

“Render to Caesar” (Luke 20:19–26)

October 27, 2019

Brian Watson

A little over two weeks ago, CNN held a town hall event for Democratic presidential candidates to discuss LGBTQ issues. Beto O’Rourke was asked if religious institutions that oppose same-sex marriages should lose their tax-exempt status. He quickly said, “Yes. There can be no reward, no benefit, no tax break for anyone, or any institution, any organization in America that denies the full human rights and the full civil rights of every single one of us.” This comment raised again issues of religious freedom, the First Amendment, and the relationship between government and religion.

There’s a lot that I could say about O’Rourke’s comments. I could say that Christians are committed to human rights and civil rights, but that not everything that is claimed to be a right is indeed a right. I don’t think anyone has the right to redefine what marriage is. And, really, that was the issue. People were already free to marry. But marriage has a definition, one created by God and one understood by all kinds of people for millennia. But that’s not the issue I want to address today. I do want to talk about the relationship between the government and religion, between the state and the church, and between civil leaders and God.

The reason why I want to talk about that is that the issue comes up in the Gospel of Luke, which is the book of the Bible that we have been studying on Sunday mornings. At this point in Luke’s biography of Jesus, it is only three days before Jesus will die on the cross. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to die. He knows that this will happen. And the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time grows day by day. The religious leaders rejected Jesus and his teaching. They didn’t believe that he is the Son of God and the Messiah, the anointed King of the house of David. They were jealous of him, they thought he was a nuisance, and they simply wanted him gone. So, they tried to trap him in his words. They tried to get him to say something that would get him in trouble with the Roman Empire so that he would be put to death.

One of the last traps that they have is a question about government. We’ll see that Jesus avoids the trap by answering the question brilliantly. And what he says has ramifications for political and religious history.

Now, let’s turn to Luke 20:19–26:

¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. ²¹ So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. ²² Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” ²³ But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, ²⁴ “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.” ²⁵ He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²⁶ And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.¹

Last week, we saw that Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was the central religious and political symbol of Judaism, and Jesus went there to show that its days were numbered, and that the leaders of the Jews had failed to serve God. Over the centuries, they had often rejected the prophets that God sent to them. Now, they were rejecting God’s own son.

When Jesus taught a parable saying that much, the Jewish leaders knew that he was speaking against them. They wanted to kill Jesus right there and then, but they couldn’t do that without starting a riot. Starting a riot would lead to problems with the Roman Empire, the superpower of that time, and the occupying force in Judea since 63 BC. If there was a riot, the Romans would hold the Jewish leaders responsible. They could be killed, and the Romans would appoint a new high priest. So, Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders didn’t do anything at that moment, because they feared the people. That’s a sad commentary. Instead of fearing God and his Son, they feared the people.

Then, they started some sneaky business. They sent people to spy on Jesus. These people pretended to be sincere, to ask a simple question of Jesus, but what they were trying to do was set a trap. They wanted to catch Jesus in something he might say so that they could deliver him to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. And that’s what they do in the end.

So, these falsely sincere people come to Jesus, and they try to flatter him. “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.” Now, they don’t believe any of this. But what’s ironic is that they are telling the truth. Jesus is the only one who always speaks the truth, who doesn’t show favor to the rich and powerful, and who gives us the clearest revelation of God. In fact, Jesus doesn’t just teach the truth. He is the

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

truth. He famously says elsewhere, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

There’s one details that Luke doesn’t give us that’s important. Both Matthew and Mark, in their Gospels, say that this group of “spies” included Pharisees and Herodians (Matt. 22:15–16; Mark 12:13). Pharisees were a group of Jewish religious leaders who were very serious about applying the law found in the Hebrew Bible to all of life. Herodians were Jews who wanted the Roman Empire to appoint a Jewish king. They get their name from Herod the Great, who was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate. Herod died about thirty-five years earlier, and the Herodians hoped that there could be another king like Herod, someone who was Jewish but who ruled under Rome. In short, the Pharisees resented Roman rule, because they believed this land belonged to Israel and there shouldn’t be Gentiles ruling over them. The Herodians embraced the political situation and accepted Roman rule. These two groups didn’t agree on many issues. They wouldn’t have spent time together. But they agreed that Jesus was bad for their business, so they planned to get rid of him. (Mark 3:6 tells us that they had planned this much earlier.) There’s an old saying, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” A common enemy can unite two very different parties. This won’t be the last time this happens in the Gospel of Luke.

Now, these spies ask Jesus a question: “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” Caesar was the Roman emperor, who happened to be Tiberius at this time. What they are asking is if it’s right to pay the poll tax, which every Jewish man was supposed to pay. There were various taxes that Jews had to pay to Rome; this was just one of them. Other taxes included taxes on produce and land. The Jews resented paying taxes to Rome. In the year AD 6, a man named Judas led a revolt against Rome because of this tax. These spies wanted to know if Jesus was a revolutionary or if he was something of a sell-out.

