**Matthew 22:21** October 25, 2020

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***Matthew 22:21He said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”***

*Other readings: Matthew 22:15-21; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Samuel 24:1-12*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Giving Them What They Deserve: Caesar & God**

This week I was up in Wisconsin for pastory meetings. At one of the breaks, someone commented that our group of 20 or so pastors seemed quieter than usual. Maybe the cold, dark, rainy Wisconsin fall was dampening spirits. Maybe the facemasks were muffling voices. Then someone mentioned a new phrase he had just heard: “Caution Fatigue.” We are so tired of being careful of danger, so used to walking on eggshells that we just don’t open up and talk as much. Whatever the reason for our quiet, we can imagine that “caution fatigue” really is a thing.

“Caution fatigue” makes me reluctant to say much more about Matthew 22:21, our reading for this sermon. I mean, this reading is about politics. And if there is one thing that will blow up any conversation these days, it is politics.

This may be playing with fire. But on the other hand, God’s word speaks to the big issues that take up so much of our time and attention. God’s word talks about contentious issues because God’s desire is not that we live over-cautious and fatigued lives, but so that we can walk in His presence with confidence in the midst of danger and discouragement. Each of today’s three readings tell us something of Church and State, the Christian and Government.

But there is an important reason to address this issue *this* Sunday. If we were to look at these words of Scripture three weeks from now, people would have suspicions and complaints that I was taking political sides. Maybe they would see it as sour grapes that I didn’t get what I wanted out of the election. Or maybe people would see it as pastor doing a victory lap for a political party. God’s word teaches us principles that apply in good times and bad, whether my preferred political party holds the reins of power or not. And the best thing for us to do is to look at these principles *before* an election. That way we can prepare ourselves beforehand to act like godly people afterward, no matter what the outcome. Then we can stand above the commotion of this world, with our hearts and minds fixed on things above.

**I.** So of the readings, the one from Romans is most straightforward. I read the first two verses: ***“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.”***

That makes the Christian’s relationship to governing authorities clear. God wants Christians to be obedient. People will try to do all kinds of logical end-arounds on this; times and reasons that they don’t have to submit. Those ways are too many, and I am not sharp enough to debate their arguments. All I can do is take them back to this clear word of God. ***“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”***

Just in case someone objects, “That’s fine if you have good government, but we don’t have good government…” Really? Let me remind you who the “governing authorities” of Romans 13 are. It is the Roman Empire. It would be 250 years before the Roman Empire would have its first Christian emperor. At the time *Romans* was written, Nero was the emperor of Rome. Nero had come to power four or five years earlier when his mother assassinated her husband, the previous emperor, so that Nero, her son, could be emperor. (That’s hardly a peaceful transfer of power, or a legitimate path of succession, is it?) Add to that, the Roman emperors were all pagans of the most immoral kind. While the emperors may have generally kept law and order, they were brutal people. These are the authorities of Romans 13. God says, *“Submit to them.”*

To be clear, we owe obedience to our authorities not because of their goodness, faith, morality, or popularity, but because they have been established by God. Whether they rule justly or not, for the public good or not, that is God’s to judge—and he will! Our response is not to rebel, curse or disrespect, but to obey. This Bible passage flatly tells us that to rebel against governing authorities is rebellion against God. Disrespect of authority is disrespect of God.

**II.** So is our obedience to these authorities absolute? Must we do anything and everything they command? That is where our Gospel reading comes in. Submission to authorities is our God-pleasing response to God’s gift of authority. But Jesus says that is not without qualification. ***“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”***

To understand what Jesus is saying, we need to understand what was going on. People had come to Jesus to ask a question about whether Jews should be paying taxes to pagan Romans. It was a “gotcha” question worthy of a presidential debate. If Jesus answered “No” the Romans would have his head; if he said that people should be paying taxes, masses of oppressed Jews following Jesus would become disillusioned. Jesus saw through their trick question, and instead of running away, took it head on and taught them heavenly wisdom about the very thing they were trying to trap him in.

Jesus told the challengers to bring the most common coin of the day, the denarius. This is the coin they would use to pay taxes. On that coin was a portrait of the current emperor, Tiberius Caesar, in Jesus’ day. Fine, no problem there. But there was this inscription around the portrait, “Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus.” On the coin Emperor Tiberius’ father, Augustus, was called “divine,” which would make Tiberius the “Son of God.” So what Jesus is telling them is, “That silver, give it to the tax man. It is the government’s; it is Caesar’s to demand. It is their God-given right to collect taxes from you. But, that inscription, the ‘Son of God’ thing. That you cannot give to him. That belongs to God.” So, finally, there is a limit of obedience to governing authority. Where God makes demands, the government cannot.

But here is the problem. We, especially in our nation with democratic principles, we tend to have this attitude the government shouldn’t do anything I don’t want it to do. We tend to think that if the government acts in the opposite of what I think should be done, then I am kind of free to gripe and complain, and maybe even if I disagree with it enough, to just disregard it. You can see this in most people: the idea that if I didn’t vote for something, it’s sort of optional for me.

