



A GOD-CENTERED VISION OF POLITICS

Matthew 22: 15-22

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¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Introduction

"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

This is certainly one of the most *famous* things Jesus ever said. It's a well-known saying within the Christian church, but outside of it as well. Poets, philosophers, songwriters, politicians—most everyone's familiar with this saying of Jesus.

And rightfully so, because it also happens to be one of the most *brilliant* things he ever said. We see from the context that the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders at the time were, frankly, sick and tired of Jesus. So, as we read, they "plotted how to entangle him in his talk" (v. 15). Like kids on the playground tired of playing with little Jonny, they wanted to find a way to get little Jonny into trouble so he'd be taken off the playground and down to the principal's office—only in this case, what they had in mind for Jesus wasn't a detention, but an execution.

So, they tried to throw Jesus on the horns of a dilemma, and there watch him skewer himself to death. Of course, before they do that, they flatter him a bit, trying to cause him to lose his wits, telling him how virtuous they think he is. "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances" (v. 16). You see what they're doing: they're buttering him up before they try to barbeque him.

Then they say to him: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (v. 17). In effect, they're asking Jesus a question without a good answer: "Jesus, are you pro-Roman or anti-Roman? Are you in support of this idolatrous pagan empire that oppresses us Jews? Or are

you a dangerous political revolutionary who's getting ready to strike out against Rome? Which one are you Jesus? Come on, tell us."

Of course, it's hard to throw the Son of God anywhere—much less on the horns of a dilemma. And so it was in this particular case. Jesus knew exactly what they were up to; he was "aware of their malice" (v. 18). So, he not only calls them out by calling them "hypocrites," but he also goes on to turn the tables on them in a most delicious fashion with this most brilliant of statements: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21).

Yet there's something else we can, and should, say about this statement: it's one of the most *God-centered* things Jesus ever said. Yes, it's a profound statement; but it's also profoundly God-centered, as I hope you'll see as we look at it more closely in just a moment.

But because this statement is so God-centered, it's also so *relevant* for you and me—for all of us—given the fact that the midterm elections are less than two weeks away. Did you know the midterm elections were less than two weeks away? What are you hoping for as an outcome of those elections? What do you want to see?

If there is one desire that should be in all our hearts during this election cycle, if there's one priority I'd long for you to be committed to on November 2nd, if there's one prayer I hope you've been praying, it would be this: *that followers of Jesus Christ would render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*

I hope that's your desire as you look forward to voting day on November 2nd; and I hope that's your conviction as you think about these upcoming elections; and, looking beyond this November, I hope that's your compass as you think about navigating the often murky, choppy political waters in America today—*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.*

Perhaps you've been thinking about how as a follower of Jesus you should approach politics. Perhaps you've been wrestling with what the Bible has to say about the way you vote. Perhaps you've been wondering what your Pastor thinks about politics: Is he conservative, liberal, progressive, moderate, centrist, emergent, all of the above, or none of the above?

If so, let me tell you this: Here's what I want to be—and, frankly, here's what I want you to be: not necessarily conservative or liberal or progressive or moderate or centrist or anything in between—but *God-centered*. I want your DNA as a follower of Jesus to shape the way you think about all of life, including the way you think about politics. And that means thinking about politics in a God-centered way.

Unpacking Jesus' Royal Riddle¹

God-centered in your vision of politics: God-centered because that's what Jesus was, and that's what Jesus calls us to be in this most famous and brilliant and God-centered and relevant of statements, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

A Conviction About Ownership

Notice several things implied in Jesus' words: *First, a conviction about ownership.* If his name's on it, he owns it. Therefore, give it to him. So, Jesus asks for the coin with which to pay the taxes: "Show me the coin for the tax" (v. 19). Of course, he knew full-well what was on that coin: a picture

¹ Here I'm indebted to N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 493ff., who refers to this and other sayings of Jesus as "royal riddles."

of Caesar, his likeness, and his inscription. It's got Caesar's picture and his name on it; therefore, give it to Caesar. It belongs to him.

A Call to Worship

Notice, second, there is implied in this statement is a call to worship. Notice how this conviction about ownership works in two directions; it cuts both ways. Yes, give to Caesar what's got Caesar's name on it; but give to God what's got God's name on it. Therefore, Jesus hastens to add: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, *and to God the things that are God's.*" If it's good for the goose, it's good for the gander. If you're going to give to Caesar what's Caesar's—which you should—then you must also give to God what's God's.

But what is God's? What does God have his name on? Where's God's likeness and inscription? What does God have a claim to, what does he own? Where's his picture? Where's his name?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. . . .

