

“Render to Caesar”: The Christian and the State (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. ²² Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” ²³ But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, ²⁴ “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.” ²⁵ He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²⁶ 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. (Luke 20:19–26)

The Christian and Politics

- A. With a highly contested and controversial election coming up in just a few months, there is perhaps no better text for us to have come to now than this one.
1. For here we are given opportunity to reflect together upon the relationship between the Christian and politics, the church and the state, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this world, Jesus and Caesar, and so forth.
- B. Surely you’ve felt the political tension these days here in our country. The upcoming election is really just the tip of the iceberg.
1. We could talk about the COVID-19—how it’s being handled;
 2. the racial unrest and inequality—what’s the best way forward;
 3. the economy—whether we should open it back up or not, and, if so, what sectors and when and how far;
 4. even what to do with the post office is a hot-button political issue in recent days.
 - a. I heard one pastor say something profound lately that really put all this in perspective for me. I’m paraphrasing, but he said something like: “In 2020 it’s almost as if we’ve taken the Spanish flu of the 1910s, and coupled it with the unemployment of the Great Depression in the 30s and 40s, and mashed that in together with the protests of the 60s, and rolled all that into one. And to top it off let’s throw in a highly contested, incredibly volatile presidential election.” It is crazy to think about, is it not?

- C. In view of this, there is, no doubt, great confusion (as truly there has always been) regarding how a Christian or disciple of Jesus is to engage with government and politics, if at all.
 - 1. I'm sure you've experienced it—the complexity of the social issues, the rapidity of the news cycle, the clash of opinions between family members and friends and even between brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - a. It's confusing. It's disorienting. It's saddening. It's maddening.
 - i. But still we are left with the question: What is our place in it all? What does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus in the midst of the mess? How should we respond? What options do we even have?

What Are Our Options?

- A. It's that last question concerning our options that I'm really going to try to tackle in this message.
 - 1. I don't know why, but for some reason, that's how this text initially unfolded for me. I saw our various options for political and social involvement laid out. And I watched how Jesus, almost systematically, seems to be shuffling through them, discarding and correcting, and then, ultimately leading us to the right approach.
 - a. Now, before we proceed here, I should say that I do, at this point at least, plan to wrap back around next week and deal with the broader concerns of government and church and also work out a bit more of the practicals and things. The subject matter here, the timing of it all, is, I think, worthy of deeper reflection than a single sermon can provide.
- B. So then, here's the agenda for this morning:
 - 1. I first want to simply make a few Introductory Comments just to ensure that we're seeing what's happening here and that we're properly entering into the narrative.
 - 2. And then we'll spend the great majority of our time discussing these Various Options concerning a Christian's political and social involvement.

(1) Introductory Comments

Setting the Trap

- A. Remember, conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders there in Jerusalem is ramping up.
 - 1. The last parable seemed to be the last straw for some of these men. So we read there in [v. 19a](#): “The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.”
 - a. They wanted to kill Him. But the only thing holding them back Luke tells us is that “they feared the people” ([v. 19b](#)). “They’re all hanging on His every word. If we just

come after Him in broad daylight, we're going to lose favor with them. They're going to turn on us. And we can't have that."

- B. So they hatch a plan. It's quite brilliant, honestly. We're told in v. 20, that "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."
 - 1. They send some guys undercover. And they arm them with a simple question. It seems honest enough. And yet, with it, they're aiming to put Jesus in checkmate. They set up a binary—a simple yes or no answer will suffice. But either way Jesus goes, it's game over.
- C. Here's the question, vv. 21-22: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. [This is just empty flattery, they're trying to disguise their malicious intent and catch Him off guard. But here comes the question . . .]²² Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"
 - 1. "Yes or no? That's all we need. A simple answer." The trap is set.
- D. Now, to clarify, this "tribute" (Gk. phoros), refers to what was called the "imperial poll tax" which was paid directly to Caesar, in this case, Tiberius Caesar, and, as such, paying it could be understood as an acknowledgement and even an honoring of the Roman emperor.

Checkmate?!

- A. So here's the dilemma . . .
- B. If Jesus says, "Yes, pay it"—well, to put it simply, the people of Israel will no longer be hanging on His words. Indeed, they'll be ready to hang Him! For this to them would look to be in support of the Roman occupation and the oppression of God's people by this pagan nation.
 - 1. In fact, there's a long history of Jewish disdain for this particular tax. When it was first initiated back in 6 AD, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us that a man named Judas from Galilee fomented a rebellion against Rome calling his fellow countrymen to resist. (It's this that later grew into the Zealot movement that ultimately drew Israel into revolt against Rome in 66 AD and got the whole nation destroyed.)
 - a. All of this to say, if Jesus even hints at support of Rome, He will appear to many to be both a traitor to His country and a traitor to His God. The Jews would be done with Him.
 - i. And these religious leaders will have won.
- C. But if He says, "No, don't pay the tax"—the consequences for Him will be equally dire, perhaps even more so. For then He will look to be seditious, a revolutionary. And, while the Jewish people may applaud and rally around Him, the Romans will quickly hear of it and stamp Him out.
 - 1. In this case, these Jewish leaders here could get Rome to do their dirty work while they still maintain a clean reputation among the people.

