

## What We Believe: Caesar and You

People in general have an interesting relationship with their government. We vote for people to “represent” us in places called “legislatures” where our representatives legislate - they write laws. When we don’t like the laws they are agreeing to, we complain and maybe protest, but we are forced to go along because the laws are backed up by people with guns and with keys to jail cells.

We expect governments to take the money we send their way in taxes and provide for us useful services, the very things we would want to have that money spent on. When the government wastes those tax contributions on things we don’t agree with, we complain and maybe protest, but we are forced to go along because they are backed by guns and jails.

We expect that the people we send to represent us will act according to a high ethical standard and will make decisions that are in the best interests of the majority of the people they represent. When they choose self-interest, or the interests of only those who have made large financial contributions to their reelection campaign we complain and maybe protest, but are forced to go along because they have the guns and the jail cells.

This has always been the way it works. There are always people in charge who do things that most of the people they are in charge of would disagree with - if they had any say - but the people in charge have the power to enforce their will and they tend to carry on until they make enemies of people with real power.

This was the situation when Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee. The Jews of Palestine were ruled by a far-away leader, the Caesar of Rome. He didn’t care all that much what they wanted or liked. He cared much more about what the leading families of Rome wanted and liked and what they liked was peace in their conquered territories and prosperity at home. Keep the natives quiet and subservient and we can turn our attention to other conquests and the wealth that they can bring to Rome. So the *pax romana*, the ‘peace of Rome’ was a political priority - and wherever there was turmoil and insurrection in the Empire, it was suppressed quickly, ruthlessly.

Nowhere in all of the Roman Empire was there more trouble, more of a fighting spirit bent on independence, than in Judea. They had experienced a successful revolt against the Greeks in the second century before Jesus’ birth and had existed for many decades as an independent nation during what’s called the Maccabean period. That ended in 63 BC when the Roman General Pompey was invited to help settle a dispute between two brothers who were fighting against each other for control of Judea. The end result was a siege of the temple area of Jerusalem and ultimately victory for Pompey and the end of independence for Judea. But that didn’t end Rome’s troubles with this rebellious province of its Empire; a succession of would-be Messiahs led various revolts over the next 200 years which ended in 135 AD with the defeat of Simon Bar Kokhba. The Emperor Hadrian removed the name of Judea from the map and replaced it with Syria Palestina.

When Jesus began His public ministry, there were three responses to the Roman occupiers and those three general responses are still pretty typical of the way people react to political powers today.

1. There were the activists, called the party of Zealots, who were revolutionaries. They were determined to bring in the kingdom of God by overthrowing the Romans, driving them out of Judea and installing their own king in Jerusalem. They would be considered terrorists today, or maybe “freedom fighters” if you were on their side.
2. The second group were the pacifists, called the Essenes, and their approach to the issue of Roman occupation and exploitation was to withdraw, to develop their communities out in the wilderness, far from the presence of legions of Roman soldiers and the politics of the city. It’s entirely possible that John the Baptist, whose parents were already quite old when he was born, was raised by relatives that were part of an Essene community near the Dead Sea.
3. The third group was right in the thick of things, the politically connected group, those who assimilated to the reality of Rome and who cooperated to the full. This is best represented by the Sadducees, who came from the leading families of Judea and who worked with tax collectors and paid allegiance to Caesar.

So these were the options for a first-century Jewish person: revolt, withdraw, or assimilate. Guess which one Jesus opted for? If you guessed “none of the above”, you would be right.

Just think about the group of followers called Jesus’ disciples. One of them was from the party of Zealots, and is named in Luke 6:15 as “Simon called Zelotes” or Simon the Zealot. This isn’t Simon who was called Peter, but another Simon who was one of the twelve. And in that inner circle of close followers, Jesus invites a tax collector, Matthew. Imagine the tensions that those two had to work through in order to keep walking with Jesus for three years! On one of their journeys they are met by a Roman centurion - the kind of person that the Zealots are looking for an opportunity to kill - and Jesus says that He hadn’t found anyone with such great faith as this centurion, in all of Israel. Just think of Simon Zelotes response to that statement.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus comments on a situation that would have been well known by His audience, where a Roman soldier could compel any Jew to take a dispatch from one station to the next or to go with him to provide directions or even to let that soldier use one of his animals in some way. Imagine how a member of the Zealots would feel about Jesus’ instruction, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” (Matt. 5:41) The only ones who had the right to use force against you were the Roman soldiers who occupied Judea and Galilee.

