

## **Jesus and Politics**

February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014

Luke 20:19-26

*"Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. <sup>22</sup>Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" <sup>23</sup>But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, <sup>24</sup>"Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." <sup>25</sup>He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>26</sup>And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent."*

This is an explosive passage, particularly because of the key statement that Jesus makes in verse 25: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." It's explosive because in just a few words Jesus unites two of the most divisive, controversial subjects in our public life: religion and politics. You know the sentiment that if you want to start a good argument, start talking about one of these two matters. It's common for people to say that these subjects are "off limits", so as to keep the peace.

So this little statement is a big deal; probably the clearest way that Jesus addresses how we, as servants of Jesus, are to relate to the governing authorities (i.e., the State). And we who follow Jesus – who long to make Him preeminent in *all things* – should care about what He has to say on this important subject. Each half of the statement teaches us a crucial truth. So today I want us to dig into this statement, and consider the two principles that it communicates.

### **The Setting: Another (Failed) Trap for Jesus**

But before we dig into that, let's first acquaint ourselves with the setting for this explosive statement, because if we miss this, then we'll miss another key lesson that I believe God wants us to see here. Remember that we're situated here in the final days of Jesus' life before His death on the cross. Jesus has come into Jerusalem on a donkey, trumpeting Himself as Israel's long-awaited King, He's received the worship and praise of a great crowd of Israelites, and He's exposed the

hypocrisy of the Jewish religion by cleansing the temple. The religious leaders know they must do away with Him (19:47).

Their problem is that, politically speaking, they have no ability to get rid of Him. So they attempt to trap Jesus into saying something provocative, so that they can hand Him over to the Romans, so that they will “take care” of Him. They start by asking Jesus about the source of His authority (20:2), but Jesus exposes their hypocrisy and shuts them down.

It was a pretty lame attempt, but this is one is much better. If ever there was a “Heads I win, tails you lose” scenario, this is it: "22Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" They've *really* got Jesus cornered here. If Jesus said, “No taxes to Rome!”, then He was a revolutionary, and they could take that to the Roman rulers, who would do anything to quench any threat to “pax Romana”, the peace of Rome. But if He said, “Yes, pay your taxes to Rome,” then the people would see Jesus as a compromiser, and not the true King they were waiting for, who would free them from their enemies.

So Jesus really seems stuck between a rock and a hard place on this one. “This time,” they must be reasoning, “we’ve got Him, and there’s no slipping out of this trap!” But again, they are wrong, and Jesus leaves them stunned and silenced (v.26). "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Genius! What riches of wisdom are found in Jesus!

### **Beware: Another Expression of Pretending**

But before we analyze this statement, let's note another expression of this wicked, religious heart that we dealt with two weeks ago regarding “pretending”. In that message, I made the point that sometimes the rebellion of hypocrisy masquerades as sincere curiosity. Here, we see that sometimes rebellion masquerades as a passion for public justice.

The picture in verses 19-22 is a picture of pure evil: hatred, malice, cunning, deceit, flattery. They're seeking to kill the Lord of life!

But how concerned they seem to be about the state of the government! "Jesus, we're not supposed to pay taxes to evil Caesar, are we? We are God's people, He is our King, and we have no other King but Him! How can we be faithful and still support *'the system'*? It's so full of corruption!" Do you see this hypocrisy? Their hearts are absolutely brimming with evil and corruption, but their question is, "What do we do about Caesar?"

So let's soak in that lesson: you can have the right position on public policy, but have a very wrong, wicked heart in the holding of that right public position. How many times do we see that play out in the media, or in the world of Christian political activism? A church leader who vehemently, vocally derides a certain kind of conduct (abortion, gay rights, gun control, prayer in schools, etc.) and then is exposed for sleeping with their personal aide, sending inappropriate pictures to teenage boys, adultery with other men in airport bathroom, these stories make the headlines all the time. It's one reason why the world wants nothing to do with the Church, because they see and feel the hypocrisy.