D. So either way it goes, it's a win-win for these wicked men. "Checkmate" . . . or so they thought!

Outsmarting God

A. Now might be a good time to remind us that it is never a good idea to try to outsmart God. Yet, sadly it seems to me, we are trying to do this all the time.

1. Ever since the garden. God comes in and we're like hiding in a bush as if He's not going to see us, as if He doesn't know what we're up to.

B. I always love Matt Chandler's illustrations. And I remember him saying it's like trying to play hide and seek with your little kid. She's always thinking she's clever, but she's got that one spot, behind the curtain or whatever, and you already know that's where she's headed before you even start counting. You come into the living room and there she is. "Oh my, where could she be?"

1. When we play these games with God it's like that. It's never going to work.

C. Maybe, you've got some stuff you're doing right now and you think you're getting away with it. Just because God hasn't called you out to mat on it yet, you think you're clever. He knows. Come clean. Come out of hiding and get real.

1. Truth be told, we may think we've got Him in checkmate, but really He's just one move away from flipping the trap back on us.

D. And that's what happens next here in our text. And it's at this point that we see, Jesus is not just evading this trap and flipping it back on His opponents, He's also really giving us a broader vision of what it looks like for Christians to engage the government and broader culture around them.

1. Here then we come to those various options I referred to at the front. I've got four of them. We'll take them one at a time . . .

(2) The Various Options

Option #1: Antagonism

A. The first option to bring out is what I would call Antagonism.

1. By this I simply mean that we may consider it the church's job to fight the culture and push against the state. We may be prone to see government as evil, as our great enemy, maybe even our greatest enemy, and the source of our problems. Therefore, we must get aggressive, we must rebel, we must rise up against it.

B. I dare say, there are probably not a few among us who are feeling this way about the American government right now. Antagonism.

C. Here would be the perspective of those Jewish nationalists in Jesus' day—the Zealots as I mentioned. And the Maccabees before them. "Get rid of Rome and then we'll be good!"

- D. Some take this a step further, of course, and see it as the goal to “Christianize” government as it were.
1. For the Jews, the hope would be to replace Caesar with YHWH and return to the Sinai theocracy of the Old Testament where God ruled directly over His people.
 2. For Christians this is the move we saw with Constantine and the advent of Christendom, where suddenly the church wields both the power of the keys and the power of the sword. “We don’t want the pagans set over us. So let’s overtake the state with the church.”
- E. Now this may actually sound good to us on the surface, but Jesus Himself here pushes back on the idea. And with this we come now to the first part of His brilliant response.
1. In v. 24, He asks for someone to set forth a denarius—it was a coin in that day that amounted to about a day’s wage for the common laborer. “Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” He asks. “They said, ‘Caesar’s.’”
 - a. It would have Tiberius Caesar’s image on this coin. And with it would have been inscribed the following: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus”—in other words “son of god.”
- F. You can see how all of this would have been so incredibly distasteful to the Jews who did not put any images on coins, especially images that represented a deity.
1. Emperor worship in Rome began in full with Augustus and carried on through subsequent Caesars after him. They thought themselves to be gods and demanded to be treated as such.
 - a. Is it any wonder, then, that the Jews thought: “Surely this has to go! Surely when God sends His Messiah He’s going to make a swift end of this idolatry!”
- G. So here Jesus is, holding this wretched coin in His hand—Son of God versus son of god, it would seem. And one would expect Him to throw it aside, unsheathe His sword and make a run on this Tiberius for sake of His blatant vanity and depravity.
1. But He does nothing of the sort. Instead, no doubt to the surprise of many standing by, He says: “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .” (v. 25a). “His image is on it. Give it back to him.”
 - a. There’s no Antagonism. There’s just what appears to be humble submission and, even, respect.

Option #2: Compromise

- A. Now let’s talk about option #2, what I would call Compromise.

1. This is where it might look like Jesus is leading us with the first part of His response here. “Give your money to Caesar. If you can’t beat them, join them. Go soft. Accommodate. Capitulate.”
 - a. If Antagonism is the church trying to overtake the state, Compromise is the church letting the state overtake her. We dilute our convictions, we lose our distinction as God’s people. Our hope starts to migrate from the kingdom of YHWH but to the kingdom of Caesar.

- B. In Jesus’ day, this would be the perspective of groups like the Herodians, or even the Sadducees. They were supportive of Rome. They appreciated the opportunities for power and prestige it afforded them and they were happy to buddy up to the Gentile nation and the emperor if it meant they could maintain what they had and perhaps get even more.

