand new citizenship. We become citizens of a kingdom in which there's redemption and forgiveness.

And so it's important to understand that that must, it absolutely must supersede the old allegiances. We need to hear this often because in our country, and this is not just true of our country, but in our country, we very easily get our love for our nation wrapped up with our love for the gospel or with our religion. It's like for some people, the lines can get blurry. It's like being a Christian is the same

thing as being a good patriotic American. There's nothing wrong with being a good patriotic American, but they are not the same thing. And again, we're not the only country in which people have struggled with this. In the early fifth century, when Rome fell to the barbarians, many Christians in Rome couldn't understand how this would happen. They thought that Rome was like the pinnacle of civilization. It had been around for centuries and people felt like, Christians felt like, when Rome collapsed that it was in some sense the end of the world. Many Roman Christians found that their identity and their security was actually more tied up in the Roman Empire than it was in being a Christian and a follower of Jesus. It's very easy for us to do the same thing with our nation.

Like the Romans, I think many of us can hardly imagine what would the world be like without America. It's hard to imagine that. And to think that America would one day go away, that could even sound like the end of the world. Now, I want you to know, I love our country. I am so glad to be an American. I think we live in an amazing place. I think the freedoms that we have are precious gifts, the blessings of democracy, protections of free speech. I don't want to take any of that for granted.

[6 : 13] And I don't think that you should either. But we must never forget, even as Americans, where our primary allegiance lies. Even Rome, which was a very long-standing empire, it came to an end.

All kings and empires will eventually come and go. And that's true for our nation as well. One day, America will cease to exist. But the kingdom of Jesus will never end. And he will never cease ruling. He will never be removed from his throne. So we should pray that good nations like ours last. But even if they don't, that doesn't crush us because there is no nation on this planet that is the hope of the world. Jesus is the hope of the world. So if you're a Christian, Jesus Christ doesn't simply fit in as one of the allegiances that you have. Again, it kind of takes over. Our allegiance to him comes above everything else. He's the true king. And he doesn't serve our other interests. All of our other interests must actually serve him. But his reign is not like the reign of other kings. And his kingdom operates on a whole different set of rules. This nation in which we're in, actually, the kingdom of God is political.

Politics is simply a word to describe how groups of people relate to one another. And Jesus gave his disciples a new politic, a new way of making decisions together. How are we going to get on in the world? 1 Peter 2 verse 11 says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners, travelers, and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Peter says that we may be citizens of a new kingdom, but he says, by the way, we're currently living in a foreign country. So we've got a new way of living that's related to Jesus, but we're still travelers and exiles in these other places, whether that's America or the Roman Empire of many centuries ago. And we're exiles here. So we're living in a way, we should be living in a way, that doesn't actually make sense to the people who are around us. The politics of Jesus Christ and his kingdom, will it often be odds with the politics of the cultures in which we live? And so what we see within this idea of having this, being brought into a new nation, what we see is that we live by Jesus's kingdom values. Peter is saying precisely because you have this new identity and new citizenship, you will never actually totally, you won't be home here in the same way that other people are home here. Because the politics of Jesus and the ways of Jesus and the values of Jesus will cause you to say no to things that your culture says yes to. You were in exile. So what does that look like? Well, a lot of it is summed up really nicely in one of Jesus's earliest sermons called the Sermon on the Mount. And this is what he says in

Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. These are the values and the ways of this new kingdom, part of the politics of this new kingdom. He says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[9 : 21] Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who

were before you. You see, this is the way of Jesus. Now, the way of the world is the opposite of this, right? The whole world lives to get on top, but Jesus' values turn the ways of the world, the values of the world, and the politics of the world upside down. We are a kingdom of people who are happy to be at the bottom for the sake of other people. There's a pastor named Ray Ortlund, and he flipped all of these statements from Jesus, called the Beatitudes, those statements we just read. He flipped them to their opposite to show how big of a change Jesus' kingdom is from that of the world. This is more like the ways of the world. Listen to these. Blessed are the entitled, for they get their way. Blessed are the carefree, for they're comfortable. Blessed are the pushy, for they win. Blessed are the self-righteous, for they need nothing. Blessed are the vengeful, for they will be feared. Blessed are those who don't get caught, for they look good. Blessed are the argumentative, for they get in the last word. Blessed are the winners, for they get their way.