This is another religious game that people play (though there are in fact godly, humble people with a burden for the political climate of our country). But we at least need to beware that the loudest, most vocal advocates of a true, right position can be some of the most ungodly people (anger, sexual sin, greed, pride) in their personal, private lives. "My temper is vicious and destroying relationships, but I'd rather vent about Obamacare." Beware of that; God will not be mocked. Apathy to your own personal holiness will not be hidden by your loud ranting about what's wrong in Washington. Jesus won't play that game. That's what His statement exposes.

**Render to Caesar what is Caesar's**

So with these words, Jesus is exposing a certain kind of evil. But it is also very instructive. I feel confident in saying that because of the way Paul (Romans 13) and Peter (1Peter 2) expound on this little statement in their instruction to the churches. So, as I said, let's look at the two halves of this statement ("Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"), and learn what we need to about how to rightly relate to the governing authorities.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's..." With these words, Jesus legitimizes the authority of Caesar (i.e., the State). In other words, He affirms and recognizes the legitimacy (the rightness, or goodness) of civil authority. Paul says: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1).

One of the striking things about this exchange is that the "spies" come with an either/or question: "<sup>22</sup>Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, *or* not?" (Yes OR no, one OR the other), but Jesus' gives a both/and answer: "<sup>25</sup>Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, *and* to God the things that are God's." So the conclusion, then, is that these two realities (Caesar's authority and God's authority) are not mutually exclusive. During this age (cf. Revelation 11:15), God wills that there be a sphere of authority given to the State which may not conform in all its ways and laws to the law of God.

We know this because Jesus (and Paul) say that Caesar has a sphere of authority which should be honored, though He knew that this man was an ungodly, corrupt ruler. He is calling the Jews to render to a pagan Caesar a certain kind of honor, even though the coin that bore his image had the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus". And He says to Pilate, "<sup>11</sup>You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." So even wicked Pilate has an authority given to him by God.

**Praise God for Government!**

This is hard, because things certainly aren't the way they're supposed to be, but we really do have a lot to give thanks for, and that thanks belongs to God. Do you realize what this land would look like without God's common grace of civil authority? What would you do if 911 didn't answer? If there were no police or firemen or national guard? If gang members could steal and murder without any restraint or retribution? What anarchy and chaos would we have!?

So we affirm the legitimate place of civil authority by rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. We pay taxes and we obey traffic laws and we vote, and we pray for our leaders and we regard them with respect and honor (Romans 13:7, 1Peter 2:17), because we recognize that these men and women are in the positions they are in by God's design and decree, even when they govern poorly (like Tiberius, Pilate and Nero).

Are we Christians known as people who lead the way in respecting our leaders? We do in fact have the right – and sometimes the duty – to express our disagreement and pursue change, but we do that with charity, honor and respect, which doesn't seem to flourish in an age of social media. But we're to be different from the world in our disagreement.

### **Render to God what is God's**

I have more to say on that, but first, let's turn to the second half of this statement: "<sup>25</sup>Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, *and to God the things that are God's.*" If the first half of the statement legitimizes civil authority, this half of the statement limits civil authority. Caesar (and our president, governor, senators and congressmen) has a legitimate sphere of authority that should be honored, but that authority is not ultimate and primary. God's is. Everyone listening to Jesus would have clearly understood this. "Render...to God the things that are God's." What is that? Everything!

*"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein,"*

*"<sup>14</sup>Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it."*

*"<sup>20</sup>Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. <sup>21</sup>He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings"*

*"<sup>23</sup>[He] brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness."*

Jesus is the Son of Man – the One with dominion over all peoples, nations and languages – who declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He has already said of Herod, when hearing that the King was trying to kill Him, "<sup>32</sup>Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.'" "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" Including Caesar!

