

Religion & Politics

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Our sermon text for today is Luke chapter 20, verses 19 through 26.

That's page 826 in the Pew Bible. Let me invite you to turn there with me. Luke chapter 20, verses 19 through 26, page 826.

Let me pray, and then I'll read for us. Amen. O Lord God, we pray with the psalmist that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts would be acceptable and pleasing in your sight.

O Lord, you and you alone are our rock and our redeemer. So we pray that through attending to your word this morning, that truth would become more and more real to our hearts, that you are an immovable rock and you are a gracious, merciful, faithful redeemer.

We pray this in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen. Luke 20, verses 19 through 26. The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him, that is, Jesus, at that very hour.

[1:19] For they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be sincere that they might catch him in something he said so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.

So they asked him, teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not?

But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have? They said, Caesar's.

He said to them, then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. 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.

Well, we've all heard it said that the two things you should never discuss in polite company are religion and politics. But our text this morning forces us to face these twin issues head on.

[2:41] In particular, the question is, how should Christians relate to the governing authorities? Now, that's a tricky question. And history has shown that when we get it wrong, well, the consequences can be pretty far ranging and often pretty damaging to the gospel.

So this is an important question. Now, I think as humans, we often can fall into two traps. Either we can demonize governing authority.

That is, we view it as corrupt and evil, and therefore we want nothing to do with it. We despair over it. Or on the other hand, we can deify governing authority. That is, we view it as the ultimate source of what's really going to make things better.

And therefore, we invest it with our hope, with our trust, with our allegiance. Now, of course, few of us fall completely into one trap or the other, but that doesn't make the question any less difficult or any less important.

But what for us is an important and difficult question was, in Jesus' day, a dangerous question. Now, remember where we are in the Gospel of Luke.

[3:54] Jesus has just entered Jerusalem, and his conflict with the religious authorities, that is, the scribes and the chief priests, those who sort of controlled the temple system, that conflict is coming to a head.

And Jesus has just told a parable in verses 9 through 18 of Luke, warning the temple leaders that if they continue to reject him, they will find themselves, in fact, rejecting God's own authority.

And so, the religious leaders have had enough. They want Jesus eliminated, out of the picture. But the people, the people are enthusiastic about this young, vibrant teacher from Galilee.

Some even think that he is the long-awaited liberator, the Messiah. So, the scribes and chief priests, rather than risk a confrontation with the people and falling out of their favor, they send what Luke calls spies, who pretend to be sincere, but in reality, they're out to catch Jesus in something he says in verse 20.

That is, they want to trap him in his words. Why? So, they can hand him over to the Roman governor, Pilate. You see, the Jewish authorities in that time, living under Roman rule, didn't have the authority to sentence someone to death.

[5:23] But the Roman governor did. And so, in an attempt to trap Jesus, these spies ask him, under the guise of much flattery, you can hear them just laying it on really thick, can't you?

They ask a seemingly innocent, but in reality, a dangerous question. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not? Jesus, how should we relate to this governing authority?

So, this morning, first, I want to take a look at this question in a little more depth, and then we're going to look at Jesus' two-fold response. And then third, I want to consider why this question can be so difficult for us.

So, that's where we're headed. The question, Jesus' response, and then our hearts. So, first, let's look at the question. Now, the tribute in question here is actually a particular tax that the Roman Empire would levy on people, groups, and kingdoms that they had conquered.

This is the sort of tax that back in Luke chapter 2, you remember, Caesar Augustus was taking a census, right? We read that every Christmas time. He was taking a census. Well, why was he taking a census?

[6:40] He was taking a census so he could lay a tax on them and burden them with a taxation. And this question that these spies asked isn't whether or not such taxes in general are necessary or legitimate.

It's a question of whether it's lawful for us to pay them. That is, good, faithful Jews who, according to the law of Moses, are to have one God and one Lord only.

