

Render and Surrender! Mathew 22: 15-22

For thousands of years, beginning with the days of Noah, religion and government have overlapped in some way. As each of Noah's descendants multiplied, scattered, and began to form nations, their understanding of God also influenced how their own individual tribes (or nations) would be governed. God's will, holy standards and guidelines that govern the lives of individuals also apply to organized groups of people.

That is true and good, and in a perfect world God's will would be perfectly known and followed. Unfortunately, we don't live in such a world, at least not yet. The founding fathers of our great nation recognized that, and understood it is not the role of government to tell its people how or how not to worship or live their daily lives. They incorporated the establishment clause in the First Amendment of our constitution to help prevent that from happening. It states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. Thomas Jefferson famously wrote that a wall of separation is necessary between Church and State.

However, there are windows in that wall. Freedom of religion is not the same as freedom from religion. Like it or not, it is not possible to entirely separate church from state. Faith and politics overlap. Unlike checking our coat at a restaurant, we don't leave our faith at the door to the polling place and not think about it again until it is time to leave. Faith or the lack thereof will have an influence on decisions made in the voting booth that will ultimately impact society. In that sense, a freely- elected government will somewhat reflect the faith of the people, or at least the portion of people that choose to vote.

Politics is the process by which groups of people establish authority. Those authorities then determine who gets what, where and when. As Christians, we understand that our ultimate authority is God, for God is the sovereign creator, ruler and provider of the entire universe. Psalm 103:19- "The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all". In Paul's letter to the church at Rome he reminds them and us that "there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Whether Paul intended that to refer to specific individuals is questionable, but there can be no doubt that God has established authorities to keep order in our world. Among others, God has established Jesus to be the authority over the church, the church to be the authority over believers, the parent or grandparent to be the authority over the child and the government to be the authority over its citizens. These authorities have two basic objectives- reward good and restrain evil. Those two objectives are the same whether we are defining the authority of God, the authority of a parent or grandparent, the authority of a government or the authority of the church. Because we are fallen people, it is a natural human response to question it rather than submit to it. Even so, there are times when it is appropriate or even necessary to do so.

Looking at our Scripture text, it seems that some of the people who lived during the time of Christ were struggling with questions of authority. At first glance it appears they were asking Jesus a political question. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? It is important for us to understand who was asking this question of Jesus. Verse 15 and 16 reveals that two groups of people were behind that question that day- the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were a religious party who hated Roman rule. Jesus was constantly at odds with their legalistic teaching, and routinely pointed out their failure to properly interpret and uphold the Scriptures. The Herodians on the other hand were a political party, dedicated to King Herod. Many Bible scholars believe the Sadducees, the rulers of the temple, were also members of that group.

If this were happening today in the U.S. St. Mathew might say the Republicans and Democrats were there. I say that not to compare the Pharisees to Republicans or the Herodians to Democrats, but to make the point that two groups with entirely different political perspectives shared a common goal that day- to “entangle Him in His talk”. On the surface it appeared the question they asked Jesus was a reasonable one. Jesus, when is it alright to question authority? It is a question that we still struggle with today. What do we do when our government does things we don't like? What do we do when we are treated differently because of heritage or skin color? What do we do if we are opposed to war and our government keeps sending our sons and daughters into battle?

What do we do when Planned Parenthood, an organization with no regard for the sanctity of human life, is receiving our tax dollars? What do we do if we think some people are not paying enough taxes and others are paying too much? What do we do when we believe that the government is enslaving some people for life-economic slavery- without offering even a chance for freedom? What do we do when our government or church hierarchy are in direct conflict with the Scriptures when it comes to defining marriage? What do we do when those in authority overstep their bounds and people die from excessive deadly force? Jesus, please help us to know when is it alright for us to question authority.

The question they asked Jesus was appropriate. Much like many of us, they had problems with politicians and taxes. For one, their income tax money was being used to finance the very army that was keeping them in oppression. On top of that, every non- Roman citizen had to pay a special tax to Rome called a poll tax. Bible commentator John Macarthur said this about it: The poll tax was the most hated of all the taxes because it suggested that Rome owned even the people, while they viewed themselves as possessions of God. Sorry emperor, we don't belong to you, we belong to God.

Their question about paying taxes was a valid one. The problem was not so much with the question they asked of Jesus but their motive for asking it. It was a good question asked with an evil purpose. The real authority they were challenging was not that of Rome but that of Jesus. Neither side liked His message of love and equality. The goal of both groups that day was not to obtain justice or relief from Roman oppression but to get Jesus killed.

They thought they had laid the perfect trap. If Jesus said it was OK not to pay taxes, the Herodians would charge Him with treason. If Jesus said they should pay their taxes, the Pharisees would claim that Jesus was favoring Rome ahead of the Jewish nation. Heads they win. Tails Jesus loses. It seemed like a no-win situation. But just as King Solomon in his wisdom found a solution to the perplexing dilemma of those two mothers who claimed the same infant, Jesus provided a wise answer to their question in a way that only He could.

Mathew 22:21-“render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” No need to wonder what their reaction was- verse 22 in the NRSV says they were amazed, the NKJ says they marveled, but Young’s Literal Translation renders it this way: and having heard they wondered, and having left him they went away.

Neither group heard what it wanted to hear. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to condemn the government and its oppressive taxes and the Herodians wanted Jesus to justify it. He did neither, and as a result both groups turned their backs on Him and went home. Their desire to use Jesus for their own cause had failed, and they went away wondering what had gone wrong. They went away wondering why this Jesus was so different from anybody that had ever met. So why didn’t Jesus choose sides? He very easily could have told the Herodians that they were wrong in assuming that politicians would use the taxes collected from them to meet the social and spiritual needs of the people. The Herodians themselves were willfully ignoring the needs of those less fortunate. Jesus could have chastised the Pharisees for stirring up anger and resentment against Rome. There was already ample anger among the people without them adding more fuel to the fire.

The reason Jesus didn’t choose sides that day is found in verse 16. Jesus taught with a high regard for divine truth-God’s standards for living and with no regard for partiality. Jesus loves everybody equally, despite their sins. Some things will belong to the emperor, including the ability to levy taxes. But those taxes should be paid with the understanding that it doesn’t matter whose picture is on the coin, because the gold or silver or copper used to mint the coin actually belongs to God. God owns everything, and God has the right to lend some of it out on occasion as He sees fit.

Some things might belong to Caesar, but there are other things that belong only to God. There are some things government will never be able to do, and loving people is one of them. That is the role of the church. God has gifted and commanded the church- in other words people like you and me- with that holy work. People belong to God and not to Caesar. Unlike Caesar, God loves all of us equally, without regard to race, creed or wealth.

The problem is that church seems to have forgotten that it is not Caesar. We cannot force people to love each other, no matter how hard we try. By default, we choose not to love and care for each other as God loves us. We love ourselves more than we love others. Hatred, bigotry, and racism are spiritual problems. No political system or government can fix them. There are no political solutions to spiritual problems and that will be true until Christ returns and makes things right. Spiritual problems need spiritual solutions, and the solution lies in changing hearts. It begins with learning to worship together.

People will be people, and God will be God. Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but more importantly surrender to God the things that are God's. Give Caesar his taxes but give God the glory He deserves by loving each other the way Jesus loves us- without partiality. We are justified in questioning authority when the authority in question is preventing us from carrying out that God given mission- loving others as Christ loved us. My prayer is that we may remain obedient to that call and hearts will be changed. Amen