

Untitled (35)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2020

Preacher: Caleb Evans

[0:00] Amen. And Jesus said to them, Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. So I have to say that it is with fear and trembling that I preach on this gospel passage and what has become a contentious election year.

You might have heard that we have an election coming up. Anyone not aware of that fact? I just want to say this up front. No hard feelings if you guys choose to tar and feather me after this morning's sermon.

Being the election year that it is, many of us have strong opinions. My oldest daughter, Mia, even seems to have arrived at a strong opinion on the election without mom or dad's influence.

We all have our opinions. We also all have our duties as citizens. How do we wade through that in a way that honors the Lord? I want us to think about that together this morning, as well as the larger question of how Christians think about government and about the authority that we have over us.

[1:27] This passage gives us a broader context for how we think about our role as dual citizens, citizens of the kingdom of God and citizens of whatever country we happen to live in.

And let's think about that together. It helps us to remember that Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar in an attempt to trap him.

The trap was set in a couple of different directions, and he didn't take the bait either way. Instead, he steers a middle course that provides a helpful framework for us.

So let's look together at our gospel passage in Matthew chapter 22. There we find this, beginning at verse 15. Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words, and they sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

Tell us then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? So again, the Pharisees and the Herodians had set a trap in a couple of directions.

[2:51] Keep in mind, Caesar was not well loved by Israel at that time. The Romans that Caesar represented were regarded by many as an unlawful and tyrannical occupying force.

First, Caesar was not regarded by the Jewish people as their just and righteous leader. The Pharisees thought that they could entangle Jesus, as our text tells us.

If Jesus were to denounce Caesar, that would land him in all kinds of political trouble. On one level, they were likely hoping that Jesus would say that they didn't have to pay taxes to Caesar, and that they didn't have a duty of obedience to Caesar.

In other words, they were hoping that Jesus would say that rebellion against Caesar was the proper course of action. But that's not the only trap that Jesus navigates around in this passage.

They were probably also hoping, hey, maybe Jesus will appear to be too friendly to Caesar.

Caesar, again, was not well loved. He was regarded by many as a tyrant.

[3:57] If Jesus were to throw in his law with Caesar, so to speak, who was a tyrant and did not worship the one true God, then they expected Jesus would be discredited as a teacher among the people, and he would be regarded as a traitor to Israel and to God.

In fact, they were asking him this. So should we obey God or should we obey Caesar? They were asking this, of course, with quite impure motives.

And Jesus does not take the bait. Look at how he handles it. Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.

And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? And they said, Caesars. Then he said to them, Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Brothers and sisters, as we think about how to navigate our role as citizens, I would urge us to keep this teaching of Jesus in mind. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

[5:12] This gets fleshed out quite a bit more in Romans chapter 13. If you would turn over there with me, let's look at what the Apostle Paul writes there, starting with verse 1.

I think this will help us as well. 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.

Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur a judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval.

For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

[6:27] Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but for conscience' sake. For because of this, you also pay taxes.

For the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Now, as Americans, we don't like kings or emperors, so we might find this teaching more than a little bit uncomfortable. We fought a war about that, if you will remember.

Well, really, a couple of wars about that. No one is going to tell us what to do, and we're only going to honor the person who is in charge if we like the person who is in charge. But we need to make sure that our attitudes are in agreement with God's word, which tells us that whoever resists the governing authorities resists what God has appointed.

So we think about how we navigate that. We need to remember the example of Jesus, who again said, Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's.

[7:46] So what does rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's look like in our context?

Obviously, we don't have a Caesar. What does rendering to God that which is God's look like in our context?

I want us to think about both of those things together. Let's begin with examining what rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's looks like.

Again, obviously, we don't have Caesar's, but we do have governing authorities that we are subjected to. As believers, we are called to be obedient to those authorities appointed over us.

That means, among other things, that as Christians, we should strive, of all people, to be the very best citizens. We should be engaged in our communities. We should practice civic responsibility.

Not only that, we are called to be obedient to the law. In most cases, that means being obedient to the law, whether or not we like the law. In most cases, resisting the law and resisting the governing authorities would be an example of resisting what God has appointed.

[9:02] I don't know about you, but that's a situation I don't want to find myself in. Rebellion against what God has appointed is bad news. And if that's not enough, Romans 13 says to honor those to whom honor is due.

That can be really hard for us if we don't like the people who are in authority. But God's word doesn't ask us if we like them or not. It says to honor them, period.

Keep in mind, Paul was writing to believers who would suffer persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities. But he doesn't say to honor them only if you like them or only if you think they're treating you fairly.

