

## Christ Culture: Government...Thank God for It!

A sermon based on Matthew 22:15-22.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, we're going to venture into probably the most radioactive topic in our culture today...politics...more specifically, our government. I'll admit, this is one of these Christ culture topics that I really had to psyche myself up for because I know how opinionated most are when it comes to our leaders and the work they've done...and how we have a big election coming up in few months...which makes it probably the best time to explore – or maybe to be reminded about – what God has to say on the issue of, again, government.

So I want to start off this morning with a couple of questions for you to take a few seconds to ponder right now...if Jesus were alive today, would he be a Democrat or Republican? Would he have voted for Clinton or Trump in the last presidential election? Would he have gone Libertarian? What do you think?

I bet, if I did a poll of all of you here today, the results would probably be heavily skewed towards Jesus being a Republican for Trump. You wouldn't be alone. Politico Magazine stated 81% of white evangelical Christians voted for him. Why do you think that would be? Well, the GOP, for as long as I can remember, has been a party focused on preserving marriage as being between a man and a woman. You know their attitude towards abortion. Those are two huge social issues for Christians today.

But critics on the other side would say, "What about the other actual teachings of Jesus, like helping the poor, caring for the sick, loving one's enemies?" Don't those seem to be more in line with a liberal agenda?

Friends, should we even be trying to box Jesus in on one side of the political divide? Do you know that's what Jesus' enemies were trying to do with him?

If you look back at our gospel, you see Jesus was approached by 2 groups of people...remember who they were? Disciples of the Pharisees (so Pharisees) and the Herodians. Two groups with opposing political affiliations. The Pharisees were ardent nationalists, opposed to Roman rule, while the Herodians, as their name indicates, supported the Roman rule of the Herods.

And while their peaceful interactions were about as common as the Left reaching across the aisle to the Right or vice versa, this day, they were joined in one thing, though...their hatred of Jesus. They feared he was the political Messiah so many thought and hoped he was, and so their burning desire was to see him go.

And so it was all a clever trap. ***"Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men."*** Can you see it? Them, trying to catch Jesus off guard with flattery, speaking of Jesus as being truthful, when they had no desire to be truthful in their dealing with him.

And then, the trap, ***"What is your opinion (you know how dangerous that question is)? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"***

It was foolproof, right? Basically, "Jesus, are you pro or anti-Caesar?" If Jesus said, "No, don't pay taxes" the Herodians would report him to the Roman governor. He would be executed for treason. If he said, "Yes," the Pharisees would denounce him to the people as disloyal to his nation. Either way, Jesus would be ruined.

Except he knew their evil intent. And, so, Jesus' simple answer? ***"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."***

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Do you know what does he mean by that? Obviously, at surface level, Jesus was answering their question...telling them to be dutiful citizens of the Roman Empire and to pay their taxes.

On a deeper level, he was getting to a more important lesson, one we need to hear today...one, the Apostle Paul went into a bit more detail on in our Second Lesson. Hear his words again, ***“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, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”***

What does God say here? How does he define the government? To steal Paul’s phrasing...“Authority...established by God. The one in authority is God’s servant.” In other words, government leaders are God’s representatives. They represent God.

And so, in view of that, God gives us the command to “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” He gives us the command to submit. No Christian is excluded from the command to submit to the governing authorities. That command demands an ongoing, unfaltering obedience. Submission or subordination to authorities means obedience to authorities...to all of our government’s laws and representatives, from the greatest to the least, from the local crossing guard to the president sitting in the Oval Office. Why? Because there’s no law and no ruler who hasn’t been established – put in their place – by God himself!

Take a moment to let that sink in. I know what you might be thinking. “But that president or our governor...Congress...some of our local officials...Pastor, you know how corrupt or how immoral or how unfit or lazy or how dumb such and such a leader is, right. Why should I submit to such immoral? Why should I obey their policies? Why should I respect and honor them with my words and my actions?”

Answer this for me...who was in charge when Jesus was alive? Caesar...more specifically, Tiberius Caesar. You know what kind of person Tiberius Caesar was? When the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus their “deceptive” question, remember what Jesus had them do? He had them check out one of their coins. And of course, they saw Caesar’s picture on there.

But what you might not know is that there was also an inscription there, which, in Latin, would have said, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” Do you understand the claim? The man in charge in Jesus’ day asserted himself to be God.

Or, how about Paul...who was leader of the Roman Empire then? Someone by the name of Nero...ever heard of him? One of the most ruthless of all rulers of all time. He violently persecuted Christians, to the point of throwing them in the Colosseum and then siccing wild beasts on them to tear them to shreds.

Notice a trend? Did you notice how Paul didn’t attach an “insofar as”? Our culture does. “Insofar as this leader makes choices that are popular with you, obey.” “Insofar as this ruler doesn’t make stupid, boneheaded decisions, leading our country to its inevitable demise, respect.” “Insofar as this government official aligns himself/herself with your political party, submit.” “And if not, gloves are off, complain, name-call, sling mud, refuse to obey.” Neither Paul nor Jesus went that route because, again, these are God’s servants...his representatives...authorities established by God.

And to give anything less than respect and honor and submission and obedience to these governing authorities is rebellion. Even if the existing authorities are evil, rebellion against them is a rebellion against God. Paul emphasizes

that point by repeating three times in two verses (see for yourself) the fact that God established the existing authorities.

And to lead a rebellion against God is to bring down upon oneself God's judgment. Is there room for any misunderstanding? God establishes the existing powers. Christians are to obey and respect the existing powers. And we don't...not always.

