

God and Caesar

Psalm 96, Matthew 22: 15-22

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Matthew 22: 17

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
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There are certain passages of Scripture that work their way into our hearts and minds and become a part of who we are. When that happens on a broad scale, they make their way into our common language and provide the warp and weft of a society's value system. This Sunday and the next, I want to focus our attention on two such passages from the 22nd chapter of Matthew. Next Sunday, we will examine the commandment identified by Jesus as the greatest commandment in the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and it is the greatest. The second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” None of this is as simple as it sounds.

Today, we turn to Jesus' answer to the question the Pharisees put to him about paying taxes to Caesar. “Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.” Or, as the stately King James Version of the Bible puts it, “Render unto Caesar the things that

are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" That doesn't even **sound** simple, does it?

One would be hard pressed to think of an issue over which American citizens are more divided today than the issue of church and state, or as I heard it put recently, the relationship between citizenship and discipleship. The question of whether or not Harriet Meirs was selected for nomination to the Supreme Court because, among other reasons, she shares the President's evangelical Christian views, is a topic being hotly debated. Some would maintain that to privilege one person over another for public office on the basis of his or her religious views is contrary to Article VI, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution, which reads "...no religious Test shall ever be required as a qualification for any Office or public Trust under the United States." On the other side of the argument are those who just as vehemently believe that one's religion, whether one is a born again Christian or Buddhist, should never disqualify that person from holding a public office.

When it comes to this prickly matter of citizenship and discipleship, there are not always clear guidelines to follow. (1) That is especially so on the discipleship side of the coin. Because the role of religion in politics and public life evokes such lively discussion these days, I thought it would be

useful for us to think about what the Bible says about these matters. From my experience at dinner parties recently, I sense that most people in the Christian tradition are already clear about what they think about these matters and are not shy in sharing their opinions. I am not shy about it either, but I do not preach to share with you my opinion. I preach in order to live out my calling of discerning what God's word says. What does the Bible say about religion and politics, about the faith community and the civil authorities? The Bible has relatively few passages that deal directly with these questions. Why? Because these were not the kinds of questions that the cultures and societies that produced the scriptures were asking. For example, those societies knew nothing of the modern democratic state. That does not mean, however, that there are no passages to help guide us today.

In the Old Testament in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, the children of Israel are wandering in the wilderness, and God makes a declaration. That declaration is called the Decalogue, the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments. They begin with an unconditional admonition to give one's ultimate allegiance to God alone. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

There was no understanding of life being in two different realms, the civil life and the religious life. The monarchy that emerged in the early history of Israel was a theocracy, that is, a government that is ruled by priests and officials who claimed divine sanction.

In the New Testament, there is the often quoted passage in the 13th chapter of Romans. Paul writes, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Paul goes on to say, however, that governing authorities derive their power and legitimacy only by implementing justice. An unjust tyranny, then, would not qualify as an authority instituted by God. (2)

The last passage I would call your attention to is the Revelation, the book that concludes the New Testament. The church is suffering under official persecution by the state. John, the writer of Revelation, is imprisoned on the island of Patmos during the last days of the Emperor Domitian. The state and its imperial officers are clearly understood as the enemies of the children of God.

Do you see from this brief and scattered review why people are puzzled about what the Bible says? The Bible says different things in different contexts. It is important to remember Biblical history. It is also important to

remember our American history and how the New World was settled mainly by Protestants who, motivated by the desire to freely practice their religion, came to the New World. They came with the idea of establishing a “city set on a hill” and a working model of God’s good society.

(One of my favorite stories about the founding of our country has to do with two pilgrims who were standing on the bough of the ship crossing the Atlantic. One says to the other, “My immediate goal is religious freedom. My long range goal is to make a killing in real estate.”)

The Declaration of Independence refers to “nature’s God” and “the Supreme Judge of the World. By the time the last musket of the Revolutionary War had been fired, however, the thirteen colonies were inhabited by religiously diverse peoples and there was a common understanding that religious freedom needed to be guarded. Religious tolerance was the watchword in the land where only a minority was actual church members. One of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, the illustrious Deist, reflected the common attitude of the day when he wrote, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods. Or no gods. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” Out of this rich mix of religious diversity emerged an unprecedented peaceful solution to one of the most perplexing problems of human society, how shall the church and state be related to one another. (3)

The First amendment to the Constitution, to my mind is the high water mark of Western democracy. It reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

That is what our Constitution says. In today’s familiar but perplexing passage from the Gospel, what does Jesus say? Can those ancient words help us navigate today’s choppy waters? We cannot lift out the single verse, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s,” and say we understand what’s happening here. We must understand the context in which those words were spoken. The context was one of deep conflict. Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem’s temple, the center of religious power, were in a struggle to the death. It was a real, bitter, and intense struggle. The Pharisees understood themselves to be the preservers of the faith tradition, and Jesus was a threat to that tradition in their minds as well as to themselves and their own authority. The conflict was intensifying, and you know the outcome. Before long, the people who were engaging Jesus in the conversation would go to Caiaphas, the high priest and Pilate, the civil authority. Jesus would be crucified for the sin of blasphemy and the crime of sedition in an unholy melding of the religious institution and the state.

In today's verbal skirmish, the Pharisees want to entrap Jesus in his own words. They send their disciples to Jesus, along with the Herodians, who are allies of Rome. With unctuous flattery they say, "We know you are sincere and you love God," and so on and so forth. "Tell us then, is it lawful to pay taxes to emperor?" Jesus is not fooled. He understands what their motives are. He is not intimidated by the question, as crafty as it is. If he answers no, it is not lawful, then the Herodians will come down upon him with both feet. If he answers yes, it is lawful, many in the crowd will think that he had caved in to the governmental authorities. Remember, they're living under occupation by a foreign power and have no voice at all in how they are governed or how their taxes were used, which often was to bestow more wealth on the elite while they continued to endure the effects of poverty.