- C. For us, this may look like putting way too much hope and stock in a political party, as if it’s going to fix everything and do for you what only Jesus can.
 1. There’s a lot of this exaggerated rhetoric going around these days, right? As if you’re destiny, your very life, is hanging in the balance with this next election. If it goes one way, it’s over for you. If it goes the other, it’s salvation.
 - a. And we can buy into this. It’s no longer the gospel of Jesus Christ we’re hoping in, but it’s the gospel of the Republican party, or the gospel of the Democratic party, or whatever. We’ve compromised. We’ve put our hope in earthly kings.

- D. But Jesus won’t let this stand either. That’s why He goes where He goes next. And this is where things get particularly interesting and profound.
 1. So remember, first He says: “Get me one of those coins. Whose ‘likeness’ is on it?” [The Greek word there is eikōn = “image.”] Well, if Caesar’s image is on it, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”
 2. But then He adds this: “. . . and [render] to God the things that are God’s” (v. 25b).
 - a. Well, let me ask you: What has God’s image on it? According to [Gen 1:26-27](#), you and I do: “So God created man in his own image [LXX, eikōn] . . .; male and female he created them.”
 - i. Implication: If Caesar gets your money because his image is on it, God gets you—and every aspect of your life, submitted, surrendered to Him—because His image is on you!

- E. So whatever else is going on here, it’s certainly not Compromise.
 1. We’re not antagonistic, insurrectionists.
 2. Nor are we compromisers, collaborators.
 3. We’re somehow engaged with the state, even generally appreciative of it and working with it, and yet we’re remaining faithful and committed to our God. We are not trying to crush

Caesar, nor are we bending the knee to Him. We're moving towards him in the name of Jesus.

- F. Now you see, perhaps, why Jesus' opponents just marveled at Him and went away silent.
1. They set up a false dichotomy. They thought they had a yes/no question. When truly Jesus is saying it's a both/and.
 - a. Jesus answered their question in such a way that both Roman overlords and the Jewish nationalists could be sufficiently satisfied. He's not promoting rebellion against Rome, because He said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's." But neither is He promoting capitulation to them, because He said, "Render to God what is God's."
 - i. He stayed faithful to YHWH while, in a sense, calling us to be faithful citizens of whatever earthly kingdom we're a part of. Indeed, as He's saying here, one of the ways you can be a faithful member of YHWH's kingdom is to be humbly and intentionally engaged as a citizen in the kingdoms of this world.
- G. And in all this, He's revealing to us the way we as Christians can properly relate to the political sphere of our day.

Option #3: Withdrawal

- A. Now, before I go any further, I need to hit pause and consider one other insufficient option that many people of God through the years have been tempted towards. I'd call it Withdrawal.
1. The idea here would be to take Jesus' words and see Him as almost delineating two entirely separate realms, distinct and removed from the other.
 - a. The one realm belongs to Caesar (the secular government and things).
 - b. And the other realm belongs to God (namely, the church).
- B. Here is the division between secular and sacred. Here's what has been referred to as two kingdoms theology taken to the extreme. Here's what has through the years been referred to as the doctrine of the "spirituality" of the church. "Our domain is spiritual stuff, we don't engage the political sphere, that's not our place."
1. Here's what has led to Christians pulling away from culture rather than engaging it. "Let it burn. We can't fix it. It's not our job." So you have the Essenes of Jesus day, who just kind of pulled off into the desert and away from everyone else, the Ascetics of the early church, Monastics of the Medieval period, the Anabaptists of the Reformation era, and the Fundamentalists in our day.
- C. I'm sure some of us have wanted to go here lately, right? The noise of your Facebook feed, the complexity of the social issues, the rising angst and rancor even among Christians. Don't you just want to turn it all off and say: "Forget it!" Don't you just want to withdraw?

D. But listen, this sort of attitude among Christians has led to all manner of problems. So much evil has been permitted and unchallenged by the church, because of this mistaken impulse to separate instead of engage.

1. So Lutheran theologian Robert Benne, speaks of how the German Lutherans, as an unfortunate result of their two kingdom approach (the government over here, church over here, with little to say to one another) “allowed the Nazi movement to go unchecked by appeal to the intellectual and moral content of the Christian vision.”

a. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor famous for taking a stand against the Nazis even unto death, pleaded with his fellow Christians at the time: “We must finally stop appealing to theology to justify our reserved silence about what the state is doing—for that is nothing but fear. ‘Open your mouth for the one who is voiceless’—for who in the church today still remembers that that is the least of the Bible’s demands in times such as these?”