Is it lawful for us to pay his tax? It's a brilliant trap if you think about it.

One can almost see their self-satisfaction as they ask it. We've got him. After all, think about it. If Jesus says, yes, it is lawful to give tribute to Caesar, then he risks alienating himself from the people.

The people who hate Caesar and his oppressive taxes. The people who just, days before, were heralding him as their king. The people whose admiration at that very moment is the only thing keeping the scribes and the chief priests from openly arresting him.

[7:55] What's more, if Jesus says, yes, he could even be accused of disloyalty to the God of Israel. After all, Caesar made the most blasphemous claims about himself, and those claims were written on every single Roman coin.

What did Caesar call himself? Lord, Savior, Son of the Gods. Was Jesus going to suggest that we endorse those claims?

By paying tribute? But think about if Jesus says, no. No, it's not lawful to give tribute to Caesar.

Well, then, it's not hard to see. He would be accused of sedition. Sedition against the state, political insurrection. And Rome had little patience and little mercy for rebels in their empire, especially in backwoods areas like Judea.

And so, the trap is laid. And they're going to catch Jesus either being disloyal to Israel on one hand or disloyal to Caesar on the other. One answer will prove him to be an enemy of the people.

[9:08] The other will prove him to be an enemy of the state. And so, how will Jesus answer this difficult, this even dangerous question? Will he demonize the state?

Rejecting its claims? Advocating for withdrawal? Or will he deify the state, rendering it unyielding obedience and allegiance? And those are the traps before us too, aren't they?

Sometimes we can get so frustrated with the governing authorities, can't we? We see the flaws. We see the hypocrisies. We see the failure to bring about change. And we just want to give up altogether.

But on the other hand, sometimes we see the power. We see the influence. We see the importance. Sometimes we can place so much emphasis and trust in it, so much of our hope in it, that it ends up stealing our heart's allegiance.

How do we get out of this trap? The answer Jesus gives is brief. Yet, brilliant. And it contains the seed of all clear thinking and acting when it comes to the question of how Christians ought to relate to the governing authorities.

[10:36] And note, lest we think that Jesus' answer here is just a clever way in the moment of avoiding arrest, consider how his opponents respond at the end of our passage.

They're not frustrated because he slipped away. They're not plotting their next question. They marvel, Luke says.

And that tells me that Jesus' answer struck even his enemies as more than just a clever answer to avoid trouble. They marvel because he's actually answered their question.

He's answered an insincere question with a genuine answer. That is exactly what their flattery said. Truthful, rightly, and without partiality.

So what is that answer? Well, it's twofold. First, Jesus says, we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

[11:36] Now, the first thing Jesus does, seeing through their flattery and their craftiness, is he asks them for a denarius. Now, a denarius was a silver coin. It was Roman currency. It was worth about a day's wage for a common laborer.

This is the kind of coin that they would use to pay the tax. And what happens? Out of their own pockets, they pull out the Roman money. Proving that they themselves use it.

They rely on it. They trade with it. They buy and sell with it. They, too, are participants in the Roman system. And then Jesus asks, whose likeness and inscription does it have?

You see, as I mentioned earlier, on a Roman denarius, there would be a picture that is a likeness of Caesar's head. And there would be an inscription written on it. And on a lot of denarii in that time, the inscription read, Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the deified Augustus.

So Jesus says, whose likeness, whose inscription, and out of their own mouths, they have to answer and say, Caesar, it's his image on the coin. Jesus forces his opponents to admit, then, that they are participants in the Roman system, whether they like it or not.

[12:54] They cannot escape it. They use Caesar's coins, then use them to pay Caesar's tax. Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Now, if we press into this a little deeper, we see that Jesus is showing them that there is an unavoidable and somewhat legitimate authority that the governing authorities possess.

It's not ultimate authority. It's not unquestionable authority. But it's real nonetheless. And the rest of the New Testament is going to unpack this a little bit for us.