That is not what Jesus says with ***“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”*** If we are tempted to not submit to the governing authorities, we ought to be very very careful and very very sure that it actually is contrary to God’s will. This isn’t about my preferences, or what I think is wise, it is about what God commands. We should ask ourselves, “Do I not obey this rule, this law, because it is contrary to God’s will, or is it because I personally don’t like it?” If we are honest, it is just about always a personal preference, but rarely actually something where we can truly say, “God doesn’t want me doing that.”

What do we owe to Caesar? The extent of our submission to governing authority goes beyond the pointy end of the Roman short sword. Back in the Romans reading it says, ***“Give every [authority] what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”*** Yes, authorities are to be given more than obedience; they are to be given respect and honor. The slogan that rang out four years ago, “Not my president,” which may well ring out in a couple weeks no matter who is elected—that slogan has no place in a Christian’s mouth or heart. Coming from either side of the political aisle it is sin. ***“He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.”***

**III.** What does this look like in real life? That’s what our Old Testament reading was about.

David’s troubles with the governmental authority started with an unimaginable blessing. One day on the farm, he was doing field work that none of his older brothers wanted to do. While out there one of his dad’s hired men came running and told him to get home as fast as he could. He hurried home. From a distance he could see everyone just standing around. Was someone sick, dying? No. Everyone was waiting—and here was the surprise for this youngest of eight boys—they were waiting for him! In the middle of the family faces was an old stranger who bore the stamp of authority. When the old mysterious man (the prophet Samuel by the way) saw young David, he paused like he was listening to a voice from heaven, then told the young man to kneel. Kneeling, the old man took a horn of perfumed olive oil, poured it on the young man’s head, and pronounced him the king-elect of God’s people, Israel. This was not what David had expected when he got out of bed that morning!

Yet David was not king. A man named Saul was still Israel’s king. David was God’s choice to be the *next* king *after* Saul. King Saul had been reprimanded by God many times, and finally rejected, for his spiritual failings. Now Saul just couldn’t stand the thought that he could not hand off his kingdom to his son. And so, in repeated fits of jealousy, Saul tried to eliminate David. One time David was played a soothing tune on the harp in the palace, and Saul took a spear and hurled it at David. David dodged it, twice. Another time Saul sent soldiers in the dead of night to David’s house to kill him, but David made a get-away. And in our Old Testament reading, Saul took a brigade of 3,000 soldiers, and was hunting David down in the desert wilderness. As God would have it, David was hidden in a desert cave, the same cave Saul was using as a latrine.

So let me ask: at that point, what does David owe King Saul?

Apparently, David thought he owed him obedience and honor. With Saul breathing out murderous threats, with David’s own men cheering him on to take a scalp, David cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. Just a corner, to let him know, “If I had wanted to, I could have.” Yet even at that, David felt guilty for disrespecting his king. But why? Hadn’t God chosen David? Hadn’t God reprimanded Saul? Hadn’t Saul repeatedly shown himself incapable, if not unworthy of the throne? Yes, yes, and yes. But Saul was still David’s king.

After Saul had left, *“David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, ‘My lord the king!’ When Saul looked behind him*—listen to this—*David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He said to Saul, ‘…This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, “I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the Lord’s anointed…” May the Lord judge between you and me.’”*

Do you see it? A living, breathing picture of what it means to live out ***“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”***

If you were in David’s place, is that what would you have done?

Let’s take it out of the hypothetical and make it real. How are you treating your leaders in government? The last time you had a political rant, how did you speak of those in authority? Are you treating them with David-like respect and obedience? If you are now, were you four years ago?

If your side wins the election are you going to remember that you owe a greater allegiance to one with a kingdom “not of this world”? If your side loses the election, are you going to live out Romans 13:7: ***“Give every [authority] what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor”?***

**IV.** Thinking about my relationship to my government in light of today’s word of God leads me to two convictions.

**A.** The first conviction is that, here too, I have fallen short of God’s desires. I have not only fallen short, I have sinned. I have disobeyed and dishonored my God when disobeying and disrespecting those in authority. Over the years I have complained bitterly about rules, laws, policies, elections. That is wrong. There are even laws and rules I have even refused to submit to, tried to get around. More sin. This self-examination reminds me that I have to humbly take refuge in my Savior. I can’t pretend that all is good and right with me. It’s not. I need Jesus, because he did take all those sins to the cross. And he has promised me that in him it is forgiven.

We Christians need to live out our lives of submission to authorities in humble thanksgiving to our Savior.

**B.** The second conviction is that I have much to be thankful for in the government of our land. Oh, sure, we love to complain about it—and I don’t say that to our credit. But do you know what is worse than any government, and infinitely worse than ours? No government. You’ve heard stories of people fleeing from places with no government? What awful places to live, where you fear for your and your family’s lives, where you know that your property enjoy no protection under law. For all the flaws and all the things we complain about in the running of our nation, we have much to be thankful for. And when we see things we don’t like, we can speak, we can vote, we can run for office, we can file a suit. Let us be thankful for what we have. And let us, instead of complaining, do the thing other than submit that God’s word tells us to do for those in authority, *“I urge, then… that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for… kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”* (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

When we realize God’s will for us toward earthly authority, we will be blessed, and a little bit of the “caution fatigue” is going to fall away. Amen.