

Sermon for July 8, 2018 – Independence Day

Mark 12:17 (EHV)

Theme: For God and Country

*Then Jesus told them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."  
And they were amazed at him.*

Proper patriotism is a good thing. Improper patriotism, however, is downright dangerous. Let me explain what I mean. Serving and supporting our country and its government out of love for the LORD is good and God-pleasing. If, however, we place our love for our country ahead of our love for the LORD and his Word, then we become guilty of the sin of idolatry.

Yes, proper patriotism is a good thing. Improper patriotism is downright dangerous. With Jesus himself as our guide, let us consider exactly what a Christian's relationship to his country should be, under the theme: **For God and Country**

Part One

Our sermon text finds Jesus being asked a patriotic question of sorts by some Pharisees and Herodians. This was, in and of itself, very strange. How so? Because it would probably be easier to get Democrats and Republicans working together than these ancient political parties. The Pharisees were a religious party that was very patriotic to the idea of Israel being its own country with its own king. They hated the Roman occupation of Judah. They despised Herod's rule. The Herodians were just the opposite. They were a political party that was fiercely loyal to Herod and the Romans. They believed that Roman protection was good for Judea.

As you can see: it is very strange to see these two groups working together; but here they were, trying to trap Jesus.

Their question was simple: *"Is it lawful to pay a tax to Caesar or not?"* If Jesus answered: "Yes," the Pharisees would then broadcast Jesus' answer to the crowds who, by and large, hated Roman taxation and occupation. This would incite the people to turn on him - especially since they secretly hoped that he would restore Israel's independence and political dominance. And if Jesus answered "no" to their question, then the Herodians would surely inform Pilate and Jesus would be marked as an insurrectionist - as someone who is stirring up the people against Rome.

Jesus, however, masterfully answers their question. His answer not only protects him from the trap that was laid, but also summarizes for all time what a Christian's relationship with his government ought to be.

Jesus said: *“Bring me a denarius so that I can look at it.”*<sup>i</sup> The coin Jesus asked for was the coin the Jews commonly used for trade and commerce. *“So they brought one. He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” “Caesar’s,” they answered him.*<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus is in effect saying: "You hate Caesar (the Roman emperor), but look, you use his money. Through the protection, order, and governance he provides, you are able to trade and make commerce. This is not merely a question about tax. It is a question about government and authority."

*Then Jesus told them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”*<sup>iii</sup>

The Roman government had a right to expect taxes, respect and honor from the Jews. Why? Because God’s Word says: *Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God.*<sup>2</sup> *Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God’s institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves.*<sup>iv</sup>

Every government and authority that exists on this earth, has been established by God to accomplish his set purposes. This was true regarding the Romans in Jesus' day and it is true today regarding the current administrations occupying our local, state and federal offices in America. True: our government was elected by the people, but understand God directed the whole affair to get the government He wanted to rule over us.

And why does the LORD establish governments around the world? The book of Romans tells us: *he is God’s servant for your benefit . . . a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer.*<sup>v</sup> In other words the primary function of government is to protect us from those who would cause us harm and punish those who do wrong.

<sup>5</sup> *Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience.*<sup>6</sup> *For this reason you also pay taxes, because the authorities are God’s ministers, who are employed to do this very thing.*<sup>vi</sup>

Because the government has been established by God to govern, protect, punish wrong doing and promote what is good for the common welfare of all its citizens, the Bible commands: *Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed.*<sup>vii</sup> This is what Jesus meant, when he said: *Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.*

Consider what this means for us: even though our country was founded by a revolution against governmental tyranny, and our right to free speech allows us to speak spitefully against those in authority over us, this does not make these things right in the eyes of the LORD. God commands us to respect, honor and support the people he places over us regardless of who they are.

If we are honest with ourselves, I don't think there is a person here who has given the government the respect, honor and service God wants us to give. Sure, when we have leaders we love, it is easy to serve them. But what about the leaders we don't especially like? Do we respect, serve

and honor them as we ought, when they enact policies with which we don't agree? Sadly no. We grumble and complain, don't we? Worse yet, we are quick to assume the worst of our leaders, mock and disrespect them.

Do you realize that when ever we do this, we are in fact dishonoring the Lord, who gave our leaders the authority they possess? This is not to say that we can't disagree with our leaders or vote them out of office, but in all things Jesus wants us *to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, to be gentle, and to display every courtesy toward all people* - especially our leaders!<sup>viii</sup>

Yes, we are all guilty of dishonoring God by dishonoring those in authority over us, because of which we all stand under God's just condemnation.