In Romans 13.1, the Apostle Paul is going to unfold some of what Jesus is teaching here, saying that governing authorities are actually part of God's providential plan to maintain civil order.

What means has God instituted to keep human society from spinning into anarchy and injustice? Part of the answer is, God has instituted human governing authorities.

They are imperfect, yes. But that's still part of how God chooses to rule his world. And because this is the way God providentially orders things, listen to what Paul will say in Romans 13.1-7.

[14:14] He 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. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur 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 it as 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 a servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience.

For because of this, you also pay taxes for the authorities or 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, if you're like me, the first thing you think when you hear a passage like that is, are you kidding me? Human governments are so corrupt.

[15:25] How can Paul say that they're instituted by God? But, if anyone knew that human rulers were corrupt, it was the Apostle Paul.

The Roman Empire was pagan, pragmatic, brutal, and militaristic. Paul had spent many nights in a Roman jail.

He was no stranger to political injustice. So, Paul can't be saying, he is not saying, that every government is, in and of itself, honoring to God.

Paul isn't saying that there's no room for civil disobedience, or protest, or seeking to change how governments think and work. In fact, many scholars think that one of the main reasons Luke wrote the book of Acts was to influence prevailing Roman opinion about the legality of Christianity in the empire.

There's a very book in the New Testament that's trying to change how people think when it comes to political policies. But what Paul is saying, in line with what Jesus himself taught in our text in Luke 20, is that human governments, under God's ultimate providential authority, have been instituted to exercise a limited degree of power.

[16:48] And in that respect, we must render to them what they are due. Taxes where taxes are due. Yes. Despite the high rates of taxation in Connecticut, we should still pay our taxes as Christians.

I know, that just makes you want to groan. Revenue to whom revenue is owed. Respect to whom respect is owed. Honor to whom honor is owed.

And you know, this line of thinking isn't just unique to the Apostle Paul. Listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 2, 13 through 17. The Apostle Peter says, Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the governor as supreme, to the emperor as supreme, excuse me, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

For this is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free. Not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. The consistent teaching of Jesus and the apostles then is that we must respect the limited authority God has granted to human governing institutions.

[18:11] We should pay taxes. We should honor those in leadership positions. We should obey the laws of the land insofar as they do not contradict God's laws. Paul even says in 1 Timothy that we should pray for kings and all those in high positions, which is the passage Greg read out for us earlier.

And remember that all this is laid down with the unflinching realism that governing authorities will be imperfect and even at times unjust.

Now, the New Testament obviously was written in a time when the prevailing form of government was an empire.

And today, we live in a representative democracy. It's more than a little different, isn't it? So what does rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar mean for us in a time when the form of human government is quite different?

Well, some have suggested that in our day, rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar now entails meaningful participation in government insofar as we are called.

[19:25] For many, this means voting in elections, serving in jury duty, which I had the honor of doing this month. Yay! Yay! For some, for some of us, we'll be called.

Well, friends, part of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ is to bear one another's burdens and to not be so stuck in our own purposes and plans that we fail to forget that we're real living human beings sitting next to each other who need love and care and support.

So thank God for that reminder this morning. And thank God that we're reminded of our own frailty, right? You know, a lot of us in this room are young and yet we need to have the reminder from those who are a little further down the race than us that this is a finite life that we live.

And we start our life in dependence and we will end our life in dependence. And part of what it means to prepare to meet God is to grow into that second dependence and to be okay with that and to let that be a testimony to the goodness of God and the faithfulness of God and the trustworthiness of God.

I think Fred's going to be okay. If they're taking him to the hospital, he's going to be all right. He fainted. But let's not lose the opportunity that God's given us this morning to attend to one another and to attend to ultimate realities.

[20:53] So why don't we pray? I'm going to preach the rest of this sermon to you guys and then we're going to eat the Lord's Supper together. Does that sound good? Let's do that. Lord Jesus, we are grateful that you are a good shepherd and you love your sheep.

