

The Christian and Government

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As different as the major religions of the world are, most of them have one thing in common. They have something to say about the way that nations should be governed. Many of the writings of Confucius, for instance, have to do with good government, and he argues that heads of state should seek to follow the Mandate of Heaven. Likewise, a number of the rules of the Quran apply first to nations rather than to individuals, and many of the nations of the Middle East adhere to that standard to this day. Even our Old Testament laid the groundwork for an Israelite theocracy.

By contrast, New-Testament Christianity has little to nothing to say about good government. The teaching of Jesus and His followers is concerned with individual obedience, freely given, not with using the power of the state to coerce such obedience. However, even though the Bible does not contemplate our taking over the machinery of the state, it still describes how we should interact with it. Let's look this morning, then, at the Christian and government.

Government Generally

Let's begin by considering what the Bible says about government generally. First of all, in contrast to the time of the Law of Moses, government in the age of Christ is **NOT** to be **A THEOCRACY**. This is evident from the words of Jesus in John 18:36. Even though Jesus here speaks specifically of the circumstances surrounding His arrest, His words are generally true. The kingdom of Christ is not an earthly kingdom. If it were an earthly kingdom, it would have earthly soldiers, and those earthly soldiers would engage in earthly wars to defend it and even to expand it.

That's simply not something that God and Christ could countenance. Wars are always brutal and nasty, but religious wars are perhaps the most vicious of all. Once people are convinced that they are fighting for God, there is no cruelty that they will not visit on those whom they believe are opposed to God. "Crusader" is a positive term in our language, but when the real Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, the streets literally ran with the blood of the civilians they massacred inside. Indeed, the political expansion of "Christianity" almost invariably leads to atrocity.

We must remember, friends, that the aim of the gospel is to persuade, but the aim of government is to coerce, and once men decide that they can spread the gospel by coercion, they adopt even the most evil means in pursuit of such a good end. We may speak wistfully of the days when the United States was "a Christian nation", but even if the moral precepts of the Bible were enacted into the law of the land, making fornication forbidden and church attendance compulsory, the result would likely not change a single additional heart nor save a single additional soul. Those things can never serve as a proxy for genuine expansion of Christ's kingdom by proclaiming His word to the lost.

However, despite its secular nature, human government is **TO BE OBEYED**. Peter makes this point in 1 Peter 2:13-14. It is true that as Christians, we belong first to a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly one. However, even though our citizenship is in heaven, we still must fulfill our obligations as citizens of the United States. It's our responsibility to obey its laws, whether or not obeying those laws is convenient or we happen to agree with them. The only exception to this arises when the government demands that we violate the law of God. In those circumstances, we must echo the words of Peter before the Jewish high council in Acts 5: "We must obey God rather than men." However, even then, the correct response is passive disobedience rather than outright rebellion or revolt. Christians may flee the country in which they find themselves, but they are never justified in taking up arms against its government.

In 1 Peter 2, Peter urges us to obey "for the Lord's sake". Paul expands on this reasoning when he informs us that we are subject to governments because they have been **ORDAINED BY GOD**. Look at Romans 13:1-2. This bothers a lot of people. They ask, "How can the Bible possibly say that God is responsible for the existence of every government when so many governments do evil things?" Certainly, this does not mean that God is pleased by every act of every government. There are plenty of places in the Bible where we see Him displeased by the behavior of kings and nations, so much so that He determines to destroy them. However, He was also the One who put them in power in the first place. They may have chosen to misuse it, but they received it from Him. As such, their authority is legitimate.

This may strike us as bizarre. I can remember studying Romans 13 when I was in college at Mizzou, and one girl in the class couldn't get over the notion that God was responsible for the rise of Hitler. From that perspective, it sounds almost naïve for Paul to claim such a thing. However, we must remember that Paul was no stranger to governmental oppression. Romans was written during the reign of the Emperor Nero, who, even if he didn't have the same range of capabilities as Hitler, was surely no less evil. Indeed, if tradition is accurate here, Paul would go on to lose his life to one of Nero's whims. Nonetheless, Paul would have affirmed that God put Nero on the throne, as surely as Hitler.