Jesus responds to the question by asking a question. First, he asks that a coin be given to him. He holds it up and says, "Whose picture is on the coin?"

"The emperor's," they answer.

"Then, give to the emperor that which belongs to him." If he had stopped there, his answer would have been simple enough. Just pay your taxes. But

he goes on to say, “Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God that which is God’s.” He amazes all the people with his answer. But there was more to it than that. Look again at Jesus’ question. Whose head (the Greek the word here, “eikon,” means image), whose image is this, and what is his title? Usually the Roman denarius had the head of the emperor with rays of light coming out of the head, as if the emperor were a heavenly being. Usually there was a legend inscribed, “divi filius,” for example, meaning “son of the deified one.” Then pay your tax, but give to God, that which belongs to God.

Here is the question that underlies all the other questions. In whose image are **you** made? Whose image do **you** bear? Remember Genesis? “So God created humankind in God’s own image. God created them, male and female, in God’s own image.”

Jesus was saying to all who would hear him, “You belong to God, not to Caesar. God’s image is engraved in you. It doesn’t matter whose image is engraved in the coin. You belong to God. Therefore your ultimate allegiance and loyalties must go to God.” He did not say to divide your life into two separate realms. You bear God’s image wherever you go, in your personal life, in your civic life, in your working life; everywhere and always, you

belong first and last to God and to God alone. “Render unto God” trumps “Render unto Caesar” every time.

We might wish there were less complicated Biblical principles to follow in the strange relationship between citizenship and discipleship, but there is one principle that the Bible is entirely unambiguous about, and it is this. Our love for God and our loyalty to Christ Jesus must take precedence over everything else, including loyalty to country or political party or economic system. None of those can be for us of ultimate value because we are imprinted forever with the image of God, and it is to God that our primary loyalty belongs.

I worry about the tendency on the part of many religious people in our time to make unquestioned associations between the policies of the government and the purposes of God. I agree with Methodist Bishop Will Willimon that “The best we can hope, in matters between Christians and the state, is to be permanently uneasy.” We should never automatically assume that God’s purposes and the purposes of any civil authority are all of a piece.

I think of Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, delivered in March of 1865, an address in which he offered neither North nor South what they were expecting. President Lincoln said, “Both [that is, both sides in the war] read the same Bible and pray to the same God; and each invokes His

aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us not judge that we be judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully, The Almighty has his own purposes."

Lincoln's words call to mind the words found in Isaiah. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord. Neither are my ways your ways."

It has always been the responsibility of the faith community, in whatever society it has found itself, to tell the truth about God to the nation and to be the intercessor before God for the nation. Rarely, in Biblical history is God seen sending emissaries to people in power with instructions to pat them on the back. God more often sends prophets to speak confrontive, corrective truths, both to the people in power and in a democracy, one could infer, to those who elect the people in power. (4)

Where are those in our day who are willing to bear God's image in everything they do, including in the public realm? Who is calling for the justice and the mercy and the righteousness of God?

The African nation of Liberia held an election last week. It was very moving to me to see people lined up in the dark of the night so that they could vote for the first time. People yearn for the human dignity that democracy

bestows. There were also reports of massive starvation in Africa. US aid is failing to reach people who are starving as a result of decisions by United States Congress. That's a religious matter. Christians have a responsibility to raise questions about that and to advocate for the least, the lost, and the left out, and we ought never to collapse citizenship and discipleship into one another as if they were always the same. We need to act in faith. We have the right to exercise our religion; we also have a responsibility as citizens to ensure that others in our country whose religion is different from ours have that right as well.

Commitment Season at Morningside is a wonderful time for us to get some clarity about what our commitments are and how deep they go. There are many conflicting claims in our lives. Jesus said, "Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and to God, the things that belong to God." Clearly, he expects us to decide where our ultimate loyalties lie.

"One of the main reasons we come to church is that we really want to ascertain the relative worth of the thing we hold dear. We're hoping for a moment in which the true worth of all things can come into focus." (5)

I close with a story Fred Craddock tells about a friend who was a missionary in China during the years of the oppressive Communist regime. The missionaries and his family were under house arrest for a long time and

then one day soldiers came to the door and said, “You can return to America now.” The family of the missionary celebrated. The soldier said, “You can take two hundred pounds of your belongings back to the States with you. They had been there for a number of years. It was going to be hard to choose what to take back home with them. They got a pair of scales and they began to argue with one another about whether mother’s vase was going to go or the husband’s typewriter. They argued and weighed and took things off the scales and put them back on. Finally, they got it right done to the dot, two hundred pounds. The soldier asked, “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes.”

“Did you weigh everything?”

“Yes.”

“Did you weigh the kids?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Well, weigh the kids.”

In a moment, the typewriter and the vase and all the things the family had thought were so valuable were in a heap in the corner. (6)

I can’t tell you what ought to be most important to you. Only you can decide. I can tell you what God said to Moses and instructed him to tell all the people, “You shall have no other gods before me,” the Holy One of

Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God alone do we worship and serve. Amen.

Notes:

(1) William H. Willimon, “Permanently Uneasy,” *Pulpit resource*, October, November, December, 2005.

(2) Text note, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*.

(3) This paragraph is taken from a chapter I wrote in *Preaching in and out of Season* entitled “Church and Nation,” Westminster/John Know Press, 1990.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Willimon.

(6) Ibid as quoted by Willimon from *Craddock Stories*, Chalice Press, 2001.