And Lord, that the trials and hardships we go through in this life, we don't go through them alone. Jesus, you are truly God with us in the good times and in the bad times and sickness and in health.

And Lord, what a privilege it is that we as brothers and sisters get to be present to one another in that same way and get to be a reflection of you, Lord Jesus. So God, we do pray for Fred.

We pray for restored health. God, we pray for good care at the hospital. God, we pray that good friends would surround him and encourage him to place his hope in Jesus. We ask all this in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen. Growing up, when the pastor would go over time, he would usually say something about a roast burning at home.

[21 : 57] I don't think anyone has a roast in the oven these days, but it's probably going to burn if you do. We're going to keep going. So friends, we've looked at the first half of what Jesus tells us when it comes to how we ought to relate to human governing authorities.

And he says, we ought to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. There is a certain limited but legitimate authority that human governing structures have, and we ought to render them what is their due.

However, a lot of that's going to take prayerful, biblical, communal discernment as to what that actually looks like. Jesus lays down a principle that we then have to apply.

So a lot of these things will need to be worked out together, prayerfully. But the biggest thing we need to remember as we go about doing that work is that we remember the second half of what Jesus says in verse 25, and that is that we must render to God the things that are God's.

There is a certain duty or obligation that we owe to the governing authorities, but Jesus is clear that our ultimate allegiance must always and only belong to God alone.

[23 : 13] You see, there's a subtle but maybe not so subtle connection that Jesus is making here, right? There's an image on the coins, the image of Caesar, and therefore render it to Caesar.

But there's another image. There's an image on you, God's own image. And therefore, you must render to God what belongs to God.

You must render your whole self to God. God is the creator and the sustainer of everything. Everything belongs to him. Caesar's authority is limited.

It's temporary. It's finite. God's authority, God's ownership, God's rulership is unlimited and forever and ultimate. Everything belongs to him.

Our bodies, our minds, our time, our money, everything belongs first and foremost to him. And that means when we relate to governing authorities, we must never fall into the trap of placing our unyielding hope or trust in any one political party or political cause or political project.

[24 : 28] And I think where the rubber meets the road for us today is that if we think, if we think that being a Christian means an exclusive allegiance to this political party or that political party, whether Republican or Democrat or anything else, if we think that's what it means to be a Christian, to yield unyielding allegiance to a particular party, then we have failed to render to God the things that are God's.

Jesus is saying our ultimate citizenship as the church is in heaven. God alone is our hope and trust and the gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God is neither Republican nor Democrat.

Now that's not to say that a Christian can't be a member of a political party. That too can be maybe part of what it means to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

But we must always keep our feet firmly planted in the soil of rendering to God what belongs to God. And you see, when we've rendered to God the things that are God's, that is when we've rendered our ultimate allegiance to him and him alone, something incredible.

happens. When we get that alignment right. On the one hand, we're able to be bold and truthful about what we think is for the common good.

[25 : 50] We're able to articulate ideas winsomely even when they're unpopular. It gives us a certain amount of boldness. But it also gives us at the same time the right kind of humility and distance that we need.

At the same time, we're able to critique not just the shortcomings of other political parties or ideas, whichever they may be, but we're able to critique our own and listen to critiques of our own.

And we're able to have charitable conversations with other Christians and non-Christians about the difficult issues where we disagree. And we're able to be honest about the shortcomings of our political leaders.

just like Paul and Peter when they dealt with Rome. They were not trying to whitewash governing authorities into something they were not. These are some of the signs that we're rendering to God the things that are God while we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar.

Do you see that ability in your own heart to be able to do those things? The church should be the place that leads the way in this kind of approach and critical distance to what's happening with governing authorities.