2. The same could be said on the issue of slavery in America. The doctrine of the spirituality of the church led Henry Thornwell, a southern Presbyterian theologian during the Civil War era, to write these stunning words: “Whether slavery exists or not is a question which exclusively belongs to the State. . . . We have no right, as a church, to enjoin as a duty, or to condemn it as a sin. . . . The social, civil, political problems connected with this great subject transcend our sphere, as God has not entrusted to his Church the organization of society, the construction of Government, nor the allotment of individuals to their various stations.” “Quiet down with all this talk of abolition. It’s none of our business!”

a. Well, Martin Luther King—seeing this sort of separatist, passive, withdrawn attitude still pervasive in the church—would beg to differ. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, he writes: “I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, ‘Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,’ and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion that made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.”

E. It’s that last image that just struck me. Christians aren’t supposed to be taillights, taking up the rear on matters of justice, equity, and human rights. We’re called by God to be headlights, taking the front, leading the way through the dark, wicked tendencies of this fallen world.

1. Or as Jesus Himself would say: “¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it

gives light to all in the house.¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:14–16).

Option #4: Redemptive Representation

- A. So this really leads us back, then, to what I was getting started with there before we hit pause.
1. Returning to Jesus’ answer in v. 25, what we must see is that He’s not setting up two separate circles—the realm of God’s authority over here, and the realm of the State’s authority over there. Nor is He drawing two overlapping circles, like a sort of Venn diagram, where there is some things that belong uniquely with one or the other but there are some things that overlap.
 - a. No. If I am understanding Jesus properly here, the picture is not of two circles separate or overlapping, but of one smaller circle within another all-encompassing circle. The realm of the state is still within and subservient to the realm of God.
- B. That’s what Jesus’ statement means. Caesar’s rule and realm is confined to that which has his image on it—the stuff of Rome. God’s rule and realm, on the other hand, is confined to that which has His image on it: namely, all people everywhere . . . including Caesar! And that’s the essential point.
1. These are not two separate circles. But one smaller circle within another all-comprehensive circle: God’s. God establishes government. God appoints rulers. They are accountable to Him. He has a vision for it, a plan for it, a design for it. A way it should function.
 - a. We will talk about this more next week, but what we must understand now at least is that if this true, if our God is the One who has established and defined the boundaries and purpose of the state, then, by implication, we the church, as the people of this God and the ambassadors of His Christ, should certainly have much to say and do with regards to it.
 - i. We are not to be two separate institutions going our two separate ways. There ought to be significant engagement, or what I’m here calling: Redemptive Representation.
- C. I borrow that word “Representation” from Jonathan Leeman and add that word “Redemptive” to it, because I think that’s what we are doing.
1. We are representing our King, and are working for the redemption and restoration of all things, even as we live within and engage the broken and twisted up kingdoms of this world. We bring God, Christ, and His rule and reign to bear on all of life, including the public square and matters of politics.
- D. Is this not what Jesus did?

1. He didn't see the government as man's greatest enemy—like the antagonists and insurrectionists—but He certainly wasn't afraid to call out sin and wrongdoing where He saw it.
 2. He didn't see government as man's greatest hope—like perhaps the compromisers and collaborators would have—but He wasn't afraid to support government either and call us to honor and pray for those over us and affirm the good where we see it.
 3. He didn't pull away into indifference or withdraw like the separatists, but He certainly was not of this world—and He maintains this distinction and holiness even as He lives and walks within it.
 4. And, of course, most significantly of all, He showed us a new way to be king.
 - a. Our King Jesus wears a crown of thorns before He ever wears a crown of jewels.
 - b. Our King Jesus carries a cross before He ever carries a scepter.
 - c. Our King Jesus is wrapped in burial garments before He's ever wrapped in royal robes.
 - d. Our King Jesus lays His life down in love to serve the very ones He's been called to rule.
- E. And we're called to represent Him—His agenda, His heart, His mission—even in the political arena, even in the public square.
1. To be clear: The concerns of the public square never trump the concerns of the Great Commission, but neither are the two at odds. The public square is one place in which we seek to go and make disciples—as we live with integrity, work for justice and shalom, love our neighbor, care for the orphan and the widow, make a defense for the hope that is within us, and let our good deeds shine out before others that they too might come to glorify our Father in heaven.
- F. I'll close with the words of one commentator that I think sum all this up nicely: “The reply of Jesus [in v. 25] does not echo the politics of the Zealots, who were bent on armed combat with Rome; or of the Sadducees, who accommodated to the state; or of the Pharisees, who followed an independent course indifferent to the state. Nor does the judgment of Jesus advocate a separate and perhaps even contrary sacred order within the larger secular society. Both Jesus and his followers situate themselves within their respective political and cultural milieus and advocate service of the common good within them” (PNTC).
1. Brothers and sisters, when it comes to the Christian's engagement with the state and government, we are called not to Antagonism, nor Compromise, nor Withdrawal, but to Redemptive Representation. May God help us!