

## Caesar and/or God

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

November 8, 2020

Mark 12:13-17

What do you preach on the Sunday following one of the most momentous presidential elections in history? That is an especially prickly question when you have to finish writing before the election had been called. I thought I would preach on one of the commandments. Maybe the eleventh: Thou shalt not gloat. Or the twelfth: Neither a sore loser nor an ungracious winner shalt thou be. I think perhaps it would be wiser if we addressed a broader, yet related issue, drawing on the teachings of Jesus, as we are doing in this series of sermons.

The larger issue is the Christian's obligations/responsibilities to God and/or to the state. Our text includes one of Jesus' best-known teachings, in its classic King James formulation: "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.*"

I should alert you: we are going to get into the weeds of ancient history and the Bible. I promise I will eventually get us back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in what I used to call the "so what" part of the sermon.

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First, some historical context. From the mid-second century Before the Common Era to the mid-first century, Judea, which was all that was left of the once great kingdom of David, enjoyed 100 years of political freedom after centuries of being dominated by a succession of foreign powers. But forty years before Jesus was born Rome swept in and took away Judea's autonomy as a nation.

As the years passed, many Jews adjusted to the new political reality; they made whatever accommodations they felt they had to make to get along. Others nursed bitter resentment toward the Romans and to a lesser degree toward their fellow Jews who were, in their opinion, selling out.

Those conflicting sentiments collided around the issue of paying taxes to Rome. Some people saw paying taxes as a necessary evil – what else are you going to do? While others saw refusal to pay taxes as a radical statement of resistance. Indeed, there had been an ill-fated revolt in Galilee around the time Jesus was born. The leader – Judas of Galilee – said that Jews who paid taxes to Rome were cowards. (Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, 2:117-118; Acts 5:37)

That is the historical backdrop for the incident that is described in our text.

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The text says that some Pharisees – you remember that they were one of the two major religious groups in first century Judea, along with the Sadducees – plotted to entrap Jesus. What was the nature of the trap?

According to the first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, the Pharisees had a "capacity for greatly opposing kings." This opposition sometimes "elevated to a pitch of open fighting and mischief." Josephus records an incident in which the population of Judea was told to swear their allegiance to Herod (who ruled Judea for the Romans); the Pharisees refused. Events escalated, and some Pharisees were executed. (Antiquities of the Jews, 17:2,4)

The Pharisees came to Jesus, bringing some Herodians along. Who were the Herodians? As their name implies, they were a political group that supported the rule of the Herods, the ruling party that was so despised by the Pharisees. It was the strangest of all strange bedfellows.

The leader of this odd grouping of political/religious perspectives asked Jesus, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?*”

You see the trap: if Jesus said, Yes, we should pay taxes to Rome, he would alienate the Pharisees. If he answered, No, we should not pay taxes to Rome, he would alert the Herodians of his radical views, and they would likely report him to the appropriate authorities.

It was a delicious trap. There seemed no way out. But, as you know, Jesus found one. He asked for a denarius, which was the amount of the annual census tax, and asked whose head and title were on the coin. They answered, “The emperor’s.” Jesus responded famously, “*Then give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor and to God the things that belong to God.*”

It was a shrewd move. They gave him two options: pay taxes or not, A or B. Jesus answered, C. The text says, “*And they were utterly amazed at him.*” And well they should have been. It got him out of a tight jam. But did it leave a blueprint for the way his followers in future generations should deal with questions about their relationship with the state, government, politics?

Let’s see.

A couple of decades later, Paul wrote his powerful Epistle to the Romans in which he set forward the theological principle that has been so influential throughout history: “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist (i.e. the Roman Empire) have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed.*”

Whereas Jesus’ response to the direct question about paying taxes to Rome was a bit – let’s admit it -- evasive, Paul left no doubt about where he came down on that thorny issue. “*Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*” (Romans 13:1-7) Paying taxes to Rome was part of what it meant to “*render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,*” according to Paul.

What we do not know is whether Paul had a change of mind and heart a decade or so later when the emperor Nero blamed the burning of Rome on “a class hated for their abominations,” i.e., Christians, and tortured and put to death many believers, including, according to an ancient tradition, Paul himself.

If Paul had dictated a letter in his last moments, do you imagine that he would said, “I stand by what I said in Romans,” or do you think he would have said, “I am having second thoughts about the thirteenth chapter. I’ll get back to you.”?

Fast forward to the last decade of the first century. Rome was persecuting Christians on a large scale. The book of Revelation offers a graphic image of the suffering:

*I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given. . . . They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of*

*their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed. (Revelation 6:9-11)*

If Christians were to “*render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s*” in that tragic circumstance, what exactly would that be?

For two thousand years Christians have struggled with and argued over what it means to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, on occasion coming to diametrically opposed conclusions.

There is one thing I believe all Christians can or should be able to agree on: when Jesus said, “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s,*” he was saying, at bare minimum, they’re not the same thing.

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This is the “so what” part.

Any effort to identify Christianity with a nation or an administration or a party, any effort to identify the Gospel with a political platform is to confuse God and Caesar. They’re not the same.

The state is always happy to use the church for its own benefit. But the church is always diminished in the process.

Bad things can happen when believers merge God and Caesar. To put it crassly, as only Bob Dylan could back in the day, “You don’t count the dead when God’s on your side.”

The United States is not a Christian nation. It is not God’s last, best hope.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “*Thy kingdom come. . . on earth,*” he wasn’t talking about your favorite political party.

Scripture encourages us to make “*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings . . . for kings and all who are in high positions.*” (I Timothy 2:2) Yes, we will pray for them. But we will also hold them accountable. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The church is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”

Our call to accountability, like our prayers, will be nonpartisan. We will hold “our party” to the same standards – the standards we have learned of Jesus -- that we hold the “other party” to. That alone would constitute a new day in America! Amen.