

The Christian Citizen • Luke 20:20-26

The 2000 presidential campaign made American history when Al Gore, the Democratic presidential nominee, chose Senator Joe Lieberman as his vice-presidential running mate. It wasn't because Lieberman was from Connecticut or because of his political positions. History was made because Lieberman was an Orthodox Jew.

Senator Lieberman repeatedly made front-page headline news with his pronouncements regarding God and religion. When speaking at a Detroit church Lieberman said, "As a people, we need to reaffirm our faith and renew the dedication of our nation and ourselves to God and to God's purpose."

Public and political response to Lieberman's frequent God-talk ran to both extremes. The religious right praised Lieberman's affirmation of religion while the Jewish Anti-Defamation League formally requested Lieberman to stop talking about religion because it was inappropriate to mix religion with politics.

That was not a new issue. Long before the founding of the United States and long before American presidential politics a question was posed to Jesus that was highly political, very religious and smacked of high-level political intrigue. It is found in Luke 20:20-26:

Keeping a close watch on him (*Jesus*), they (*the Jewish leaders*) sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

He saw through their duplicity and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"

"Caesar's!" they replied.

He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

The question they asked Jesus was both political and dangerous and they intended to be. Luke is very direct in saying that those who questioned Jesus were "sent" to watch him when he says they were "*spies*", they "*pretended to be honest*", they "*hoped to catch Jesus*" in a statement that would get him in serious political and legal trouble. In other words, they were political operatives and their goal was to destroy Jesus of Nazareth.

They were good at their jobs. They publicly questioned Jesus with seeming honesty and warmth. They flattered him: "*Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.*"

They were good! Many modern candidates are grateful when their campaign staff members possess such personal and political skill. The question they asked was really quite simple: "*Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*"

The same question could be asked today. Is it right to pay taxes to a government with whom you significantly disagree? If you disagree with your government's policy on abortion, gay rights, foreign policy, public education or any one of a thousand other policies should you pay taxes, pledge allegiance and give support even if you morally disagree with the government and its policies?

Actually, some of the same issues were around in the first century. Abortion was rampant and condoned by the Roman government. There was also widespread infanticide, women had very few rights and were treated terribly, slavery was legal

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and widespread, homosexual behavior was common among political leadership and corruption was rampant.

But those were not the issues that made the question asked of Jesus a political bombshell. It was all about the Roman occupation of Israel. The Romans had a standing army with garrisons controlling the historic homeland of the Jews. They said and did abominable things that were contrary to everything Jews believed and practiced. To pay taxes to Caesar was tantamount to approving and endorsing what they believed was morally and politically reprehensible. It was a matter of principle. The amount of money was not itself large. The law required every male to pay one denarius per year. That would be only a few cents in our economy. So even the poorest people could afford it. It wasn't so much an economic issue as a moral issue.

Like many dangerous political questions, it was a trick. They did not much care how Jesus answered it. They thought they had Jesus trapped either way. If Jesus said, "No, don't pay the tax," he would be immediately reported to the Roman authorities as an anti-government subversive. In the Roman Empire you could be arrested for telling people not to pay their taxes. They would have loved this answer because the Romans would be forced to deal with the popular Jesus and do their dirty work for them.

On the other hand, if Jesus said, "Yes, go ahead and pay the tax," he would lose much of the popular support of the people. There was widespread hatred for the Romans and the tax. The extremists were called Zealots and many of them came from the northern province of Galilee. That week there were thousands of Galileans in Jerusalem for the Passover and they were the backbone of Jesus' popular support. If Jesus supported the tax the crowd would turn against him. Either the crowd would take care of Jesus themselves or they would abandon Jesus and leave him unprotected from his enemies. Either way would be okay for the team of spies.

Jesus' answer was brilliant and profound: "*He saw through their duplicity and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?'*" He asked them for a coin—the

exact coin required for the Roman tax. He held it up for all to see and asked whose portrait and name were carved into it. Throughout history the power to mint money has always been a symbol of authority. Anyone who mints money has the authority to require taxes. The two have gone hand-in-hand, historically. That is why some people chose to barter rather than use money. That is why new governments usually replace old currencies with their own.

Look at the money in your pocket. It is loaded with powerful expressions of the authority of the United States of America. Political leaders are pictured. "The United States of America" is written in large letters. There is the seal of the United States Department of the Treasury. It says, "This note is legal tender, for all debts public and private."

"Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"

"Caesar's!" they replied.

He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

In other words, if the government asks for its money, give the government the money. And when God asks for what is his, give God what is God's. For, just as the likeness of Caesar is on coins, the likeness of God is on us.

"*They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.*" They were quiet because they didn't anticipate his response. Jesus was so right-on and so profound in his understanding of something so complex that they were speechless.

Let's learn some principles from Jesus for today. First, Jesus refused to be drawn into the politics of his day. Frankly, he disappointed many people with what he said. They wanted Jesus to take a stand against the Roman government. They wanted him to lead a rebellion. To them this was a moral more than a political issue. They thought Jesus was a political compromiser. It wasn't that Jesus didn't care about the issues, that they weren't important. It was that Jesus was committed to a greater mission. When he stated his life's purpose it was not that he came from heaven to earth to

“overthrow the Roman government and right the political and moral wrongs against Israel.” His life’s purpose was to “*seek and to save what was lost.*” Jesus refused to be distracted from his greater mission in life by dealing with the political controversies of his time.

We often face similar choices today. There are people who want to draw the church into the political controversies of our day. They say that these issues are important and are matters of principle and morality, not just politics—and they are right. There are churches that have been significantly polarized. However, it seems to me that at the end of our story it will be far better to say that we sought the salvation of those who were lost from God than to say that we became involved in the politics of our generation.

We also learn that Jesus had friends who were tax collectors and Zealots even though he refused to be drawn into politics. Tax collectors were agents of the Roman government. Zealots were political extremists against the Roman government. Jesus even included both as members of his closest circle of followers: Matthew (who wrote the first book of the New Testament) was a tax collector; Simon was a member of the Zealot party and was repeatedly identified as a Zealot in the New Testament. They were at polar opposites on the political spectrum. If we are to be like Jesus we should consider his example to guide us. We may include among our friends and those whom we disciple for Jesus Christ persons who are at political extremes. Just like Jesus!

Jesus taught that we should submit to government authority and pay taxes even when we don’t agree with things the government does. And, Jesus taught that we are to be personally loyal to God as our owner and maker. How does this practically work?” Well, if there is a conflict obviously God is the higher authority. If we must choose between government and God then Christians should always go with God. However, the

New Testament clearly expects that to be the exception that is rarely made.

Jesus’ teaching is significantly expanded upon later in such places as Romans 13:1-7:

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, he who 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 he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong,

be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent 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 because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor then honor.

This is a clear and helpful explanation of the teaching of Jesus. Not only are we to pay taxes but, as Christian, we are to give respect and honor to our government and its leaders. Yet, I have heard Christians speak in disrespectful ways about our government, our president and other government leaders. In I Peter 2:13-17 we are told:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to

Let us be sure we give to God what is God’s. Give him our lives. Give him our love. Give him our loyalty and our time and our money.

commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

I have tried to imagine the first response of Christians in the Roman Empire when they heard these words read. They must have said, "Wait a minute! You're talking about Caesar, the Roman governor? He's immoral. He's a murderer. He imprisons and kills Christians. You're talking about the Roman army? They rape and steal and slaughter!"

It wasn't easy for them. It may be harder today in places like Indonesia, Iraq, the Sudan, North Korea and the People's Republic of China. They cannot imagine that life could be as good as it is for us. We cannot imagine how hard it is for our fellow-Christians under anti-Christian oppressive governments. But the teaching of Jesus applies to us all: ". . . give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

One thing is for sure. The greatest part of Jesus' teaching is the second half. Let us be sure we give to God what is God's. Give him our lives. Give him our love. Give him our loyalty and our time and our money.

Recently I was talking with a professional counselor who shared with me an interesting insight. She said that many of her clients act as if their entire lives are being lived on a very small stage with themselves at the center of the stage.

The props are their homes, cars and other possessions. She said it is especially sad when Christians live this way, without a sense of the greater stage of God and all he is doing in history.

Let us understand and believe that God is sovereign and is working out his will and his purposes in our world. We have the grand opportunity to live for God and not for ourselves. It is a revolutionary perspective. It can lift us out of discouragement and depression and give us hope, direction and a purpose in life that can transform our attitudes. It is not only that we give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but most of all that we give to God what is God's . . . and that is ourselves!

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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