

Sermon Render to Caesar...

Matthew 22:15-22

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

How can we live a Christian life in a non-Christian land? How can we sing the Lord's Song on foreign soil, one of the Psalmist wailed.

How to serve God in an environment that does not look kindly on Christians who want to follow their master? This is a question we and most Christians worldwide ask ourselves every now and then.

This question was in the background when Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are of God" (Mt. 22:21).

1 The tricky question

Jesus was not *lecturing* on how it is possible to combine obeying God and our government. He was actually in mortal danger because his worst enemies were conspiring against him.

The Pharisees and the Herodians wanted to get Jesus out of the way.

The Pharisees were sworn enemies of the Romans occupation and they stood strongly against paying taxes to Caesar - Who was the head of the occupying monster, and who claimed to be divine.

The Herodians were the supporters of King Herod; they cooperated gladly with the Romans. They were the wealthy class of Israel that gladly collaborated with the enemy. So they would have no problems with paying taxes to Caesar.

The enemies of Rome and the friends of Rome were united in their hatred of Jesus. So they had agreed to ask him this tricky question:

"Is it lawful to give a poll tax to Caesar or not?". (Mt 22:17)

The first century "poll tax" was payable directly to Caesar himself.

It was only one denarius - about one day's wage, but of all the taxes of the day, this "poll tax" was the most problematic one for devout Jews.

Surely, no-one likes to pay tax, but for a devout Jew, God was the only king; their nation was a theocracy; to pay tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship and thereby to insult God. God rules the earth, and no-one else, we saw in Psalm 96.

This Roman "poll tax" was especially hated by pious Jews. It had to be paid in Roman coins – with coins that bore the image of Tiberius Caesar who ruled in those days. In your bulletin you see what that coin looked like.

The coin was particularly objectionable to Pharisees because it bore the image of Tiberius Caesar - a direct breach of the ten commandments. And it also bore an inscription calling caesar "son of a god", or "high priest".

If Jesus said, "sure, no problem, pay it", many pious Jews would resent him as a traitor and as not a true servant of God.

But if he were to answer, "no, you should not pay Caesar anything", then the Herodians would have him on a charge of sedition; they would have had little problem persuading the Romans to have Jesus arrested. People had been crucified, in living memory, for staging rebellions against paying tax.

I guess after they posed their question, the Pharisees and the Herodians smiled at each other and thought "Gotcha!" while they waited for an answer. Whichever way Jesus might answer - or so they thought - he would lay himself open to trouble.

So Jesus answers, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are of God" (Mt. 22:21).

In modern times, this statement by Jesus has sometimes been taken to mean, that there are two sphere of life, church and state, or religion and the secular sphere, and that we as Jesus' followers must respect both, in quite separate compartments of life, without confusing the two.

A very dualistic attitude, where God is actually pushed back to the realm of private life, and to the heart, and where God plays no role in public life.

Bishop NT Wright in his book 'How God became King', writes this:

I think it is safe to say that nobody until the late eighteenth century ever took it like that; in other words, we are hearing in that interpretation the echo [...] of the European and American Enlightenment and the theory of "church and state" that they developed.

In that theory, "religion" and "politics" are simply two quite different sides of life; one must not bring the one into the other.

This is trotted out [Bishop Wright says] by those who write angry letters to the newspapers every time somebody from the church ventures a comment on a political question. "Stick to your own patch," we are told. "Jesus separated Caesar and God and so should you."

2 Dualism?

But if this would have been the answer of Jesus, he would have fallen into the trap set for him. He would have immensely angered the pious Jews. They believed that God and God alone is the king of all of life: of our worship, our culture, our politics, of your work, of your study, of your hobbies, of your marriage.

There is no area excluded from God's rule.

Jesus gave a much more subtle answer than, "surely, pay tax to the government and worship God at home."

He asked them first for a denarius. One of the Herodians, I guess, took one from his purse. Whose image is imprinted on the coin? The image of Emperor Tiberius.

In the ancient days coinage was the sign of kingship. As soon as a king came to the throne he struck his own coinage; and that coinage was held to be the property of the king whose image it bore.

Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The answer was that Caesar's head was on it. "Well then," said Jesus, "give it back to Caesar; it is his. Give to Caesar what belongs to him; and give to God what belongs to Him."

