

The Christian American

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Many of the servants this curriculum is written for live as Orthodox Christians in a country that is not ancestrally Orthodox, and whose cultural air is shaped by values that sometimes agree with the Gospel and sometimes quietly oppose it. This lesson is about the particular task of being faithful to Christ in the American setting — how to love our country without absolutizing it, how to use its freedoms without being shaped by its assumptions, how to raise Orthodox children in a pluralistic world, and how to witness to a Gospel that is older than any nation and larger than any political moment. The Fathers spoke to their own cultures with the same question. We draw on their wisdom and on the Scriptures' long experience of the people of God living as pilgrims among many nations.

Citizens of Two Kingdoms

The New Testament gives us a clear posture toward earthly citizenship. The Christian is a citizen of the country where he lives, and he is also — more deeply, more ultimately — a citizen of a kingdom whose King is Christ.

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Philippians 3:20, NKJV

St. Paul wrote this as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:27–28), using the privileges of Rome when they served the Gospel, and yet never placing his ultimate hope in Rome. He is our model. We do not despise the country where the Lord has placed us. We honor its good, obey its just laws, pray for its leaders, and serve our neighbors in it. And we do not confuse any earthly city with the eternal one.

The Epistle to Diognetus, one of the most beautiful writings of the early Church, captures this double citizenship in a single paragraph:

“Christians dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.” Epistle to Diognetus V

That sentence is, word for word, a description of the Christian American. At home here; a stranger here. Loving this country; not finally belonging to it.

Honoring the Country

Scripture speaks with unusual clarity about our duty to the earthly order. Paul, writing under an emperor far from friendly to the Church, still instructs:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” Romans 13:1, NKJV

This is not a baptism of every policy of every administration. It is the recognition that ordered civic life is itself a gift of God, and that Christians are to be good and honorable participants in it. We pay our taxes. We vote thoughtfully. We serve on juries. We keep the laws. We are not subversive or cynical citizens; we are among the best our country has.

Jeremiah, writing to Israel in Babylonian exile, gives us the most useful sentence for Christians living in any country to which their deepest loyalty does not belong:

“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” Jeremiah 29:7, NKJV

Seek the peace of the city. Pray for it. Do it honest good. That is the posture of the Christian American in every generation, regardless of who holds office.

Love Without Absolutizing

There is a particular temptation in any country — and it is no less present in America — to baptize one's national story as though it were the Gospel's own. Christians have fallen into this in every age. The remedy is not cynicism about our country but a clear-eyed love that knows the difference between the nation and the kingdom.

The apostles refused, firmly but courteously, to confuse the two. When the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching, Peter and John answered:

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:19–20, NKJV

This is the sentence every Christian must be ready to speak, in whatever country he serves, whenever the country's demands come into direct conflict with the Lord's. Such moments are, for most of us, rare. When they come, though, they come with clarity.

In the daily life of a parish, the danger is usually subtler: not persecution, but a slow adoption of the culture's reflexes. The Christian American must learn to recognize when a political position is being dressed in Gospel language that does not actually fit it, and when a Gospel position is being softened to fit a political coalition we happen to favor. The Gospel is neither of the left nor of the right; it is older than the American founding and longer than any election cycle.

St. Augustine, who wrote *The City of God* as the Roman Empire fell around him, gives us a sentence to keep near:

“Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The earthly city glories in herself; the heavenly, in the Lord.” St. Augustine, The City of God XIV.28

Freedom and Its Discipline

America's most famous gift to her citizens is freedom, and the Christian American should be honestly grateful for it. Freedom of religion in particular has allowed our Church to worship, teach, build, and evangelize with a latitude our ancestors in many lands would have considered miraculous. We do not take this lightly. We use it gratefully.

But the Christian understanding of freedom is not the same as the cultural understanding of freedom. The culture tends to define freedom as the absence of constraint — 'I can do whatever I want.' The Scripture defines freedom as the presence of the right capacity — the ability, given by grace, to do what is actually good.

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Galatians 5:13, NKJV

A Christian American is therefore a free citizen in two senses that must not be confused. He has political freedoms from his country, which he uses gratefully. He has evangelical freedom in Christ, which is the freedom to love, to serve, to tell the truth, to forgive, to be patient. The second is the deeper, the permanent, and the one for which he finally lives.

