**Give to God What is God’s**

(How to live under a secular government)

September 13, 2020

Mark 12:13-17

Key Verse 12:17 “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’”

John MacArthur of Grace Community Church in California decided to disobey California’s ban on in-person worship with the word, “Christ, not Caesar, is head of the church. The government cannot modify, forbid, or mandate worship. When, how, and how often the church worships is not subject to Caesar. Caesar himself is subject to God.” California government has been threatening them with fines and jail time, and even taking away their parking lot. But Grace Community Church has been standing firm. Some may say that we should obey the government and we should love our neighbor by closing our churches because of the coronavirus. But Grace Community Church thinks that the government is using the crisis to persecute Christians. How should we live under a secular government who demands that we disobey God’s command such as “Let us not neglect our meeting together” (Heb 10:25)? In today’s passage, we encounter a similar question, “Is it right to pay tax to Caesar or not?” Here this tax is a poll tax, paid by everyone. It is one denarius a year, a day’s wages. We will see that this question is not only about taxes, but also about how we Christians should live under a secular government. Jesus responded, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” In this verse we can find the answer to our question, “How should we live under a secular government?”

Look at verse 13. “Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.” This verse shows that all the Jewish religious leaders and political leaders had united among themselves to find a way to arrest Jesus. On any other occasion the Pharisees and Herodians were archrivals. The Pharisees opposed the Roman occupation of Israel. Herodians were Jews who supported the Roman sponsored Herod dynasty. Both parties found common grounds in their opposition against Jesus. Look at verse 14. “They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” Now, what is at dispute here is not taxation policy. The Pharisees and Herodians were not really interested in what Jesus had to say about the issue. What they were interested in was trapping Jesus. This was a trick question, along the same lines as “Have you stopped cheating on your exams?” If you answer no, then the response is “So you still cheat.” If the answer is yes, then the response is “Ah, so you admit to cheating in the past.” We laugh at the joke. But this question, “Is it right to pay imperial tax to Caesar or not?” was a serious one.

We need a little bit of background on this question. In 6 A.D., there was a man in Galilee named Judas, not Judas Iscariot. When the Rome required a census so they could collect that one denarius tax from everybody, Judas and his friends led an insurrection against Rome because they said the tax was ungodly. Judas was killed and all his followers were scattered. That is referred to in Acts 5:37. Taxation was always a hot issue. In 66 A.D. the Jews led another insurrection over the issue of paying taxes to Rome. One of the first acts in that revolt was that the Jews minted new coins because the Roman coins were distasteful. But in 70 A.D. the Romans came and completely destroyed Jerusalem. The Jews, from the time the Romans showed up, believed the taxation by Rome was treason against the true God. The Pharisees then were sure that Jesus was going to say, “No, don’t pay tax to a false religion, to a false God.” Why? Because he would see that as idolatry – that’s how they saw it – because his popularity was at stake. If he said, “Oh no, go ahead and pay that tax to Rome,” he would begin to lose his popularity. But if he said “No, don’t pay tax to Rome,” the Herodians are right there and they would report him to the Romans as a rebel and inciting a revolt. Finally, the Jewish leaders felt they had Jesus in a trap in which there was no escape.

Jesus’ answer was a masterpiece of brilliance. He starts by asking them to give him a denarius and then asks them whose picture and inscription were on the coin. Here is the picture of a Roman coin from the 1st century during the reign of Tiberius the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus. You’ll notice that on the coin there is a picture of Tiberius. On one side it says “Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus.” If you flipped the coin over, it would have a picture of Livia, the mother of Tiberius, and it would be inscribed “Pontifex Maximus,” meaning “High Priest,” a title the Pope now wears. Augustus had minted coins in 17 B.C. He had identified himself as God. Tiberius designated himself as the son of the divine and as the high priest. So these coins, in the minds of the Jews, were little idols. It violated the 2nd commandment in Ten Commandments, “You shall not make for yourself an image.” They saw them as little idols. As you can imagine, this made the coins really unpopular with Jews, not only having a forbidden image, but claiming to be son of God. They wouldn’t carry them. They wouldn’t use them. They would pay the Roman tax in the equivalency in their own Hebrew coinage even if they had to pay high exchange fee. So the question is about whether to pay the tax acknowledging idol worship, or whether not to pay the tax in order not to commit the sin of idol worship.

Look at verse 17. “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus answers with a reply that avoided both traps the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to lay for him. Firstly, it can be taken as way of saying ‘yes, pay the tax’ so he is not in trouble with the Romans, but by drawing attention to the blasphemous image and inscription, he is in fact saying “send this filthy stuff back to where it came from.” It is opposing the Pagan Romans and their blasphemous claims but they can’t charge him with anything, after all he didn’t “tell people not to pay the tax.”

