

Render to Caesar, Render to God
Mark 12:13-17

During many Presidential campaigns, the nominees of the two major parties are pretty much settled by this time, but this year seems to be a bit different, doesn't it? We may not have clear frontrunners by the time our own primary rolls around on March 8, so we Mississippians might actually get a chance to have a say in who the nominees will be.

And that means we might see some of the major candidates campaigning in our state. Donald Trump or Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio or Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton might show up and make some promises to us for a change.

Okay, so what do we want them to do for us once they get elected? What exactly do we think a President should do? 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?

Some among us might say, "Not very much!" Some of us might balk at giving anything to the Federal government, because we don't want them to waste it. In fact, some of us object to many Federal policies, whether concerning marriage or abortion or immigration or foreign policy.

But I doubt that any of us are as alienated from our Federal government as the Jews were from the Roman Empire in the days that Mark describes. After all, even though they had no say at all in who the Roman Emperor would be, he had something close to absolute power over them. The fact was that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, could pretty much do whatever he wanted to the Jews.

For example, although he knew the people would be violently opposed to it, Pilate had brought 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 that Pilate was forced to remove the standards.

But that wasn't the end of Pilate's 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 much water was needed to clean up after all those bloody animal sacrifices. Thus, Pilate thought it most reasonable for the Temple treasury to contribute to the completion of the project.

But the Temple authorities had other ideas. They thought it sinful to use money that had been given as offerings to help pay for such a "secular" purpose. In true Roman fashion, Pilate took the money by force, but in doing so, engendered no goodwill among the citizens of Jerusalem.

And so, by the week the events of Mark chapter 12 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 is into such a highly charged atmosphere that Jesus' opponents injected their seemingly innocent question – should we give tribute to Caesar or not?

They thus sought to drive 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 answer this question. If He said the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, He would forfeit much of His popularity, especially with the nationalists who hoped 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.

How does Jesus evade the trap? By revealing that his questioners are in fact the ones caught in it. He does this by asking them to produce a penny, which was actually a Roman denarius, a common coin worth a day's wages for a working-man. They have no difficulty in finding one to show Him – many of them probably carried such coins with them every day.

But what, exactly, would carrying such coins mean to the Jewish nationalists? Well, 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 the presence of Imperial Eagles in Jerusalem, how much more should they object to such idolatrous images being carried in their 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 who sought to destroy His popularity among the Zealots.

So, what did the possession of such coins say about those who sought to trap Jesus? If they sought to paint Him as a Roman ally, 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 Jesus' argument wasn't only an embarrassment for his accusers. No, the coins in their hands convicted all the Jews of hypocrisy. For as much as they 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 are 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 is just as helpful for Christians living in any time and place, for it helps to clarify a Christian's proper relationship to the government. Jesus makes it clear that Christians 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 also caught with denarii in their hands. By trying 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 grouse about abuse and fraud and waste in the Federal Government, we know that sort of separatism isn't right. We know from this very passage that we should pay our taxes to pay 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 – it wouldn't make sense for us to pay the policemen to enforce the laws only to turn around and break those same laws.

So much is obvious, and so much is clearly spelled out by Peter and Paul in Romans 13, I Timothy 2 and I Peter 2. And so of course we should obey the Laws as these passages say. Of course we should pray for all who are in authority. And, yes, these admonitions are all the more striking when we remember that both Peter and Paul were put to death by the very Imperial system that they taught the Church to obey.

But for us Americans, there is a more 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 in our governmental system, the sovereignty actually lies with us. No matter how it may seem in our daily lives, in our system of government, the elected officials really work for us. That's why they will spend so much time over the next few months asking for your vote – they serve at your 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 in balancing our loyalty to God and to government, we must also take into account our responsibility to participate in making the laws and in levying the taxes.

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 Caesar?

Well, what we owe to God as individuals is similar in many ways to what we owe 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.

The same thing is 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. Surely we can 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 as the electorate?

Well, some people, 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 the 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 make people 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, 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 use God's rules as the basis for society's rules?

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.