

**Living In The Crucible:  
GIVING WHAT BELONGS  
TO CAESAR**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

*What belongs to the government,  
and what belongs to God?*

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Did you ever notice how politicians are not very good at answering questions? This week, the Senate has held confirmation hearings for Judge Amy Coney Barrett, who is not exactly a politician, but it was a political setting. She was asked many questions about specific issues and cases—abortion, Affordable Care Act, immigration, etc.—which she refused to answer. That is understandable—she doesn't want to take a position on something she might have to rule on without seeing the specific case or hearing all the evidence.

In the so-called debates between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, the moderator would pose a question to one or both candidates. Almost immediately, or within one or two sentences, the candidate would pivot to a talking point that he or she wanted to get out there, regardless of the question. It was all very interesting, but not very enlightening. Politicians don't seem to be very good at answering questions.

Jesus was no politician, but he knew how to dodge a dangerous question, too. He could spot a trap a mile away. In Matthew 22, Jesus is teaching in the Temple during the last week of his life. The Pharisees challenge his authority, and he tells three parables, one of which we discussed last week. Then they make three direct challenges, trying to trick Jesus into making a statement that would run him afoul of either the Jewish or Roman authorities. The first one had to do with paying taxes to Rome. The Roman oppression of the Jews was brutal physically, but also financially. They hired Jewish collaborators—publicans or tax collectors—to get as much as they could out of the mostly poor subject people.

The group that came to Jesus consisted of Pharisees, who were Jews zealous for the Law, but appeasers of the Romans, and Herodians, who were probably pro-Roman in attitude. They asked him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Literally, does the Law of Moses allow us to pay taxes to a pagan emperor who is considered a god by his people? Wouldn't that amount to idolatry? Now they had him. If Jesus said yes, he would lose face with his constituents, because everybody hated the Romans and their taxes. But if he said no, he would be arrested for opposing the Roman government.

Jesus could easily see right through his antagonists. He said, “Show me a coin used to pay the tax.” Quickly they produced a *denarius*. The fact that these Pharisees had pagan coins in the Temple was a sign of their hypocrisy. But Jesus answered their question with a question, “*Whose head is this, and whose title?*”<sup>1</sup> The *denarius* had Caesar’s head on one side and his title *Pontifex Maximus*, the high priest of the Roman religion, a god in human form, on the other side. Whose name and title was on the coin? The emperor’s.

“*Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,*” and I can imagine Jesus pausing for effect, “*and give to God the things that are God’s.*”<sup>2</sup> Boom! Drop the mic, Jesus. The hostile questioners dropped their jaws in amazement, then turned and walked away.

Not only did Jesus avoid a politically damaging answer; he also took the question to a deep level of faith. The question remains important for us today, especially in this politically charged season. What belongs to the government, and what belongs to God? Let’s look at that question today.

What belongs to the government? What do we owe the political authorities in our time? How are we called to be good citizens of this or any country?

Our first responsibility would be to obey the laws of the land. Yes, we should pay our taxes, even if we don’t like them. Drive the speed limit (or near it). Don’t commit violence against other people. The New Testament, all written in the Roman era, counsels Christians to submit to the authority of the government. Paul says in Romans that authority was given by God and whoever resists the government resists God.<sup>3</sup> I Peter says, “*For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ...Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*”<sup>4</sup> Does that surprise you? For Christians, the foundational principle is obedience to the authority of law.

But because government is a human institution, it is not always right, and it is never complete. So the second thing we owe the government is to engage the process. Be involved, especially if you have the privilege of

democracy. For us right now, that means to exercise the right and the privilege to vote.

Last week I introduced Peter Storey, the South African Methodist preacher. His book, *With God in the Crucible*, gave me the idea for this sermon series. He engaged the political process in South Africa to help rid that country of the oppressive racist system of *apartheid*. In a land where only 10% of the people—the white 10%—were allowed to vote, some advocated boycotting the elections to show how senseless they were. But Storey encouraged every white person to vote, knowing that they also voted for many, many fellow South Africans who were disenfranchised.

For inspiration, Storey looked to our founder John Wesley, who lived in a time when only the wealthy males in England had a vote. Wesley said, “Each man must vote as if the whole moral outcome of the election depended on his one vote.”<sup>5</sup> That’s still a good principle today.

But even deeper than Wesley, Storey’s engagement was based on his theology. He believed, as we believe, that God is everywhere and involved in the entire world and in all of our lives. Therefore, God cares how we engage in government. Storey says, “If Christ is Lord, nothing may operate outside of his reach. If I believe my Christian faith has nothing to say about my politics, I am saying God ought not to be God—and that is a nonsense. So if I have a vote, and I am a Christian, I am responsible to God for how I exercise that vote, in the same way that I am responsible to God for every other decision I make.”<sup>6</sup>

It’s like the yard signs that I have seen popping up all over town lately that say, “Your vote matters to God. Pray, then vote!” Let me just say, Amen. Obey the law. Engage the process.

And advocate for justice. That’s the third thing we owe the government, although the motivation for justice comes from our theology, too. The God of the Bible is on the side of justice for all people. God is an advocate for the poor, the oppressed, the stranger in the land, the widow, and the orphan. The dispossessed, indisposed people on the margins of society are God’s special favorites. Being on God’s side means we share that concern.

