

## Sermon for July 1, 2012 – Independence Day

Mark 12:17

### Theme: For God and Country

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

Patriotism can be something wonderful. Patriotism can be something dangerous. Patriotism is wonderful if we serve and support our country and its government out of love for God. Patriotism is dangerous if we place our love for our country above our love for God. It is dangerous when we use our patriotism as an excuse to mock, spite or even rebel against the government God has placed over us.

What exactly is the Christian's relationship to his country? This will be the topic of our sermon, as we consider Jesus' words 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. Now these were two groups you would not see working together too often. 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.

The question was simple: *"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?"* If Jesus answered: "Yes," the Pharisees would then broadcast Jesus' answer to the crowds who, by and large, hated Roman taxation and occupation. Jesus would be considered a friend of the Romans - and no friend of the Jews. And if Jesus answered "no", 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 this question. His answer not only protects him from the trap that was laid, but also summarizes for all time what a Christians relationship to government ought to be.

Jesus said: *"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."* (Mark 12:15) Jesus asked for the coin the Jews commonly used for trade and commerce. *"They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.* (Mark 12:16)

Jesus is in effect saying: "You hate Caesar (the roman emperor), but look, you use his money. He is providing you with currency. He is also doing much more. He is providing governance, protection, order, and enabling trade and commerce. This is not merely a question about tax. It is a question about government and authority."

*Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."* (Mark 12:17)

The Roman government had a right to expect taxes, respect and honor from the Jews. Why? A passage from the new Testament book of Romans tells us: *"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, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."* (Romans 13:1-2)

God has established all authority and every government. There is not a government on this earth that exists outside of God wanting it there for his set purpose. This was true regarding the Romans in Jesus' day and it is true today regarding

the current administrations occupying our state and federal offices in America. Sure, our government was elected by the people, but it was God who directed the whole affair to get the government He wanted to rule over us.

And why does the LORD establish government? Again, Romans tells us: "*He is God's servant to do you good.*" (Romans 13:4) What kind of good? "*He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*" (Romans 13:4) In other words the primary function of the government is to protect us from those who would cause us harm and punish those who do wrong.

*"Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing."* (Romans 13:5-6)

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 - and because God commands and desires that we serve and obey the government he places over us, Jesus tells the Pharisees, Herodians and all of us to give to Caesar what is Caesars.

And this idea of giving the government what belongs to it is not restricted to taxes. The LORD says in Romans: "*Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*" (Romans 13:7)

And here is a sad truth: Even though our bill of rights defends speech that makes fun of the government, and even though our country was founded on a revolution against governmental tyranny . . . this does not make any of this acceptable behavior in the eyes of God who commands us to see every authority as one he established, and therefore we should be willing to serve, honor and obey it.

I know that this is a hard pill to swallow on the 4th of July, the day we celebrate the declaration of our independence and the revolution that followed, but this nevertheless remains true. God commands us to respect, honor and support the authority he places over us regardless of who they are.

If we are all honest with ourselves I don't think there is a person among us 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? What about those who policies we disagree with? Do we honor and serve them as we ought? Sadly no. We are all guilty of dishonoring those in authority, and when we dishonor them, we dishonor God. Lord have mercy on us sinners.

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! Unjustly Jesus suffered, and yet there was no hint of rebellion or revolution in him. He submits willingly, thereby winning our righteousness and salvation.

How much honor and respect does our government deserve? Is there any point where we can rebel? Look at Jesus before Pilate for that answer and see what God desires of us and how Jesus offered such obedience in our stead.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's - give to the government the respect, honor, service and finances it deserves - and give to God what is God's.

## Part Two

Is there a point up to which we ought to serve and obey the government? Yes there is. And what is that point? It is when the government asks us to do something that God forbids in his word. If the government makes such a demand of us then "*We must obey God rather than men!*" (Acts 5:29)

There is a little interesting note concerning the coin Jesus had in his hand. The inscription on the coin read: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." You see, Roman emperors claimed to be gods and demanded to be worshiped as such in later times. Not too long after Jesus' death and resurrection there would come a time when

Christians would be asked to offer a coin to Caesar - not to pay a tax, but as an act of worship; as an acknowledgement that they considered Caesar as their 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 in persecution 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 LORD alone!

Give to God what is God's. Only God 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 here: no one is holding a gun to my head and saying, 'Worship the president.' This doesn't apply to today. We don't make "god's" out of our leaders.

This may be true. But we sometimes act as if the rights our government is elected to protect are on par with the Gospel itself! What do I mean? Let me try to explain.

The rights and freedoms the LORD has granted our country are unique and wonderful. But here is the thing: even though the declaration of independence calls "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" unalienable rights endowed on everyman by the Creator; this is not necessarily the case. There are plenty of examples in Scripture where God wills that a certain people lose its liberty and right to pursue of happiness. Even "life" itself is not a "right" that we have, but a privilege from God - a blessing to be treasured because of his grace.

And I guess this is where the rubber hits the road. All the rights and liberties we have are from God's hand. In truth, they aren't really "rights" but privileges that God grants us according to his undeserved grace. 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. But are we really entitled to them in the eyes of God? Do we have any right to the freedoms we enjoy? The true answer "no". The LORD, in his wisdom, could take them all away from us at any time if he chose to do so.

Let us then, brothers and sisters, not take these blessings for granted, but treasure them - realizing that they were given for a purpose. And what purpose might that be? That we thank and praise God for the gracious love he bestowed on our country and that we make use of the opportunities the freedom God has granted provides us to share the Gospel with our countrymen.

Let us remember not merely to thank and think about the soldiers and service men who gave up so much to guard and protect us, but let us give to 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 country, 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.