Jesus knows what they’re up to. He knows that if he says, “Yes,” then the Jewish people will think that he’s not the Messiah, because they believed the king of the Jews wouldn’t capitulate to Rome. If he says, “No,” then his enemies would be able to bring him before the Roman governor and tell him that Jesus is a rebel. In fact, that’s more or less what they will do (Luke 23:1–5). If Jesus is going to avoid their trap, he can’t give a simple yes or no answer.

So, he does something brilliant. He says, “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” A denarius was a Roman coin, the coin used to pay this tax. On one side of the coin, there was an image of Tiberius, the emperor, and words that said: “Tiberius

Caesar, Son the divine Augustus.” Augustus was the emperor when Jesus was born, and he came to be regarded as a god. Tiberius, his son, was therefore regarded as a son of a god. On the other side of the coin, there was a woman, possibly Augustus’s wife, Livia. The text said, “High Priest.”

Jews would have used these coins, but they would have resented using them, because of the religious claims made on them. Jews would regard the coins as bearing graven images of a false god. They knew Caesar wasn’t God. They knew that no Roman figure was a high priest. But they also had to use these coins.

Jesus’ question has an obvious answer. These coins bear the image of Tiberius, the emperor, and they belong to him. So, he says, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Literally, he says, “give back to Caesar Caesar’s.” It’s his coin, so there’s no problem giving it back to him.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He also says, literally, “of God to God.” In other words, “and also give back to God the things that belong to God.” Caesar’s image was on a coin. What is God’s image on? Well, God doesn’t have a body. He’s immaterial. He’s spirit. But the Bible says that we are made in his image and likeness, which means many things. We are made to represent God on Earth, to reflect his greatness. We are supposed to serve God and worship him. And we are supposed to be God’s children, which means we are supposed to love him and obey him the way perfect children will obey a perfect father.

By using the language of “likeness” when talking about the coin, and by talking about what belongs to God, I think Jesus is alluding to the language of Genesis 1:26–28, the passage that says we are made in God’s image and likeness. He’s saying that it’s good and right to give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but don’t forget to give back to God that which is God’s. And what belongs to God? Well, everything. Because he made the whole universe, everything belongs to him. But, more specifically, we belong to him. Human beings are made in his image. They bear his likeness. And we are supposed to give our whole lives to God. There’s a line in a poem by A. E. Housman that says of men who die young, “They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man.” We are God’s coins, you might say.

What Jesus is saying is that human government is legitimate. Jesus will later tell Pontius Pilate that the authority that Pilate has was given to him “from above,” from God (John 19:11). It’s right to pay taxes to the government. But, he quickly adds, don’t forget that everything

belongs to God. You belong to God, so recognize him as your ultimate King. Recognizing the authority of the state and recognizing the ultimate authority of God are not mutually exclusive. We can obey God by being good citizens in whatever country we find ourselves in. God is ultimate, and he has given authority to the state.

Before I unpack that idea a bit, let's recognize that Jesus escapes the trap. Luke tells us that these spies "were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent." Because Jesus didn't give a simple yes or no answer, and because his answer was brilliant, he disarmed his enemies—at least for the moment. They marveled at Jesus' wonderful answer. They had nothing to say.

Now, let's think more about what Jesus teaches us in this passage. The first thing we should notice is that secular governments are legitimate. They have been ordained by God to perform a certain function. Jesus' recognition of this truth is very important, because it wasn't something that people of his day believed. In much of human history, governments were tied to one religion. Israel was a theocracy: God was their King, and their whole form of government was established to recognize that fact. In the Old Testament, you can't separate what is religious from what is political. And that was true of other nations in the world. That was true even in the Roman Empire, where many different gods were worshiped. Every city had its own god. Different crafts or trades had their own gods. But Romans were also supposed to recognize that Caesar was a god. Jesus says here that Caesar is not God. That's a significant statement that we take for granted. But he also says that Caesar's rule is legitimate.

Jesus isn't the only one to say this. Jesus' greatest messenger was the apostle Paul. In his letter to the church in Rome, he says the following:

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.
² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.
⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Think about that for a moment. Paul says that all government has been instituted by God. Even the Roman Empire, which often persecuted Christians in the first three centuries of the church. In fact, the emperor at the time Paul wrote this letter was Nero, a very wicked and godless man who would later put Paul to death. Paul says that even a godless government has authority.

Another apostle, Peter, says pretty much the same thing. In 1 Peter 2:13–17, Peter writes

¹³ Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Peter tells Christians to be subject to the emperor and to governors. Christians should honor such people. They should fear God, not men, but they should recognize the authority of civil leaders.

