

Heart Matters: Allegiance

Deut 6:1-9; Mt 6:16-24; Romans 14:1-10



We recite pledges of allegiance. We pledge allegiance to the American flag, to the Christian flag, and to the Bible as well. What is allegiance? Where do we owe allegiance? What does allegiance mean, anyway?

Allegiance was one of Jesus' ministry themes. Jesus spoke of our allegiance to God and to God's reign. This was not an issue He took lightly. It was not a light matter for the Old Testament prophets. Jesus called for a restrictive allegiance to His lordship and sovereignty over the believer. He talked about His lordship rising above our cares for family, friends, status, and position. Jesus' call to discipleship was a demand for complete loyalty.

At times, Jesus spoke of wealth as vying with God for our allegiance. It might appear that this was the greatest issue of First Century Judaism, as regarding counter claims for allegiance. Wealth was a central concern, for on one level it spoke of God's blessing and care. On another level, however, Jesus mentioned how one's dependence upon wealth displaced one's dependence upon God. As Matthew records Jesus' words on allegiance, we find wealth set up as the alternate lord. Just after that, Jesus speaks of anxiety and worry over provision in this life.

We can deal with the characterization of Jesus' words about not serving the false gods and idols of the nations. That is not a big problem, especially since we are not generally faced with claims for switching our allegiance to others deities. Unfortunately, it seems that Jesus had a knack for dealing with concerns that are a lot closer to home that we might prefer.

We would rather not find Jesus' words addressing wealth. Wealth is comfortable. It gives us a sense of security. Our nation claims wealth as the answer to the world's problems. Jesus' claims are rather different. Jesus speaks of security—financial security and social security—from trusting God. In our modern context and capitalistic society those words don't seem to make much sense. They make a lot more sense if we remember the context of allegiance to a king in the Ancient Near East. That is, after all, the picture behind the meaning of Jesus' words.

There were several types of treaties in the background of Jesus' day, but they generally spoke to the allegiance of a regional leadership and people to a more powerful military figure. They forged alliances to buy the military protection of a military might. This king to whom they might swear their allegiance would vow to offer protection as long as certain conditions were met. These were generally viewed in terms of monetary tribute. The alliances for protection, however, were also based on the condition that an alliance with one king ruled out having outside provisions for protection. A people accepted alliances for military protection in order that they might enjoy enough peace to work their lands and maintain economic stability.

Often, the alliances of the nations had some relationship to the service of the gods of the king offering protection or demanding subservience. Among most of the neighboring peoples, the kings claimed to be gods or related to the gods. They could speak of serving the king of another nation in the same breath as referencing the gods of other nations. That is what was behind the prohibition against establishing alliances with other nations in the Promised Land. *Yahweh* claimed absolute sovereignty, with no need to rely upon the help of the gods of the other nations to achieve peace and stability. Jesus asked

for the same kind of allegiance. He wanted no other ties to stand in the way of our dependence upon God's care and provision.

Jesus' words spoke in a new way of allegiance to the protections of wealth, popularity, status, and acceptance. He wanted our absolute dependence upon God to countermand every other claim upon our lives. He called to a dependence upon God based upon confidence—a confidence that did not require sacrifices the gain audience with one's Lord, but which requires wholehearted service. He called us to a confident dependence—one with the intimacy of direct access to God.

While military allegiance was designed to protect economic prosperity, Jesus called us to refuse to depend upon earthly prosperity to offer security. Military alliance demanded payment for protection of one's wealth. Jesus calls us to a different level of allegiance—lay your wealth in the hands of God and trust Him to provide. We forget too easily that heaven was a standard Jewish reference to God. Jesus called for entrusting God as our sovereign, not with the required tribute of the model treaties, but with our all. His definition of allegiance went beyond the standard models of the day. It goes beyond our own models as well.

When Jesus reminds us that no one can serve two masters, his words cut to the very concern behind the pledges of allegiance in His day—economic and social stability. He calls us to choose allegiance to God on a different level. Serving God requires absolute allegiance, not the quest for using God to meet our own needs and desires. We are called to a level of dependence that rules out the other issues all together. We must choose between material security and dependence upon God.

Regardless of their understanding the issues, that is the essence of the challenge to allegiance in the Shema. "Hear, O Israel: *Yahweh* is our God, *Yahweh* alone." This is the jealous God who does not allow for competing allegiance. Security, future, and true prosperity depend on a pure devotion and allegiance to *Yahweh*. Nothing else may interfere. Any distraction to dependence upon God's provision is opposition to God's claim of sovereignty over our lives.

As Paul reminds us that if we live as Christians, all we do is to be directed to allow Christ to live through us. We have but one Lord who demands our allegiance. If we choose another as lord of our lives, we give up Christ. Issues of doctrine, manner of worship, and observing Jewish law and tradition were dividing believers in Paul's day. He subjected all division and differences in interpretation to serving Christ Jesus as Lord. Tradition, application of doctrine, and interpretation of Biblical truth were causing division. Paul reminded believers that these were opinions that were in essence competing for allegiance with the lordship of Christ. Our responsibility is to serve Christ as Lord, with pure allegiance, dependence, and trust. We are to allow Christ to live through us.

There are many claims for our allegiance. Some claim our allegiance to definitions of doctrine. Paul ruled that out. Some claim allegiance to the provisions of government for social and economic stability. Jesus ruled that out. Some claim a division between claims for one's material and spiritual allegiance. Jesus ruled that out as well. "Hear, O Israel: *Yahweh* your God, *Yahweh* alone. You shall serve *Yahweh* with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Jesus added "strength." We should have nothing left for other claims of allegiance. It is Christ or nothing. How shall we then choose?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*