He goes on to say, don't these Beatitudes describe this world? But which of these two cultures, the kingdom of Christ or the kingdom of this world, more accurately describes your church? The household of God must offer a clear and lovely alternative to the madness of the world. The church is meant to be a glimpse into the kingdom of Jesus, a preview of the world that Jesus will one day bring up to earth as it is in heaven. That means that our churches and our lives should really be a taste, a taste for others of what that's going to be like one day when Jesus returns. Too often, we should be honest about this. Too often, our values, even as Christians, are taken more from the cultures that we were born into than they are taken from the Sermon on the Mount and from the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Every aspect of our lives should look different because we are part of a new nation.

We have a different politic. We have a different playbook. And it's so different from the ways of the world. The way that we do marriage, it should look counter-cultural. It should be filled with self-sacrifice. We should always be putting our spouses first and putting their needs ahead of our own. We should be committing to one another for life even when we feel like our needs aren't always being met. The way that we work should be different. The way that we relate to our employers should be different. We shouldn't actually complain about our bosses or even our co-workers and gossip about them because in the kingdom, even when people mistreat us, the politic of the kingdom, the way of this nation is that we treat each other with love even when we feel mistreated. The way that we handle money should look different. Radical generosity and sacrificial generosity should characterize all of our lives. We should care more about being good stewards and being generous with our resources than we do about getting to the top. Now, all of this behavior will at times look crazy to people who are not part of this nation. There will come a moment where it flies in the face of the wisdom of the world, but it makes total sense if you know Jesus and you're committed to following him. If your true country is the kingdom of God, then yes, your behavior is going to look odd to others, but this is what

Jesus has called us to. This is, again, these are not optional extras of following Jesus. These are the values. These are the laws. These are the politics of the kingdom. So being a new nation means we have a new allegiance, a new set of values to live from, a new kind of politics, but it also gives us a new purpose for the world that we're in. Remember, we might be citizens of Jesus's kingdom, but we're still sojourners or travelers in this one. We are people in a culture, but not of these cultures. And so that gives us a job to do. Paul has a great metaphor for this. He calls Christians ambassadors in 2 Corinthians 5.

[14 : 05] Therefore, we are ambassadors of Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. What's he saying? He's saying as Christians, we are ambassadors to the world from Christ's kingdom. Many of us have heard that passage a lot, but have you ever thought about what the job of an ambassador is? Man, it's hard. You are living in a place that is not your home, but you are representing the interests of someone else. Ambassadors from our country may live in countries all over the world, but they represent the interests of the president and his administration in our country.

That means they've got to be conversant with the culture in which they live. They've got to have some understanding and even grace for appreciating the culture in which they live. But at the end of the day, they can't decide, you know what? I like it here and I'm going to just, I'm going to basically abandon all my old ways of doing things and thinking, and I'm going to abandon those values, and I'm going to embrace the values of this place. They've got to be comfortable enough to get along with people here, but they must always have as a first priority the values of their home and of, you

know, for ambassadors that are in countries around the world, you know, they've got to embrace the values of the president. For us, it's the values of our king. That's what it means to represent him where we live. To be an ambassador of God is to be someone who totally understands the culture in which we live, the hopes and the dreams of the people around us. What are they hungry for? What are they looking for? And yet to demonstrate and proclaim that those hopes and those dreams are ultimately going to be satisfied with Jesus. Ultimately, that's what it means for the church to be a holy nation. The church is the place where Jesus is always king. So as you are gathered in groups, consider discussing some of this among yourselves. What does it mean that the church is a holy nation?

And what are the rivals in your own heart? What are the allegiances that you are prone to give more primacy to than to Jesus? Where is maybe, where the needs and the values of the kingdom may be being in service to other things rather than everything else being in service to Jesus? What is shaping your values and the way you live more than, more than, what are the things that are shaping your values in this world, shaping them maybe more than, than the gospel is? And are you living in this world as an ambassador of Jesus? If you feel like you're not, what are things that you could do differently so that you can live out your calling as an ambassador? God bless you guys.