

Christ the King: Luke 20
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Church of the Good Shepherd
The. Rev. W. Terry Miller

Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, not what is God's

As far as holy days go, Christ the King Sunday is the “new kid on the block.” It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, less than a century ago. Now, if you know anything about European history, you’d know that Europe was in chaos in the 1920s. Inflation was rampant, and colonial rule was collapsing. Totalitarian dictatorships were on the rise throughout Europe, planting the seeds of evil that would soon produce the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II. In the midst of all this chaos and evil, the Pope established the Feast of Christ the King to declare, over and against the inflated claims of the Nazis and Communists, that it is Jesus Christ who is king, who is sovereign, not any worldly government or ruler. Jesus is the goal of all human history, the joy of all who hear, and the fulfillment of our greatest aspirations. Pius was reasserting to the faithful the point Jesus makes in today’s Gospel lesson: “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God” and he warned them not to confuse the two!

While the reassertion of Christ as King did little to arrest Europe’s descent into the Nazi and Stalinist hellscape, the Pope was surely right in calling out their lies and reminding the faithful that all earthy governments, states and political philosophies are temporary, limited, and subject to God’s judgement.

Today, nearly a century after the Pope established Christ the King Sunday, the West is no longer threatened by Communism or Fascism, regardless of what Republicans and Democrats accuse each other. No, today, we face a new challenge, stemming from a new and different ideology, one which is even more insidious and destructive than those of a century ago, for it threatens not just to upend the international order but to erode our very notions of justice, reason, and objective truth. Now, confronting this threat is more difficult than fighting totalitarian rule because it is not easy to identify. Whereas the dangers of Nazism and Communism were concrete and overt, with their armies and propaganda and the larger-than-life personalities of Hitler and Stalin, the threat facing us today isn’t so conspicuous. It comes at us not as an invading army, but from within existing institutions, infiltrating them, taking them over. This threat has no generally recognized name, or leader, and so it has proved remarkably difficult to pin down. But if we are going to combat it, we need to be clear about what we are talking about, so I’ll use the name given to it by academics—‘Critical Theory.’ No doubt, you’ve never heard of this term, though you may have heard of “Critical *Race* Theory.” “Critical Theory” is related to “Critical Race Theory,” but is upstream of “Critical Race Theory,” is its philosophical parent. And as such is more comprehensive and far-reaching in its implications.

Now, before going any further, I have to acknowledge that not everyone enjoys diving into abstract subjects like philosophy and social-political theory as I do. But, let me share with you why, in the spirit of Pope Pius, I think it’s important for us, both as citizens and as followers of Christ, to understand the threat Critical Theory poses today.

As one observer has noted, Critical Theory is basically “Marxism on Postmodernist steroids”—a deeply cynical view advanced with the express goal of deconstructing, dismantling, destroying the foundations of free society. Once a fringe social theory confined to academia, Critical Theory has escaped into society, like a virus from a poorly secured laboratory. And now it has infected not just students, but politicians, social influencers, thought leaders, and, perhaps most detrimental of all, bureaucrats, those unelected and unaccountable officials who control budgets, curriculum, and employment, and so have the power to shape our social, political, and cultural discourse. This wouldn’t be so bad perhaps, were it not for the fact that wherever it is introduced, Critical Theory deliberately provokes disunity. It intensifies ethnic hostility, promotes crass identity politics, and foments resentment.

So, if Critical Theory is so bad, what is it? How do we recognize it? Well, likely you’ve already come across some aspects of it before without knowing it. If you’ve ever heard terms like “structural racism,” “intersectionality,” “implicit bias,” or “diversity, equity and inclusion,” then you’ve come in contact with Critical Theory. Those are all concepts employed by the Theory’s advocates to advance its central claim, which is this: that all societies are characterized by the unequal distribution of power and status (some people have more power and status and some people have less), and that this hierarchy is inherently oppressive of those on the bottom, and furthermore, that those on top maintain their position not through force, but by controlling the institutions, laws, and cultural norms of society. They get to dictate what is good and proper. And lastly that it is racial, gender and sexual minorities, that are most oppressed in society, the least privileged.

