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Living as Citizens of Heaven In a World of Government, Politics, and Taxes

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TEXT: Matthew 22:15-21 (ESV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle Him in His words. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought Him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Dear Friends:

The apostle Paul tells us in the Book of Philippians that if we are followers of Jesus Christ, then our citizenship is in Heaven. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul also says that if we're followers of Christ, we are ambassadors for Christ, we represent His kingdom in this world. The question is, how are we to operate as citizens, ambassadors of Heaven in this world of government, politics, and taxes? What does that look like? Well, Jesus has some wisdom for us today in regard to that question.

In this story from Matthew, we see that the opposition to Jesus is bound and determined to trip Him up and make Him look bad. They do not like Him. He's a threat

to them. So they decide, let's stump Him, somehow, embarrass Him, get Him into trouble. And they approach Him armed with a trick question. They begin with flattery about His being true to God's ways and not swayed by human appearances or opinions. And then they launch their attack. Tell us what you think, Jesus. Is it lawful, (meaning according to God's law and scripture), is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? They think they have Him now. There appears to be no good answer to that question. If Jesus says yes, it ruins His credibility with the Jewish people, who hated the Roman oppressors and didn't want to pay taxes to a pagan emperor with money that was an abomination in God's sight. But if He says, no, you shouldn't pay the tax, then the powers that be might see Him as some sort of subversive insurrectionist, trying to promote a revolution against the Roman government, and they'll arrest Him. It looks like a no-win situation for Jesus, doesn't it? We need to remember, though, that Jesus is the smartest person that ever lived.

Just look at this response. First, He exposes their hypocrisy, calls them out for testing Him. He can see through their flattery as well as the intention behind the question. They have maliciously set up a trap for him. Next, He answers their question with a question – Jesus liked to do that. First, He has them bring Him one of the coins that was used to pay the tax. And surprisingly, they have a coin on them which openly exposes their hypocrisy. What are they doing with one of those hated taxation coins? And then He asks, “Whose image and inscription is on that coin?” They answer: “Caesar's.” The coin has Caesar's image on it and an inscription stating that he's divine. And any Jew with a sensitive conscience would hate that, for it broke God's commandments. It was bad enough to pay taxes to the oppressors, but this coinage was an abomination. Jesus answers their question with this memorable statement, and it provides wisdom and warning for us: “Therefore, render [or give back] to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's.”

Give back to Caesar that which is Caesar's – yes, give back to Caesar, meaning the government, his due. Pay your taxes, Jesus says. The usage of Caesar's coinage acknowledges his authority and our obligation to pay taxes. They could not benefit from imperial roads or education or justice and freedom from invasion without making their contribution. Jesus is saying, those who enjoy Caesar's benefits should pay Caesar's taxes. You and I are to participate and give back to our community, to our nation, with our time and our energies. We exercise good citizenship, we pay our taxes,

we serve. We are law-abiding. We work for justice and peace and the well-being of our neighbors.

But then Jesus adds to that, He says, “And,” (and this is a big “and”), “give back to God, to things that are God's.” This could be seen as almost a subversive statement when you think about it, because what is God's? Well, what has God put his image upon? If you look at Genesis 1:26, we see that God has made us in His image. His image is on us, we're created in His image. He created us for Himself. Therefore, we belong to Him. We are to give our whole selves to Him, to walk in a relationship with Him and obey Him and trust Him. And when a person trusts in Jesus Christ, we're marked with the sign of the cross. We've been bought with a price, haven't we: the saving blood of Jesus who paid for our sins at the cross. We belong to Him now. Therefore, God deserves our ultimate allegiance, loyalty, affection, and worship. He is to be the center of our existence. As kingdom citizens, we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness in our world. We love Him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. We give Him our all and all.

There's a bit of warning to be found in this statement as well. Jesus also is saying that as a citizen of Heaven, you don't give to Caesar what doesn't belong to Caesar: your worship and your ultimate allegiance. Your ultimate obedience and hope and identity is not in politics or political leaders or nationalistic pride or philosophy. It's in God alone. Therefore, be careful not to love Cesar with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind – only God deserves that from you. Be careful not to love a political party with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. Only God deserves that from you. And be careful not to love a nation and a government with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, because, again, only God deserves that from you. You and I as Christians are not to worship anyone or anything but God. Only God gets that from us.

Now, many early Christians were martyred because they refused to say that Caesar was Lord. Because they understood what Jesus was saying here. They understood that only God deserves worship. For more recent history, I'm reminded of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against Adolf Hitler and what he was doing (or attempting to do) in the German church: trying to nationalize it with Nazi doctrine, to use it to promote his evil philosophy and teachings. Bonhoeffer's conscience, though, was bound to God, so he took action against Hitler. God and God alone deserves our worship.

God's command must be kept. So Bonhoeffer exercised civil disobedience against Hitler and Nazism. He wound up being arrested and executed for it.

Or there's the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who observed man's inhumanity towards man in the "Jim Crow" laws of the government, which denied black people their rights of equality in our own country. He knew they were against God's laws. He organized peaceful protests against those laws. And he was continually arrested and assaulted and jailed, and eventually he was assassinated. Dr. King said one time, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool."

So that's how a citizen of Heaven, an ambassador for Christ, conducts himself or herself as a citizen of a nation according to Jesus. There is wisdom here and warning in this brilliant statement from our Lord. The wisdom is: as citizens of our nations, Christians, of course, are called to be good citizens. We pay our taxes, we give back to the community. We work to make it great for our neighbors and ourselves. We're respectful, honest, humble, peaceful, law abiding, and involved. And as citizens of the Kingdom of God, through faith in Christ, our worship and ultimate allegiance belongs to God and God alone. In His name, we pursue righteousness, holiness, and love. We live out the great commandment of love: loving God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Him and Him alone we worship. We fulfill the Great Commission He's given us to make disciples of all nations, telling the story of Jesus Christ – His life and death and resurrection – to everyone around us so that they might enter the kingdom of God and live lives that our lives have Thanksgiving and praise and service and obedience to God.

And here is the warning, the caution sign: it's so easy to mix the two up and blend them together, which is dangerous – spiritually dangerous. It leads to idolatry, which is the worship of something other than God. And it leads to compromise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and compromise of Christ's church. Someone once wrote, "Historically, when the church and state have become too closely aligned, the result has most often been the compromise of the church and the gospel."

So let us be vigilant. Each of us must regularly be asking ourselves:

Am I following these words of Jesus? Am I giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and giving the God what is God's? Or am I getting them mixed up, and giving to Caesar what really only belongs to God? Who is shaping my identity as a person in this world, Caesar or God? And where does my most basic allegiance in life lie, with Caesar or God? In what am I placing my hope for the future, Caesar or God?

I conclude this message today with a profound quote from a biblical commentator, Dr. Michael Green, regarding these words of Jesus that we've been examining today. He writes,

When we do give back, without reserve, to the God who gave us everything and formed us in His own image, and when we set out to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give God what is God's, then we have within ourselves a spring of action, which is always questing, always seeking integrity, in a world of compromise. We must wrestle to discern the areas where Caesar has no right to dictate. These areas must be handed back to God.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, my fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God: let us be vigilant and follow these words of Jesus carefully.

Amen.