

Independence Day
July 4, 2004
Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

A Christian Lives in Two Kingdoms

1. Giving to Caesar what is Caesar's
2. Giving to God what is God's

NIV Matthew 22:15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius,²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"²¹ "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The time-honored advice about dinner table conversation is to avoid two subjects: religion and politics. The reason is that subjects that elicit such strong feelings and run the risk of dividing people and thus spoiling the dinner. But when the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus, the gloves came off. They asked Jesus a question that was both political and religious in nature. It was a question they had no doubt worked hard to develop, because their intention was to trap Jesus in his words. But it's a question that we also want to be able to answer. What is our responsibility as Christians toward our government?

I think you're aware that different religions have answered this question in different ways. Fundamentalist Muslims want the government to be their tool to institute Islamic law. The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, also tried to keep the government on a short leash. And it probably wouldn't surprise you to hear that there have been governments that believe the church should serve *its* goals and aims. Think about how the Communists co-opted the churches in Russia and in Eastern Europe. Then there are the Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe that secular governments are a tool of Satan. That's why they won't salute the flag or serve in the military. Despite the long debate and the divergent views, Jesus managed to dispose of this issue in a single sentence. He said simply, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." That is, we Christians live

in two kingdoms. We are citizens of the United States of America by birth or by naturalization. We are also, through faith in Jesus Christ, citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And our Savior describes our responsibilities in these two kingdoms this way: we are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

1. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's

It says here that the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians came to Jesus with this question. You have to know how unusual this joint effort was. The Pharisees tended to see the Romans as a pagan power that they couldn't be rid of soon enough. The Herodians, on the other hand, were all for the way in which Rome was currently administering portions of their region through the descendants of Herod the Great. In other words, the backers of Rome and the detractors of Rome are working together here. Why this rare instance of cooperation? To get Jesus. To nail him to the wall with a question that seemed certain to get him into trouble with at least one segment of the population. And if they could make Jesus look foolish in the process, it would be a bonus.

They prefaced the question with some flattery about Jesus' integrity, but that was just an attempt to catch Jesus off guard. The question was, "*Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" There doesn't seem to be an answer to please everyone. If Jesus says, "Yes, it's right to pay taxes to Caesar," then the Pharisees will be offended and accuse Jesus of favoring support for the pagans of the Roman Empire. But if Jesus says, "No, it's not right to pay taxes to Rome," then the Herodians will turn Jesus in for fomenting rebellion against Caesar. The question would have left most people stuttering, but Jesus gives an amazing answer: "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*"

He tells us, first, to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. That denarius that they brought to Jesus was a Roman coin—silver—with the image and inscription of Tiberias Caesar on it. It was worth about a day's wage for the average man. The denarius was minted and issued by Rome so that the subjects of Rome could pay their taxes to the Emperor. Jesus doesn't take issue with that. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" means, among other things, paying taxes. The apostle Paul said that in so many words in our epistle this morning from Romans 13: **"This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue."**

But maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves here. The reason we pay taxes to our government is that the Bible teaches us that government is God's servant. Paul says that repeatedly in Romans 13. More than that, he says specifically that the unbelieving Roman emperor—it was Nero when Paul wrote Romans—is God's servant who has been given authority to rule by God. God has established governing authorities because he wants to bless us. The duty of government is to ensure the survival and security of the citizens. Government's job is to keep peace and order so that, as Paul wrote to Timothy, **"we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."** (1 Tim. 2:2) In his gracious

providence, God has designed government to be one of the means he uses to defend us from all danger and guard and protect us from all evil. It's through our government that God is answering our prayer for daily bread. "Daily bread", as Luther explains it, includes things like godly and faithful leaders, good government, and peace and order. Just think of how hard our government—everyone from the military to the CIA and FBI to state and local law enforcement agencies—is working to prevent a recurrence of something like the 9/11 attacks.