Now, it’s important to point out that Critical Theory is not concerned with *economic* inequality, the typical concern of the liberals; it’s concerned with the unequal distribution of status, prestige, power. It’s through that lens—power—that activists look at the world. When they analyze history or examine social phenomena today, they see nothing but a never-ending parade of systemic oppression. And no counter-evidence can dissuade them. Where we might point to the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, Emancipation, Civil Rights laws, and the like as evidence of progress, they’d say that’s just an illusion, a smokescreen for naked domination. Exploitation has just become more sophisticated, more subtle and more deceptive. If you don’t see that, it’s because you haven’t been trained in the proper “critical” methods, and are likely to be benefiting from the system. Those who’ve gone in for Critical Theory are so convinced of their view that the very notion of free speech is anathema to them, because even to hear the opposing side would be harmful, oppressive. Indeed, rather than using discussion and debate to prove their claims, they prefer to criminalize dissent through “hate speech laws” or else to bully their detractors into silence, through what has become known as ‘cancel culture,’ a method of public humiliation and harassment which can lead to the target losing his or her means of income.

What’s confusing to many is the way in which Critical Theorists take familiar liberal ideas and redefine them for their own purposes. Take, for instance, “equity.” It sounds like “equality,” what the Civil Rights movement was about—treating people fairly, equally, making sure that everyone is afforded the same freedoms and rights before the law regardless of class, race or gender. “Equity” means something very different. It is not about “equal opportunity” but rather “equal results.” It sees unequal outcomes as incontrovertible evidence of structural inequalities—

proof of prejudice—and so pushes for redistribution of status and privilege, chiefly by putting minorities in positions of visibility. Or, another example—racism. To the adherents of Critical Theory, racism is not simply prejudice on the grounds of race—something we can all agree is abhorrent and deserving of condemnation—but instead they define it as “a racialized system that permeates all institutions of society.” This racism is largely invisible, save for those who experience it or who have not been trained in the proper “critical” methods to see it. (that is to say, if you don’t see it, you aren’t “woke,” haven’t awakened, to it.)

As should be clear, this is *not* liberalism. Under Critical Theory, genuinely liberal values—freedom of speech, tolerance of differing opinions, equality, individualism, open-mindedness and evidence-based arguments—are replaced with illiberal values like intolerance, bigotry, censorship, and collective guilt and innocence. Critical Theory is not liberalism, it’s *anti-liberalism*, totalitarianism, only without the tanks and gulags.

Now, in case you’re thinking this is just part of the ongoing “culture war,” it’s not. Critical Theory is something I think—I *hope*—that liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats can all agree is poisonous, corrosive to free society. It traffics in grievance, resentment, and condemnation, and holds no hope of grace or forgiveness. It is destructive of goodwill, corrosive of the bonds that hold us together.

Now, an acolyte of Critical Theory were to hear that, they’d say it’s just another attempt by someone in power—me—to control others. It’s a power-play, an attempt to perpetuate “white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, male domination”. But here’s why that isn’t so, why as Christians we have to say that Critical Theory is a fraud, a cynical, malicious distortion of the world.

As Christians, we can critique Critical Theory for any number of its vices—the substitution of slogans for reasoned argument, the exploitation of victimhood, the promiscuous name-calling, the hectoring and dogmatic tone of its advocates, their lack of self-awareness, the impulse to interpret critics in the most uncharitable light, the way words are redefined at will for the sake of political expediency (“speech is violence and violence is speech”). But, in the end, by attacking these offenses, we would merely be pruning the branches, when what we really need to get at are the roots, at the original lie on which Critical Theory is founded. As C. S. Lewis observed, “if the first step in an argument is wrong, everything that follows will be wrong.”

