

Christians and the USA

Matthew 22:15-22

Yesterday was July 4th, the day set aside to celebrate the United States of America's independence. For most Americans, it is just viewed as another day off work, and the opportunity to gather with family and friends. Other Americans understand the significance of the day and remember what all has happened in history to bring the nation to where it is today. They celebrate the freedom and independence we have as a nation.

If we narrow the demographic of USA citizens to born-again believers, we see there are still a variety of perspectives on the topic. Some Christians believe that as believers we should not observe July 4th. Other Christians think, we absolutely should observe and celebrate the day. I don't want to spend any time on that specific topic for this sermon, but you can definitely ask me later. Instead I want to broaden our focus as we consider how God wants you and I as His children, to interact with the government that He has placed us under, the United States of America.

This is a huge topic with many different aspects. Of course we don't have time to cover them all. Instead, as we consider Matthew 22:15-22 together we will make 4 observations that I pray will provide direction and insight in how God wants us to relate to the United States government. I trust these observations from the text will be foundational stones, upon which you and I can then build our thought processes/our beliefs and convictions on how God wants us to relate to the United States of America.

But first some background to this text. Jesus has had many run-ins with the Pharisees over the previous months and years. Simply put, the Pharisees wanted to get rid of Jesus. He was messing up everything that they were seeking to accomplish. In fact we read in Luke 19:47 "...but the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him."

As we saw in previous weeks, they tried to discredit His authority and turn the people away from Him. But each time Jesus skillfully responded to their questions and accusations. He even shared a number of parables that were partly directed at them and concluded by saying to them in Matthew 21:43: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it..." The chief priests and Pharisees understood He was speaking about them (v. 45). They were upset and wanted to seize Him right there, but they feared the people (v. 46).

Because they could not seize Jesus at that time, they decided to hatch a plan to trap Jesus; forcing Him into a corner where He would be caught and discredited, as you can see in verse 15.

This passage is almost like a chess match between the Pharisees and Jesus. The game of chess has so many different strategies for winning. As a result there are a number of traps that expert chess players can set up to beat their opponent in 4 or 5 moves. It is almost like the Pharisees have designed one of those traps in verse 15 and they are confident that in 3 quick moves they can put Jesus into checkmate. Verse 16 they butter Jesus up, hoping He won't be on His top game as they then lay the trap in verse 17 waiting for Jesus to step into it. Unfortunately for them, Jesus is the better chess player if you will, He sees their trap, verse 18, calls them on it; and then sets up His own trap, which they willingly step into in verse 19. Instead of Jesus being in check, they soon find themselves in checkmate, verse 21. That is the overview. But let's go back through the text and zero in on 4 observations that arise from the text about Christians and government. Notice first:

1. **The Rigid Opposing Views vv. 15-16**

Unfortunately there are many topics that Christians do not see eye to eye. Believers can sometimes end up on opposite sides of a spectrum of beliefs on a certain topic. And Christians and government is one of those topics. But it is interesting that the men who approached Jesus here also had extremely different views.

As you can see in verse 16, the Pharisees sent their disciples (possibly thinking Jesus would not recognize these younger men, and thus not be on His top game), and the Herodians together to trap Jesus with their question.

It is fascinating that the Pharisees and the Herodians are working together here, because these 2 groups of people did not often see eye-to-eye. They had vastly different opinions and views on the Roman government of their day. The Herodians loved the Roman government and thought that the Herods who were appointed by the Romans to rule over Israel were rightfully sitting on the Jewish throne. The Pharisees, on the other hand, despised the Romans and had no desire to submit themselves to Herod. But these two groups were willing to set their differences aside because they had a common opponent: Jesus.

In a similar way today there are some Christians who believe:

A. Government is Bad

They view the United States of America as an evil nation that has committed many wrongs and should not be allowed to prosper. These people are similar to the Pharisees of Jesus' day who were convinced the Romans were unjustly ruling over the Jewish people. The Pharisees resented the fact that the nation of Israel, God's people, was under the rule of the Romans.

There are a handful of Christians today, who because of an incorrect understanding of God's Word, believe that all government is bad. They teach that Christians are not required by God to submit to the government in any form, because the government is evil and run by evil people. On the other side there are Christians who say the:

B. Government is Good

There are other Christians who think the USA is the best nation that has ever existed. They believe that many of the promises made to Israel in the Bible can be applied to the USA. They believe that God has given the USA the responsibility to correct all of the wrongs in the world and to solve all of societies' problems in this nation as a whole.