When we see God's hand of blessing behind our government, then we can also see why the Bible makes obedience to the government and respect for governing authorities a matter of conscience for us. This is a 4th Commandment issue: Like our parents and teachers and leaders in the church, our rulers are appointed by God to be channels through which God blesses us. When Paul says in Romans 13, "**Give everyone what you owe him,**" he mentions not only taxes, but also says, "**if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.**" What we see in this incident is Jesus as he continues his work of obeying God's law for us. If he had advocated that his followers refuse to pay taxes, he would have been breaking God's law, and if he had broken the law, then his death at the cross could not have paid for our sins. But as it is, Jesus here urged obedience to earthly authorities and the payment of taxes. By doing so he was putting himself in a position to offer his respect and obedience in place of our disrespect and disobedience. Through faith in Jesus, his holy obedience is credited to us.

Now it also follows that if government is a God-appointed means of blessing us, then Christians can serve in the government or in the military, can pledge allegiance to the republic and participate in the political process. When we Christians do these things, we don't see them as way of trying to compel other people to become Christians or share Christian morals because no one becomes a Christian by compulsion. Only the gospel can bring a person to faith. The government doesn't use the gospel. It uses reason and common sense to enact laws and it uses force to see that the laws are obeyed. Not only may we participate in the political process, but as individual citizens of this community, state, and country, we have a duty to participate. A recent survey indicates that only about half of all evangelical Christians vote. I would think the statistics are probably similar in a church like ours. But that means that some of the great moral issues facing our country are going to be resolved without the participation of many Christians. Issues like stem cell research, partial-birth abortion, and homosexual marriage will have far-reaching consequences for our country and its future. God has given us an opportunity as Christian citizens to participate in the debate and to show why, on rational grounds, trampling on the rights of the unborn and overthrowing traditional marriage are bad policies for our country to adopt.

But Jesus does place a limit on the government's sphere of authority when he continues his answer by saying, "*Give to God what is God's.*" We know something about that coin that was brought to Jesus. Not only did it have the image and inscription of Caesar on it, but on the other side it showed Caesar

sitting on throne and inscription labeled Caesar “PONTIF MAXIM”—“Highest Priest.” Caesar was the God-appointed ruler of the empire, but he was no high priest. We Christians have a great High Priest. His name is Jesus Christ. He offered the sacrifice of his own body at the cross as our Mediator, and thereby reconciled us to God. When government attempts to exceed its God-given authority, then we Christians must insist on giving to God what is God’s.

2. Give to God what is God’s

As Christians we are also citizens of this second kingdom—the kingdom of God—and as citizens of God’s kingdom, Jesus guides us to give to God what is God’s. What is God’s? Everything is. King David says in Psalm 24, **“The earth is the LORD’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.”** As the Creator of the universe, it’s all his. We’re his, too. We were bought at a price, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. No other payment would have been sufficient. It took the sacrifice of the life of God’s Son to ransom us from sin and death. So what should I give to God? Luther says it this way in his explanation the Second Article of the Creed: **“All this he did that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.”** God created us to worship him with every aspect of our lives.

In our country we’ve enjoyed a situation where there’s no conflict between being a faithful Christian and being a good citizen. But if it would happen that our government calls for us to worship a false god, as the government of Persia required of Daniel, then we would have to respectfully refuse to obey. And if our government forbids us to do what God commands or commands us to do what God forbids, then our allegiance to the true God will have to take precedence over our allegiance to our country. That principle was established for us in Acts 5, where the apostles, when they were commanded to stop preaching in the name of Christ, said, **“We must obey God rather than men.”** Right now the situation is that our country allows what God forbids (abortions or homosexual behavior, for example). But we can endure that, as long as we are not compelled to go against what God has said. Besides, if we have the freedom to express our religious beliefs, then we still have the possibility of using the gospel to win over people whose beliefs are currently at odds with God’s will.

As citizens of the United States, Independence Day is a great time for expressing our thanks to God for all the blessings he’s given us in this country, none more important than the freedom of religious expression. The gospel of Jesus has flourished in this country where we believe that we’ve been endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, like life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness as we understand it. As citizens of an earthly kingdom, we can glorify God by being good citizens, obeying the laws, honoring our leaders, and casting our votes and participating in the political process. And as citizens of the kingdom of God,

Jesus has won for us the privilege to pray for our country and its leaders. In both kingdoms there are blessings for us and opportunities to glorify God. Amen.