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Sermon Summary #35

Honor Caesar, but Worship God! **Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:1-7**

I can't imagine what it would be like or how I would react if I were arrested and thrown in jail for hosting a Bible study in my home. Try to imagine being sentenced to five years in prison simply for sharing your Christian faith with a friend at Starbucks. Let's be honest and admit that it's hard to envision such things happening. After all, with few exceptions, it's easy being a Christian in America. We feel relatively safe and secure and free living for Jesus.

Of course, we should never lose sight of the fact that, tragically, we do live in a country where it is more acceptable for a woman to have a wife than it is to pray in Jesus' name in a public ceremony. We live in a country, tragically, where spanking children is called into question but it's legal to abort them!

Nevertheless, the idea of having to choose between loyalty to our God and loyalty to our government probably isn't one that keeps us awake much at night. The idea of being forced to choose between obedience to our **heavenly Lord** or obedience to an **earthly law** is foreign to most of us. But there are Christian men and women who have to make that choice every day of their lives.

It raises the question: *What is the Christian's responsibility to the state?* What are we supposed to do when our allegiance to God conflicts with our allegiance to government? What should we do if the state or federal legislature passes laws forbidding small group gatherings or public worship services such as The Sing? These are not academic questions but ones that intimately touch the lives of many believers today, and may well affect us in the days ahead.

The question of a Christian's allegiance to both God and government was once posed to Jesus. Let's look at it.

But first let's consider the context. Jesus, to put it mildly, has been raking the religious leaders over the proverbial coals. They are fed up with this carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher from Nazareth who now dares to claim that he is Israel's Messiah. Having been under constant attack from him and having been repeatedly exposed in public as hypocritical, self-serving, power-hungry manipulators, they decide to go on the offensive! So they start peppering Jesus with questions.

All these inquiries by the religious leaders were not designed to gain an understanding of who Jesus is, far less did they actually want answers to the questions they asked. They simply wanted to entrap Jesus (look at v. 13). They wanted to catch him in some public gaffe. They wanted him to slip up verbally so they might have **grounds for taking him down**. They couldn't have cared less about the truth. They simply wanted to take him down. Luke's gospel is even more explicit: "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" (Luke 20:20).

The question of paying taxes to Rome was a burning issue among the Jews in the first century. Times haven't changed. No one in any age or in any country enjoys paying taxes. The Jews of Jesus' day were no exception. The Jews resented paying exorbitant taxes to Rome. After all, this was the land God had given to Israel. God alone was Israel's King. What right does this pagan, Gentile ruler have to demand taxes from Jews? Thus, for the Jews of the first century, paying taxes to Rome was a religious offense.

Their strategy for approaching Jesus is unbelievable! They employ two tactics hoping to ensnare Jesus. First, according to v. 13, "they sent to him some of the **Pharisees** and some of the **Herodians**."

So what, you say? What's the big deal about that? Simply this. It would be impossible to find two more hostile, politically antithetical, religiously opposite groups than these! The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Israel, the leaders of the occupied nation, those who suffered under Roman rule and insisted on the strict observance of all OT Mosaic laws. The Herodians, on the other hand, were staunch allies of Rome. They had

received various high political appointments in the government. The Pharisees resented the Herodians and looked upon them as oppressive and pagan. The Herodians hated the Pharisees and looked upon them as religious fanatics and a constant social nuisance.

This would be somewhat similar to the ACLU joining forces with the Tea Party! It would be like members of the Ku Klux Klan seeking partnership with the NAACP!

So why this partnership? Isn't it obvious? If Jesus should fall into their trap by objecting to the paying of taxes to the state, the Herodian Roman sympathizers would serve as credible witnesses against him. The Pharisees were known to be enemies of Roman rule, so no one in the government would believe their testimony. But the presence of the Herodians solved this problem. So the Pharisees enlist them to aid in setting a trap for Jesus.

