

“Jesus and Politics”
Matthew 22:15-22
May 26, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus didn't say a great deal about politics. Today's passage, though, contains one of his most significant pronouncements about this topic. His declaration is both simple and profound: **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's”** (Matt. 22:21).

It would seem that politics was about as divisive in Jesus' day as in our own, because the topic was brought up by Jesus' enemies in the hopes of getting him in trouble. Matthew tells us this right at the beginning. **“Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words”** (v. 15). The first word there, “then,” is not without significance. It connects this passage with the preceding parable. Jesus had spoken about heaven as the great wedding banquet, mentioning how many miss that banquet because of their anger against God. Here we have that anger expressed against Jesus.

The Pharisees enlist the Herodians to help them in their plot. These are strange allies because they agreed on almost nothing. The Pharisees were the strict conservatives of their day. Politically, they saw the presence of the Romans as their main problem. The Herodians, on the other hand, were favorable toward the Romans. They were called Herodians because they were behind King Herod, who ruled at the direction of Rome. So the alliance of these two groups shows the depth of their animosity toward Jesus. It's the old idea of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

So they came to Jesus with what they thought was a sure way to trip him up. They would ask him a question that would get him in trouble no matter how he answered. **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”** If he answered that it was lawful, he would be taking a political position that wasn't very popular. The Romans were widely viewed by the Jews as pagan idolaters. Even the coin used to pay this tax had these words written around its perimeter: “Tiberius, Caesar, worshipful son of the divine Augustus.” So if Jesus took this unpopular position that taxes should be paid, he would lose favor with the people and the goal of the Pharisees would be met. Jesus would be marginalized. If, on the other hand, he took the popular position that taxes should not be paid to Rome, he would get into trouble with the Roman authorities. The Herodians would charge him with being a revolutionary, worthy of execution.

Has anyone here ever gotten into some trouble with other Christians by some political statement you've made? I'm taking the risk this morning that I

might not be as successful as Jesus in escaping trouble when venturing into the political arena. I think one of the needs of the hour is for us not to allow our divisive political climate to spill over into the church. It feels to many in the church that politics is like the third rail today. That's the one that is electrified—if you touch it, you die. I believe that it is possible for us to remain unified as a church even in the midst of divergent political views held by church members. Such unity is possible to the degree that we faithfully follow Jesus. I'm going to be talking about politics today, not because I think I have anything of particular value to add to this discussion. There's no reason you should listen to me about political matters. But you should listen to Jesus. So let's look more carefully at what he said about politics that we might further this unity in our divisive world.

I. What Do We Owe Caesar?

The point of this passage is not to show us how clever Jesus was in escaping this trap set for him, though his answer was indeed witty and clever. Who could argue that the coin with Caesar's picture on it belonged to him? But his purpose was far bigger than winning a verbal joust with his opponents. He is announcing a significant change in the relationship between civil government and the Church. In the Old Testament, Israel functioned both as the civil governing authority and the people of God, the Church. But from this point forward there is to be a division between those two. Jesus teaches this through his "both-and" statement instead of an "either-or" statement. There is a role both for Caesar, for civil government whose rulers may be pagan idol-worshippers, and for God's people, the Church. The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is Lord over both realms, but they have different purposes and roles. So let's look first at the role of Caesar as we ask this question of what we owe Caesar.

The first and most obvious answer in this passage is that we owe our taxes. This obligation to pay our taxes is not reduced by the evil purposes the government might make of our tax dollars. It was certainly the case that not everything the Roman government did met biblical moral standards. Bribery, corruption and cruelty were sometimes funded by these tax dollars. But also funded were the roads Rome was famous for, roads that were later used to carry the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman army was cruel and ruthless at times, but at other times the governmental authorities, as they enforced the rule of law, served to protect the apostles from unlawful attack by their opponents. It is the same in our day, with our civil government at every level providing many helpful services, but while also using our tax dollars in ways we would not endorse. Even so, Jesus says to pay your taxes.

Second, we owe obedience to all lawful commands, which are defined as any command that doesn't require us to disobey God. Peter said it this way in

his first letter; **“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good”** (2:13-14). Peter says that it is for the Lord’s sake that we render such obedience. This motive makes it possible to obey laws that we might find defective in some way. We do it for the Lord’s sake.

Third, we are to honor the government. Peter adds later in that same passage the command to **“Honor the emperor”** (2:17). I think there are at least a couple of duties involved in this. First, cultivate gratitude as your dominant attitude toward the government instead of cynicism and complaints. Think of where we would be without government services. You would have had a difficult time making it to church this morning because no one would be responsible to keep the roads clear and the traffic lights working. If you go out to eat after church this morning, you would be far more likely to eat something harmful to you without health inspectors going before you to inspect the kitchens of those restaurants. When you fill up your car with gas, you may or may not be getting a full gallon of fuel that you paid for because the government would not be there to provide a bureau of standards and measurements.

I came across a story this week told by the late Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina.

