

The Christian Citizen, Caesar, and Christ

Matthew 22:15-22

September 6, 2020
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We are back in this five-part series on the Christian and government from Romans 13 as part of our exposition of Romans. What have we learned so far? Human government exists by God's design. There is governance in every sphere of God's working. The Trinity. The angelic realm. Marriage. Family. Church. And human society. The problem isn't governance; it is the sinners doing the governing and the sinners being governed. Romans 13 tells us the role of government is to oversee and organize human society by promoting what is good and approving those who do so and punishing the evildoer and thereby acting as a restraint on human depravity. Promote the good. Punish the bad.

Romans 13 also tells us God's will for how we relate to governing authority over us. We are to submit to it. Obey. By doing this, we are not on the punishment side but on the blessing side. Paul also says we are to pay taxes as an act of conscientious worship to God. It's not easy to sing the Hallelujah Chorus on April 15, but paying taxes for Jesus' sake can take some of the sting out.

Simple, right? There's no need to say anything more! It's all perfectly clear. No problem. Nobody even argues about politics, right? In reality, there are a host of lingering problems for the Christian citizen who wants to be a responsible citizen under Caesar. Today, we are going to step out of Romans 13 to seek some clarity and next week we'll try to answer some final questions.

Before anyone here gets too fidgety, I'm not going to tell you specifically who to vote for. That's not where this is going. I am going to say that voting is important, and I urge you to do so. We are not a church that endorses candidates. Period. We don't endorse a political party. Besides being legally perilous, it's important to us that our church retains its prophetic role in our community. Once a church becomes political, it's difficult to remain prophetic. We choose to be a prophetic, gospel-oriented church where all political persuasions are welcome. After all, there is only one King that you can put all your hope in. His name is not on any current ballot. His name is Jesus.

Are you familiar with what it means to be a dual citizen? It's someone who is a citizen of two countries. It could be because of birthplace or parents' citizenship. Our challenge as Christians is that we are dual citizens of two vastly different kingdoms.

A Christian is a dual citizen of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man.

To be human is to live in human society and under human government. We are all citizens of the kingdom of man. But there is another citizenship for the Christian. To be a Christian is to be a citizen of the kingdom of God with Jesus as your King. "*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 3:20 ESV). How does an American Christian live out this citizenship? The same way a Chinese Christian citizen or Iranian Christian citizen does. By living in the one as an act of worship in the other.

Jesus was confronted with this same question in the highly charged and political world of his day. He lived in first-century Israel, which was occupied at the time by the Romans. Rome

had come to power by invasion and sword and remained in power through force and overwhelming strength. They forced high taxes on the people. They had their own currency and had the hubris to put their own emperor on the coinage that Israel had to use. Did the Jews like Roman government? While not as bad as some conquerors, they deeply resented the Romans. There were regular uprisings against them. Revolutionary groups existed everywhere; even Jesus' twelve disciples included one revolutionary, Simon the Zealot. He was at least a political operative, even possibly an assassin.

"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'" (Matthew 22:15-16).

The Pharisees were desperate to take Jesus down. What better way to do it than to catch him in the political inferno of his day? Here is the trap: *"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"* (Matthew 22:17) Behind this seemingly simple question is a nuclear bomb. On the surface, it is a question of taxation. Sure, you should pay your taxes. But the question is, should we pay taxes to Caesar? Caesar was the head of Rome. Tiberius Julius Caesar ruled the known world. Do you see any irony here? In terms of kingdoms and power, who is greater, Caesar or the one answering this question about Caesar?

Rome governed the kingdom of man. Jesus is King of the kingdom of God. The question is addressed to the King of kings about duty to the lesser king.

Do you see the catch-22 they pose to Jesus? If he says you shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, now he is a revolutionary and they can leverage that to persuade Rome to kill him. Any claim to kingship was a threat to Rome and Rome didn't play nice.

But if he said, *yes, pay taxes to Rome*, in the eyes of the people, he was a capitulator. An appeaser. A traitor to his own people. Why? The Jews hated Rome, hated their tax collectors, and hated the taxes. They have put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma with no way out. Unless you have the wisdom of the Son of God...

"But 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?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away" (Matthew 22:18-22).

What an incredible answer! Can you imagine Jesus in a presidential debate? He handles this "gotcha" question perfectly.

He asks for a denarius (see image below).