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:1-2, 26-27).

Let me ask you, friend, fellow Christian and non-Christian alike: Where has the creator God placed his divine image? On what has he put his sovereign inscription? On coins? On temples? On churches?

No, on none of these things; on only one thing. On you and on me, on each of us, indeed on every human being who's ever lived or shall live. Almighty God has created you in his own image, after his likeness, with his inscription; you bear the image of God—whether you're a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu or an agnostic or an atheist.

Therefore, Jesus says to us, by all means, give to Caesar—or Uncle Sam, for that matter—your taxes, yes; he's got his picture and his name on the coin, whether it's the emperor Domitian or the President George Washington. But, to each and every one of us, Jesus says: *give everything to God*—your whole self, your entire person, your very life. That is, as the apostle Paul would say, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

So, sure, give Caesar money; but give God *worship*.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness (Psalm 29:2).

Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! (Psalm 95:6).

Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!
(Psalm 96:9).

Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (Psalm 99:5).

You see, this wonderful statement of Jesus' is not, in the first instance, a statement of political theology; it is, fundamentally, instead, a call to worship: to worship God, because God has created you, he has made you, he owns you, and you exist to worship him and him alone. And this, ironically, is for the Christian his or her most basic political theology—a life of worship and submission to the true and living God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords—President above all Presidents!

A Caution Concerning Idolatry

But, listen, because there is a call to worship implied in this statement, there is, thirdly, a caution concerning idolatry as well.

As sinful humans, we're always confusing these two, blending them together: giving to Caesar what properly belongs to God alone. We're forever mixing them up. Humanity throughout the ages always has. Certainly, the people of Israel did. And so, too, tragically, has the church of Jesus Christ—rendering to Caesar what should only be rendered to God.

Perhaps this is where some of you are right now: you've fused the two together, blended the things that belong to Caesar with the things that belong to God. Maybe you even officiated the wedding of Caesar and God so that the two are now one flesh; so that, in your mind, there's very little difference between the mission of the church and the mission of the United States.

Now, when this merger happens in a person's mind—and it can be incredibly subtle, as all forms of idolatry are—that person begins rendering to Caesar the very thing that belongs only to God: worship.

Of course, in the West, not least in the United States, we don't offer worship to Caesar the way they did in the ancient world, or in other parts of the world today. We don't deify Uncle Sam the way the Romans deified Caesar Augustus. But that doesn't mean something like that isn't going on inside your head or your heart, so that you wind-up rendering to Caesar—or to the State, or to the political system—that which is most precious to you, most fundamental about you, expressions of your worship: your hope, your allegiance, your identity.

Letting Caesar Define Our Identity

We give to Caesar what doesn't belong to Caesar, when we let Caesar define our identity. We do this when we let Caesar or the State call us by name, tell us who we are, our fundamental identity.

You see, Caesar or the State always seeks to define who you are and how you see yourself and others. It works hard to define your most basic sense of identity; therefore, you're an American, or a Republican or a Democrat; you live in a Red State or a Blue State; you're a conservative or a liberal or a moderate or a centrist, and so on, political label after political label. And these labels, in turn, define our identity. And when that happens, these labels control us; they shape the way we see ourselves, and the way we see others.

Do you have a closer affinity to those who share your same political views, or your same theological convictions? Would you have more in common with a non-Christian who votes the way you do, or a Christian who doesn't?

If so, what does that say about your sense of identity? Are you letting Caesar define who you are, what's most fundamental to you and about you? It would be a great victory of Satan if he could use Caesar to divide the church of Jesus Christ.

"But," as the Apostle Paul reminds us, "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). We are children of Abraham, and live by faith just like he did. This means that we are just as "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). As God's people, we recognize the most fundamental thing about us is that we are "strangers and exiles on earth" (Heb. 11:13); we are those who are "seeking a homeland" elsewhere, "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:14, 16).

Pledging Allegiance to Caesar

Another way in which we're tempted to give to Caesar what doesn't belong to Caesar is when we let Caesar have our allegiance.

It is an ironic thing that we cannot pray in schools, but we can pledge allegiance to the flag in schools. My fourth grader cannot express his allegiance to Almighty God, but he can to the Republic for which the flag stands. Doesn't that make you feel just a tad bit uncomfortable, especially when you join others in that sacred gesture of placing your hand over your heart.

The people of God have been, and always will be, tempted to make allegiances with earthly powers. Israel was constantly tempted to do this very thing. So, too, are we, especially as Christians living in this truly remarkable and extremely powerful country called the United States.

