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## Rejecting the Empire – Favorite Things #4 – 10.11.9

**Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." John 18:36**

You've seen those old Westerns where the hero, being chased by the crooked marshal and his deputies, makes for the Mexican border. Every effort is made to capture him before he gets to Mexico, but there's an inevitable dramatic moment when, just ahead of the bad guys, he splashes through the Rio Grand and into Mexico and he's safe. He has entered another country, another dominion, another kingdom, and the marshal has no authority there (and even though he breaks other laws, he won't break this one because the movie script says so!) That's the idea of a kingdom, even though we don't use that term anymore. The Kingdom is in force here, but not over there. You're either in the Kingdom or you're not.

The Kingdom of God is just as definite as any earthly dominion, but it doesn't have definite geographical boundaries. God's Kingdom isn't defined by the borders of Israel, or the borders of the U. S. nor is it defined by the four walls of the church. Jesus addressed this in **Luke 17 - 20** **Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, 21nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."**

That means that you are an American if you were born in America, but you aren't a Christian simply by being born into a Christian family or by going to church or by living in a nation that some people think of as a Christian nation. The Kingdom of God isn't like that. You become a citizen of the Kingdom of God by choosing to live under his authority, his rule. The question isn't so much "Am I in the Kingdom of God?" but "Is the Kingdom in me?" "Is it in you?" Another way to put it is "Who do you serve?" Bob Dylan said that "*You gotta serve somebody. It might be the devil, and it might be the Lord...*" God's Kingdom exists everywhere someone lives for him.

With that we move into the topic for today, which isn't so much the Kingdom of God but the alternative, the enemy kingdom that wages war against our souls. Yes, there IS another kingdom at work, and **Colossians 1** describes salvation in reference to it: **13For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

We're going to talk about a couple specific expressions of the dominion of darkness today, expressions which are the more dangerous because they seem mundane. My title is *Rejecting the Empire*, and I have chosen to name this competitor to God's Kingdom The Empire partially as a nod to *Star Wars* (everyone who knows *Star Wars* knows that The Empire is bad!) and mostly in reference to the Roman Empire which makes its presence felt throughout the NT.

Now the Roman Empire is an interesting study. The Empire did a lot of good things (roads, secure shipping lanes, law and order where before there was tribal chaos). And the Empire was staffed by a lot of decent people who were just trying to earn a living, including some spiritually discerning folks like the centurion who sent for Jesus to heal his son and the soldier who stood at the cross and said "Truly this was the Son of God".

At the same time, however, the Roman Empire was usually moving against the Kingdom of God (even if it didn't mean to) and eventually the two clashed and by the time of **Revelation**, the Empire was trying to snuff out the citizens of Heaven because at bottom, the citizens of heaven were the only real threat to the Empire.

Was the Roman Empire an evil thing? No. Was everyone in it of the devil? Not at all. Some accepted Christ and kept their jobs. But deep down, the Empire had a set of beliefs and values that ran contrary to God and pulled people away from the Kingdom of God and therefore had to be rejected.

Likewise, today's Empire isn't defined by the usual scapegoats. Hollywood isn't the Empire we must resist, even though Hollywood often embraces and promotes the values of the Empire that are most contrary to God's Kingdom. Wall Street isn't the Empire, nor is Wal Mart, but there are ways in which both, along with our whole system of commerce and consumption, promote and sustain practices which go against the Kingdom of God. Even Washington DC isn't the Empire, but our political system certainly pushes forward with beliefs and ideas that are against the Kingdom of God.

I almost want to say what Jesus said about God's Kingdom – the Empire is within you – but that isn't completely true. The Empire does plant its thoughts and values in our hearts and minds, but at the same time, it stakes its claim all around us too.

I like how Paul described the Empire: **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12)**. The Empire, it turns out, is all around you, but you can't always see it with your eyes.

So let's talk about some values of the Empire. Some of these values masquerade as Christian values, and some of them are such a part of our culture that we hardly know how to question them anymore.

My outline: Pleasure, Power and Possessions

Pleasure – To call pleasure a value of the Empire is dicey because pleasure is from God. All pleasure, even something that someone has twisted into something awful can be traced back to a blessing God gave us. It's because of God, not his enemies, that we have the pleasures that come from food and sex and sunshine and a cool breeze and strong coffee and sleep. Satan can create nothing and the pleasures that we call sinful are just the ones that we take out of God's presence to use in our own way, or we twist them so that they abuse someone.