### **God's Authority Shapes our Submission to Caesar's Authority**

Knowing this should shape both our submission and our disobedience (when that is necessary) to Caesar. If Caesar has a sphere of authority that comes from God, because everything is God's, then our submission to Caesar is a part of our submission to God. When you submit, you're submitting for God's sake, not Caesar's. That's what Peter means when he says, "<sup>13</sup>Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution..." We submit to human authority because a higher authority, Jesus Christ, tells us to submit, for His glory. When you follow the speed limits, or vote in an election, or pay your taxes, or shovel your walkway, click your seatbelt, you are worshiping God. You're giving to God what is God's, in your giving to Caesar what is Caesar's. Because God owns Caesar!

These simple acts of submission are part of our witness to the truth about Jesus and His Kingdom. After laying out the church's mission and calling in 1 Peter 2:9-12, the first way Peter begins to apply that is in our relationship to governing authorities (v.13-17). In rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, we say with our lives, "Christians are not out

to overthrow the empire politically by claiming Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord. Christians submit to laws and pay taxes and show respect and do good in the community. We are not revolutionaries against your throne. We are harmless lovers of lost and hurting people and will do much good in your empire, because our Kingdom is not of this world, and our citizenship, along with our King, is in heaven.” Those whose citizenship is in heaven ought to be the very best citizens on earth.

### **Shaped by the Cross when we Disobey**

But, because our King is in heaven, we do not do all that Caesar says. Jesus modeled (23:9) and taught (21:12, 16), and Luke records (Acts 5:29) that there are limits to how we will submit to Caesar, because Caesar is not God, and submission to God is our highest, ultimate, commitment. These limits are when submission to Caesar would cause us to compromise our allegiance and submission to God. So if (when) our government renders that it is illegal to spank a child or to call homosexuality a sin or to proselytize, I will still declare that Jesus is Lord, and that all people (homosexuals included) must repent if they would find eternal life.

Much wisdom and discernment is needed to know when this kind of civil disobedience is warranted, or necessary. I won't solve that difficulty today. Instead, let's reaffirm the most crucial lesson, which is that the systems, the candidates, the policies, the issues, they don't deserve our fullest attention. They matter, but they are not ultimate. Christ is ultimate. Christ is our hope; not a Christianized nation. Christ will be ruling over His people with perfect supremacy, no matter who is elected, what bills are passed, what government stands or falls.

So let's be defined by no cause but the cause of Jesus Christ. And that cause is not fighting for all of our religious and/or civil liberties, but proclaiming the good news of Jesus, and making disciples of Him, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything He commanded, including the command to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

And because our relationship to Caesar is part of our discipleship, then we are called to engage in all spheres of society and culture (including politics), with the light and taste and aroma of Jesus. And in our engagement, let's remember that is the aroma of Calvary. We are people of the cross (9:23). Our Lord willingly surrendered His supreme authority and made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, and submitted to crucifixion willingly to save His enemies from eternal damnation. We are hell-deserving, forgiven, sinners. We owe our lives to Him<sup>1</sup>.

That takes the swagger out of our resistance, doesn't it? If we're shaped by the cross, then the tone and demeanor of our civil disobedience will be the opposite of the haughty, sarcastic, belligerent, rock-throwing, screaming venom that often seems to characterize the "Religious" Right. When your soul has marinated in the message of the cross, your indignation at the failures and injustices in Washington (and the way you pursue change when it's needed) will be softened with a kind of humility, sincerity, compassion and contrition that will emanate with the taste and aroma of Christ.

The main war in this life is not to be treated justly in this world by civil authorities. The main war is to trust Christ, to be humble and to deny ourselves for the glory of Christ and the good of others. The greatest battle we face isn't overcoming unjust laws or politicians, but becoming this kind of people. May God give us the strength to be weak in this unjust world, so that our lives and lips would testify to the great King whose Kingdom is not of this world. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

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<sup>1</sup> The thinking in this paragraph, and the following two, are influenced by John Piper, *What Jesus Demands of the World*, p. 334-35.