First of all, Jesus said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” God has ordained civil authority. There is no such thing as a Christian government, no such thing as a Christian nation, never has been, never will be until Christ establishes a worldwide theocratic kingdom. All I expect out of my government is that I can get here when I want to get here and not get shot or robbed in the process, and that the water comes when I turn the faucet on. What did Caesar do for Israel? Build bridges, aqueducts, brought in water; provided protection, gave peace; the Pax Romana kept the whole world of that time around the Mediterranean at peace. In the purpose and plan of God, the Romans were there. Payment of a tax to an earthly government, even to idolatrous, blasphemous, pagan people is still the right thing to do. Give it to them. Pay the tax.

Look at verse 17 again. “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus was saying that if a coin with the image of Caesar was to be given to Caesar, surely what bears the image of God should be given to God. What bears the image of God? According to Genesis 1:27, man does. It says, “God created man in his own image.” It mentions it four times in Genesis that man is made in the image of God. Here is Jesus standing in the courtyard of the temple, saying, “Coming to the temple and giving the required sacrifice are not enough; he wants all of you. Religious observance that ignores God is not enough.” Jesus’ answer was directed at the Pharisees who refused to respect the Son of God as in the Parable of the Tenants. They paid the tax to Caesar even though grudgingly, but they did not give Jesus the Son of God the respect he deserves. Jesus is really saying that as we bear the image of God, we should give our lives to God, all of it, completely.

How then should we Christians live under a secular government?

**First**, we should not distinguish the secular and the sacred. It is very easy to split our lives up into different bits that don’t affect one another, so religion is one thing, work another, family another and so on. But God says no. There are some people who, when they cross the threshold of the church, their languages change, there are things they would never dream of doing in church, yet they do them all the time when they are not in church, as if God is somehow confined to the church and is not aware or doesn’t care about what goes on outside the church doors. When Jesus said, “give to God what is God’s,” he was talking about man bearing the image of God. That means all of us. Our work life, our private life, our family life, our religious life. Everything belongs to God. It doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy yourself or do things for your pleasure. It does mean that your ethics apply right across the board. If it’s not acceptable in the church, then it is probably not acceptable out of the church either.

Charles Spurgeon, the 19 century famous preacher, said, “To a man who lives unto God, nothing is secular, everything is sacred. He puts on his workday garment and it is a priestly robe to him. He sits down to his meal and it is a sacrament. He goes forth to his labor, and therein exercises the office of the priesthood. His breath is incense and his life a sacrifice. He sleeps on the bosom of God, and lives and moves in the divine presence. To draw a hard and fast line and say, “This is sacred and this is secular,” is, to my mind, completely opposed to the teaching of Christ and the spirit of the gospel…God has made the common pots and pans of your kitchens to be as the bowls before the altar –if you know what you are and live according to your high calling. Your labor is holy if you serve the Lord Christ in it, by living unto Him as you ought to live. The sacred has absorbed the secular.”

**Second**, we have to live as dual citizens. We are citizens of two kingdoms – a heavenly one and an earthly one. Jesus’ answer is profound. Pay your taxes to Caesar, but give yourself to God. Fulfill your obligations to the government, but worship God and God alone. In fact, a believer in Christ should be a better citizen than most. Daniel is a good example of one who lived as a citizen of the kingdom of God under evil rulers. When his country was destroyed, he was forced to serve evil rulers who killed many of his people, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar. But he did not try to join a rebellion or assassinate the king. He served the kings and even prayed for them. But he resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he kept himself pure. He also prayed three times a day even though it was against the law. His enemies used it against him to put Daniel in the lions’ den. But Daniel was faithful to God to the end. God protected Daniel, and through this event, God was honored and glorified and the unbelieving king Darius became a believer.

**Third**, do not give to Caesar what belongs to God. If the government asks you to do something that God forbids you to do, then you have to do what God wants you to do. Acts 5:29 says, “We must obey God rather than men.” If the government says “Don’t do this,” and God says, “Do it,” then you do what God says you should do and take the consequences. In ancient times as I mentioned, it means not worshipping Caesar as God or a Son of God, because worship belongs to God. In modern times, we don’t worship, bow down or kill animals as sacrifices as they did in ancient times, but we do put other things in God’s place, we let other things become our top priority, the thing we care most about. As our Creator, as the one who gave everything he had for us, as the Sovereign Ruler of the universe, as the one who loves us and wants the very best for us, God has a right to be our top priority and the number one. We should honor God in all we do. Give to God what is God’s.

Going back to the question of the government’s ban on in-person worship, we need to think about what is at stake. The church by definition is an assembly. That is the literal meaning of the Greek word for “church”—ekklesia—the assembly of the called-out ones. A non-assembling assembly is a contradiction in terms. Christians are therefore commanded not to forsake the practice of meeting together (Heb 10:25)—and no earthly state has a right to restrict, or forbid the assembling of believers. When the government restricts church attendance to a certain number, they attempt to impose a restriction that in principle makes it impossible for the saints to gather as the church. Therefore, we should submit to God in this matter.

Jesus always gave back to Caesar what was Caesar’s, but he never offered to Caesar what belongs solely to God. So pay your taxes, obey the laws of the land, and pray for your government officials. But we have to worship God and serve him only. It is what it means to live as a citizen of heaven while we are citizens here on earth.

Big Idea: Give to God what is God’s