So Jesus was saying that the Zealots’ approach to dealing with Caesar wasn’t God’s way, that the kingdom of God wouldn’t be advanced through violence against Rome. But there was this second group that were on the other end of the spectrum of political activism. The Essenes had withdrawn from the culture that included an occupying army and had formed their own religious sub-culture. If the Pharisees were strict in their rituals and applications of the Jewish purity laws, the Essenes were even more so. And

because they lived apart from the towns and villages of other Jews, they could be very strict in how they applied these laws on a daily basis.

Imagine how they felt, then, when Jesus touched a leper, when He sat down to a meal with tax-collectors and prostitutes, or when He praised Samaritans and Gentiles! Jesus' unwillingness to enter into this mode of withdrawing from society is one of the reasons I think John the Baptist was raised as an Essene. In Matthew 11 we read that John sent his disciples to ask Jesus a simple question: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" This is the same John who baptized Jesus after announcing to the crowds, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." And here he is now, in prison, wondering if he baptized the wrong guy, if he somehow missed it. Why would John doubt? In fact, Jesus raises this in His reply to John's disciples:

*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me. (Matt. 11:4-6)*

What were you expecting, John, that I'm not fulfilling? Maybe John expected that Jesus would be careful to observe all the ceremonial purity laws. Maybe John thought that Jesus would stay away from the cities, the Roman soldiers, the godless Gentiles and Samaritan traitors to the faith. It's a possibility - or maybe John didn't expect to be stuck in prison when the Kingdom of God was advancing all around him.

So, Jesus rejected the revolutionary response and He rejected the hermit response, "Run away!" What's left? The compromise of the Sadducees; go along to get along; don't rock the boat; when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Because very few of us are revolutionaries in the political sense and because none of us have yet been able to withdraw from our culture, we'll spend most of our time today looking at the "assimilation" model and how Jesus responded to it.

It was a mixed group that came to Jesus one day just before He was crucified. A group of the disciples of the Pharisees and a group of Herodians came to ask Jesus a question. These two were enemies of each other. The only thing they seemed to agree on was that they didn't like Jesus and wanted Him out of the way. So they tried to trap Him with a question about taxes.

*"Teacher," they said, "we know 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. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

*But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap Me? Show Me the coin used for paying the tax."*

*They brought Him a denarius, and He asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"*

*"Caesar's!" they replied.*

*Then He said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's." (Mt. 22:16-21)*

The trap was a pretty sharp one. If Jesus were to say, "It's not right for a child of Abraham to pay taxes to Caesar", these enemies of His could have Him arrested on the spot and tried and executed for sedition, for counseling a rebellion against Rome. But if Jesus were to say, "You ought to pay to Caesar whatever he demands from you", then the people would turn against Jesus because the Romans had demanded a lot from them and they were living like slaves in their own country. So, it looked like the Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees had Jesus trapped, but Jesus knew what they were up to and, before He answered their question, He called them out, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

Now, watch what happens next. Jesus asks for one of the coins that was being used to pay the tax. That says something; it says that Jesus didn't carry those coins with Him. He wasn't part of the system the way the Sadducees were. He wasn't accommodating to the right of Caesar to be worshiped by the people he ruled. "No, I don't have one of those coins - could you bring Me one, please." And when it was brought to Him, He looked at it and asked His own question, "Whose portrait is this? What does it say under the portrait?" And they tell Him what He already knows; that this is Caesar's portrait and inscription.

Then Jesus said two important things, the first of which was, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The coin, the one with Caesar's portrait and inscription, that belongs to him, to his kingdom, to his authority over the Empire. But the second thing challenged all Jesus' listeners: "And give to God, what is God's." The shock to some of those listeners would be that there are things that do not belong to Caesar.

What is Jesus talking about when He says that some things are not Caesar's, but belong to God? How would those Pharisees and Herodians have understood that statement? He's obviously not talking about the coin of the empire, so He must be referring to something else, some more absolute loyalty, something that Caesar does not deserve, but that God does. I think that those who were listening would have thought about things like worship, like ultimate obedience, like Jesus' refusal to name Caesar as His lord.