And yet when pleasure takes first place for us, it takes on the shape of the Empire rather than the Kingdom of God. And putting it in first place is exactly what the Empire tries to convince us to do. Overeating? Promiscuity? Getting drunk? Overspending? Obsessing on entertainment? You can't sit through a football game today without being targeted by the commercials to do all of the above. It's hard to resist after awhile, hard to see the wisdom of living another way.

But listen to this profound paragraph from **Philippians 3:18-21** - **For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Who are these enemies? Warlords? Abortionists? Slave traders? Not this time. They are people who live only for this world, and thus repudiate the values of the Kingdom. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. They've been assimilated by the Empire. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will**

**be like his glorious body.** When you live for pleasure, your god is your stomach, or worse. It's a step of faith to reject the Empire and its value and choose the Jesus way, the way of the cross.

Power – I'm speaking here of the kind of power where one person rules over another. In first century Israel, there was no doubt who had the power: the Romans. It was their armies, their flags and standards that filled the streets, and their taxes that the people had to pay. In that light, Jesus said some interesting things about power which I'll get to in a minute, but he never told his followers to admire it, learn from it, or to try to go get some for themselves.

For all of my life, I have lived in the most powerful nation on earth. When I was a kid, we feared that the Soviet Union was more powerful, but it turned out to not be so, and they went out of business. As a result, it has been easy for us to be like the people who are criticized in **Psalm 20:7** where it says: **Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.**

And then for half my life or more, evangelical Christians have had quite a bit of political power too. Of course we don't all have the same political views here at MHCC and we don't all vote the same, but there is a strong movement of evangelical Christians that does a decent job of motivating many of us to speak out on certain issues and vote for certain candidates. And they've been successful with this, more so in some years than others. In 2008, the Republican party added Sarah Palin to its ticket as a way to shore up the evangelical base.

It can be intoxicating to be powerful, even if it's just as a small part of a larger movement, or as a citizen of a large country. And if you grow up in that kind of culture, you might be tempted to worship power everywhere, from the MLB millionaire ballplayer who can get away with whatever he wants, or the business person who crushes the competition, or the guy with a stash of guns who says "This is my property and I'll shoot anyone who comes on it", or even the religious leader who is accountable to nobody and who has the power to get things done quickly. Those are the values of the Empire, to lift up the strong and the successful and follow the powerful and maybe become powerful ourselves.

But what did Jesus say about that kind of power? "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". And: **"...the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).**

We all deal in power every day, in our relationships at work or school, even at home. It's a fire that has to be handled carefully, and we have to constantly reject the temptation to use it for ourselves. It's an act of faith to reject the Empire's teaching on power and choose the Jesus way.

Possessions – I have become convinced that the most dangerous and potentially most oppressive manifestation of Empire these days isn't the government, but businesses – commerce, marketing, materialism and all of that. I even suspect that when we look for the warnings in **Revelation** to come to pass, we probably should pay more attention to the world of business than to government. The Mark of the Beast, after all, is a mark of commerce. You get it or else you cannot buy and sell in the marketplace. Actually, there isn't much of a distinction between government and business anyway, since big businesses finance campaigns and exercise tremendous influence in government.

This past Monday night in our Financial Peace University class, Dave Ramsey showed us the history of how credit has been developed in the United States. According to Dave Ramsey, the early Sears catalog called debt "foolish" and Ford didn't sell cars on credit because Henry Ford was so against it. But gradually people began to realize what a profitable product credit is, and it has

been so successfully marketed to us that we not only accept it as commonplace, but it's the one product where we fill out applications and beg for the privilege of buying it!

My point today isn't the pitfalls of credit, but rather how the values of this Empire have been so skillfully marketed to us in the service of getting us to get more possessions. To modify an idea I heard from Rob Bell recently: If you have to put your car in the shop, and they give you an embarrassing loaner...how do you handle that? You take it to a job interview and when you arrive, everyone is standing outside and they see you drive up, and you introduce yourself and then the first thing you say is "It's a loaner!"; or to a class reunion where everyone is sizing each other up trying to see who is living up to their potential and who isn't..."It isn't mine, it's a loaner. Of course I would never own such a thing!" If that's you or me, we probably have bought into the values of the Empire instead of the Kingdom, especially the value that says that you are what you own.

It isn't that marketing is a sin or possessions are wrong. Indeed it would be far simpler to deal with them if they were; then we could simply shun them. But Jesus warned: **"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15)**. It's a clear difference between the Empire value and the Kingdom value, and it is an act of faith to choose to live the Jesus way.

Pleasure, power, possessions – they aren't just free floating temptations, but the values of an Empire, one that competes with the Kingdom of God, the Jesus way, for our loyalty. Jesus calls us to a way that is fundamentally different, radically better. Listen!

**Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** Luke 12:32-3