He says to honor them. Remember when I was growing up, my mom said this to me. That wasn't just a rhetorical thing for her.

I won't say who it was, but mom didn't like the president who was in office at the time she said that. But she made it clear to me that regardless, I was to honor and respect his office.

[10:16] And she was right about that. That is what Christian citizens do. We are called to give honor to whom honor is due, regardless of our feelings about the persons.

In addition, disliking the laws is no excuse to be disobedient to the laws. Here's an example. This is what kind of came to mind first, sort of as a silly example.

But let's say that I don't like wearing a seatbelt. But it's the law that I wear a seatbelt. Now, I do because I think it's a good idea. But God's law doesn't forbid me from wearing a seatbelt.

That being the case, I should wear a seatbelt, even though personally, maybe my opinion is that it's not the government's job to tell me that I have to wear a seatbelt. Of course, all of this is complicated by a number of factors in day-to-day practice.

In our system of government, we have a role of electing some of those who have authority over us. How do we render to Caesar that which is Caesar's in that sort of framework?

[11 : 26] First of all, the political arena this year and in recent years has become rather nasty. Often, nasty things are said about our candidate of choice.

We're tempted to say nasty things about the person who isn't our candidate of choice. Sometimes, the person that we think is best loses the election, and someone we don't like takes office.

And how do we navigate all of that as Christians? That's tricky, isn't it? The Anglican priest John Wesley, who was also the founder of the Methodist movement, was once asked that question.

What do we do? How do we navigate this? And here's what he said. I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election and advised them, one, to vote without fee or reward for the person they judged most worthy, two, to speak no evil of the person they voted against, and three, to take care of their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.

Wise words. I would commend them to all of us. At the same time, we need to remember that since citizens in our system of government have a greater role in how we are governed than is sometimes typical, so we have a greater responsibility in making wise and godly decisions.

[12 : 56] As we consider voting in a few weeks, I'm not going to tell you, I'm not going to provide for you a list of candidates to vote for. That said, I would remind you of the teaching of Scripture and the clear teaching of our Church, which is reflected in our Constitution and Canons.

It says this, Since we have a role and a voice in how we are governed, we need to make sure that we use it responsibly.

That said, here's another complicating factor. What do I do? What do we do? What happens if we end up in a terrible situation where we end up with leaders who are absolutely wicked?

That can happen, right? First of all, as we think about that, and we're reminded of something that the theologian and reformer John Calvin once said. Calvin said this, When God wants to judge a nation, he gives them wicked rulers.

That hurts. If we find ourselves in that situation, we need to recognize the sovereign hand of God and repent of our own sins. But what if we have wicked rulers who would forbid us from practicing our faith or would require us to be complicit in evil?

[14 : 45] Say we had leaders who made it illegal for me to preach biblical truth or who made it illegal for us to attempt to evangelize. And that's happening in many parts of the world today, right?

Or say, to use an extreme example, we had leaders who said that we needed to be complicit in our neighbors being sent to concentration camps. That we needed to help facilitate that.

Well, let me be clear. Those in authority over us have no legitimate authority to force us to disobey God. We are called to obey the governing authorities whether we like them or not.

But what happens if the governing authorities would compel us to disobey God? Then we must draw a line in the sand and say we must obey God rather than men.

Martin Luther once said, In all other matters I will yield to any man whatsoever, but I have neither the power nor the will to deny the word of God.

[15 : 49] We must render unto Caesar's what is Caesar's. Unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but we certainly must render unto God what is God's.

Notice too that Jesus didn't fall into the trap of throwing in his lot with Caesar. He didn't confuse his kingdom with any earthly kingdom. Notice also the example of the apostles who didn't stop preaching the gospel just because the governing authorities told them to.

Our obedience to God and our citizenship in heaven always comes before all other commitments that we might have. So I close this morning.

I want us to think about what the gospel tells us about who we are as believers. We have been saved by Christ. We have been washed in his blood.

Our sins have been forgiven through his cross. And that means what? Our citizenship is in heaven. As citizens of heaven, as those who have been adopted as the Father's beloved children, how do we navigate our lives in this world?

[17 : 26] Well, we are called as forgiven and redeemed sinners to be salt and light in this dark and fallen world. We are called to be in the world but not be of the world.

We are called to be model citizens to glorify God and bear witness to our neighbors by being model citizens. And we are especially called to live as citizens of the one kingdom that will never end. Because heaven and earth will pass away but the kingdom of our God will endure forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.