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Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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“What is Caesar’s . . . What is God’s” **Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22**

The 4th of July—Independence Day! Flags and fireworks, food and family time, a day of relaxation and refreshment, and hopefully reflection—reflection on freedom and the sacrifices that have been made to achieve it and maintain it.

Whether we’re citizens or sojourners, God has blessed us to live in a land that has enjoyed unprecedented freedom. As Christians, and particularly as *Baptist* Christians, we should appreciate most of all our *religious* freedom.

Jesus and Rome

The Jews of Jesus’ day were living under a government that provided order and stability. The only problem was that it provided them through oppression.

The Roman Empire provided a great deal of freedom for its citizens, but not its subjects. One important exemption had been granted to the Jews, though. Because of their long history of worshiping only the LORD God of Israel, rather than being required to offer a sacrifice to Caesar, declaring that “Caesar is Lord,” and thus worshiping the emperor, they were permitted to burn incense and offer a prayer to their God for the emperor as a demonstration of their loyalty.

But Roman rule was still a bitter pill to swallow for most of the Jews. Many especially detested paying taxes to Rome.

So it’s really not surprising that during the last week of Jesus’ earthly life leading up to his crucifixion, the Pharisees (a religious group) would join forces with the Herodians (a political group) to try to entrap Jesus by asking him about taxes. It was a taxing question in more ways than one!

They said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.”¹

Nice setup, huh?

Then they asked him: “Tell us, then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

They thought they had him. It was a no-win situation, like when a reporter asks a politician, “Have you stopped taking bribes?” If Jesus said they shouldn’t pay taxes to the Roman government, then they could accuse him of sedition. If he said that they should, he’d lose public support, since most Jews resented paying those taxes.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

But Jesus didn't fall for it. He said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought a denarius to him, and he said, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

And they answered, "Caesar's."

At that, Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

They were amazed. It was so clear, so simple, yet so profound. *Jesus declared that people should give to Caesar and God what rightfully belongs to each.*

What Jesus said here carries profound implications for how we as his followers should relate to the state—to the earthly governments we live under. As followers of Christ, *we must honor the legitimate claims of the state while submitting to God's ultimate claims over us.*

Living as a Christian in America

Today we mark the 234th birthday of the United States of America. We are truly blessed to live in this land. Whether we were born here or came here in search of a better life, America offers amazing freedoms that the citizens and residents of many countries of the world simply don't enjoy. The fences along our borders have been built to keep people out, not in.

And not least, in fact I would argue the greatest of these freedoms is *religious freedom*—the fact that our government cannot force or enforce the religious beliefs or convictions of any one individual or group on any other individual or group. With the First Amendment to our Constitution, the law of the land established that our government could neither promote nor prohibit religion, that it could neither favor it nor fight against it, that it could neither work for it nor against it. And this really is best this way; because whenever government tries to help religion, it's like Barney Fife's cousin Virgil on "The Andy Griffith Show"—the harder he tries to help, the worse he messes things up! And the more the church tries to be involved in government, the more like government it becomes.

We call this principle "the separation of church and state." While that actual phrase does not appear in the Constitution, in his response to a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, then President Thomas Jefferson (one of our most famous Founding Fathers) wrote these words:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" thus building a wall of eternal separation between Church & State.²

The terminology has stuck through the years.

And Baptists, throughout our history, at least until the last three decades, have staunchly guarded this liberty. In fact, our early American Baptist ancestors were the primary advocates for religious liberty at the birth and infancy of our nation. Many of them had suffered persecution at the hands of the various state churches, and insisted on and worked for *freedom*, not toleration, and not just for themselves, but for *everyone of any faith or of no faith!* They believed that faith could never be forced, so people *had* to be free when it came to religion!

² Library of Congress, Information Bulletin June 1998. Accessed 7/1/2010 at <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

Now the government we live under in the United States is far different from any of the governments found in the Bible, or even up until its establishment in the late 1700s. But Jesus' words, taken with Paul's comments in Romans 13 that we read earlier in our service, give us some guidance in how we as Christians are to relate to the government, whatever form it may take.

What is Caesar's . . .

Now based on Jesus' declaration here in Matthew 22, two questions immediately arise about how we as Christians relate to the government we're living under—how we are to live as citizens, or in the case of most early Christians and many believers throughout history, as subjects. The questions are simply this: what is Caesar's, and what is God's?

