

Rendering To God and Caesar

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Ancient Witness: Matthew 22:15-22

It's been quite a week. I had to throw out a sermon I had written and start over. After the inauguration of President Trump, we've seen what many view as the beginning of an assault upon our democratic institutions and the rule of law. The President pardoned all of those who violently stormed the Capitol Building four years ago, trying to prevent the peaceful transfer of power while attacking police and trying to harm members of congress.

The targeting of immigrants has begun, with extorting states to cooperate in rounding up immigrants by threatening to cut off federal funding, even though using state law enforcement and state resources is not an action that they are not legally required to do. There are efforts to make disaster relief to California conditional in the midst of the loss of property and life in the terrible fires. And even to abolish federal disaster relief altogether.

And there was the remarkable church service in the National Cathedral in which Episcopal Bishop, Mariann Edgar Budde, preached about Jesus' God of love. She addressed President Trump directly, speaking on behalf of gay, lesbian and transgender children, and on behalf of immigrants, noting that the vast majority are not criminals but work to support their families, pay taxes and are good neighbors. She gently, but powerfully said,

“In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now... I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land.”

The President was indignant and demanded that the Bishop apologize for her audacious words. And his followers, many of whom identify as Christian (about 85% of white Evangelicals voted for him) also attacked her.

And so we see two kinds of Christianity here. These opposing kinds are summed up by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”

And so we see a Christianity that has merged with the state and a political leader that sometimes acts like its servant, turning their heads and justifying abuse of power, and sometimes as its master, establishing laws and policies that dominate, oppress and exclude. We can call this merging of church and state Christian Nationalism. The result is that neither the state nor this church have a conscience and serve only to justify the other.

And the other Christianity still holds to the radical oath and to The Way: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” These followers continue to make the profession of loyalty to Jesus and his path of love is Lord, and not Caesar, not Trump, not any earthly ruler. Jesus is Lord, not those who profess to believe in him. This way of love and justice serve as the conscience of the state and claims ultimate allegiance.

The passage that we have today is about misplaced love and confused allegiances. Here was the situation: After 6 CE, there was a Roman poll tax which the Zealots, the nationalistic party, refused to pay. The Pharisees, although they were separatists and legalists within the Jewish community, were also somewhat politically conservative, for want of a better word. So even though the Pharisees refused to take an oath of allegiance to Herod, for example, they did not resist too much. They had somewhat of a truce with the Roman government and paid their taxes. They reluctantly co-existed.

So it was a strange alliance of the Pharisees, who had sent a delegation to interrogate Jesus, and the Herodians, who ruled on behalf of Rome. Yet the temple elite and the emperor had one thing in common: they both exploited, oppressed and sapped the very life from the people.

And so the famous question: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?” Now, this was not an honest question in search of an answer; it was a trap. Matthew says, “The Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle Jesus in his talk” (vs. 15). They really weren’t interested whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. All they wanted was to get Jesus. It was not just a tough theological question; it was a trick.

The Pharisees had created a no-win situation: Jesus will be damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. If he said, “No, it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then the Herodians and the Roman authorities would have him killed for treason. If Jesus said, “Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then the Jewish nationalists and much of the crowd would rise up against him.

According to Matthew, Jesus saw through this, knew their true intent, and called them “hypocrites” or “play actors.”

Jesus’ response, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” was amazing. Matthew says, “When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away” (vs. 21-22). It was amazing because it was not a complete answer at all; it simply defined the nature of the problem. And yet, he was still able to get his point across. Reading between the lines, everyone knew exactly what he meant. There was no way the Pharisees could twist his response and trap him. His answer backed *them* into a corner because it begs the question: Which things are God’s and which are Caesar’s?

As Robert McAfee Brown said in his book, *Saying Yes and Saying No: Rendering Unto Caesar and to God*, this splendid principle offers little practical help. It does not give us a simple answer. It is not like an ethical cookbook which we might follow in some recipe style. Jesus rejects in principle any ready-made formula. It requires his followers to think and to struggle with their choices.

The real issue in this passage is not just taxes or even the church vs. state; the real issue is to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance. Jesus was well aware of a central affirmation of his own

Jewish tradition: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

If we hold our highest allegiance to God, we must struggle with every situation. Discerning what is God’s and Caesar’s is not an easy task; it is a real test. Caesar, like any government, is sometimes with and sometimes against God’s will. So we need to be continually evaluating.