Finally, the role of government is **TO PROMOTE JUSTICE**. Paul explains this in Romans 13:3-4. In our nation, it is fashionable, and I suppose it always has been, to grumble about the government. Taxes are high, politicians are corrupt, the laws are poorly written, and so on. However, we should not allow those things, which are often marginal issues, to blind us to the great good for which our government is responsible. When I go to bed at night, I am not kept awake by fear that some band of thugs is going to break into my house, rob me, and harm my family. It's not that I

happen to live in a country where all the people are good-natured and well-behaved. I don't think that people in the United States are really all that much different from people in Afghanistan and Syria, where lawlessness and crime are epidemic. Instead, I think that many would-be evildoers here are constrained by fear of the government.

Likewise, I have no fear that when we are assembled here this morning, a squad of storm troopers is going to kick down the door and haul us all off to jail for worshiping God according to our consciences. In fact, once we start looking at the tax code, it become evident that the government encourages and supports the practice of our religion. There are certainly exceptions, but it is generally true that our government punishes the wicked and protects the good. Indeed, that is much more true of our government than it was of Paul's government. The Romans could often be cruel, arbitrary, and high-handed. History has seen few governments as effective as ours, and that is a very great blessing from God.

Jesus and Government

During the second part of our study together this morning, we're going to consider what our Lord had to say about this topic. Before the Lord's Supper, we're going to consider Jesus and government. This study is going to focus on two main texts. The first concerns **JESUS AND THE TWO-DRACHMA TAX**. It is found in Matthew 17:24-27. Interestingly enough, Matthew is the only gospel that contains this story. Perhaps, as a former taxman himself, Matthew was the most sensitive of the four gospel writers to the implications of the story.

Regardless, the tax that is under discussion here is not a tax that Matthew himself would have collected. This wasn't money that went to the Romans. Instead, it was money that went to the maintenance and support of the Jewish temple. We see the Scriptural backing for this tax in Exodus 30:12-13. This points to an important feature of the Law of Moses as opposed to the law of Christ. As we alluded to earlier, even though the old Law was concerned with individual behavior too, it wasn't only concerned with the individual. It also laid the groundwork for the government of the Israelite nation. That's why, in addition to things like the Ten Commandments, the first five books of the Old Testament also establish rules for things like property ownership and how an Israelite king should rule his people. Even after the Jews were conquered by various foreign empires, a lot of the machinery of the Mosaic government survived. Jesus, then, is presented here with a question that is neither wholly political nor wholly religious, but has overtones of both.

On one level, the outcome here is not surprising. The combination religious/civil law said that Jesus needed to pay a tax; He paid it. What's interesting here to us, though, is that Jesus used the occasion to do some teaching. He asked Peter a simple question without an obvious point: who pays taxes, strangers to the king or sons of the king? Peter, who had probably seen enough of Jesus to be nervous about having been asked a question without an obvious point, gives the obvious answer—strangers pay taxes. Jesus uses this to make the point that the sons are exempt, so He, as the Son of God, should be exempt from the taxes that support God's temple.

However, Jesus doesn't insist on this right, lest, as He says, He give offense. He pays the tax, but He does it in a way that shows its inapplicability to Him. He doesn't pay it out of His own pocket. Instead, He has Peter catch a fish that miraculously has a shekel in its mouth, which is sufficient to pay the tax for Jesus and for Peter too.

There are a couple of lessons here for us. First, like Jesus, we have been adopted as sons. Before any of our other obligations, we are citizens of the kingdom of God and members of His household. As such, we could do like the sovereign-rights people and deny that we are under the jurisdiction of the courts of the United States, etc. However, our citizenship in God's kingdom is not the kind of citizenship that exerts itself against earthly authorities. There are plenty of times in our lives when we cause offense by doing what God wants us to. We don't need to add to that by offending the government on our own. We need to be the best citizens we can, not because we fear it, but because we fear God.