So just what is Caesar's? Or to put it another way, what are the legitimate claims that the state has over us?

In Romans 13, Paul addressed the God-ordained role of government and its God-given authority. He stated that God instituted government to maintain order in society. He went so far as to say that Christians should submit to that order, that they should look to the government for the administration of justice against criminals, and that they should even support the government's functions through paying taxes and tribute! Christians had a responsibility to relate properly to the government, which in their day took the form of the Roman Empire.

Now understand that Paul was *not* talking about a Christian government here! Quite to the contrary, the Roman government was anything *but* Christian. Its official religion was that of the twelve Greco-Roman gods and goddesses of ancient mythology. The emperors sometimes claimed to be divine themselves. Yet Paul said the government's authority was established by God! And when government is operating within the sphere God has established for it, the governing authorities should be respected and honored and the laws obeyed.

So government is responsible to maintain an orderly society, enforcing and executing justice in the land. For us in the United States, our government's stated purpose from the Preamble of the Constitution is to

“establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity . . .”³

That is certainly consistent with what Paul described as the role of government here in Romans 13.

And what do we owe to the government of our country?

Paul spoke in terms of paying taxes and revenue and offering appropriate respect and honor to leaders. Our government is much different than that of Rome. But the same ideas still apply to us.

Though many of us often feel like we pay too much, we should *pay taxes* to enable the government to carry out its legitimate functions.

We should *honor and respect our leaders*, and as Paul enjoined in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, we should *pray for them* faithfully.

³ The Charters of Freedom, *Constitution of the United States*. Accessed 7/1/10 at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.

We should be *appropriately involved* in our community and state and nation's affairs, living as law-abiding, model citizens. We should *always* exercise our right to vote and make our voice heard in winsome ways on critical issues. While we *should* strive to make individual Americans disciples of Jesus, we *should not* try to Christianize our government, but instead be salt and light and leaven to influence it for justice, mercy, and freedom *for all people*.

And we should always have a *principled loyalty* to our nation and our government. So long as our government's will is not contrary to God's will, we should be loyal. But whenever government begins to step beyond the boundaries God has assigned to it and usurps the authority and worship and loyalty God has claimed for himself, things change. Because while we must render to Caesar what he can legitimately claim, we must ultimately submit to God's claims!

What is God's . . .

Jesus said that we must render to God what is God's. And what is God's?

We are! He created us, so he has claims over us. He has redeemed us through Jesus' death and resurrection, so we're doubly his—he has made us and he has bought us!

It's interesting when you look closely at the parallel Jesus draws here. He points to Caesar's image and inscription, and says to render to Caesar what is his. Could it be that Jesus is reminding them by this that as human beings, we bear God's image, and that he has written his moral law in our minds? We bear his image and inscription, so we belong to him!

A disciple of Jesus cannot have divided, competing loyalties. We can love our country, yes—but not the same way we love God. We can be loyal and patriotic, yes—so long as we remember that God always has *first claim* on our loyalty and obedience. We can be faithful citizens of our nation, yes—but we must remember that even more, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, and that he is our ultimate and absolute Sovereign!

We owe God our total love—with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—our complete selves, and our absolute loyalty and commitment.

And if the claims of our country and the claims of our God ever collide, there must be no question about which takes precedence. As important as Caesar's claim is, God's is always a higher and greater claim!

To Caesar . . . to God

One of my favorite movies of all time is "Sergeant York." In this old black-and-white classic, Gary Cooper portrays the World War I hero Alvin C. York from Tennessee.

After a time of rebellion following his father's death, York is converted and becomes a devout follower of Jesus. When he's drafted into the Army during World War I, his simple faith won't let him reconcile obedience to the Sixth Commandment—in the KJV, "Thou shalt not kill"—with fighting in the war. After his request for exemption as a conscientious objector is rejected three times, he reports for duty.

When his skill as a sharpshooter becomes evident and he's offered a promotion to corporal to help train others, he declines, explaining his reason. His commanding officer talks with him and sends him home for a few days with a book about American history to make a decision.

One of the most powerful scenes in the movie is when York is sitting on the mountainside with his hound dog, reading his Bible, reading the history book, and praying. After a couple of days of this Scripture and soul searching, he lays his Bible down after reading awhile, and a gust of wind turns the pages. He picks it up and reads:

“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are
Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”

And so he did.
And so must we.

†*MEG*