

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "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, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

²¹ "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22)

What Do We Christians Owe Caesar?

For the last couple of weeks, I've been teasing my youngest son about him owing me favors. Every time he asks me to drive him somewhere, I try to evoke the scene from *The Godfather* and tell him he owes me a favor. "Someday – and that day may never come – I'll ask you to do a service for me." His response has been to say that as a parent I have unlimited favors, so what's the big deal? Of course, he's right. Parents don't have to earn favors from their children. There's no ledger counting whether or not we get to ask them to load the dishwasher or mow the lawn. They owe us those things. In the years that I've been a pastor, I've seen many grown children, sometimes with children and even grandchildren of their own, spend enormous amounts of time and effort taking care of elderly parents. Certainly, they do that because they love those parents. But they also usually feel that they owe their mom or dad for all the years of care and love and support that they received from those parents. I think that's a biblically sound way to look at it.

But in my mind, it raises a question of what we owe and to whom. Most of us could make lists of favors that people have done for us and opportunities that they've given us. We might feel some level of obligation for those things. But do we only owe those people who have done something for us? Of course not. Sometimes, we owe people just because of who they are and who we are. Even if a parent has not done a great job of parenting, God's Word still places an obligation on that person's children to honor them. God places an obligation on us to love those who hate us and to help those who can't help us. We owe those things to those people because we owe those things to God.

This weekend, we're celebrating the 4th of July and our country's 241st birthday. Alongside all the picnics and barbeques, most of us will experience a surge of patriotism. When you drive away from the church, you'll see an American flag hanging from the parsonage. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus makes a famous statement about our obligations to our country. He said, "**Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.**" So this morning, we want to ask ourselves, **what do we Christians owe Caesar?**

Jesus made this statement in response to a trap that his enemies had laid for him. This was during Holy Week, and as Jesus' final confrontation with the sin and death and hell drew closer, his enemies lined up to for their final confrontations with him. The Pharisees and the Herodians, the supporters of the family of King Herod, joined forces to attack Jesus. All the different Jewish political and religious parties were jealous of Jesus because the people hung on his every word. They wanted to get him to say something they could use against him. So they asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Now, they sugarcoated the question with complimentary words about how Jesus taught the truth and didn't care about people. But that didn't change what they were doing, and Jesus knew it.

Why was it such a difficult question? They were asking a religious question. "Is it lawful" didn't mean, "Does the government require us to do this?" Everybody knew the Roman government did. They were asking about the law of Moses. In other words, is it sinful for us to pay taxes to these gentile overlords, these uncircumcised conquerors that we all want to kick out of here? They assumed that the Messiah was going to be a political Savior, so there's no way he would tell them to pay the taxes. So if Jesus really wanted to claim to be the Messiah, he had to say no. Then they could report him to the Roman authorities and he'd be arrested for

interfering with the tax collection. But if he said, “Yes, pay the taxes,” they would say he was a Roman stooge and not the true Messiah. They figured they would win either way.

But Jesus asked them to show him the coin they used to pay the tax. He asked them whose image was on it. Here in America, we only put dead presidents’ pictures on our money. But in a monarchy, you put the current ruler’s picture on your coins to show who’s really in charge. Caesar’s picture was on the coin. Then Jesus gave his famous answer. He wouldn’t let them pit God against the state. They owed something to both. He called on them to fulfill both obligations, to be faithful Jews who lived under the covenant and to be good citizens who paid their taxes.

Jesus’ answer sums up what it means to be a Christian living under a secular government. Sometimes, we Lutherans call it “the doctrine of the two kingdoms.” What does that mean? We are citizens of two different countries at the same time. Two of my children have dual citizenship. Because they were born in Colombia, they can claim Colombian citizenship, and, in fact, one of them has a Colombian passport. But because my wife and I are Americans, they were also born as American citizens. Every Christian has dual citizenship. We’re citizens of whatever country claims us here on earth. For all of us here today, that means we’re Americans. But when we came to faith, we also became citizens of heaven. So we have two kings, Jesus and whatever civil government rules us here. Of course, in America, that second king isn’t really a king at all, but you get the point.

We all know what we owe God, right? We owe him a life that confesses Jesus by the way we treat other people and by the way we honor him. Jesus told us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He told us to preach the good news to all people. That’s what we owe God. But what about the government? That’s what Jesus meant by Caesar, the emperor. What do we owe the government? Some Christians have taught that we don’t owe the government anything. Clearly, that’s not what Jesus said. St. Paul expands on Jesus’ words in our epistle lesson for today. He tells that we owe our government obedience and respect. He says, **“The authorities that exist have been ordained by God.”**

Government didn’t just happen. God himself created government when he made the head of the first family. And he controlled history so that today, we live in this free country where we can think that the president is a hero or a dope. And no one can throw us in jail for either opinion. But God does tell us to honor and respect and obey the government, even if we don’t like it. That’s what we owe Caesar. Now, most of us think of ourselves as law abiding citizens. But what about traffic laws? Do we obey those as if they were given by God’s representatives? What about tax laws? Do we pay every cent that we owe because God’s servants have commanded it? Or do we do deals “under the table” to avoid paying taxes? Do you pay the sales tax on internet purchases? In Michigan, you’re supposed to add that to your state taxes. Do you?