Realize this coinage was itself agitating. The Roman currency had the image of Caesar on it. Every day the currency was a reminder of being under Caesar's thumb. Most countries put founding fathers and national heroes on their money. Imagine using money every day with Hitler or Bin Laden's picture on it; that's kind of what it was like for the Jews using Roman coinage.

They bring him a denarius and Jesus asks a simple question, *whose picture is it?* He knew whose picture it was. He was simply starting them on a path of reasoning. *Caesar. We all know that. Duh. Why you are asking such an easy question?* Jesus says, *"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"* (Matthew 22:21).

This is arguably the most important single sentence of political philosophy ever uttered. In one sentence Jesus lays out the relationship between church and state and the proper perspective of a Christian to human government.

Caesar represents all human government—all the kingdoms of man. Caesar's kingdom has "things" to which we must "render" or "grant Caesar authority" over us. This includes our money, taxation, and with it comes our responsibility to submit to Caesar. Jesus sanctions submission to government and participation in human government. He doesn't stop there, but what if he had?

If all he said was, *give to Caesar what is Caesar's*, we would think that government and political power was *the* most important thing in this world. We would give all our time and energy to it. All our hope would be in government. We would pursue political power like a religion. We would be overjoyed when our candidates win, and we would be overwhelmed when they lose.

Are there people like this? They show their religion every election cycle. The fury and animus they show over the election makes you think that for them, this kingdom of man is the only kingdom that matters. It also shows itself in people who promote government as the great hope for humanity. They want more and more of it. The more the better. Certain political theories are all about rendering to Caesar. *The more rendering the better! Caesar can fix our problems. Hail Caesar!*

Beloved, do your emotions, interest, talk radio consumption, or cable news obsession suggest that government has become too important to you? Are you living like the kingdom of man is the only kingdom that matters to you?

But what do I do about it? Realize Jesus didn't stop with, *"render to Caesar."* Why? Jesus knew a secret. Do you know this secret?

The answers to man's real problems don't come from man.

No matter how brilliant or wise Caesar is, man's basic problem remains. Sin. Separation from God. Death. Hell. That is why even the most extreme forms of governmental control (like socialism, communism, and totalitarianism) eventually collapse (USSR is the most recent example). We can render to Caesar all we want, but it doesn't change the basic problem of the human heart. Every politician takes that basic depravity and corruption into the public office. Power doesn't corrupt; power reveals corruption, and absolute power reveals corruption absolutely.

It is the second part of Jesus' answer that is so critical. "*And [render] to God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22:21). What things are God's?

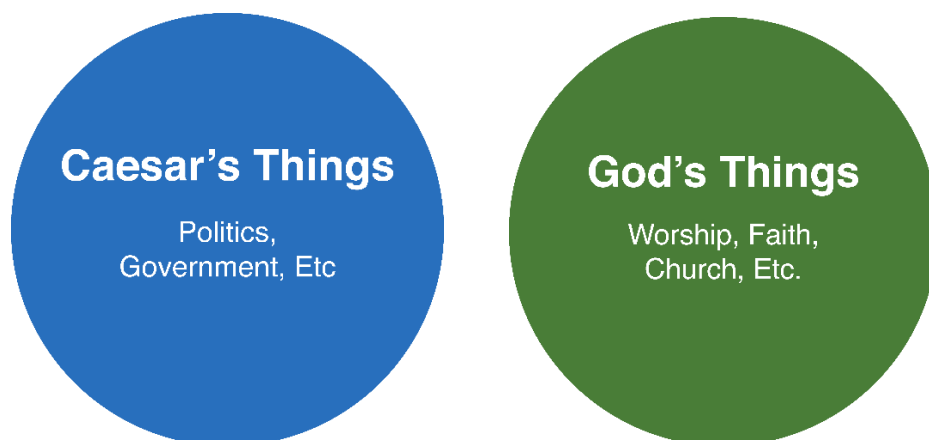
- "*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein*" (Psalm 24:1).
- "*The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them*" (Psalm 89:11).

These and many, many other verses make it clear that God is the owner and ruler of everything. "[Render] to God the things that are God's" doesn't mean Caesar owns some things and God owns some things. Rather, Jesus is describing where our allegiances should be.