Unfortunately some Christians elevate the government to a place or role that God has not given to it. Again, from an incorrect understanding of the word of God, they think eventually when the government has this nation and maybe the entire world all fixed, Christ will come back to this earth to set up His kingdom.

I have just painted with very broad strokes, but I'm guessing you may find yourself identifying with some of the things I have mentioned; or have talked to other believers who think in some of these ways. These are the two extremes, and you have Christians at all other points on the spectrum. So who is right? Keep listening and we will let Jesus answer. Before we move to the 2nd observation I think it is wise to point out the flattery that is happening in verses 16-17. Following Jesus' example, you and I must:

❖ **Beware of Flattery**

The Pharisees have plotted how they might trap Jesus, part of the plan was to butter Him up and flatter Him so much, that He would not be on His guard. Notice again what they say in verse 16 (read). Talk about sweet and smooth words! If someone said that to you or I, I'm sure we would want to believe it and be on board with whatever they said next. The interesting thing about these words is that they are all true. Everything these men said was true, but they didn't believe it. It was just words to them, and Jesus knew it as we see in verse 18.

Even their question in verse 17 was a form of flattery. To seek out and ask someone's opinion demonstrates you esteem and think highly of that person. These men were trying to flatter Jesus to disarm Him in order to trap Him. But again, verse 18, "He perceived their malice or wickedness."

Flattery can be very dangerous. Whenever someone, who you don't know well, begins to heap praise on you seemingly out of nowhere, watch out! They may possibly have a hidden motive. Do not fall for their buttery speech. Beware of flattery.

There is a big difference between flattery and genuinely encouraging or praising another person. I'm sure we can all do better at passing out encouragement to those around us, especially our family, but we need to stay far away from flattery.

Alright, enough of the rabbit trail. As we consider the Christian and the USA, notice secondly:

2. The Real Question vv. 17-18

There are many specific questions we could ask in the topic of the Christian and the USA, but a question that is often on people's minds and the question that is asked of Jesus is:

❖ Is it lawful to pay taxes? v. 17b

Depending on what translation you have your Bible may mention: 'tribute' or 'imperial tax' or simply say 'taxes.' The Greek word refers specifically to a census tax. A tax that is taken based on the number of people. This tax was a universal tax on every person. In order to make sure the government received all of the money it was requesting there would often be a census taken; which, by the way, is why Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem.

But notice the question is focusing on whether or not that specific tax was 'lawful' or was it 'right'. This is where the trap of this question was. If you will, there were two laws in play, the Hebrew Law and the Roman law. Or to put it another way, there were 2 ways to look at it; the Pharisees saw the tax as unlawful, because in their minds the Romans were not legitimately over them; they were a false government that had usurped authority. Caesar was not their god, and they had better ways to use the money, than to pay taxes. But the Herodians saw the tax as perfectly acceptable, because they embraced the Roman government's appointed leaders.

Thus, if Jesus answered No, the tax was not right or lawful then the Herodians would have him trapped. By Jesus answering "no" He would be rebelling against the government and they would have evidence to prosecute Him before the Romans as committing treason.

However, if Jesus answered "yes" then the Pharisees would claim that He had abandoned Israel's hope. In their minds He would be denying that He was the Messiah; He would be alienating Himself from the nation of Israel. They would be able to twist His words claiming that He didn't believe that God was king over the nation of Israel. Can you see the trap that was laid for Jesus?

We will investigate how He responds in a little bit, but first understand, the same question is still discussed today: is it lawful to pay taxes? Or put another way, does God want us to pay taxes to the United States government? The short answer is yes. We know this from Romans 13:5-7, which reads: "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection [to the government], not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor." If God commanded Christians to pay taxes to the evil Roman government, than we definitely need to pay taxes to the USA.

Before we move on, I should point out another principle in verse 18. You and I must:

❖ Beware of Motives v. 18

As we can see in verse 18 Jesus immediately identifies the motives behind these men's question and calls them out on it, before He even begins to answer their question. He perceived or was aware of their malice and He correctly called them hypocrites, because that is what they were. They didn't believe the words they were saying. Jesus was fully aware of their motives because He is God, but also because He had discernment.

You and I are not God, we cannot immediately see a person's heart or their motives. But God does provide us with wisdom and discernment, which we need to exercise at times to consider the motives of a person who is interacting with us. It is always a good idea to follow Jesus' overall example and ask good questions before proceeding. I'm not saying that we always have to second guess people's motives. But, I do think it is wise to at least consider there is often many other things going on in a person's life, beyond the little interaction you are having with them at a specific time.