But thankfully our Savior has been merciful to us. How merciful? So merciful that he willingly submitted to a government that was oppressive and abusive in order to suffer and die for our sins. Yes, look at Jesus giving to Caesar that which Caesar demanded - even when that demand was his life! Even though Jesus suffered unjustly, not even the slightest hint of rebellion or revolution could be found in him. He willingly submitted to death, in order to win the righteousness, life and salvation we so desperately need.

How much honor and respect does our government deserve? Look at Jesus before Pilate to see what God truly desires of us. More importantly see how he offered this perfect obedience in our place.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's: give to the government the respect, honor, service and financing it deserves. Let us also, then, give to God what is God's.

## Part Two

Someone might ask, is there a limit to the obedience God wants us to give to our earthly leaders? Yes, there is. And what is that limit? It is when the government asks us to do something that clearly goes against God's Word. If the government ever makes such a demand of us then, "*We must obey God rather than men!*"<sup>ix</sup>

There is a little interesting note regarding the Roman denarius Jesus asked to see. The inscription on the coin read: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." You see, Roman emperors claimed to be gods. A time would soon come when Christians would be forced to offer a coin to Caesar - not to pay a tax, but as an act of worship to him as god!

Faithful Christians refused to make such an offering. Why? Because they knew that if they offered a coin in worship to Caesar, they would be giving him the honor that is due Christ alone. These Christians gave to God what belonged to God - and many lost their possessions, limbs and even life because of it! But even when this happened, they did not rebel. They simply accepted whatever God ordained to happen to them. They reserved their worship for the LORD and for Him alone!

Give to God what is God's. Only the LORD deserves our total heartfelt thanks and praise. Only the LORD deserves our total trust and worship.

Now, we might be tempted to think: "This is not a problem for us in the States. We don't make "gods" out of our leaders. No one is holding a gun to our heads - demanding that we worship the president."

This may be true. But sometimes we act as if we worship our nation, placing the ideals this country was found upon - as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights – on par with the Gospel itself.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. The rights and freedoms the LORD has granted us in this country are wonderful. But here is the thing: even though the Declaration of Independence calls "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" inalienable rights endowed on everyman by the Creator; this is not actually true. Every one of these gifts are, in fact, not inalienable rights, but privileges given to those whom God chooses to give according to his undeserved grace. Our lives do not belong to us, but to the LORD. Our liberty is not something we can demand, but is given as a gift. We have no "right" to pursue happiness, but the privilege of enjoying God's blessings as we serve him in love. The Scriptures are crystal clear on these points. We don't deserve these blessings anymore than anyone else in the world, and yet God gave them to us according to his grace.

And yet we often are tempted to take these "rights" for granted. We are tempted to think that we are entitled to the freedoms we enjoy. People say things like: "I can do whatever I want with my body. I have the right to whatever makes me feel good. I am only responsible to myself." But is this true? The answer is "no". The LORD, in his wisdom, could take all our "rights" away from us at any moment he chooses – and be completely just and fair in doing so. Everything we have is an undeserved gift from him.

Let us then, brothers and sisters, not take all the freedoms and privileges we enjoy in our nation for granted. Let's treasure them - realizing that God gave them for a purpose. And what purpose might that be? To thank and glorify the LORD for His gracious love by making use of the opportunities with which our freedom provides us to share the Gospel with our countrymen.

Let us remember to not merely think about and thank the soldiers and service men who gave up so much to guard and protect us; let us also remember to give God the glory that is due to him. He is the one that protected us through their service. Without the LORD's hand graciously protecting our nation, we would have lost every war and our country would have faded into oblivion. But God has been merciful to us and protected us - all this out of sheer grace that we have neither earned nor deserved.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. To our government we owe respect, honor, revenue and service. To our God we owe worship, thanks and praise - not only for saving us from sin, but also for providing all that we need in life including a good government, so that we can live quiet and peaceful lives to the glory of Christ's name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 12:15 EHV

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 12:16 EHV

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- iii Mark 12:17 EHV
  - iv Romans 13:1-2 EHV
  - v Romans 13:4 EHV
  - vi Romans 13:5-6 EHV
  - vii Romans 13:7
  - viii Titus 3:2 EHV
  - ix Acts 5:29 EHV