The blending together of one's allegiance to Christ and allegiance to country has produced American civil religion. This happens when the values of the Christian faith are fused together the values of the country; when the life and mission of the church merges together with the life and mission of the country.² When this happens, you hear people talk about revival in the church in order to bring about revival in the country—as though the goal of the gospel was to renew America.

Civil religion takes a healthy patriotism, or love of country, and injects it with religious devotion. Civil religion is patriotism on steroids. It is the melding together of faith and flag, Christian ideals and American interests.³ And it therefore becomes a context in which we give to Caesar what belongs to God without even knowing it.

Where do your deepest loyalties lie? Who has your most fundamental allegiance? Do you feel a greater sense of pride when your candidate gets elected, or when Jesus gets honored? Do you have a greater sense of joy when someone comes to your side of a political position, or embraces Jesus Christ? Do you more deeply align yourself with your political party or with the people of God? These are the kinds of questions that test our allegiance.

Pinning Our Hope on Caesar

There is a third way in which we're tempted to give to Caesar what doesn't belong to Caesar, and that's when we pin our hope on what Caesar can do.

Israel constantly got sidetracked by looking to Caesar—rather than Yahweh—as the source of hope in difficult times. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah upbraids the people of Israel for placing their hope in an earthly power, i.e., Egypt, instead of the living God.

² See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, p. 145.

³ I owe this way of putting things to Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth*, p. 114. "The god of civil religion is dazzling because it is wrapped in red, white, and blue, but the god of civil religion is still themselves."

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord! . . . The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit (31:1, 3).

So, too, we as Christians can get sidetracked as well. We can place—and, frankly, at times, have placed—an inappropriate amount of hope in politics. Through political action, by giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, it is thought that we can stem the tide of secularism, reclaim America for Christ, unleash revival in the country, renew the moral fabric of our society, and so on.

Be careful not to pin your hopes on Caesar because in the end Caesar will always disappoint. No matter how good or even how seemingly Christian Caesar becomes, don't render to Caesar what only belongs to God: your hope.

Instead, hope in God. And look to God alone for that human community, that society, that government, you so long for—one in which goodness and righteousness dwells. For God will one day establish his reign and his rule upon the earth, through his Son, Jesus Christ.

We have a different President, and he will one day make his power known. We hope for a new heavens and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, which will come down to earth from heaven. It will be a city that never goes dark because the glory of God continually shines in it. No dark alleys, no street lights, but the light of the Lamb of God. It will be a city whose gates will never be shut; there will be no police force, no locked doors, no deadbolts, no barbed wire fences, no security cameras.

It will be a city in which you will never hear the sound of gunshot, or a crying baby, or a howling siren, but only singing and laughing and celebration. It will be a city where nothing unclean or untrue will enter in; there will be no stealing or murder or prostitution or gang violence or embezzlement or betrayal or suicide. It will be a city of righteousness, a city in which everyone who's there, belongs there. For their names have been written in the city registry—the Lamb's book of life (see Revelation 21:22-27).

This is what we hope for. This is what we look forward to. And this is what we call others to prepare to enter into by faith and repentance. This is what God is calling you to hope in today, by placing your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins and the hope of everlasting life.

Be Careful – Caesar Is Subtle

Of course, there is so much more that you and I must wrestle with as we try to fill out a God-centered vision of politics. Each of us needs to grapple with how it ought to get worked out in the actual voting booth, because I suspect we're not going to find God's name on the ballot on November 2nd.

So, give to Caesar what properly belongs to Caesar: get engaged in the political process, pick up a voter's guide, show up on November 2nd, contribute money to worthy candidates, attend rallies, perhaps even knock on doors—this sort of thing is all perfectly appropriate for a follower of Jesus.

But, as we do all of this, I believe Jesus would want to say to you and me: "Be careful. Caesar is subtle. He can steal your heart without you knowing it. Caesar can become an idol. And pretty soon, you'll find yourself giving to Caesar what isn't really Caesar's at all, but God's: your identity, your allegiance, your hope."

Yes, render to Caesar what is Caesar's, but to God what is God's. Let your vision of life—all of life, including your political life—be God-centered, not man-centered, not Caesar-centered.

So each of us must do the hard work of asking ourselves:

- Am I giving to Caesar what belongs to God alone?
- Who is shaping my identity?
- Where does my most basic allegiance lie?
- In what am I placing my hope?

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, some in political candidates and the casting of votes, but we—as God-centered followers of Jesus Christ—ultimately trust in the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7).

Amen.

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