In another letter, St. Paul commands us to pray for all those in authority so that we might lead decent and quiet lives. God gave government to keep society safe and orderly. Many Bible passages speak of the government’s job of providing justice to the oppressed. So Paul calls us to pray for men and women who might not be Christians, who might even lead sinful lives because they are in positions of authority. Certainly, that prayer includes keeping them safe and healthy. But Paul’s point was praying that they do their jobs well, so that our society is safe and quiet and just. Do we do that? Do we ask God to give them wisdom and honesty and courage in a dangerous and difficult world? Do we ask God to give them faith so that after serving him here they might live with him forever?

Our governmental system allows for legal opposition to the rulers. So it’s not sinful to vote someone out of power. Hopefully, we exercise that right in way that shows that we understand that part of what we owe Caesar, we owe to our society at large. God wants us to be productive citizens who work for the good of those around us. So serving in the military or the police is God pleasing, when we do it in a Christian manner. Teaching our children to love their country does generally fit within that description – as long as we know the limits. God wants us to be honest. So pretending like our sinful society has never done anything wrong is not God pleasing. Likewise, joining in sin because the government tells us to, is still sin. What do I mean? Well, the day could come when our government labels some of our teachings as hate speech. But it would be a sin to allow them to shut us up. The day could come when our government tells us that this church is a place of public accommodation, so we can’t forbid a gay couple from being married here. They might even insist that we have to provide organists or a minister. It would be a sin to obey the government on that day.

Finally, we Americans are only about 5% of the total population of the world. It would be sinful for us to engage in a war of conquest against weaker countries. And the 95% of the world's population that isn't American owes their governments the same loyalty that we owe ours. They owe their societies the same commitment that we owe ours. While "America First" might be a viable policy, it isn't really a Christian virtue.

And Christian virtues are what we're really talking about, right? We give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's because we want to live Christian lives and Jesus himself tells us to do that. We cannot give God all that is God's unless we live like Christians and that includes being good citizens. So what kind of citizens are we? Do we obey all the laws of our country, not just the easy ones or the ones we like? Do we honor politicians from the other party when they get elected? Or do we constantly slander and attack them? Do we pay our taxes, even when we think a different approach would be better? Do we pray for our leaders, no matter what party they come from? Do we ask God to guide them and to bless our country? Do we stand up to sin in our society, no matter how unpopular that makes us?

I don't know about you, but I have trouble with all those things. I'm a sinner. So are you, so I'm guessing you struggle with some or all of those things, too. Part of being a sinner is hating having other people tell us what to do. Part of being a sinner is resenting giving our hard earned money in taxes. Part of being a sinner is avoiding responsibility. If we're honest, we're all guilty of that kind of sin. So we're all guilty of disrespecting the representatives that God himself gave us. We don't give to God what is God's because we don't always give to Caesar what is Caesar's. For that, we deserve God's punishment in hell forever.

But even here, Jesus has saved us. No matter how much his people wanted him to drive the Romans out, Jesus didn't raise a mob or conspire against authority or even speak against the powers that God had put in command. Jesus perfectly obeyed the Roman and the Jewish authorities even when he testified to their sin. Jesus never joined his society or his rulers in sin. Jesus took our place in being good citizens. And he died for all the times we've been unchristian citizens, for all the times we disrespected God by disrespecting his representatives, for all the times we selfishly put our country ahead of all others and refused to hear truths that we don't want to know. Jesus died and paid for all the sin in our hearts and in our lives. Then he rose to tell us we are free. We are forgiven. We are perfect in God's sight.

That Christ-given perfection is what drives us to be good Christians – and that does include being good citizens. God has given us eternal life. Let's pray for the rulers of this life, and be a force for good here. God has taken away all our sin. Let's work for justice here, even when it's unpopular. God has made us citizens of heaven. Let's honor and respect his representatives here, even while we work within the system he has given us for the things we believe are best for our society. God has freed us from all that is wrong with this world. One day soon, we will stand in a perfect world and live there in joy forever. Until that day comes, let's show this world what it means to be citizens of heaven by leading good and productive lives as citizens of the United States. May God give us the strength and the wisdom and the courage to do that. Amen.