Chuck Swindoll tells about a time he was a guest speaker on a cruise ship. Each night he had the privilege of opening the Bible and teaching those who were gathered. He was in his element. Every night

there was an older couple who sat on the front row, and every night the husband fell asleep within the first couple minutes of Chuck's message.

The first night it didn't bother him too much, but when it happened a second, and then a third and then a fourth time, he was almost becoming angry at the man. On one of the final nights the man again fell asleep, and Chuck was irritated. When he finished, almost immediately the wife of the man who had been sleeping made her way to him. She expressed her sincere gratitude for his ministry and the things he had shared each night. She then commented that her husband was dying and doctors said he only had a short time to live, but one of his final requests was to go on a cruise and listen to Chuck Swindoll. That was one of those times when you feel about this big. But we have all been there, misjudging a person's motives or the reason behind their actions. We must take time to consider or learn the back-story before we jump to conclusions.

Thus far we have observed the real question and the rigid opposing views of government, which brings us to the third observation:

3. The Role of the Government vv. 19-20

What is the role of government in the life of the Christian? Has God ordained the government? Jesus begins to answer these questions as he responds to the question posed to Him by the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians.

As Jesus asks for the coin in verse 19, the men asking the question are quick to give Him the coin, thinking He is going to play right into their hand. Instead, by them producing the coin, they were acknowledging that it was their coin, even though it had Caesar's picture and inscription on the coin. These men were the ones who had possession of the coin that belonged to Caesar, even though it came from their pocket.

Jesus will explain that God has ordained government to fulfill an important role in society. At that specific time Jesus and these men were all living under the Roman government. Therefore, since they were under the Roman government and using Caesar's money system, when he asked for it back, they should give it to him.

The broader truth that both Paul and Peter explain in their letters is that Christians are to submit to the government. This principle applies towards even very corrupt governments, like the Roman government.

The role of government is to provide a stable society in which people can live and carry out their God given responsibilities. As Paul explains in Romans 13 and Peter explains in First Peter 2, the government is a minister of God (13:4) that is assigned the role of punishing evildoers and praising those who do good (2:14). In fact this is one of the reasons God wants us to pray for our government leaders. We read in First Timothy 2:1-2 "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." When the government is doing its God ordained duty and job, the citizens are able to lead a peaceful life.

However, as we are currently watching in some of our major cities in America, when the government does not punish wrong doers who loot, destroy and steal, the problem becomes worse and other citizens are harmed and even killed. Government has the responsibility to bear the sword and punish those who harm their fellow citizens. We clearly read this in verse 4 of Romans 13: "But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil."

Of course in order for a government do carry out all of these services, it takes revenue, which is why we need to pay taxes, as we saw earlier in verses 6-7 of Romans 13.

The rub for the Christian begins when the government demands its citizens sin against God. It is at that point that the Christian is no longer to submit to the government. Instead, as Peter states in Acts 5:29 "We must obey God rather than men." The context of that passage is when the religious leaders,

who had some governing/political authority, were demanding that Peter and the other apostles stop teaching about Jesus. Of course they could not do that because Jesus had commanded them to preach to everyone. Therefore they could not submit to these leaders.

The same thing happens today on a regular basis around the world. Day by day, Christians are making the decision to obey God rather than man. Many of them suffer mightily for their decision, including being put to death. As a whole we do not face those kind of scenarios very often in the USA, but it sure looks like it is coming. In fact in some ways it already has.

Around the time our government began shutting things down, I was reading the book Killing Christians subtitled: "Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe." The author recaps the life of 8, 21st century believers who are living or died living in countries very hostile to God and the Gospel. Like Yousef in Egypt who should have died at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood, but whom God spared; or Shukri from Iraq who died at the hands of ISIS, after he shared the gospel numerous times with many Muslims outside the Great Mosque in Mosul, Iraq. I was amazed to read of how determined these believers were to gather together, knowing if they were caught assembling they could be prosecuted and even killed.

When the news of the coronavirus hit our country and as things began to be shut down, there were many opinions floating around about how serious the virus was. We had and still have a wide range of opinions in our own church family about how we should respond to the virus.

When the governor and health director of our state began laying out recommendations and requirements, we had a choice to make. Does God want us to submit to and follow what is being asked or does God want us to submit up to a certain point and then depart and obey and follow Him? This is a question that each believer has to answer and consider for themselves.

This is also what Jesus is going to say in verse 21, give to the government what is theirs; taxes, honor, obedience to laws, rules, edicts or orders that do not override or eclipse God's truth. And, give to God what is His; our love, worship, and obedience.