In Paul’s other letters, he tells Christians to pray for such leaders and to submit to them. In 1 Timothy 2:1–2, he writes,

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

And in Titus 3:1–2, Paul writes,

¹ Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

So, human government has been instituted by God. Christians should recognize these authorities and submit to them.

Now, Jesus doesn’t tell his followers what the role of government is. But in those passages that I just read, Paul and Peter give us some indication of what the state should do. Paul says that rulers are a terror to bad conduct. He says that such a ruler “is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” The government does what the church should not, which is punish the wicked. The government exists to restrain evil, whether that’s through imprisonment or even the death penalty. This can also be through fines. And since there are many different nations in the world, and because there is bound to be conflict between these nations, we can imagine that the sword the government wields includes national defense.

Peter says much the same thing. The government exists “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” What that praise amounts to isn’t clear. Praise might be some kind of public recognition.

What’s important to see is that neither Jesus nor his apostles never say that government is intended to fix all the problems of the world. In fact, the Bible doesn’t say that government is the source of all evil, and neither does it say that it’s the solution to all evil. Jesus never tells his followers that to fix poverty and hunger, they must campaign to get the right emperor and senators in place in the Roman Empire. He never suggests that the answer to such problems is the government. Instead, he commands his followers to take care of the poor.

Additionally, Jesus doesn’t say that the government exists to advance the kingdom of God. The government isn’t the church. It doesn’t evangelize or make disciples. It can’t do that. And I would argue that the government’s ability to shape virtue and character is quite limited. Government is great at punishing vice but rather bad at instilling virtue.

So, we have seen that secular governments are legitimate, and from the rest of Scripture, we get a sense of what the government is supposed to do. How does the government relate to the church? This isn’t spelled out clearly in the passage. But throughout history, Christians have thought carefully about this. Christians have largely agreed that the government has a certain sphere of authority and that the church has a certain sphere of authority. Both have been granted by God.

One of the important documents in the history of the church that relates to this issue is a letter that Pope Gelasius wrote at the end of the fifth century to the emperor. The first half of the letter says this:

There are two powers, august Emperor, by which this world is chiefly ruled, namely, the sacred authority of the priests and the royal power. Of these that of the priests is the more weighty, since they have to render an account for even the kings of men in the divine judgment. You are also aware, dear son, that while you are permitted honorably to rule over human kind, yet in things divine you bow your head humbly before the leaders of the clergy and await from their hands the means of your salvation. In the reception and proper disposition of the heavenly mysteries you recognize that you should be subordinate rather than superior to the

religious order, and that in these matters you depend on their judgment rather than wish to force them to follow your will.²

Gelasius tells the emperor that he is permitted to rule over humans, but not in spiritual matters. He also says that the church is weightier than the state. And that seems to be what Jesus is saying, too. Caesar has some things that we must give back to him, but all things are God's.

This division between the state and the church is reflected in our own nation's Constitution. The First Amendment begins with these words: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The first clause, the so-called Establishment Clause, says that there should be no state church. Many countries have had an official religion and an official church. Think about the Church of England, for example. The Constitution says that the government should not establish such a church. The government doesn't have the right to decide which religion is true and which religion we should adopt. The Free Exercise Clause says that the government should not prohibit its citizens from freely exercising their religion. And that doesn't just mean that we should be free to do what we're doing now, gathering in a church. It means that people should be able to live according to the dictates of their religion.

Much more can be said about the relationship between church and state. I don't have time to say all that I'd like to say, but I do want to respond to Beto O'Rourke. If our government decided to remove tax exemptions from certain religious institutes, but not others, then it would essentially be establishing an acceptable religion. It seems that if the government starts to pick which religions are acceptable, then the Establishment Clause is being undermined. Remove tax exemption from all churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, or don't remove them at all. The second thing I would say to O'Rourke is that the history of churches not being taxed is a long one that goes back to Constantine, the Roman emperor in the beginning of the fourth century. This tax exemption is not a reward. Rather, it's an understanding that the government does not own the church. It's a reminder that the government's authority is limited. It's a sign that says, "God is King; the government is not." The Bible states, in both Daniel and Revelation, that governments that get too large tend to become beasts, oppressing people.

² Gelasius I, *Famuli vestrae pietatis*, written to the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius in 494. A translation of this letter can be found at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/gelasius1.asp>.

Now, we've seen that the government has a legitimate authority, a certain role to play in God's economy, so to speak, and how it should relate to the church. There's something else that we need to consider. How should Christians relate to the government? In general, we should be the best citizens. We should submit to authorities, pay our taxes, and pray for those in government. But what happens if the demands of government and the demands of God come into conflict with each other?