That great preacher and social prophet, William Sloane Coffin, wrote:

For Christians to render everything to Caesar—their minds, their consciences—is to become evangelical nationalists. That’s not a distortion of the gospel; that desertion.

There are things that do not belong to Caesar. No country is beyond evaluation and criticism. We render too much unto Caesar when the country is absolutized and above reproach.

Robert McAfee Brown’s point is that sometimes it is necessary to say “no” to the state if we are to say “yes” to God. Sometimes, he says, to render unto God means that we must withhold from Caesar.

And lately we have seen a movement in this country to continually cut taxes for the oligarchy and reduce spending for everything except the ever-growing military. But the government or “Caesar” does have a right to some of our money. It is not just our patriotic duty, it is our ethical duty as well. Jesus said, “give Caesar his due.” In Romans 13, Paul wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governmental authorities.” Why? Because the government often serves the purpose of God. Governments restrict bad conduct; they protect the weak from violence; they provide essential needs for their citizens; they support the poor and vulnerable; and they help the common good, the well-being of all the people. “For this reason you *pay taxes*,” wrote Paul, “for the authorities are God’s servants... Pay to all what is due them.”

And yet, there is a very unpatriotic movement in this country threatening to tear apart the fabric of this nation. Corporate profits are at a 60 year high, while corporate taxes are near a 60 year low. And many large and profitable companies pay nothing, due to countless loopholes, bought and paid for by political contributions.

These corporations and billionaires don’t pledge allegiance to the flag, to the nation, or to anything else, except their own bottom line to enrich their executives and shareholders. And often, it’s the same actors, responsible for the legal but immoral looting of our national treasury, who are calling for austerity—cuts in education, cuts in programs for the poor and vulnerable, cuts in wages and benefits of public employees, cuts in wages and protection of average workers.

If we have a problem with patriotism today, it is not with those who oppose militarism, mass surveillance and the suppression of dissent. It’s not with those who protest the number of unarmed African American men who are killed by police and the lack of accountability. It’s not with those who want to show compassion for immigrants and asylum seekers. No, it is with tax-dodging, wealth-extracting, law-writing corporations who are undermining the well-being of the nation.

My ethics professor in college, Richard Mouw, used to say that we need to balance Romans 13 with Revelation 13. We need to balance the image of the state as the servant of God with the

image of the state as “the beast” or God’s enemy. For both Paul and John were writing not about two different countries but the *same Roman empire!*

And so we love our country but we don’t worship it. “It’s wonderful to love one’s country,” said Coffin, “but faith is for God.”

I have found it helpful, for many years now, to meditate of this wonderful little quote from William Sloane Coffin:

As I see it, there are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.

Let us each strive to become good patriots.

We are called, it seems to me, to render to Caesar, pay taxes to the government, when we are, at the same time, rendering unto God, rendering to love, rendering to justice, rendering to the common good, rendering to the well being of all. Jesus, I like to note, said “render to Caesar *and* God,” when they overlap, when they are consistent. The highest form of patriotism is to struggle to make this so, to help the nation live up to its highest ideals.

And so, we pledge our loyalties to church and state, but we give our ultimate allegiance to God and stand up for compassion and justice.

We render unto God our ultimate allegiance. May we so truly desire it that we shall weep for it. May we want it so much that it will be reflected in our tears, even at great personal risk.

Nothing shall be more important. Nothing shall command more loyalty. It is an allegiance to the way of love,
to compassion for the poor and weak,
to the tears of the suffering and exploited,
to the way of justice and fairness.

It is an allegiance to something stronger than any army or country or institution or any earthly force.

One of the most important religious documents of our time is the Barmen Declaration written in May of 1934, when Hitler was well into the second year of consolidating unlimited power. Most of Germany had capitulated to the Nazi vision. Even the church was taken over by the so-called “German Christians,” a group that was willing to follow the directives of the Nazi party. That church had lost all of its critical distance.

But, there was a small minority called the “Confessing Church,” who spoke out at great personal risk. Led by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Martin Niemoller, they drafted this declaration that called for the rendering unto God those things that are God’s.

Scripture tells us that... the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace...

We reject the false doctrine, that the State... should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life...

We reject the false doctrine, that the Church... should and could appropriate the characteristics of the State, thus becoming an organ of the State.

I want you to understand how courageous they were to say this, how they were accused of treason, how many lost their lives and how they embodied the highest form of patriotism.

We remember those original lyrics of Katharine Lee Bates that call for best kind of patriots to continue the lovers quarrel:

*America! America! God mend thine every flaw
Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law!*

*America! America! May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!*

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)