I am thankful that our state did not require us as a church to close down. I understand they recommended it and said it was very unwise for a church to meet, but they did not require us to shut down. God's Word is clear in Hebrews 10:24-25, that we as believers need to meet together. I am thankful for the technology we have to livestream and we plan to continue to do that. But nothing can replace the face to face interaction we are able to have with one another when we meet together.

Please hear me, I am not condemning or criticizing those believers who are doing everything they can to avoid serious illness. Each believer must decide for themselves how God wants them to respond to all of this, because there are so many factors in these decisions.

The question I want each one of us to consider is this: if things in the USA got really bad (whether a virus or a government that persecutes Christians) and meeting together was outlawed and punished by 90 days in jail, would you be willing to meet together in secret? Where will you personally draw the line? When does God want you to obey Him rather than men?

I guess I have already moved to the 4th observation.

4. The Responsibility of the Christian vv. 21-22

We have briefly overviewed the role of government and now let's continue talking about the responsibility of the Christian to that government, specifically to the USA since this is where we are today. Jesus says in verse 21 (read). In this simple statement Jesus is explaining that God tells us we need to:

A. Pay Taxes

As Christians we need to pay the money the government calls for because it is theirs; we are using the governments' money and we are citizens of this country. We use all kinds of services the USA government provides including: roads, bridges, libraries, parks, police officers, judges, prisons and many

more things. From a practical standpoint, since we use those services, we should be willing to pay for them and pay our taxes. But even more importantly, as we saw earlier, God commands us to pay taxes.

We are all aware that our government uses some of that money to fund things that go against God and His Word, like abortion and homosexual marriage. But it doesn't work to keep back a small portion of the taxes we owe in an effort to not provide money for those sinful activities of our government. Even if we only pay 75% of our tax bill, our government is still going to use a portion of that smaller amount to fund those evil practices. So we should go ahead and pay the full amount. In addition, God has commanded us to pay the full amount as we see here and in Romans 13. We must pay our taxes.

But that is not the only responsibility the Christian has in this topic of government. As believers we have the responsibility to remember that God is King; and thus practically:

B. Place God as King (in our hearts, minds and lives)

It is important to keep in mind that when Jesus says: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" He was not separating the secular from the sacred as we often like to do. In our minds we sometimes think certain aspects of life...the government, our free-time, our job is secular and doesn't involve God, but other aspects of life, like Church and family devotions are sacred and so we involve God. It is like we give our time to our job and the tasks around the house; but then make sure that we carve out some God time each day or at least on Sundays. We make a hard line between what involves God (sacred) and what doesn't involve God (secular). Many times we don't even give it a second thought, that is just how we operate and think. But simply put, that is wrong.

Upon first glance one might think that is what Jesus is stating here in verse 21, making a hard line between the secular and the sacred. But in reality Jesus is reminding the people around Him that everything is God's. God is over everything. Thus as believers everything we do, should be done for Him.

Jesus is specifically explaining that God is the one who has set Caesar on the throne, thus they must pay his taxes. But ultimately we pay taxes because God is the one who has set up the government. We read in Daniel 4:17b "...In order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes, And sets over it the lowliest of men." God is the one who places kings and presidents into power. He is in sovereign control over it all.

God is over everything. Thus, for the Christian everything should be sacred, because God is involved in each area of our lives. The big picture is that God is over it all, everything we have and do comes from the Lord. He owns it all. He is the king, because He is God. Thus we must place God as King in our lives. We must live our lives in light of the fact that God is over it all and He is king.

The question becomes do we actually live our lives in light of the truth that God is king? What from our daily life is demonstrating the fact that the Lord is our King and Master? Are we making a hard divide between the sacred and the secular? Or do we understand that God is involved in each area of our lives? There is nothing in our lives that can be separated from God. He is king over it all. Is that how we operate in life? Or do we just allow Him to be king over certain areas of our life?

As you can see in verse 22, Jesus' answer amazed the men who had come to trap Him. They immediately realized they had been checkmated; they had been beat. Instead of trapping Jesus like they had intended they realized they had been exposed. As one man said: "They had the presence of mind to leave before exposing still more of their ignorance and wickedness."

Conclusion: If you don't remember anything else from what I have said this morning, please remember: God is king. The United States of America is not King, sovereign or worthy of our worship. While we can be thankful for the privileges we have here in the USA, we must keep in mind that God is the One Who has made all of this possible. We must live for Him. We must first and foremost be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, long before we proudly display our citizenship in the United States of America.

Everything that we have belongs to God. He is over it all. Everything that we do should be done for God. I know, personally, I'm not there yet. God is not always a part of my thinking or my actions. I want to make progress in this, what about you?