The second story we will consider is the story of paying **TAXES TO CAESAR**, which is found, among other places, in Mark 12:13-17. It begins with **A TRAP** laid by His enemies. If you'll recall, the primary feature of Jewish politics in the time of Christ was the occupation of the Jewish homeland by the Romans. The Pharisees opposed the Romans, but not to the point of advocating rebellion like the Zealots did. The Herodians, on the other hand, were named after the Herods, who were the Roman puppet rulers. They were Roman collaborators. Pharisees and Herodians working together, then, is extremely unusual. It would be like Democrats and Republicans forming a coalition today.

Their trap concerns taxes. One of the most debated issues in Jewish politics was whether good Jews should pay the ruinous Roman taxes. The Pharisees said that Jews shouldn't, which made them pretty popular with the people. The Herodians, on the other hand, many of whom were tax collectors, said that Jews should. They think, then, that they have Jesus trapped. If He says "Yes," the Pharisees can condemn Him before the people. If He says "No," the Herodians will promptly get the Romans on His case. Both parties clearly thought that they had succeeded in cornering Jesus.

Jesus, however, makes **A REQUEST** of His own. He doesn't stammer and sweat as He tries to think of a way out of the trap; He simply asks them to bring Him a denarius, the coin in which the taxes are paid. They do, and He asks them whose likeness and inscription appear on the coin. We know what Jesus' enemies have not yet figured out: that when you're trying to trap Jesus, and He asks you a question without an obvious point, He's going to make a fool out of you as soon as you answer it. This is about to be the big "Aha!" moment for the bad guys. From this point on in the

gospels, they refuse to answer any more questions that Jesus asks. In fact, in Luke's account of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in Luke 22, Jesus reveals that He already knows that whatever He asks, they will not answer. They learn that as bad as silence looks, answering the question is invariably worse. However, they haven't had that epiphany yet, and in their own version of sheep to the slaughter, they answer the question by correctly identifying Caesar on the coin.

This sets them up for **JESUS' ANSWER**. Jesus replies to them with a simple idea—"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God what is God's"—with extremely complex implications. Caesar's likeness and inscription identify the coin of taxation as belonging to Him, so the Jews were to pay their taxes. On the other hand, though, the Jews, as do we ourselves, bore the likeness of God in their own spirits. They were responsible for giving money to Caesar, but themselves to God. The elegant logic of this reply left both Pharisees and Herodians dumbfounded.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's look at two applications of this principle. The first is in our Lord. Jesus was always careful to render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar. He paid His taxes. He never broke any laws, even when the conflicting tangle of Roman and Mosaic ordinances made obedience to both nearly impossible. However, it wasn't His rendering to Caesar that set Jesus apart. It was His rendering to God. God prepared His body for Him as a sacrifice for our sins, and Jesus returned that body entirely to God on the cross. To the core of His being, He belonged to His Father. It is that sacrifice, that utter rejection of the self for God and for us, that we are about to remember.

Next, for ourselves, we must ask how our lives compare to the life of Jesus. In a setting where obedience to government is much easier for us than it was for Jesus, do we imitate His example? Far more than that, though, to we give to God what belongs to Him? I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't wander through Wal-Mart buying random items for no reason. When I buy, I buy with a purpose in mind. Likewise, God bought each one of us with the price of the blood of His Son. We belong to Him doubly, both by our creation and by our salvation. God has a purpose for our lives. We are either fulfilling that purpose or not. Let's examine our hearts and our lives, then, as we partake.

Government and Us

In our final portion of study this morning, let's consider what all of this means for our daily interaction with government. Probably the first and most obvious application is that like the Jews 2000 years ago, we must **PAY OUR TAXES**. Among other passages, Paul says this explicitly in Romans 13:7. This is not a popular concept. I see all kinds of estimates for how much of the average American's income goes to taxes every year. Those estimates range from fairly close to wildly inaccurate. Probably most of us are convinced that we pay far too much in taxes. I have been known to grumble about supporting all those nephews on the state payroll myself.

