Sermon for October 18, 2026 – The 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:17 EHV

Theme: **Regarding Government, God wants us to:**

1) Give to Caesar what is Caesar's.
2) Give to God what is God's.

Then Jesus told them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

It is easy to honour and support a government that has the best interests of the citizenry in mind. But what is God's will for us Christians when the government seems inept, cruel, or corrupt? What is God's will for us if, God forbid, some foreign power overtakes and oppresses us?

These questions are not hypothetical. For the prophet Daniel, the apostle Paul, and people in Jesus' day, they were reality. And with the world being as it is, who can guarantee that such a fate won't befall us as well?

Does God want us to oppose an evil government by taking up arms if necessary to fight against it? Or does He want us to always acquiesce – throwing our full support and defence behind all its decisions regardless of how godless they may be?

The answer is neither. Instead, with Jesus as our guide, let us learn that, when it comes to government, **God wants us to** follow this simple axiom: 1) Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. 2) Give to God what is God's.

Part One: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's

Before we meditate on Jesus' profound instruction, let us consider the situation under which He spoke it. It was the Tuesday before His crucifixion, and *the Jewish leaders sent some Pharisees and some Herodians to Jesus to try to trap him in what he said.*[i]

Pharisees and Herodians working together? A strange sight indeed! Most Pharisees despised Herod's corruptions and prayed for independence from Rome, whereas the Herodians were fiercely loyal to Herod's policies and supported Roman rule.

What could bring such political enemies together? Hatred for Jesus, which is why, after offering vain flattery to camouflage their true intent, they ask Him, "*Is it lawful to pay a tax to Caesar or not?"*[ii]

Note that this question was more than: "Should I pay my taxes?" By questioning if it was "lawful," they aimed to have Jesus openly declare whether He considered Caesar's ungodly rule over the

Jewish people legitimate. This is a loaded question since most Jews viewed the Romans as foreign oppressors whom the Messiah would defeat to restore David's throne.

If Jesus replied with a simple "yes," the Pharisees would certainly broadcast Jesus' answer to the crowds, who would turn against Him in such utter disappointment that they might form a mob to kill Him.

If Jesus answered "no," the Herodians would inform Pilate, who would then treat Jesus as an insurrectionist with a public following.

Since Jesus knew their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why do you keep testing me? Bring me a denarius so that I can look at it." So they brought one. He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" "Caesar's," they answered him. Then Jesus told them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.[iii]

The Roman government had a right to expect taxes, respect and honour from the Jews. Why? Today's second lesson explains: *Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. Therefore the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves.*[iv]

Did you catch that? God has established <u>all</u> authority. No government on this earth exists without God establishing it for His set purpose. That was true regarding the Romans in Jesus' day, and it is true today regarding the current administrations that govern the world. Even if a government is elected by the people (as is ours), the LORD directs the whole affair to accomplish His purposes.

What are God's purposes? While the LORD rarely reveals His specific reason for installing one ruler over another, He tells us that His general purpose for those in authority is to be *God's servant for your benefit… a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer.*[v] In other words, the primary function of the government is to protect us from those who cause us harm and punish those who do wrong.

Therefore it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of conscience. For this reason you also pay taxes, because the authorities are God's ministers, who are employed to do this very thing.[vi]

Because God has established all governing authority, including that of an occupying nation like Rome, to protect, punish wrong, and promote the common welfare of all its citizens, Jesus publicly tells the Pharisees, Herodians and us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

And Jesus means much more than financial support, as the apostle Paul explains: *Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed.*[vii]

We have the blessing of living in a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, whose charter grants us the freedom to criticize and protest government. This, however, does not give us the right before God to disrespect, dishonour, or disobey those He placed in authority over us.

God's command in the fourth commandment regarding parents extends to all those He places in authority over us regardless of who they are, what they believe, or what our opinion is about them!

So let me ask: do you give all governing authorities the obedience, respect, and honour God commands you to show them as His representatives? Maybe if we perceive them as competent and worthy of our respect. But what about the incompetent, selfish, and immoral ones, whose policies we cannot support in good conscience? Sadly, we find it all too easy to dishonour and disrespect such leaders – even going so far as to justify our sin with God's Word, claiming they deserve it.

What they deserve is up to God to decide, not us, for they are His servants. By disrespecting them, we disrespect God. May the LORD have mercy on us for this!

And the LORD is merciful – so much so that He willingly submitted to a corrupt, abusive and oppressive government to suffer and die for our sins. Yes, Jesus gave to Caesar what was Caesar's: He did not resist, even when Caesar's governor sentenced Him unjustly. Jesus paid a debt on the cross, but not to Caesar. The debt He paid was the debt our sins owed God, a debt He willingly paid in full.

What Jesus suffered was the height of injustice, and yet He did not disrespect or dishonour those God placed in authority over Him. Speaking the truth in love, He willingly submitted to their unrighteousness to win our righteousness and salvation.