A veteran returning from Korea went to college on the GI Bill; bought his house with an FHA loan; saw his kids born in a VA hospital; started a business with an SBA loan; got electricity from TVA and, then, water from a project funded by the EPA. His kids participated in the school-lunch program and made it through college courtesy of government-guaranteed student loans. His parents retired to a farm on their social security, getting electricity from the REA and the soil tested by the USDA. When the father became ill, his life was saved with a drug developed through NIH; the family was saved from financial ruin by Medicare... Then one day he wrote his congressman an angry letter complaining about paying taxes for all those [welfare] programs created for ungrateful people.

Another part of honoring the government is to guard against spreading falsehoods about it. I mention this because some of you have been doing it through re-posting on Facebook something you read there, while a quick fact check would reveal that the content was untrue. Just because something appears on the internet doesn’t make it true. If you don’t know how to do a fact check, I would encourage you not to post that thing you read, even if you agree with the ideology behind it. As Christians, we are to be men and women of truth because our God is a God of truth.

Finally, we owe to the government our prayers. Instead of complaining, cynical words spoken to others, I wonder how much better our nation would be

if every Christian would instead offer words of prayer to God for our leaders. This is clearly what the Scriptures command of us. **“I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions”** (1 Timothy 2:1-2). This is especially true in areas where we are tempted to complain. Psalm 82 contains God’s words to earthly rulers, and they would be well-suited to our prayers for them. **“Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”**

II. What Do We Owe to God Alone?

God alone is due our worship. One of the greatest tragedies in the world, something that has led to more deaths than anything else I can think of, is when the worship of God is replaced by the worship of the state. While there are many good things civil government is able to do for us, there are some things they cannot do, things that only God can do. And if the state attempts to do these things, the results are never good. Totalitarianism results. Every totalitarian state I can think of starts with an attempt to bring heaven to earth. It has some vision of an ideal state, whether it is Marx’s vision of the rule of the common worker or Hitler’s vision of the Third Reich and of Aryan supremacy for a millennium. How many millions lost their lives in those misguided efforts to make the state ultimate? The state cannot bring heaven to earth. The state cannot change people’s hearts. It cannot make people love one another. The state cannot cleanse the guilty conscience and deliver us from the fear of death. Only God can do these things and only God is to be worshiped.

One of the special callings of the Church is to stand against the idolatry of state worship. Such idolatry can happen on the right and on the left of the political spectrum, for those in power are always tempted to overreach and use their power foolishly. One of the noteworthy failures of the Church in this regard was the failure of the German church to speak up as Hitler was gaining power and using that power illicitly. The majority of the German church failed to speak up as Hitler preached his vision of German nationalism. Germany had suffered tremendously following World War I, and Hitler seemed to offer hope to Germans that he could return the nation to the might they all wanted. He realized that the church would be an obstacle he would have to overcome, so he began seeking authority over the church. When he started making laws that disadvantaged the Jews, small at first but rising eventually to fatal, the majority of church leaders remained silent. They reasoned that the goal of returning the nation to its place of strength was worth overlooking a few of the shortcomings of their leader. We all know the tragic results of this.

Our second obligation to God is to trust him. God alone is worthy of our ultimate trust. How often have politicians promised one thing during election

season and done something else when in office? How often has God promised one thing and done another? Never. Who should you trust? When the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus to ask him this question, they began with some flattery. **“Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances”** (v. 16). They were simply seeking to make sure Jesus answered their question, because it was considered rude in his day to ignore such affirmation. But in saying those things, they spoke better than they knew. Jesus has never and will never utter a falsehood. He can be trusted completely. Worldly leaders promise some version of heaven but never deliver it. Jesus secures heaven for us. The world’s leaders often use their position for personal gain. Jesus sacrifices personal gain, to the point even of giving up his life, for our sakes.

Have you put your trust in Jesus? I don’t just mean your trust for heaven, though that is of paramount importance. Do you trust him in this life as you are governed by people you don’t fully trust? I think one of the evidences of trusting Jesus is when we learn not to respond out of fear. By almost any measure that might be used, our nation has been in a moral decline for several decades now. How should we respond to that? We respond by trusting God, not by giving way to fear. When we are afraid, we tend to vilify our political opponents. When we trust God, we are freed up to love them instead. We can still disagree with them, but we can disagree in a loving way.

CONCLUSION:

I don’t know whether things in our nation are going to get better or worse over the coming years. What I do know is what God calls us to do. He calls us to trust him and to love people. Part of what that looks like is to be the best citizens of our community as we can be. That may sometimes require suffering on our part, as a brave minority of the Christian leaders in Germany discovered, men such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It will also require us to stay engaged as citizens, not withdrawing and giving up on our society. And it will require us to labor to make the Church strong. A strong Church is the best gift I can think of for a culture that is going off the rails. Jesus said about us that we are salt and light to a decaying and darkened world. So let’s be the Church Jesus has called us to be.