We all have Caesars and various levels of them that govern over us. In the US, the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court are our Caesar. We also have state governors and legislators, local government officials, and police officers fall under this. Even our bosses and teachers and school principals fall under these authority structures. What should be our posture toward government that is over us? "*Render to Caesar.*" This is essentially what Paul addresses in Romans 13. What does "*render to Caesar*" look like? Submit. *Do what is approved by Caesar. Pay your taxes.* Why? Earthly governmental authority is established by God.

It is the divine higher authority that endows the lesser human government with authority. A Christian is called to submit to the lesser authority as an act of obedience and worship to the higher authority, God himself.

There are things that are Caesar's and there are things that are God's. You could hear that and think that this is the what Jesus is saying:



Thanks to Jonathon Leeman for the illustrations and the helpful article in *The Gospel Coalition*.¹

This dichotomy of circles and responsibility should seem familiar because it is largely how philosophical liberalism presents itself. The result is the privatization of faith and worship by tolerating it as long as it isn't brought up in polite company and definitely not in the public discourse. Christian writer, Richard John Neuhaus, called this the "naked public square,"² meaning that faith, religion, and morality are eliminated from the life of society. It is forced to retreat behind the walls of churches and homes. *Don't bring it up. You can have your quirky religious beliefs, but they are not to influence the halls of Congress or the voting booth.* Separation of church and state is being twisted into separation of church from the state. It's functional governmental atheism. Political humanism. No God. All man.



The goal is to expand Caesar's circle and to shrink the circle of God's things (see image at left). This is veiled with a word like "tolerance" or the insistence that religion has no place in government. That is a charade because secularism is also a religion and the politicians acting like they are not religious are simply bowing to different gods and idols. Politics is at its root religious, and political ideologies are masked idolatries. Idols of power, money, and control are the same gods the ancients called the Baals and Asheroths.

The first secular, non-God-over-everything moment was when Satan tempted Eve to carve out a little kingdom of her own. "Eat... and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:4-5). Man has aspired to be God ever since and the primary way is through the consolidation of power and control in government. Render everything to Caesar.

But Jesus' statement doesn't give Caesar autonomy from God. Why? "[Render] to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21) What is God's? "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1)

Everything is God's including Caesar (see image below).



When we are rendering to Caesar taxes or obeying civic laws, we are doing this in the broader circle of God's will for humanity and the governing of human affairs. But Caesar is also under God. The best human governments, the ones that allow human flourishing by common grace, require Caesar to render to God the things that are God's. This includes freedom of religion, social justice, and punishing and threatening the evildoer by wielding the sword.

Caesar always wants to do more and grow its circle of authority and control. Because of human pride, its ultimate goal is to replace God. It wants to be the whole circle. What was the Tower of Babel? What was Nebuchadnezzar's giant golden statue? What was Rome's essential religion? Not Christ is Lord, but Caesar is Lord. Human pride wants the circle to be all man, no God.

¹ Jonathan Leeman, "The Relationship Between Church and State," www.thegospelcoalition.org.

² Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1988).

Don't forget, Revelation prophesies in chapter 15 that someday this will happen. Human government is described as a whore. That's the word. A one-world government in which all commerce and all humanity are centrally controlled. Someday global humanity will render to Caesar the things that are God's. Fascism and communism are forms of government foreshadowing what is to come. The tower of Babel will rise again.

The best human governments acknowledge and recognize the distinction between church and state. We are blessed to live in a country whose founding documents and system of checks and balances closely align with this truth.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."³ (The Declaration of Independence)

While not perfect theology, it is a statement of natural law. Natural law says that human dignity and worth comes from a higher place than government. It echoes *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."* (Matthew 22:21) Our rights as humans come from a Creator, not a Caesar.

If our rights don't come from a Creator, then they are only given to us by government. If government can give them, government can take them away. So not only must we render to God that which is God's, society flourishes when Caesar renders to God that which is God's too.

What do we do when Caesar requires us to do something God forbids or what if Caesar forbids what God requires? Should the Huguenots have hid Jews during World War II? Or Bonhoeffer participate in the assassination attempt on Hitler? Or Anne Frank hid in that attic? Or present-day Christians in China worship in the underground church? Or the Jewish midwives drown the babies by the order of Pharaoh? Christian citizenship places requirements on us, but are there any exceptions? And what does faithful Christian citizenship look like when Caesar seeks to overthrow God and his people? That's next week. I hope you will join us.

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³ *Preamble to the Declaration of Independence*, www.Archives.gov.