One practical outcome of this double understanding: the Christian American exercises his political freedoms with a restraint that the culture often does not understand. Not every thing he is permitted to do is a thing he should do. His speech is gentled by love. His consumption is bounded by stewardship. His politics are softened by prayer for those he disagrees with. This is not weakness; it is the freedom of a son of God, living in the meantime.

Raising Children as Christian Americans

For parents and teachers, a central pastoral question is how to raise children who are truly Orthodox and truly rooted in this country without being assimilated out of the faith. This has been the immigrant Orthodox experience for more than a century, and it remains the daily work of many of our families.

A few wisdoms have come down from those who have done this well. First, the home is the first church. The icon corner, the evening prayer, the fast days observed together, the feast days celebrated with joy — these give a child an Orthodox taste for life long before he can articulate doctrine. Second, the parish must be non-negotiable. A child who attends liturgy reliably, sings in the choir, serves at the altar, or teaches younger children grows up knowing where his home is. Third, Orthodox friendships matter. A child who has a circle of Orthodox peers with whom he talks about faith will find it much easier, in college and beyond, to remain faithful. Fourth, parents must model the struggle rather than

pretend they have arrived. A child who sees his parents praying, confessing, forgiving each other, and continuing to serve through difficulty learns what adult faith actually looks like.

“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” Ephesians 6:4, NKJV

It is important also to be patient with the questions the culture will put to our children. We should not be surprised when our children ask hard questions. We should welcome them. A home where difficult questions can be asked without fear is a home where the Lord can answer them. A home where such questions are met with alarm often drives the young believer to ask them somewhere else.

Witnessing in a Pluralistic World

The Christian American lives and works alongside people of many faiths and no faith. This is, from one angle, the great mission opportunity of our time. The ancient Christian way of witness is not argument but life.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:16, NKJV

A Christian colleague who is honest in his work, gentle in his speech, faithful to his spouse, generous with his time, and quietly unembarrassed about his faith will, over the course of years, be noticed. Some will come to ask. For those who ask, the Scripture has a simple counsel:

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” 1 Peter 3:15, NKJV

'With meekness and fear.' Our witness is never combative; it is always warm, always humble, always rooted in a visible life.

A second way we witness is by hospitality. Our tables, our homes, our parishes should be places where the stranger is welcomed without first being interrogated about his beliefs. Hospitality is one of the oldest evangelical instruments the Church has, and it remains, in our busy and divided country, one of the most powerful.

May the Lord who has placed each of us in a particular country, in a particular generation, teach us to live in America as Christians first and as Americans gratefully second. May He preserve us from the confusion of the nation with the kingdom, and from the cynicism that refuses to love our country because it is not the kingdom. May He give us speech that is honest and gentle, freedom that serves rather than serves itself, homes that pass the faith on whole to our children, and hospitality wide enough to make room for the stranger. And may every servant among us finish his days having sought the peace of the city and yet having never forgotten that his citizenship is in heaven.

Review Questions

1. The Epistle to Diognetus describes Christians as citizens of every country and strangers in every country at once. How does this double citizenship show up concretely in our own life as Christian Americans?
2. Jeremiah told the exiles to 'seek the peace of the city.' What is one specific way we could do that this year in our workplace, our neighborhood, or our civic life?
3. Where, in the last political season, did we notice the temptation to dress a political position in Gospel language, or to soften a Gospel position to fit a political one? What did that teach us?
4. The cultural definition of freedom is the absence of constraint; the Christian definition is the presence of the capacity to do what is good. Where is that distinction currently asking something of us?
5. For parents and teachers: of the four wisdoms named (home as first church, non-negotiable parish, Orthodox friendships, modeling the struggle), which one is most solid in our family, and which most needs attention?
6. 1 Peter 3:15 asks us to give an answer 'with meekness and fear.' What tone do our conversations about faith currently have, and what would it look like to soften them without softening the Gospel?
7. Hospitality is one of the oldest evangelical instruments. Whom could we welcome to our table in the next month — not as an evangelistic project, but simply as a person the Lord is bringing near?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- Epistle to Diognetus (2nd century). In Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, The City of God. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 2.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans (on Romans 13).
- Fr. Thomas Hopko, Speaking the Truth in Love: Education, Mission, and Witness in Contemporary Orthodoxy.
- Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, For the Life of the World (on the Christian's witness in culture).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes