

Church-State Obligations

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Government; Church and State / Matthew 22:15–22

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction - the trick question

It's still Holy Week...probably Tuesday now. The Pharisees who had try to catch Jesus before, now send their disciples to him...and the Herodians. Take it the disciples of the Pharisees are Jews and they do not like the Herodians who are followers of the Herods - Roman officials. The Jews do not like the fact that they are under Roman oppression. Now, we see these people getting along...in hopes to trap Jesus, in hopes that Jesus would say something to spark his arrest. They ask him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Seemingly another question that Jesus has no easy way to answer. If he says, "No". He's denying the citizen's duty to Caesar. If he says "yes". Well then, the Jews are going to hate him even more. This question wasn't asked out of genuine concern for civic life. It was posed to trick Jesus...

So Jesus responds in an unexpected way to them: "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax. Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They responded "Caesar's". And he replied, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Turning the Tables

Jesus turned the tables so to speak again on the Pharisees. They probably thought that he would deny Caesar's right to collect any taxes. For who really likes to pay taxes? What did he do? He said, absolutely, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." At the same time he also added, "And to God the things that are God's." This is one of the classic texts when talking of the two kingdoms along with Romans 13. The two kingdoms...the government (The kingdom of the left" and the Church, which is the "Kingdom of the Right." The thing is, God rules them both. He rules the kingdom of the left with power, while the Kingdom of the Right he rules with grace and mercy.

The question that is posed to give Jesus, gives Him the opportunity to teach the people once again...this time about church and state.

So am I going to talk politics today. Not exactly. This morning we are going to discover the fact that we do have an obligation to both the church and the state.

Obligations to Church and State

First, what do we owe our government? We are citizens of one of the greatest nations to have appeared in history. The United States of America has truly been blessed by God. Perhaps to the point that no nation has seen before in the history of the world.

Questions that the Pharisees and Herodians asked are being asked today. Just turn on the TV, open your web-browser, or even the newspaper. Questioning what we actually owe the government that we have...whether we like it or not.

Did you notice the question that the Pharisees and Herodians asked of Jesus? It's actually correct for the Pharisees to ask Jesus what is legal to do in terms of their debt to Caesar. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" In the kingdom of the left, we are governed by law. In the kingdom of the left our loyalty is based on the law...or rather on our obligation. Really in the kingdom of the left our debt is fulfilled by doing. Therefore, we pay taxes (even when we don't like it). We do community service. We vote. And some of us have taken up arms to protect and defend this great nation. To those of you...thank you for your service. God has given us government authority, the kingdom of the left. He has established it for good reason. We are most definitely called by God to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

The responsibilities that we have to the left-hand kingdom are divinely appointed, calling for our appointment and sometimes even our lives. Yet, this debt that we owe the government is not the only debt we owe, nor is it absolutely. While we live with one foot in this left-hand realm. We have our other foot living in the right-hand kingdom. Our other foot is in God's gracious reign of grace, exercised through His church. It is in this kingdom that God frees from the effect of sin, freedom from curse and death and the accusing power of the devil. He adopts us as his own in baptism. He washes away our sin with the blood that flowed from his wounds and his body nailed to the tree - these very gracious gifts that God gives us at his altar. And there is his word, His Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who continually reassures us that He is for us.

So what is our obligation in the kingdom of the right. Old Lutheran Scholar Lenski points out: "Our obligations to God are the whole of life, those to the state one part of the whole." He adds this when we think about our obligations in the kingdom of the right.

The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel Chapter 22

This “and” places the two obligations side by side. There is to be no clash between them but quite the contrary. Neither obligation interferes with the other. “The things of God” are all that our relation to him involves: contrition, faith, love, worship, obedience, submission to his providential guidance, even to his correction and chiding. We misunderstand Jesus when we think that he says that the obligation to God has nothing to do with the obligation to our government.

Indebted to God

We are indeed indebted to God. We owe much. You and I we know that. And we look at the debt we owe and we fall on our knees as humble beggars. It’s too much. You see, our debt...your and mine, cannot be paid by our feeble attempts to fulfill the law. Sure we attempt fulfill the law. We attempt to satisfy the debt. We will never ever be able to - because we are corrupt. We are sinners.

So God, in his infinite wisdom and great love for you, paid the debt. Our debt in the kingdom of the right is paid by the innocent and bitter sufferings and death of Jesus Christ His Son, our Lord. What’s left for us to do? Not to pay the debt, not to win God’s favor. He came to us first. But we have a debt of praise and thanksgiving that acknowledges God’s love and mercy for such a lost and condemned sinner such as you and me. Yet, God actually doesn’t need our praise either. God gives us grace without expecting anything in return. It’s a free gift. yet, we respond out of faith, faith in God with our praises and Thanksgivings.

What is Jesus telling us here today? Our loyalties stand first and foremost with God. The apostle says it best in the book of Acts when the governing authorities oversteps its God-given role, when the Apostles were forbidden to teach and preach, “We must obey God rather than men.”

And even Martin Luther basically said the same, “Here I stand, I can do no other, I will not recant.”

When we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s that’s done of out duty, obligation, order, civic righteousness. What we render unto God...the whole of our lives...since everything is actually his, including the government, we respond with an act of faith and gratitude for all that He has done for us in Christ...our Savior and Redeemer.

In Jesus Name. Amen.