There is a connection between this event and the one that occurred just two or three days later, when Jesus was arrested, tried and executed by the Imperial power of Rome. He refused to place Caesar at the top of the pyramid of loyalty and honor, but declared fearlessly that only God is worthy of that position.

Throughout history, those in positions of political power have attempted to use the church for their own purposes. They have been the Caesars that believed their role, their position, was more important than God's. In each of those situations, the church needed to follow Jesus in declaring that some things simply don't belong to human political institutions, that some things belong to God alone - and the same principle is

true for us. What does the government ask from us that properly belongs to God and how should we respond?

1. The first area I want to address is nationalism - my country, right or wrong. When a nation goes to war, it depends on the military service of its young men and, increasingly, its young women. As Christians, are we allowed to say, "My country is calling, I have to go" or do we have an obligation to weigh whether or not this action is God's will for our lives? The issue is not avoidance of one's responsibility, but who your life belongs to. If your life belongs to your country, then you must go. If your life belongs to yourself, then it's totally up to you whether you go or don't go. But if your life belongs to your Creator, then you have to ask the question, "Does my Maker want me to offer my life for this particular cause or not?" In other words, when you respond to Jesus' statement, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's", you will concede that your life belongs to the One who gave it, rather than to some political system devised and maintained by human beings. In saying that, I'm not saying that God would never expect anyone to respond to their country's call to military service - in some way - but that our first obligation is to God and a secondary obligation is to our country.
2. The second area I'll address is the family. Do your children belong to your country or are they yours? In the minds of an increasing number of people, which include social workers, government strategists, media members and representatives of various agencies, the child belongs to the state, rather than to the family. So the State has the right to indoctrinate very young children into gender confusion and diverse sexual expressions ... without notifying the parents of those children. What would you conclude from that except that your children belong to the government? So, as Christian parents, we need to honor God in the decisions we make in raising our kids. No matter what educational choices we make - public school, Christian school, home school - we need to be aware of what our kids are being exposed to and talk with them through the process. Make sure that you are regularly taking time to communicate with your kids about whatever it is they are learning about.
3. A third area that we need to be aware of, and make choices about, is how much we assimilate into our culture. Will people around you identify you more as a Canadian or as a Christian? Will they identify you more as someone who is influenced by the culture of 21st century post-modernism or as a sincere believer and follower of the teachings of Jesus? As Brian reminded us last Sunday, Paul teaches us in Romans 13 that the authorities that exist have been established by God -- and so we respect them and submit to their authority to rule us -- but we can't assume that all that they do is godly or worthy of imitation. Our primary obligation is always to Jesus, so even if the Minister of Education for the Province of Alberta tells a Christian School to stop using the Bible in its teaching because she finds certain things in it to be offensive, we have to resist that. We can't obey a government that tells us to abandon our Scriptures or Jesus as Lord. We can't yield to leaders who make a caricature of the gospel and then tell us we can't be obedient to our Lord's commands. We're not there yet, but sometimes it feels like it's just a matter of time, that those who refuse to follow their government with all their heart, soul, mind and strength will be persecuted. That's the way it is in Viet Nam, in China, in countries in the Middle East.

A decision to follow Jesus is a decision to resist both the culture and to resist those who rule by declaring that we have one Lord, one King, one Master.

4. Finally, please do not put your hope in politicians, in government officials, in bureaucrats, or in speeches and promises made by any of the above. Our hope is in Jesus and we have confidence that we won't be disappointed by Him for at least these reasons: He has demonstrated faithfulness both to the prophecies made about Him hundreds of years earlier and to the will of the Father for His life- and to us! He has demonstrated humility and grace in the face of suffering and betrayal. He has demonstrated what love is all about to us and has loved us to the ultimate degree by sacrificing His life for us. There is no politician who can make that claim -- at least, honestly -- and there is none who can match Jesus' example and teaching. He gives us hope for bigger things than any ruling body can offer and His promises are true, reliable, worth believing in.

So, four things today:

1. Your life belongs to God, not to your country
2. Your family is entrusted to you by God and does not belong to the state
3. Your identity as a Christian is more important than your identity as a Canadian or American or other.
4. Your hope is in Jesus, your Creator, Redeemer and Lord. He is worthy of your absolute confidence.