If Jesus had said, "Yes, pay the tax," and simply left it at that, the Herodians would have been thrilled but the Pharisees and most of the Jewish population would have been enraged. If he had said, "No, don't pay the tax," and simply left it at that, he would have pleased the Pharisees and the people but angered the Herodians. So, they think that by their question they have put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma from which he can't escape. They have cornered him, forcing him to take side for God and against government, or for government and against God. It seemed to be the perfect trap.

And to make it even better, the other element in their strategy is flattery. Read v. 14. Their description of Jesus' personal integrity and theological insight is, of course, quite true. But they didn't believe a word of it. They try to butter him up by acknowledging that he's an independent thinker beholden to none but God. "You are your own man, Jesus, and we respect you for that." Baloney! They are hoping that Jesus' ego is sufficiently inflated by their praise that he will let down his guard and walk straight into their trap.

But it is impossible to ensnare him (see vv. 15-16)! You can't blind-side Jesus. He saw through their façade of cooperation and knew what their motives were for asking. He recognized their faint praise as nothing more than empty and manipulative flattery.

On one side of the **denarius coin** was an engraving or image of Tiberius, emperor of Rome, with the inscription: *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus*. Since Augustus claimed to be the son of god, all Caesars subsequent to him laid claim to being divine as well. On the other side was an image of the mother of Tiberius sitting on a throne in priestly robes with the inscription: *Pontif(ex) Maxim(us)* = high priest.

Thus the dilemma appears obvious: If he should endorse, without qualification, the use of this coin to pay taxes in support of a pagan, foreign oppressor like Rome, **he stands to lose face** among the Jewish people. But if he says, No, you shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar with this coin or any other, **he stands to lose his life** at the hands of the Romans as a subversive anarchist.

The verb translated "*render*" means to pay back; it has in view a debt that is owed. What Jesus is commanding, then, isn't optional. Payment of taxes to Caesar was both legal and morally obligatory. "Yes," says Jesus, "you do have an allegiance to the state."

Note well. Jesus doesn't qualify his statement by saying: "Pay taxes to Caesar, **but only if** they are used to advance biblical and moral purposes," or "Pay taxes to Caesar, **unless** they are used for obviously immoral and unbiblical purposes."

Does this help us answer the question: What should we as Christians do when our taxes are used to subsidize and support obviously unbiblical and immoral laws or actions? Yes, it does. Jesus was well aware of the immoral lifestyle of the Caesars. He knew about the corruption and cruelty and barbarism and sexual immorality of the Roman proconsuls and governors and prefects. He lived during a time when the Jewish people were being oppressed and exploited. He was aware that Rome was invading foreign countries without provocation and subjecting the citizens of those countries to tyranny and slavery. **Yet he insisted that his followers pay their taxes.**

So what do we do when we discover that our tax dollars are being used to **subsidize abortions**? What should we do when our tax dollars are given to pay for works of **so-called "art" that blaspheme Jesus and promote sexual perversion**? What should we do when our tax dollars are used to **support**

political regimes around the world that likewise endorse unbiblical practices and perhaps even persecute and imprison Christians? The simple answer: **Pay them!**

Remember: The government to which Jesus says his followers must pay taxes is the same government that in only a few days will unlawfully torture and execute the Son of God by crucifixion. Jesus doesn't say: "You are justified in not paying your taxes because that money is going to be used to support and pay for a judicial system that will soon commit the most heinous and unimaginable crime of murder in human history."

But there is a flip side to Jesus' response. *We must render to God what belongs to God, and everything belongs to God!* Jesus is not endorsing a divide or separation between the secular and the sacred, as if to suggest we owe allegiance to the state in material things and allegiance to God in spiritual things.

All things, everything, whether material or spiritual, belongs to God. Even paying taxes to Caesar / U. S. government, is itself a spiritual duty, an act of Christian obedience. If you fail to pay every dollar of tax you owe to the government, you are in sin. You are in rebellion against God and you will answer to him one day for your disobedience. And No, you cannot try to wiggle out of your responsibility by pointing to all the policies of the U. S. government with which you disagree. What Jesus is saying, then, is that whereas the government does indeed have a right to assess and collect taxes, it has no right to demand worship or religious homage.