However, before we get too upset, we need to compare our taxes to the taxes of the first century. The Romans turned their tax-collecting over to private enterprise. They allowed various tax firms to bid on how much they could extract in taxes from a given province, and the high bid won. In order to win the contract, tax firms would often promise to collect far more than the province could realistically support. They enforced these ruinous taxes with the help of the Roman army—basically, legalized extortion. All that money went to Rome to support the Romans, not the taxpayers. Then, after the Romans were done, the local officials, like the Herods, came through and took their cut too. The subject peoples of the Roman Empire were often reduced to poverty by their taxes, and yet Paul says, "Pay your taxes."

When we consider our tax burden in that light, suddenly it starts looking much less onerous. Waste, fraud, and abuse aside, at least we know that our government is trying to use our taxes for our benefit. If our brethren in the first century were to hear us complain about our taxes, they would probably respond with disbelieving laughter. Our situation is much better than we realize. All things considered, we should pay our taxes if not cheerfully, at least willingly.

Second, we must **BE RESPECTFUL** toward our government. Look at 1 Peter 2:17. In some ways, this is a much more complicated issue for us than it was for Christians in the first century. They had no voice in their own government. Even if they felt that the government was bad or oppressive, there was nothing godly that they could do about it. We, on the other hand, have the right to select our rulers at the ballot box, and, short of threatening murder, we have the legal right to say just about anything we want to about them. However, simply because something is legally right doesn't make it morally right. There is nothing ungodly about disagreeing with the policies of our elected officials. There is nothing wrong, even, with encouraging others to vote them out of office the next time the opportunity arises.

However, we must take care that our focus is and remains the issue and not the man. If Facebook is any guide, there are plenty of Christians who are not big fans of our current president. That's fine. What's not fine is when our differences of opinion lead us to speak slightly of him, mock his wife, mass-forward e-mails that falsely accuse him of all kinds of atrocity, or engage in like behavior. That dishonors the president, and ultimately it dishonors the law of God. No matter what our political beliefs may be, we must never put partisanship ahead of our responsibility to Him.

Third, we **MUST NOT STEAL**. This self-evident truth appears in Ephesians 4:28. I'm sure this seems like a non sequitur in the middle of a sermon on government, but an aspect of this that we don't often think about is that we must define theft in the way that our government does. According to the laws of the United States, theft can involve not only tangible property but also intellectual property. I don't think a lot of Christians get this. I know a lot of brethren

who would never walk into a convenience store and pocket a candy bar, yet will illegally download and watch a movie without even thinking about it. This kind of copyright-violating theft is everywhere in our society, but that doesn't make it any less theft for that. If someone is trying to sell their song or their TV show or their movie or their game, and we get those things someplace else for free, we're stealing from them as surely as if we'd just lifted their wallet. Even if it does cost us money or keep us from seeing something that we would like to, we must respect the copyright law of the land.

On the other side of the coin, though, we do have the right to **USE OUR RIGHTS** as American citizens. We see an example of Paul doing this in Acts 22:24-25. He used his status as a Roman citizen to keep himself from being tortured. Nor is this the only place in Acts where we see Paul using his citizenship to protect himself. In the same way, there are rights that we have as American citizens that we can use to protect ourselves from those who would harm us. When I lived in Austin, a sister I knew was rear-ended, but she never filed a claim or a lawsuit against the driver of the other car, even though he was at fault. She felt that taking those steps would be taking her own revenge instead of trusting God. In reality, exactly the opposite is true. We've already looked at several passages from Paul's discussion of government in Romans 13. Immediately before that discussion, in Romans 12, is where we see Paul warn us against returning evil for evil. Overall, the point is plain. We shouldn't grab a tire iron and go after the driver who rear-ends us, but God will work through our government to protect us and see that we receive our due. When we embark on that process, we aren't seeking our own. Instead, we are entrusting ourselves to Him.