The “original lie” I’m referring to is the Theory’s claim that all societal is defined by the struggle for power, that all relationships involve someone trying to control, put down, or exploit another. While there are most assuredly abuses of power in society, individuals and groups who seek to use their positions of privilege to secure domination over others, it most assuredly is not true that power is the only or chief characteristic of human society. I mean, is that how you would describe your relationship with your friends—as a struggle for domination? How about with your neighbors? Or with your spouse?!? I tell you, if you see your marriage as an opportunity to impose your will on your spouse, your marriage is not going to last long!

But even in politics, it’s not true that everything can be reduced to power. That ignores every other motivating factor in behavior—duty, loyalty, fairness, compassion, charity, a shared vision

of the common good. You take away those motivations, and all you have are coercion and fear. And any government or order that is based on fear is very fragile and will inevitably collapse. Just look at every dictatorship that ever existed.

Critical Theory is in the end just an ideology, an attempt to comprehend the world and impose a purely rationalistic framework onto messy reality. It is a totalizing philosophy, directed at critiquing and changing society as a whole, but in order to make things make sense, it reduces complexity to a simple schema—black or white, good or evil, oppressor or oppressed. Not only is reality more complicated than that, but the attempt to make the world conform to their views is an attempt to play God. They say, we alone see rightly and can fix things that God obviously can't. But anytime humans try to be God, they don't become more godly, they become rather less human, demonic. Nazism and Communism are proof of that.

Jesus denounces that way of thinking in today's Gospel lesson. He says, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." He's not just talking about paying taxes or obeying civil authorities. He's saying that we shouldn't confuse the state with God, shouldn't let politics become our religion, shouldn't mistake our ideology for reality.

But it's not enough for us to condemn Critical Theory as dangerous and wrong-headed. As Christians, we must be able to give the world a better alternative. And that we can do. For if the central concern of Critical Theory is power, then I know of no better ethic of power than the one given by the way of Christ. Whereas Critical Theory sees all power as oppressive, Christianity sees a legitimate use for it. Christianity acknowledges the unjust inequality in the world and the fact that power is routinely abused by those in authority. And it argues that we must *certainly* fight against racism, sexism, and all forms of unjust discrimination. But it says the solution isn't a utopian vision of equality, because the problem doesn't lie just with those in power. We are all weak, imperfect, and every one of us is a sinner, every one of us is capable of being a Napoleon or Stalin or Mao if given the right opportunities. So, rather than decrying all power as oppressive, Christianity teaches that raw power should be curbed, bridled and directed towards the collective good. Indeed, the only thing that justifies inequality in society, says Christianity, is the willingness of the powerful, the elite, to use their power to ameliorate the suffering of the dispossessed. The highest should properly serve the lowest. This is the example Jesus gave—the Son of God leaving heaven to come to us, to give himself as a sacrifice, to show us that power can be for something more than self-gain—it can be for the service of others.

I know this is all pretty high-minded stuff. and perhaps too hard to take in through a sermon. But, if nothing else, I hope you leave knowing that the church is not unaware of the political goings-on in the larger society. It's no virtue for Christians to stick our heads in the sand, in the naïve view that we should restrict ourselves to purely "spiritual matters." Ideas have consequences, and bad ideas have lethal consequences. What goes on "out there" has real effects on us and our neighbors. Out of love for them, we need to be on our guard, lest we be "taken captive by philosophy and empty deceit" (Colossians 2:8); and we need to also be able to show the world how empty and corrupting those philosophies are and offer a better, more gracious alternative.

You know, those in positions of power have always sought to shut Jesus up, to "cancel" him, to get him to "stay in his lane," as in this morning's gospel. But Jesus saw through them. He

perceived what they're doing, he exposed them as frauds and left them speechless. He did this to the critics of his day and he can do it to Critical Theorists in ours. Thanks be to God!