Therefore, *Jesus endorsed the legitimacy of the pagan state* when he said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." But he insisted that **our ultimate allegiance is to God** with the second half of that statement. He commanded obedience to the state but undermined its final or ultimate authority.

We should do what Caesar says because God has invested the state with authority. But we should not do everything Caesar says because the authority of the state is subordinate to the authority of God. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" is a subcategory of "Render to God the things that are God's." **Whatever is Caesar's is ultimately God's.** In rendering to God the things that are God's you are honoring his absolute authority over Caesar. If Caesar says, "Worship Caesar!" we refuse, because **Jesus is Lord, not Caesar**

Jesus said to Pontius Pilate at his trial, "*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above*" (John 19:11). When Jesus told his followers that they must render to God the things that are God's, the words "the things that are God's" included Pilate's authority. It belonged to God and came from God. So whereas on the one hand Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of human authority, he reminds us that it is not ultimate. It is legitimate, but not absolute. **The power and authority of Caesar is from God, but it is not itself God.**

In order to see how this principle is expressed more fully, we need to turn to Romans 13:1-7.

(1) All governmental authority comes from God (vv. 1,4,6). Those in authority are therefore rightly called God's "ministers" (v. 4) and "servants" (v. 6). This is not referring to spiritual salvation but to their function under God's sovereignty. Government, per se, is not evil. It is ordained by God.

(2) Because all governmental authority comes from God, all Christians are to live in subjection to it (vv. 1,5). See 1 Peter 2:13-17.

(3) Because all governmental authority comes from God, to resist "it" is to resist God (v. 2). Simply put, *a crime against the state is a sin against God.* But fear of civil judgment is not the primary motivation for obedience to the law (see v. 5). *We have a responsibility to the will of God regardless of the consequences of our criminal behavior. Our obedience to the law of the land is based first and foremost on principle: obedience to God, and only secondarily because of the consequences it may bring.*

(4) The purpose of government (the state) is two-fold: first, to promote and praise good, and second, to punish and prohibit evil (vv. 3-4). It is not the purpose of the state to promote or preach the gospel and I would oppose any law that sought to utilize the state for that purpose. It is the responsibility of the Church to preach the gospel. The state is supposed to provide a legal and moral atmosphere that makes this possible – see

1 Tim. 2:1-2.

(5) It is the right of government to levy taxes and the obligation of its citizens to pay them (vv. 6-7).

Are Christians ever free to publicly criticize their government and its officials? Yes! Paul is not saying a government is free to do whatever it pleases. It is subject to God and his will. Government is not morally autonomous. The church is the conscience of the state and therefore must call it to account when it fails to fulfill its role as God's minister for good.

Are Christians ever free to engage in civil disobedience? Yes. Neither the authority given to the state nor the obligation of the Christian obey it are absolute.

Some point out that Nero was in power when Paul wrote Romans. Thus, if he commands subjection to someone as barbaric and wicked as Nero, how can civil disobedience ever be justified? But the first five years of Nero's reign were famous for their enlightenment, justice, and equity. Nero came to power in 54 and Paul wrote Romans in 56. At the time Paul wrote, he was commanding obedience to a good and civil government.

Under what circumstances or on what grounds may a Christian engage in civil disobedience? Answer: When the state prohibits us from doing what the Bible commands, or commands us to do what the Bible prohibits. John Jefferson Davis provides us with these guidelines:

First, "the law being resisted must be unjust and immoral, clearly contrary to the will of God", and not just inconvenient or burdensome (Davis, 216).

Second, "legal means of changing the unjust situation should have been exhausted. Civil disobedience should be seen as a method not of first resort, but rather of last resort, when legal channels have already been pursued" (217).

Third, "the act of disobedience must be public rather than clandestine" (217).

Fourth, "there should be some likelihood of success, particularly when the intent is to produce changes in laws and institutions" (217).

Finally, "those who consider civil disobedience should be willing to accept the penalty for breaking the law" (218).

Acts 5:27-29 . . .

Conclusion: The example of Polycarp of Smyrna . . .