If the government asks us to do something that God forbids, or if the government forbids us to do something that God commands, we must not obey the government. There is room for civil obedience in the Bible's teachings. In the Old Testament, there are two examples from Daniel. The king of Babylon commanded everyone to worship an idol. Daniel's friends didn't obey the king's commands, and they were ready to suffer the consequence, the death penalty (Daniel 3). The king of Babylon commanded people not to pray to any god. Daniel went ahead and prayed to the true God, and he also was ready to face the music (Daniel 6). In the New Testament, we have the example of the apostles. The Jewish authorities told them not to teach about Jesus. But they went ahead and did that. They said, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The apostles suffered a consequence; they literally took a beating. And they rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" of Jesus (Acts 5:41). Then they continued to proclaim the message of Christianity.

The Bible says that we should be good citizens of whatever country we're in. But the Bible also reminds Christians that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). We are citizens of two different cities, the city of man and the city of God. We must obey both the state and God. But if the two come into conflict, we must obey God rather than human rulers. And we must be willing to suffer. We're not told that the church should overthrow governments. Paul didn't advocate overthrowing the wicked Nero. Jesus didn't advocate overthrowing Pontius Pilate.

In fact, that's another thing that is amazing about Jesus. He tells the Jews that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. The taxes that the Jews paid would support the Roman Empire. That money would be used to pay Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, and Roman soldiers. And three days later, Jesus was be killed by these people. Jesus knew this would happen (Luke 18:31–33). Yet Jesus says, "Pay your taxes, even to people who would do you harm." Paul says the same thing, even though the Roman emperor would have him killed.

Now, this doesn't mean that we should gladly vote for people who will cause us suffering. I would tell you not to vote for candidates who threaten religious freedom, just as I would tell you not to vote for candidates who are against the things that God has created, whether that's marriage or vulnerable human lives. I don't think that either of our political parties is necessarily a godly party. I'm not impressed by the political leaders that we have, and I often wish we had different choices, and perhaps a different political party. But I can't vote for a political party that celebrates what God forbids, and which threatens to forbid what God commands. Still, if we have a government that is wicked, we must be willing to peacefully disobey the government and be willing to suffer the consequences.

We can suffer because Jesus suffered. Jesus knew he would suffer at the hands of those who received taxes. Jesus wasn't killed simply because certain people hated him. He wasn't killed simply because he was a nuisance, and it was politically expedient to destroy him. He died because his life, death, and resurrection comprised God's plan to rescue sinful people. The fact is that though we are made in God's image and likeness, we don't accept that role. We rebel against God. We don't want to come under his authority. We don't want to obey him. We don't love him as we should. We ignore him. We don't worship him. Instead, we make lesser things the center of our lives. We don't want God as our King. That's why so many people act as though government is the ultimate authority. That's why people are so very passionate about politics. As rebels against God, we deserve the death penalty. Our rebellion against God destroys his creation, and God cannot put up with that forever. But Jesus, the true image of God, the very likeness of God, lived a perfect life. He died in our place. If we trust in him, his perfect life is credited to us, as though we always did what God wanted us to do. And if we have faith in Jesus, all our sins, all our evil, all our rebellion, is forgiven. Our crimes have already been punished. Our debt to God has already been paid. Jesus laid down his life so that citizens of the kingdom of man could become citizens of the kingdom of God. No president, no governor, no senator, and no representative could do that for you.

So, what do we do? First, trust in Jesus. Indeed, he is. Trust him for your salvation. And come under his leadership in all areas of life, religious and political.

Second, be good citizens. Obey the authorities—unless they ask you to do something contrary to the way of Jesus, or if they forbid you to do something that Jesus would have you do. Pay your taxes. Honor your political leaders. Pray for them.

Third, don't expect the government to solve all the world's problems. The government can't fix poverty. It can't change hearts. It can't save us. Don't expect the government to proclaim the gospel or make disciples. The government isn't the church.

Fourth, when it comes time to vote, or to do anything political, do so as a Christian. In fact, if you're a Christian, your faith should influence everything you do. Our Constitution says that the government should not establish a church or keep us from living out our faith. But it does not say there is a "separation between church and state." That phrase is based on a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut when he was in the White House. It is not part of the Constitution. Americans should refer to their faith when being political. Religion should influence public policy. The Founding Fathers believed that to be true. Christians, we can speak truth to power. Martin Luther King, Jr., wasn't afraid to quote the Bible when talking about the sin of racism. We can't be afraid to do that when talking about other evils, or when promoting other goods. But we must never expect the government to do the job of the church.

So, be good citizens, pay your taxes, pray for your leaders. But most importantly, trust in Jesus and live as if he is King. Because he is. Human governments will all fade away, but Jesus, his word, and his reign will endure forever.