

Render to Caesar, Render to God
Matthew 22:15-22

Supply chain problems and rising prices. Taliban control of Afghanistan and Russian aggression against Ukraine. Vaccines and use of masks to fight Covid-19. What exactly do we think our President, or any political leaders should do about such things? In fact, what's the proper role of the Federal Government where it comes to energy policy or environmental regulations, to labor law or tax rates? What exactly should our Federal tax dollars be spent on?

Well, none of us want our money to be wasted or misused. Liberals tend to disapprove of military spending, while conservatives don't want tax dollars to fund abortion or to resettle illegal immigrants or to provide disability benefits to people who really could get a job if they wanted it. For one reason or another, most of us object to all sorts of Federal expenditures.

But I doubt that any of us are as uneasy about paying our taxes as the Jewish people were in the days that Matthew describes. After all, even though none of them had any say at all in who the Roman Emperor would be, that Emperor had something close to absolute power over them. Yes, Pontius Pilate, the man the Emperor had appointed to be governor of Judea, could pretty much do whatever he wanted. And he did just that.

For example, although Pilate knew the Jewish people would be violently opposed to it, he ordered his soldiers to bring their military standards, long poles with carved eagles on the top, into Jerusalem. No previous governor had dared to do this, as the presence of such images in the Holy City was a clear violation of the second commandment. The people demonstrated so forcefully against the new rule that Pilate was forced to remove the standards.

But that wasn't the end of his ham-handed policies. Even programs that should have been popular somehow backfired on him. For example, Pilate had an aqueduct constructed to bring more water into Jerusalem. Now, the Temple was a chief beneficiary of this project, as lots of water was always needed to clean up after all those

bloody animal sacrifices. Pilate therefore thought it most reasonable for the Temple treasury to make a generous contribution to the building of the aqueduct.

But the Temple authorities had other ideas. They thought it sinful to use money that had been given as offerings to God to help pay for such a “secular” purpose. And so, in true Roman fashion, Pilate simply took the money by force, engendering yet more ill will among the citizens of Jerusalem.

And so, by the time the events of this chapter took place, a week at the end of which Jesus would have his own confrontation with Pilate, the question of Roman authority in general and Roman taxation in particular had reached the boiling point. It was into such a highly charged atmosphere that Jesus’ opponents injected their seemingly innocent question – should we give tribute to Caesar or not?

So, why did they raise this issue? As verse 15 says, they were trying to entangle Jesus, driving a wedge either between Jesus and his followers or between Jesus and the Roman officials. For it seems that Jesus would lose, whichever way He chose to respond. If He said the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, He would forfeit much of His popularity, especially with the nationalists who were hoping that He would lead them in an uprising. But if He were to say the Jews shouldn’t pay their taxes, His enemies could rat Him out to the Roman governor as a threat to the peace and stability of Roman rule. And we know that Pilate was only too willing to crush any open opposition.

So, how did Jesus avoid becoming entangled? By revealing that his questioners were in fact the ones caught in their own snare. “Bring me a coin,” He said, and they produced a Roman denarius, a common coin worth a day’s wages for a working-man. This was not a difficult request, as many of Jesus’ listeners probably carried such coins with them every day.

But what, exactly, should carrying such a coin mean to a Jewish nationalist? After all, every one of the denarii minted by Emperor Tiberius had not one, but two images on them. The Emperor himself was depicted on one side. The other side showed his mother, Livia, as an incarnation of the goddess Pax, or peace. In other words, if the Jewish nationalists objected to Roman soldiers carrying Imperial Eagles in

Jerusalem, how much more should they refuse to carry such idolatrous images in their own pockets?

But these coins didn't just have pictures on them – they also had inscriptions. On the denarii of Tiberius, the Emperor is called “Son of the Divine Augustus.” He is also called “Pontifex Maximus,” or High Priest of the Roman state religion. These coins were thus thoroughly pagan, idolatrous and even blasphemous, yet they were routinely used by Jesus' questioners – the same men who sought to destroy His popularity among the Jewish nationalists who hated the Romans with a white-hot passion.

So, what did the possession of such coins say about those who sought to trap Jesus? If they sought to brand Him as an ally of Rome, they held in their very hands the evidence that condemned them of the same thing. So if he should lose popularity with the crowds, so should they.

But the denarii in their hands wasn't an embarrassment only for Jesus' accusers. No, those coins also convicted all the Jews of hypocrisy. For as much as they may have resented and even despised the Romans, at the same time they were perfectly willing to take advantage of one of the chief benefits of the Imperial system – a stable and universal medium of exchange. Thus, when Jesus says that the Jews should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, He's making it quite clear that if they were going to use Caesar's money, the Jews should also help to support the government that made that money possible.

And now I think we can see that Jesus' answer applies to us as well, doesn't it? For Jesus thus clarifies every Christian's proper relationship to the government, making it clear that we can be loyal to King Jesus and loyal subjects of Caesar at the same time.

The church has not always understood this. Even today, for example, the Amish assert that they owe Caesar very little, refusing to vote or hold office or to serve in the armed forces. But in refusing to do these things, they are caught with denarii in their hands. For in their attempt to separate themselves from impurity, they are refusing to support the very system of government that protects them against invasion and that paves and polices the roads on which they drive their buggies, and that supports the

medium of exchange they use to sell their crops. Like the ancient Jews, they want to drink from the Roman aqueduct but they don't want to help pay for it.