Friends, I know that's hard to hear. I know some of you are maybe sitting there, still skeptical because you know, as well as I do, how none of our leaders are perfect. None of the governing authorities are always and completely moral, making God-pleasing decisions.

But remember this...no matter who is president...no matter who is governor...no matter who is our leader...Jesus is still King. Always has been. Always will be.

Remember how the Pharisees here buttered Jesus up by calling him a ***“man of integrity...you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth”***? That was only a few days before they, showing no integrity, turned Jesus' words around, when before Pilate, they made the claim, ***“We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar.*** They may have been lying with that, but their next statement was complete truth, ***“And [he] claims to be Christ, a king.”***

Do you understand the implications? Jesus isn't just “a king.” He's the King. All other authorities bend their knee to him. All other rulers answer to him.

And here's why. He's God. Even more, because he's been the most moral, upright, loving, kind, faithful King that has ever been. See his reaction on Good Friday as his enemies were slinging his name through the mud. Pilate followed up with, ***“Are you the king of the Jews?”*** And Jesus answered faithfully, ***“Yes, it is as you say.”***

And here's what the king of the Jews and the King over all did. He went to fight our greatest battle against sin, against the devil, against death itself...and through his perfect, sinless life, through his substitutionary death, through his glorious and triumphant resurrection, he defeated them all. He rescued us from hell. He won us a place in his eternal kingdom with him.

And you know what? Every other ruler – past, present, future – won't be able to hold even so much as a candle to Jesus, our King.

Yet he's still put those leaders in positions of authorities in our lives...as his servants. And so, in obedience to the King, how will you and I act towards our leaders today? How does Christ culture show itself in the realm of politics?

First, let's talk political preferences. I thought an online article put it well, ***“Jesus is not a Republican. He's not a Democrat either. And we need to stop approaching political discourse as if there was a party for God and a party against Him. It's gotten us in a lot of trouble, and it has warped and twisted the very nature of God along the way.”***

God's on the side of truth. Jesus cared about people. Even his miraculous and gracious acts of power were meant to point to him and his true purpose...to save souls.

And as Christians, our political beliefs shouldn't have to be bundled and pre-packaged into two neat categories color coded red or blue. We instead think hard about each issue individually in light of God's Word, understand most politicians won't completely align, and vote for who we think will best represent God.

And then don't expect them to be defenders of everything that is right and moral...that they be model Christians for you and me. Understand their purpose. Romans 13 says they ***“bear the sword...they are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrong-doer.”***

In Catechism, we talk about how the government is God's representatives, placed here to take care of our physical needs...yes, our protection (or punishment when we do wrong), but also to make and enforce laws that enable us to survive and provide for ourselves, our families, and our physical needs.

Our government leaders may not be the shining examples of morality. But do we need them to be? Do I need to look to President Trump to know how to lead a God-pleasing life? That's not his purpose. And plus, we already have the shining Star – Jesus. Look to him. Follow his example.

So, since they're God's servants, here to care for our physical needs, what do we do? Simply...**"Give to God what is God's."** Obedience to God means giving his representatives what he commands us to.

And for our leaders, 1) we owe them honor, and respect. "But they haven't earned it," you might think. You know, we live in an age when there is considerable fear and distrust of government. Some of that, to be sure, is traceable to the fact God's representatives are weak and sinful human beings who at times may not represent God properly.

But they represent God, nonetheless. God has put them in their position. And so, as an extension of the arm of God, we honor and respect them.

2) We obey them. You see, when we submit ourselves to those in authority, we are not bowing to men but kneeling before our Savior God. We are recognizing his protecting love and thanking him for his unfailing mercy.

Now, of course, there's the whole "if they're commanding you to do something that goes against God's will, like, "you have to abort any baby that will be born with physical disabilities," that are our "we must obey God rather than men" situations, where we would say no and disobey.

But what if I don't like them or their policies? Remember, just because I may not like a certain leader's policy doesn't mean it's sinful. It doesn't give me the right to sin against the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment and drag their reputation through the mud.

So, then what voice do I have to share my displeasure? You have your representatives, at all levels of government. Just as importantly, you have your vote...to choose someone you think can better provide for your physical needs.

3) Pray for leaders...even for leaders of foreign countries. I know it might sound strange. I've had members come up to me after worship before and wonder why I'm praying for our leaders when they aren't completely moral, when they may not care for this particular government official. My response? "Shouldn't that make you want to pray for them more...that God makes them the kind of leader who does reflect him? That God will make them leaders who will work towards more peace throughout our world so we can continue to have our physical needs cared for and be able to freely live for Jesus and proclaim Jesus? Pray for them.

Finally, 4) Thank God for them. Thank God for the government.

Whether our rulers are legislating or judging, they are acting in God's stead. They are God's public servants. If they rule steadfastly, as God intends, then they provide us Christians with a society in which we can safely do our own God-given work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we have that here. We are allowed to live our Christian lives largely without harassment and to proclaim our faith without hindrance. These are priceless blessings – ones for which we need to credit God's representatives and for which we daily ought to thank our gracious God.

Our culture is critical and often derogatory of our government and its leaders today. But we don't need to be because Christ culture is thankful. Christ our King, in his gracious love, cares about us. Christ our King, in his infinite wisdom, has provided servants to take care of us. And we have that. And so we thank God...for the government...as we honor, respect, obey them...as we pray and thank God for our leaders. Amen.