[27 : 08] For Christians, our citizenship is ultimately in heaven, as Paul says in Philippians 3.20. And again, that doesn't mean withdrawal from the world. We have to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

We have to seek to love our neighbor as ourself. But it does mean that as we engage in the world, we do it with a hope and with a confidence that's not rooted in this world. And so we don't despair.

But neither do we make Caesar our Lord. And so there's the answer. There's the principle that Jesus lays out for us. How should Christians relate to governing authorities?

We have to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. That is, we have to respect and responsibly engage in the governing institutions over us. But ultimately, we have to render to God the things that are God's.

That is, give our unyielding allegiance to God and God alone. And yet, this brings us to the third and last thing, doesn't it? That that is a lot easier said than done.

[28 : 05] Why is it so hard? I mean, on paper, we get that, right? Like, yeah, duh. Give God your unyielding allegiance. You know, respect the limited authority that government has.

Don't get too caught up in it. And yet, it's really difficult, isn't it? And we live in a time where that's very difficult. Well, there are lots of reasons why it's difficult, lots of things we could come up with.

But let me point to just one thing that we see here in Luke. And that thing is fear. Look again at verse 19. The religious authorities don't dare come after Jesus openly because they're afraid of the people.

They're afraid that the people might turn against them. But they're not just afraid of what the people might do. Reading between the lines, they're also afraid of what Caesar might do.

Jesus, after all, is claiming to be king. And if Pilate thinks that these temple authorities are on Jesus' side, then Pilate's going to make sure that those temple authorities pay too. And then who knows what will happen?

[29:14] But even deeper, under the fear of the people, under the fear of Rome, I think is the fear, and this is clear as you look at the rest of Luke's gospel, the fear that they will lose their power.

And if they lose their power, well, what then? I think that under much of the church's struggle to relate rightly to governing authorities today is also fear.

Fear of what people might think of us. Fear of where the future is headed. Fear of losing power and influence. But in the midst of our fears, we have to look not just to Jesus' teaching in this passage.

We have to look at Jesus himself. Consider how the rest of Luke's gospel unfolds. Soon the Jewish authorities will arrest Jesus at night, away from the crowds.

And then they will think that they are rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Jesus is a criminal and they will render to Caesar such a criminal for punishment. But as they render Jesus over to Caesar, Jesus in that same moment is making another much more profound move.

[30:38] Jesus in that very moment of being rendered over to Caesar is going to be rendering to God what belongs to God. Jesus is going to render to God the perfect payment for our human sin.

All the times that we placed our trust in human governing institutions to do what only God can do. All the times that out of an allegiance to a particular project we've let our own obedience to God slip by the way.

All the times in which we've defamed the name of Christ. All the times in which we've made Caesar Lord. All these things which deserve God's just and righteous punishment.

Jesus in that moment is rendering to God what belongs to God on our behalf and paying it in full. The Apostle John says perfect love drives out fear.

And friends as the church of Jesus Christ we know that we have been shown perfect love. All that we owe to God has been rendered in full by Christ.

[31:52] And on the third day Jesus rose from the grave to prove that it had been paid in full and to conquer death. what is it you're afraid of?

All the little deaths that drive us to be afraid and to seek our hope and our trust in some kind of human institution. Jesus has conquered and risen victoriously over all of our fears including the most basic fear of all our fear of death.

And then Jesus ascended to the right hand of God Paul says far above all rule and all authority and all dominion. that the one who sits on the throne of the universe is the king of love who will make sure that nothing will harm his people in an ultimate way.

You see there's nothing we need to fear because Jesus not Caesar is Lord. The psalmist says some trust in chariots but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

the name that we know is the name of Jesus. So brothers and sisters render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar but now and forevermore let the church be known as the place where we render to God what belongs to God.

[33:15] All our love all our praise all our confidence all our hope and let that be good news to everyone who sees it. Amen? Amen.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus as we come to your table now we pray that this would be a moment for us where we continue to receive your gifts and render back to you what belongs to you our whole selves.

Amen. I wonder if those who were helping