And however much we may all grouse about abuse and fraud and waste in the Federal Government, we know that sort of separatism isn't right. Instead, Jesus teaches that we should pay our taxes in return for the benefits the government provides for us, such as peace and security and order. And given Jesus' teaching, we know that we also owe the government obedience to the laws – for it wouldn't make sense for us to pay the policemen to enforce the laws only to turn around and break those same laws, would it?

So much is obvious, and so much is clearly spelled out by Peter and Paul in I Timothy 2, as well as in Romans 13 and I Peter 2. And so of course we should pray for all who are in authority. Of course we should obey the Laws. And, yes, these admonitions are all the more striking when we remember that Peter and Paul – and Jesus – were in fact put to death by the very Imperial system that they taught the Church to obey. So how much more should we American Christians render to Caesar the taxes and the obedience that he deserves?

For we Americans need to face facts: there is quite a complicated relationship between our loyalty to God and our loyalty to human rulers, between what we owe to God and what we owe to Caesar. For remember, in our governmental system, the sovereignty actually lies with us. No, in our day-to-day lives, we may seem to have no control over what the government does, but the fact remains that all elected officials at every level of government actually work for us. That's why they regularly spend so much time and money asking for our votes – they serve at our pleasure.

And that's why we modern American Christians don't have the luxury of sitting back and blaming bad policy on some hereditary monarch or military strongman. That's why we don't just owe Caesar our taxes and our obedience – for when we go into the voting booth, we are Caesar. That means when we seek to balance our loyalty to God and to government, we must also take into account our responsibility to participate in making the laws and thus in levying the taxes.

And fortunately for us, the second part of Jesus' comment in verse 25 helps us begin to figure out how to do this: we must render to God the things that are God's.

That means that we mustn't allow what we owe to Caesar to interfere with what we owe to God. But what do we owe God? And how is that separate from what we owe to Caesar?

Well, what we owe to God as individuals is similar in many ways to what we owe to Caesar. For if we owe the government our taxes, surely we owe God our tithes. Think about it. Jesus points to Caesar's picture on the money. Jesus says we should thus support the government that makes money possible. Well, if the government mints our coins, surely God is the One Who gives us the ability to earn them. If money has value because the government says it does, surely God is the One Who keeps the government from collapsing in ruins. So surely if we can pay Caesar his 30% or more, we can give God His tenth.

And isn't the same thing true of our obedience? If we obey the laws of the government because we enjoy the peace and order that such laws create, how much more should we obey God's law? For God has saved us from much more than earthly chaos – He has freed us from the power of sin, bringing us out of darkness into light. So, surely we ought to obey God's law as a way of expressing our thanks and praise.

But that raises another question for us Americans, Caesars that we are. How do we obey God's law as citizens and as voters? How do we render God His due in the realm of politics? What's the relationship between our faith and our responsibility to elect public officials?

Well, folks like the ACLU would say there is no connection. They would say that how you vote and what laws your elected officials make should have nothing to do with your private beliefs. And some who are running for office say the same thing, stating for example that they are personally opposed to abortion, but that they certainly wouldn't try to make abortion illegal. They would say that God and government are thus completely separate.

Is that right? Is what we owe to Caesar completely separate from what we owe to God? Of course not, for remember, we Americans are Caesar. Just as we can't deny our responsibility to help make human laws, so we can't deny our responsibility to follow God's law.

So, how do we Christian voters render unto God the things that are God's? Wouldn't it be by working to bring the laws of the land more into agreement with the laws of God?

No, I'm not saying that the Church should rule the state. Remember, churches can't vote. Since churches don't thus have any political power, they don't have any political responsibility.

Individual Christians, however, are quite different. Individual Christian voters and individual Christian elected officials have the power to help make laws, and so they have the responsibility to vote and legislate according to what God thinks is right. That's the way Christians can render to God the things that are God's.

But isn't this trying to legislate morality? Not at all – a Christian knows full well he can't force anyone to believe anything. But that's not the point of law anyway. Laws are put in place not to make people believe, but to make people behave. And it is a perfectly legitimate thing for the government to lay down the rules to preserve social order, to encourage people to behave decently instead of destructively.

We Christians should know best of all how necessary this function of government is. For one of the basic requirements of admission to the Church is for us to confess that we are not naturally good but are sinners. And we Christians know all too well that every day we struggle to bring our behavior into line with God's will expressed in His Word. So, how can we Christians, sinful and weak as we know ourselves to be, how can we doubt that everyone needs the sorts of rules and regulations that governments provide?

No, we Christians know full well that there have to be some rules in society, some laws to keep people from giving in to all their baser instincts. We also know that God's Word is divinely inspired, and is the sufficient rule of our faith and practice. So, as Christian voters and as Christian elected officials, why shouldn't we allow God's rules to guide us as we seek to determine what rules our communities should follow?

So, yes, let's remember to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Let's pay our taxes and obey the laws and pray for our leaders. But if we as Christian voters

and as Christian elected officials would also render unto God the things that are God's, let's take into account God's law as we vote and as we work for the passage of laws. Even as we remain loyal American citizens, let us first and foremost acknowledge Christ as our King.