How much honour and respect does a government deserve? Look at Jesus before Pilate to see what God desires of us and how Jesus offered that obedience in our stead.

Yes, give to Caesar what is Caesar's - give to the government the respect, honour, finances and obedience it deserves - and give to God what is God's.

Part Two: Give to God what is God's.

Is there a limit to the obedience we owe the government? Yes, there is. When the government asks us to do something that God forbids, we answer with the apostles: *"We must obey God rather than men."*[viii]

Refusing a sinful command is not rebellion against government. It's honouring God, who gave government. Consider Daniel in our first lesson. When godless Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, Daniel neither resisted exile nor refrained from faithfully serving him. Nevertheless, Daniel's faithful service had a line he wouldn't cross: he refused to go against any of God's commands, including the Mosaic dietary restrictions. But even when Daniel refused the king's food for conscience' sake, he did it with the utmost respect – requesting an exemption, not demanding it.

And the LORD blessed Daniel's faithfulness to both God and king – so much so that he outlasted the Babylonian empire.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

There is an interesting note about the denarius Jesus held when He made that statement. Most likely, an inscription on it called Tiberius the son of the divine Augustus. With that inscription, Tiberius was claiming an honour that belongs to Christ alone: the title Son of God. And that claim would in time turn into the Roman government's demand for Christians to worship the emperor as their god.

But the faithful early Christians refused to give Caesar the honour that only the LORD is due. And even though they often carried out their passive disobedience with the greatest care not to disrespect the Roman government, many lost their possessions, limbs, and even life because of their faithfulness to God. But even when that happened, they did not rebel. They entrusted themselves to their faithful Creator, confident that their persecutors could do nothing He did not permit,[ix] and that He would work even in this for their good.[x] Many even rejoiced that they could offer their lives to Jesus in gratitude for His sacrifice for them.[xi]

What moved the early Christians to endure such hardships for Christ's sake? The same thing that moves you: God's love for you in Jesus.

Just think of how faithfully the LORD loved you: while we were still at enmity with God because of our sins, God sent His Son to die for us. Not only that, but He took special care to find us and tell us the good news through the proclamation of His Gospel. It is finished – God has reconciled Himself to us through His Son. Not only that, He has adopted you into His family through Holy Baptism, sealing you with His Spirit to comfort and guide you through Word and Sacrament throughout your earthly life, to deliver you safely to His side in heaven.

Because of the LORD's undeserved dedication to saving us, how can we not respond to God by giving Him alone the glory and honour He deserves? Yes, let us be careful not to give earthly government our fear, love, and trust above all things. These acts of worship belong to God alone.

We might be tempted to think, "That's easy; I would never make a god out of our government or worship the Prime Minister as if he were divine."

But here is the sad truth: we all make a god out of government without even realizing it. How? By imagining that our lives will be infinitely better if we just elect the right leaders who could give us what only God can give. Some think the right laws can make our country more Christian. While laws can restrain outward evil, they can't create faith. Only God's Gospel can accomplish that. Others go to the other extreme of imagining that all liberties the government allows, like abortion or MAiD, are liberties God wants us to have, when they clearly are not!

God knows it is all too easy for us to put our hope in worldly leaders to provide for the things that only God can provide, which is why He warns: *Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.*[xii] And again: *It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in people. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in human benefactors.*[xiii]

Yes, without even realizing it, we all have fallen into the trap of giving government the fear, love, and trust that belong to God alone. Repent of this. And, in the peace of His forgiveness, turn to Him in prayer for all your wants and needs. Trust in Him alone to protect you and provide everything you need for your earthly life. Governments rise and fall at His command. But the LORD remains the same forever – faithfully fulfilling every promise He makes to you.

Mark tells us that when the Pharisees and Herodians heard Jesus' response, *they were amazed at him.* Sadly, their amazement went no further.

May our amazement at Jesus' words lead us to worship Him – not only for instructing us about His will regarding our relationship with government, but for living it as our Saviour. He offered perfect obedience, honour and respect to Caesar, while fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. He did this for us: to earn the righteousness we need to stand before God so that He might clothe us in it by faith.

In the peace of His forgiving love, let us then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's – trusting that the LORD Himself will work through His servants to accomplish His purposes for our good, and for the glory of His name. Amen.

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[i] Mark 12:13 EHV
[ii] Mark 12:14 EHV
[iii] Mark 12:15-17 EHV
[iv] Romans 13:1-2 EHV
[v] Romans 13:4 EHV
[vi] Romans 13:5-6 EHV
[vii] Romans 13:7 EHV
[viii] Acts 5:29 EHV
[ix] Cf. 1 Peter 4:19
[x] Cf. Romans 8:28
[xi] Cf. Acts 5:41
[xii] Psalm 146:3 NIV84
[xiii] Psalm 118:8-9 EHV