

The authorities meet Jesus * Luke 20:19-26

March 21, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Maybe I'm naive but it never occurred to me when this pandemic started that COVID-19 would spark a debate about the relationship between God and government. I guess it makes sense, that we would have this conversation, given that governments have restricted our ability to meet together in person for church, but I never thought, a year ago, that we'd be talking about church/state relationships in light of COVID-19.

But here we are. Churches have had to decide how far they're willing to go to abide by public health laws or ignore public health laws and some have decided that to be obedient to God, they need to disobey government. Frankly, I think that's a little extreme, but I admit, something's out of whack when hundreds of people can go in and out of the LCBO while going to church remains a restricted activity.

So this morning we're going to ask a pretty relevant question - what is the relationship between God and government? Can we honour government and worship God or are those two ends mutually exclusive?

That's a question that Jesus found himself facing at one point in his ministry; admittedly, the question was asked to try and trap Him (and what a politically loaded trap it was!) but it does give us a great opportunity to talk about the relationship between God and government. Let's turn together to Luke 20 and see how Jesus answered it. Luke 20, starting in verse 19. Luke 20, verse 19.

Now just before this passage, Jesus has ruffled the feathers of the religious elite. You know, that's putting it too gently. Jesus has essentially accused them of trying to overthrow God and they are NOT happy about it.

And so, verse 19 says:

19 The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

They wanted to get rid of Jesus, but they knew He was so beloved that they would have to discredit Him first. And so, verse 20...

20 Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.

21 So the spies questioned him: [They came up and they asked] "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. (They're really buttering Him up here, but then they drop the biggie).

22 Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

These people are just trying to catch Jesus in a trap.

See, at this point in history, the region that they're living in, Judea, is under Roman occupation. When Jesus was a little boy (around AD 6), the Roman army marched into town and set up shop. Rome was

now in charge. Which meant that Israel now had an emperor – a Caesar - and that did not go over well with a people whose defining idea was ‘no King but YHWH.’ⁱ They now had an emperor that they had to obey and they were not happy about it. And on top of that, they had to pay tribute to him and watch their hard earned money flow out of Israel into Rome. And this is the tax that these guys are asking Jesus about.

You can see then why this is such a politically loaded question.

If Jesus says ‘yes, you should pay the tax,’ then the Jewish authorities can accuse Him of collaborating with these Roman occupiers that everybody hates and then everybody will hate Him and lose interest.

If He says no, though, then the Jewish leaders can go straight to the Roman authorities and say ‘this guy Jesus won’t pay taxes. He’s stirring up rebellion. You’d better get rid of Him before things get out of hand.’

So Jesus is really caught in a hard place here. He can’t really say yes but He can’t really say no either and so decides to take another way.

Verse 23 - 23 He saw through their duplicity and said to them,
24 "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"

The guys fish around in their pockets and they pull out a coin – a denarius – that has the picture of the emperor on one side and a woman representing peace on the other.ⁱⁱ This one – in Jesus’ lifetime – probably has the emperor Tiberius on it with the words ‘Emperor Tiberius Son of the Divine Augustus’ on one side and his mom, Caesar Augustus’ wife, Livia, on the other. And so the answer is obvious – “Whose portrait and inscription are on it?”

Well, duh, 25 "Caesar's," they replied. He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

26 They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent (Luke 20:19-26 NIV).

I think this is one of those times when people came face to face with Jesus and had Him totally reorient their worldview.

If this is Caesar’s coin, then you should give it back to him. And it IS give it back – that’s literally what ‘render unto Caesar’ meant in the KJV – there are all sorts of benefits that came from living under Caesar. Nobody wants to live in an occupied state, but you have to admit that Rome brought better roads, better infrastructure, better water carrying technology, greater markets to sell to – in many ways, Israel was better off under Roman rule and the implication here is that anyone benefiting from the efforts of the state should ‘give back to them’ what they are owed.

Jesus here acknowledges that it is right for people to honour their governments. It is right to pay taxes and follow the laws of the land.

But that’s not all Jesus says, is it? Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s *and give back to God what is God’s*. Ok, what is God’s? The coin bore the image of Caesar; what bears God’s image today? We do. We bear the image of God. We belong to God. We enjoy the benefits of His divine rule – His provision,

His care, His deliverance. And so we give back to God our very lives. Caesar can have the material things; we give to God what's really valuable – our very selves.

This passage I think can be summed up in six words.

Honour government but live for God.

That's the take away from this I think. Honour government but live for God.

There is no inherent contradiction between honouring government and living for God. In fact, according to Romans 13, all authorities are put in place by God to govern diligently for the benefit of the people. Romans 13:1 –

1 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.

2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves...

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

God Himself has put government in place; we enjoy the benefits they bring like infrastructure and health care and public service and so it makes sense that we would give back to them, honouring them by paying our taxes, by keeping the law.

We are actually honouring God when we honour the governments He has established. There is no inherent contradiction between honouring God and honouring governments. Darrell Bock (one of the world's foremost scholars on Luke) writes: "...Government, even a pagan government, has the right to exist and be supported by all its citizens. Its existence is not an inherent violation of Christians' commitment to God."ⁱⁱⁱ

But what if those earthly rulers fail to care for the people, overstep or abuse their power, put their own interests before those of the population? I hate to break it to you – that's exactly what Rome was doing when Jesus said to pay them back. That's what Caesar was doing when Paul kept getting jailed and yet still wrote 'it is necessary to submit to the authorities...' We are bound to honour government –

Unless they are asking us to honour them before God. If they claim to be the supreme authority in your life and insist that you deny Jesus, then it's time to resist, because though we may *honour* government, we *live* for God. There is no higher authority in our lives.

He provides for us day by day. Life and health and strength. He sends sunshine and rain, whether we honour Him or not, and our world is held together by the power of His Word. He sent His Son to deliver us from sin so we could be restored to Him and He delights in us. Whether we believe in Him or not, we are all made in His image, we all have value because the image of God resides in each of us and so it makes sense that we would give back our lives for the benefit of His kingdom.

David Garland writes: "The unstated premise behind all that Jesus teaches is [that] our primary responsibility is to God... The whole earth and all that is in it is his (see Ps 24)... Since we are created in the image of God, we owe God our very selves."^{iv}

We honour government as authorities put in place by God, but our foremost allegiance is to God and so we live for Him. We render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and give back to God what belongs to Him. We honour government but live for God.

How do we apply this in practical terms?

Well, I think we starting by asking – who am I living for? Myself? My boss? My career? For God? In this passage, Jesus calls us to live for God – to build our lives around His grace and compassion. We give ourselves daily as living sacrifices; we spread joy and hope in the world; we live by God's law; we put Him first in every aspect of our lives – our families, our finances, our communities and hobbies.

And when it comes to our politics, we still put God first, which means that we honour the authorities that He has put in place. Whether we agree with them or not, they are established by God to seek the benefit of the people. And so we honour them by paying taxes and being good citizens.

Honour government, live for God.

I like visiting the website 'gotquestions.org' – they have all sorts of great answers to all sorts of great questions – and this is what they said when they answered the question "What did Jesus mean when He said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's"?"

They laid it all out and then concluded:

So give Caesar his due—the temporary stuff of this world—but make sure to give God His due: "Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness" (Romans 6:13).^v

ⁱ R. T. France, *Luke*, Teach the Text Commentary, p. 320.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribute_penny

ⁱⁱⁱ Darrell Bock, *Luke*, IVP NT Commentary, Luke 20:20-26.

^{iv} David Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT, p. 803.

^v <https://www.gotquestions.org/render-to-Caesar.html>