

Matthew 22:15–22 (ESV)

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.

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DO POLITICS AND FAITH MIX?

I’m hearing a new argument against the Christian faith. It goes like this: Religion is the cause of most violence and hate in the world. While it’s true that religion is behind some of the violence in the world, that word “most” is certainly not supported by the facts. For every violent incident caused directly by religion, there are several caused by plain old fashioned hate and greed and evil, using religion as a pretext.

But, I do have to admit that there is religious violence in the world. There has been since the beginning of time. You see, religion without grace, religion without love, religion without mercy, religion without Jesus, can be very violent. The events of 9/11 certainly prove that.

It was religion, after all, that crucified Jesus. Our text today shows how the religious leaders of Jesus’ day tried to destroy him. When they asked him, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar?” they were trying to trap Him between a rock and a hard place.

If he said no, the Romans could arrest him for treason. If he said yes, the crowds would turn against him as a tool of the Roman occupation.

The God/Caesar question is still tricky today. The first amendment of the United States Constitution reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishing of religion nor prohibit the free exercise thereof.”

Over the past fifty years, our lawmakers and judges have majored in the first part this amendment. But we’ve abandoned the second part of it. We’ve squeezed the influence of Jesus out of our society like water out of a sponge. No prayer at graduation. No sermon at baccalaureate. No Ten Commandments anywhere. No respect for marriage. No source of morals or ethics outside of the brains of our judges.

When the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth in 1620, they brought the Mayflower Compact, the first written law on American shores. It starts like this: “In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, having undertaken for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia...”

A recent high school essay turned in at Thanksgiving had to phrase it this way: “The Pilgrims came to these shores seeking freedom of you-know-what, so they could give thanks to you-know-who, so we, their descendants, could worship each Sunday you-know-where.”

And what have we to show for it? A society falling apart. Meaningless and temporary marriages. A girl who delivers a baby in a high school restroom and then trashes the child so she can return to the dance. Drug abuse of all kinds, sexual abuse, and domestic violence on the rise. Our adolescent suicide rate is up 350% since 1960. Shooting sprees are becoming common news. And now, with the specter of an economic depression haunting our land, people are more desperate than ever,

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“without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2).

It was George Washington, in our first presidential inauguration over on Wall Street, who added the words, “so help me God”—which became part of every legal oath taken in America ever since. He then kissed the Bible.

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We still have remnants of faith in our land. Our coins tell us to trust God. Every presidential inaugural speech in our history has mentioned God, except for one. Our law books are full of the Ten Commandments, even though we can’t display them in public. And Congress still opens every day in prayer. How long these relics of a past faith will last, only God knows.

Is there still a place for faith in our politics today? Well, there has to be, because you can’t live without faith! You can have faith in evolution, or faith in human reason, or faith in the political process, but you have to have faith in something.

Does our public life need people who have saving faith in Jesus Christ? Like fire needs oxygen. We need to pay our taxes, serve in the military, vote, and be involved in every level of public life. Without the salt of the earth, our land will decay and mold away.

What do we render unto Caesar today? Our belief in the Ten Commandments, our commitment to be involved citizens, our hearts of love and mercy. Without us, this land will fall into utter corruption.

James Russell Lowell called the United States Constitution “a machine that won’t go of itself. Like a bicycle, its engine is its people. We peddle it with steady citizenship.” If we get off the bicycle and leave governing to others, we will soon find out that things could be very much worse than they are now.

President James Garfield said in 1877, **“Now, more than ever, the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave, and pure, it is because people demand these high qualities to represent them in the national legislature.”**

What must we render to Caesar today? Our salty influence. There are a thousand forms this can take: being part of activist groups, having a career in government service, running for elected office, teaching, and so much more! George Washington, in his farewell address, said this: “The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. As morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related.”

We may only be able to hold back the tide of evil temporarily, but God calls us to let our lights shine without embarrassment or fear.

And what are we to render to God? Only what Paul calls “our reasonable worship” (Rom. 12). And what is that? Giving God everything, becoming “a living sacrifice.”

As Christian disciples we do not give our worship to the state. Our faith is in Jesus Christ, not the United States of America. To hear some people talk, God is a Democrat. To others He is a Republican. Dear ones, don’t try to bind the kingdom of God to a political party. Don’t expect salvation from a presidential candidate. Be involved in politics, yes, but always remember that earthly politics are temporary.

As the book of Hebrews reminds us, “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek a city which is to come.” And it’s here, in our worship, in our gathering before God’s Word, that this eternal city is set before us.

As important as politics is, it fades away here before the Cross of Christ. Like all the things of earth, it grows strangely dim. You don’t come here to hear me expound my political theories or private opinions. You come here to meet God, and that only happens through the Good News of Jesus Christ. This Gospel cuts through earthly concerns, and touches your spirit with the love of God, the only thing that gives us hope in dark days.