

God & Government

Matthew 22:15-22

The tension between the freedom and duty of an individual and coercive power of the state is not new. Jesus' enemies unite to try to make Him sound like an enemy of the state or a traitor to God so they can get rid of Him. Instead He reveals the way to freedom and faithfulness by rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Overview of the Text

The Pharisees intensely plot to trap Jesus in His words (v. 15). When He cleansed the temple, He exposed and frustrated the high priestly hustle. He just spoke three parables that humiliated the chief priests and elders for disobeying the Father, failing to work in His vineyard, and ditching His wedding feast. Now if they can get Him to say something seditious against Rome, perhaps the government will do their dirty work for them. It's remarkable that the disciples of the Pharisees join with the Herodians to ask Jesus about taxes because they land on the opposite sides of this question. The Pharisees are not as radically opposed to paying taxes to Rome as the Zealots are (who advocate violent revolution), but they resent the taxes to and the Herodians who are quisling Jews working for Rome to the taxes. The Herodians' well-being rides on the Jews' compliance in paying them. These enemies come together to flatter Jesus, trying to bait Him into sedition: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (vv. 16-17). If He answers "No", then He has come to Jerusalem to overthrow the government, just like Judas the Galilee did against the same poll tax in 6 AD. If He says simply "Yes", then so much for a new King standing against oppression. Jesus knows their malice and calls them hypocrites, asking them to bring Him the coin (v. 19). The silver denarius is likely from the reign of Tiberius. It has the emperor's face on one side and an image of him on a throne on the other. One side says, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus," and the other "Pontifex Maximus," meaning "Highest Priest." Jesus asks whose image and inscription is on it so that everyone is looking at the idolatry right in the face (v. 20). They answer, "Caesar's", to which He responds, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). Brought up short, they marvel and walk away, accusatory tails between their legs (v. 22).

Render Unto Caesar

Christians are to be in world and not of it, meaning we are not defiled by handling things that were sinfully made by unbelievers: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean" (Rom. 14:14). Sin is not located in the material creation because God pronounced "very good" (Gen. 1:31). An idolatrous coin in your pocket can't contaminate you—even US currency stating in vain, "In God We Trust." Since it has Caesar's image on it, and Caesar is in charge of the currency, it's fine to use it. Now if you use it while saying prayers to Tiberius, then that's idolatrous. He's no god, and therefore you can't render him adoration, supplication, or devotion. But you can carry his coin, pay your (sometimes absurd) taxes, and you can even express your devotion to the real God by giving such coins to the Lord's work. There's a kind of superstitious evangelical mind that wants Christian music, Christian art, Christian lit and so on by having something explicitly spiritual tagged on it. But all art and human activity is Christian in the sense that it imitates God, the only question is whether it does so well or badly. If you use pagan coins to do an honest business, the Lord is glorified. If someone paints a glorious painting while having a bad attitude, the painting still glorifies God even though the person's attitude didn't. Caesar falsely claiming to be God ("We will take care of you by

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printing more money!”) doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pay taxes. And the corruption of our rulers does not mean we shouldn’t honor, obey them, and follow the law (Rom. 13:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:17). When we obey our rulers, we are not doing so because Caesar is lord; he is just a man and his breath is in his nostrils. We do so because God requires it, because Jesus is Lord. And this is where many modern believers lose their way, carving out some space where Christ isn’t King. He establishes three governments: family (ministry of health, education, and welfare), church (ministry of mercy), and state (ministry of justice). Each has its own area of responsibility and authority, described as “sphere sovereignty” by the Dutch prime minister Abraham Kuyper in the 19th century. You recognize the validity of each of these governments regardless of the integrity of the individuals who hold the offices. Honor your parents whether they obey the Lord or not. Honor the authorities ruling according to just laws regardless of their personal worthiness (cf. Acts 26:25). Anarcho-libertarian types want to eliminate or overthrow the state, rather than reform and return it to a reasonable size. This is as godless and unbiblical as statism and must be rejected by faithful Christians.

Render Unto God

Jesus commands us to render unto Caesar even when he is corrupt, but that does not mean Caesar can ask for anything. We can pay unjust taxes, but we should rather die than burn incense to worship the king. Only God is worthy of worship, honor, glory, and gratitude for all things (cf. Rom. 1:21). It’s significant that God requires a tithe (“tenth”), and when Israel demands a king to be like all the nations, Samuel warns them that “He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants” (1 Sam. 8:15). He will take as much as God! We must remember that our goal is not to be safe, rich, respectable or even to survive, but to honor God who has and will deliver us from death. When told they would be thrown into the furnace unless they bowed down before Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18). We must be principled people in the way we think and act. The American colonialists did not revolt against England because the taxes got too high. The issue was that English Parliament had no right to tax them, thus “No taxation without representation!” If King George would let Parliament tax them, what else would he allow? The money wasn’t the issue; it was freedom, sovereignty, rights, and the rule of law. The government does not get to tell us how to worship, what to say or not (“hate speech”), or what constitutes a marriage. This is why it’s so tragic that Christian churches shut down for more than a few weeks or stopped singing at all *because they were told to* while other businesses were allowed to stay open. To focus on the virus or the negative effects of the vaccine is to miss the point. The people insisting on mandates have a god complex. But your children do not bear Caesar’s image, which is why you may not render them to him. When Christians render unto God what is God’s, chiefly the glory that is due His name (Ps. 29:2), then we function as a city on a hill, the light of the world, and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-14). Nothing can stand in way of the gospel.