Sometimes advocacy for justice may lead us to confront the systems of power that are unjust. Obedience to the law may be broken by loyalty to a

higher principle. Non-violent protest and civil disobedience can be tools of faith and justice. I don't believe God calls us to hurt people or destroy property, but I know Christians of courage who have risked their lives and lost their lives for the cause of justice.

Storey preached this: "If we are the body of Christ, are we not called to intervene as God did in Christ? ...Are we not required to do so in our nation and in our community? In every place where individual and corporate sin divides, oppresses, blinds and destroys people whom God longs to set free? If we, as the body of Christ, fail to do so, Christ has failed and this world will continue to be trapped, bound, and unaware that its Liberator has come."<sup>7</sup>

Obedience to the law, engagement in the process, advocacy for justice—that's what belongs to the government. What belongs to God?

We owe God our ultimate authority. The authority of government is limited. Only God is God. The image stamped on the coin they showed to Jesus was an image of the emperor, Tiberius at the time. But the image stamped on our souls is the image of God; we were created in God's image. So the coin belongs to the emperor, but we belong to God. Our ultimate loyalty is with our Creator.

There's a great example early in the life of the church. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter and John were arrested in the Temple for healing a man and telling the good news about Jesus and his resurrection. They were made to appear before the same Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus. They were asked by what authority they were doing these things, which gave them the opportunity to testify to the Council. They ended with the words, "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*"<sup>8</sup>

The Council conferred and then ordered Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus any more. To which they replied, "*Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.*"<sup>9</sup> Our ultimate authority belongs only to God.

Our American coins since the Civil War have used the motto, "In God We Trust."<sup>10</sup> That's the second thing that belongs, not to our country, but

to God. Our trust, our faith, and our hope are in God and not the human institution of government. The Psalmist sang it long ago, “*Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.*”<sup>11</sup> Like Peter and John said before the Council, “There is salvation in no one else.”

If you put your faith in democracy, if you trust that one day government will get it right, if you hope that all poverty, injustice, sickness, and sadness will one day be eliminated by the proper application of government programs, you will be sorely disappointed. Ain’t gonna happen. Our faith is greater than any government; our hope is higher than any human enterprise. When we die, our plans do not perish, because our plan is to spend eternity in heaven with Jesus, living in the glory of God beyond all human suffering. Even Social Security cannot beat that retirement plan! Our faith, our trust, and our hope belong to God.

And finally, what belongs to our God is our worship. Sometimes a political rally will sort of look like a worship service with a human focal point. Sometimes religious people will refer to human rulers as God’s anointed or the chosen one. But any other kind of worship is idolatry. We worship God and God alone.

The coin they showed to Jesus had the title for the emperor, “*Pontifex Maximus.*” It literally means “The Great Bridge-builder.” The “PM” was thought to be the bridge between the gods and human beings. The title was given to all the Roman emperors, and they were worshipped as divine. After the Roman Empire became Christian, the title was given to the Pope. But there is no leader of government or church who is worthy of our worship.

When Jesus was in the desert after his baptism, Satan offered to make Jesus the supreme political ruler of the earth: “*The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’*” But Jesus replied, “*It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’*”<sup>12</sup>

This is our birthright; this is our identity; this will be our joy for all eternity—to worship our God! This is what it will look like, from the Book of Revelation: *“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; ... singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshiped.”*<sup>13</sup>

Peter Storey, because of his leadership in South Africa, was invited to serve as a delegate to the World Council of Churches, a gathering of Christians from many denominations all over the world. In 1981, for the first time, the World Council was meeting in Dresden, East Germany, in a Communist country, a land that had officially suppressed Christianity for 35 years. The busloads of delegates entered East Germany through the famous “Checkpoint Charlie” in Berlin and travelled under guard to Dresden, a city that was virtually destroyed by Allied bombs during World War II. They came out of the buses in front of the *Kreuzkirche*, the Church of the Cross, which had been recently restored. They noticed that crowds of people were being held back by armed police. After the delegates filed into the church, they heard the sound of hundreds of silent, shuffling feet. In a surprising move, the officially atheistic government was allowing the people to observe worship from the balconies—two levels high—above the floor of the church.

When the service began, the organ thundered out Martin Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” As the delegates stood to sing, they felt something like raindrops falling on them. They looked up, and there were hundreds of hands reaching over the balconies, each waving a white handkerchief. The people were smiling and weeping at the same time, and their tears were falling on the church leaders from around the world. After 35 hard years, it was their welcome to worship.<sup>14</sup>

No government can do that; and no government can stop that.

Here's what belongs to the government: obedience to the law, engagement in the process, advocacy for justice. Here's what you owe to God: Give God the ultimate authority. Trust in God for your salvation. Worship the One whose image you bear. This is your gift, to receive and to give.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:20.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:21.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 13:1-7.

<sup>4</sup> I Peter 2: 13-14, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Storey, *God In The Crucible: Preaching Costly Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 104.

<sup>6</sup> Storey, 105.

<sup>7</sup> Storey, 99.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 4:12.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 4:19-20.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 146:3-5.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 4:8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Revelation 5:11-14.

<sup>14</sup> Storey, 75f.