

Render unto Caesar

Matt. 22:15-22

Governments and the followers of Jesus have often been at odds. This was as true when Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem and Galilee as it is today. When Jesus spoke the words, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." He was just days from a crucifixion that would be orchestrated by the Jewish temple authorities and sanctioned by the Roman government. (by Caesar) And, Jesus knew all that awaited Him and the part that religious and civil authorities would play in His death. Still, He said what He said.

The circumstances were still another attempt by the Pharisees to trap Jesus with words and to get Him to say something that would compromise His standing either as a subject of Roman occupation or as a teacher of the Law and Scriptures in the context of the 1st century culture in which He lived. They approached Jesus with flattery that was meant to set Him up. They suggested that Jesus was known for His independent voice and that He was unafraid and known to speak truth in any circumstance without regard for consequences. And so, Jesus, what do you think, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not? As at other times they thought that they had set the perfect trap. If Jesus were to say that they should pay taxes to Caesar this would have been construed as spiritual compromise, how could Jesus possibly support the immoral and vicious Roman regime? If, on the other hand, He were to say that they should not pay their taxes then, they would have reported Jesus to the Roman authorities as a fomenter of rebellion and as a threat to Caesar's rule. But Jesus had an answer that avoided the obvious trap and that still spoke the bold truth that the Pharisees flattery had suggested that characterized Jesus' personality.

But, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" is more than just clever avoidance of a clever trap. It is a word that has been the guiding principle the Christian Church has tried to apply to every conflict between state and church ever since. Note that Jesus did not put state and

church in a competitive relationship but instead viewed them as being parallel to one another. Don't choose between state and church but give each their due. Jesus gave legitimacy to government but kept the civil authorities accountable to the higher authority of God Himself.

Jesus' model statement appears to be quite simple but the implications are far reaching. No one seemed more aware of this than the Apostle Paul. Paul's teaching in Romans 13 is a direct application of the word Jesus spoke in answer to the Pharisees. "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God..." Rendering to God what is His must mean that we acknowledge His sovereignty in all things. This even extends to the government. Generally, the government has represented the civil authorities who rule over the general population often without the consent of or any real accountability to that population. Governments are usually made up of a self-serving minority who wish to impose their own agenda upon the people for the advancement of themselves. Even in this context, Paul sees the advantages that governments provide for the people for all governments stand against the chaos of thievery and violence. By doing so the people are protected and order is established.

Not all that the government does is good. Thus, the question of whether the taxes should be paid or not. The taxes paid by the Jews funded the occupation that they hated and that infringed upon the exercise of their faith. Today, there is the issue of abortion that has a certain level of government funding. Should Christians help pay for abortions? Jesus' answer is "Render unto Caesar..."

The fundamental conviction of this word is that God is sovereign. As such, He does not always choose to make it circumstantially advantageous to live as a Christian. And we often pray for God to reverse this policy and our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears. In reality, God's purposes are often better served by conflict than by peace.

Jesus spoke these words just days from the cross. God could have prevented that cross but He did not. Salvation is only possible by means of the cross. The apostle Paul wrote his admonition to be subject to the higher powers to the church in

Rome that He would only be able to visit and minister to as a prisoner of the government that He urged the church to pay their taxes to. But, how much of the New Testament might not had been written if Paul had not been a prisoner for as many years as he was?

Pilgrim's Progress was written during the 12 years of John Bunyan's imprisonment in the Bedford jail.

Adoniram Judson gave his life to the work of missionary work in Burma. He faced the obstacle of bringing the message of salvation through Christ to a people whose government official recognized only one religion. "To be Burmese was to be Buddhist, and to be Buddhist, was to be Burmese." In this culture, Judson sought permission to have the government recognize that the Burmese people could be Burmese and yet, be a Christian. He took long and arduous trips up-river to meet with and seek approval from the king. The trips were taken in vain and yet, Judson continued to seek the kings permission and approval through the years War occurred between the king of Burma and the British and Judson found himself alone. The Burmese didn't trust him because he was white and the British didn't trust him because he was American. Judson spent the war years in a British jail during which he worked on his translation of the Bible into Burmese and his Burmese-English dictionary.

These are all examples of Christians who were glad to give the government its due but who refused to surrender their faith. The government has its place but God has a higher place. Jesus' word means that believers will not become a threat to the government, but it also means that believers will always put God first.

The Christian position is to trust in God. When the government turns against us we trust in God. If the government takes our taxes and uses them for evil then we trust in God. In every circumstance we acknowledge that God is in control and we know that He is able to turn evil into good and so we trust in Him.