Jesus was not dividing the world here into the world of politics and religion; he had a Jewish worldview: God is Lord of all. He is Lord over the rulers of this earth as well. We saw in our reading from Isaiah 45, that even the kings of the enemies of Israel, like Cyrus, are used by God. God will not allow himself to be put into the box of religion or church.

Even Tiberius Caesar, even the rulers of this world in our days, do not stand beside God, as if they rule the world and God rules religion. They are all under God. He is the King of all.

And therefore, no government can ever have our allegiance *over* the God of heaven and earth.

Jesus actually makes play on the word 'image', 'likeness'. The likeness of caesar is on a coin. So it belongs to him. But whose image is on us, humans?

A very interesting commentary on the book of Matthew, by an unknown preacher in the early church, has some beautiful comment on this cryptic statement of Jesus.

The commentary says:

The image of God is not depicted on gold but is imaged in humanity. The coin of Caesar is gold; that of God, is humanity. Caesar is seen in his currency; God, however, is known through human beings.

The answer of Jesus has nothing to do with a church-state split; it had everything to do with the fact that God trumps Caesar on all fronts.

Jesus says, "You'd better pay Caesar back in his own coin—and pay God back in his own coin!"

Perhaps it's time for God to receive his due. His image is on every human being and his "inscription" is written across the pages of creation and the story of Israel. It is written on our lives as well and he is entitled to our full love and obedience. Give yourself to God, Jesus says.

Of course only Jesus himself lived such a perfect life of love and obedience. The image of God was truly imprinted on him. He was the only one who truly offered back to God what was his own, to the extent of loving and obeying even into suffering and death.

And within the new world that Jesus created, in the Kingdom of God, the question of Caesar, his power, and his coins looks completely different.

The governments of this world are just a sideshow. They can be mean, they can make our lives very tough, they can directly stand against the will of God. But our Lord is the King of all kings.

Jesus tells us therefore to give ourselves 100% to God. A denarius for Caesar? So what? He can have it. God has us completely.

For Christians there is no dualism. No separation between faith and life, or between church and state. Because God rules over all. And we desire to obey him all the time and everywhere.

3 God is king of all

Yes, we also enjoy the benefits that the State brings. What would we do without electricity, roads, telephone, and running water. Just as in Jesus' days, the Jews benefited from imperial roads, education, justice and freedom from invasion. Those who enjoy Caesar's benefits should pay Caesar's taxes. No big deal.

We can, as Christians, be good citizens in a secular, even in an Islamic society provided that what that society asks of us does not contravene our Primary commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here in Egypt, the situation is not very different from the times of the New Testament. In the first century AD, the state and religion were closely joined. The cult of the gods and the power of the ruler went hand in hand, as it does here.

Jesus' ultimate response to all who ask him how we must live: We have to give ourselves to God.

Often government here seems as far away and as dictatorial as in ancient Rome. And while we get little choice on paying taxes, we do have a totally free choice in what we give to God, how we obey God, how we live for God.

When we give ourselves to God, we have to give ourselves 100%. 10%, 90% or just on Sundays doesn't count. We have to give ourselves totally to him, all day, and every day.

Giving ourselves to God sounds vague and woolly. Just what does he want?

I think that Jesus gave us the answer when he was asked what the most important commandment was. He told us that the most important commandment was to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds and all our strength.

Our allegiance is to him, not to caesar.

The second commandment was to love one another. Yes even our enemies, even caesar.

Conclusion

So how to live such life in our society, today? The Bible and the church will not give us easy rules. In some situations we may have to resist government. In other situations, we obey. The decisive matter is, does our life belong to God - and does He direct our footsteps.

With the love of God as the centre of our beings, we have to make important choices all the time.

We can support and pay taxes to a government that provides the framework of modern life. We can oppose that same government when it works unfairly or unjustly. We can obey the laws of the land when they work with God's law and oppose them when they don't.

As long as God comes first.

If there is something against God's moral law, we have to stand up against it, wherever we find it. On the street, in the church, in the government, wherever.

Or to say it more positively, you and I are called to live the life God asks of us - an obedient life marked by commitment and love for Him and for all people - in all areas of life. We will not allow God and our life for him to be pushed back in the box of church and religion; the whole earth belongs to Him and that is where we serve Him.