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The Nation

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:26

What do We Owe Our Government?

Matthew 22:15-22

I. Our obedience to her laws.

II. Our participation as her citizens.

III. Our witness to the Gospel of Christ.

Many Bible believing Christians have developed a love-hate relationship with our government today. Many Christians love the fact that our nation's founding is rooted in the faith and values of Christianity. Our nation more than any other has defended and protected our religious freedom to assemble and to worship according to our own doctrine. Today our congregation, like others is exempt from property and sales tax. Our congregation has a legal right of existence protected by our U.S. Constitution. Yes, we are tremendously blessed in so many ways.

Unfortunately this is not the whole story though. Today like never before many values and freedoms are being questioned and changed at a pace too rapid for us to be content with. Yes we are the land of the free and the home of the brave but we are also the land of abortion and an increasingly depraved entertainment culture.

How do we as people who love Christ and who love being citizens of the freest nation on earth deal with this dichotomy today? I can think of two terrible ways we certainly do not want to take. Christ our Lord does give us the right path to take.

The first wrong path is the path that has been around from the beginning of our nation and one that may seem rather enticing and faithful to us at first. This is the path of extreme political activism whereby through the ballot box and through our own political workings we do everything to make the United States a state of laws which reflect our Christian values. What on earth could be wrong with that? The problem with this thinking is of placing too much emphasis upon the power of the external law. Some would believe that as long as we had the right laws we would be a "Christian" nation. Only if we could outlaw abortion and pornography and same sex marriage and even perhaps drinking and gambling, only then would we be truly a Christian nation.

The problem with this thinking becomes clear when we analyze it terms of a personal relationship with God. One is not Christian merely when they avoid the gross manifestations of sins. An external code of laws is not what makes a person or a nation faithful or Christian but a heart recreated by

faith in Christ makes on a Christian.

We may perhaps understand this in terms of a person who struggles with alcoholism. Yes, one's life can be made better from an external avoidance or inability to consume an inappropriate amount of alcohol but if their heart and desire is still fixated on alcohol, then what is the result? In a similar way a nation with merely the right kind and amount of laws is not enough to make it a faithful nation before God. That kind of approach to goodness or holiness is very far from anything resembling the gospel.

The second wrong direction or path Christians can take is the idea that since our citizenship is not really on earth anyways but is in heaven as St. Paul tells us in Philippians (see 3:4), then we can simply write off our rapidly morally declining nation. This idea is to further withdraw from society. The problem is that the more the faithful withdraw and fail to interact with the culture around them there is no counterbalance to the sinful direction of society. One only need look at much of government, public higher education to realize what culture is like completely without Christ and the Bible. This entire idea is wrong because it is with extreme purpose and reason that Jesus leaves His believers in this world. Christians are to be the salt, the light and the life of the world. When we fail to do our job we fail our main reason for being on earth. So then what and where does this leave us as people who love Jesus and who love our nation? Jesus teaches us.

In our Gospel for today the enemies of Christ are hoping to entrap Jesus in words that would put Him against the governmental authorities. We do well to remember that the two faces of government there at that time were first the Romans who had absorbed the Holy Land into their Empire. The Romans were looked at as occupiers, and in reality they were. The face of the Roman government was Pontius Pilate. Pilate had a challenging time keeping law and order in that place. In the Gospel of Luke we are reminded that Pilate had some Galileans put to death and had mixed their blood with their own sacrifices. (see Luke 13:1). Remember that Jesus Himself was a Galilean. Yes, Pilate and the Romans were not welcome nor loved. But these were not the only face of the government. The local Roman pawn of course was Herod. Herod was the local king but he was under Roman authority ultimately. Herod was not Jewish but Idumean, a long standing enemy of the Jews. Herod was neither loved nor respected by the Jews.

This combination is what makes Jesus' words and teachings extra important for us. **"Tell us [Jesus] then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they**

replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."" (verses 17-21).

Notice that Jesus not once in any way questions or challenges the authority of the state. Even in the extreme position of His own time and in the circumstances Jesus was living in He recognized the legitimacy of the government.

The simple fact is that God Himself established governments: government is a function of God's will to keep people safe and society orderly in this fallen world. Paul reiterates this simple fact in our reading from Romans today: **"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."** (Romans 13:1).

Jesus never questioned paying taxes, or following the laws of the state; in fact Jesus' death was an act of capital punishment carried out by the state. If Jesus allowed Himself to be subject to the state such as that how much more are we to follow the government's laws! This is why Paul says what he says: **"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."** (Romans 13:5-7).

We are to follow the laws of the state but we are not to just be passive within the state but as citizens we have an active right to participate to form and pass laws that help society and are rooted in our knowledge and commitment to Christ and the Bible. What does Jesus say to us today? **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's"** Yes this means taxes but it also means our participation as citizens. It means voting and being active especially as American citizens who live in a representative republic: a government by and for the people.

We exercise our Christian faith best when we keep the roles of our government and our church separate. The Christian realizes it is not the role of the government to promote religion--even the gospel itself! Why? Because that is not the role of government--that function and purpose is the role of the church. Likewise it is not the role of the church to try and "Christianize" the world through the function of the law. We do not make the world Christian by passing the right laws--we only make more lawbreakers or self righteous but unsaved people.

It surprises some when they learn that I as a Christian, Lutheran pastor am ardently opposed to something like public school prayer. The reason is quite simple. If the government mandated and also controlled

prayer in a systematic way in the schools they would by definition be doing something theological. They would be making a statement about who God is (and who God is not) and ultimately would be making a statement about one's fundamental relationship with God. Would the school prayers on some days be made to Jesus and other days to Allah or Buddha or Krishna? What would the prayers be for? Would the prayers be offered in faith as the Bible makes clear that any prayer or action offered not in faith is not pleasing to God (see Hebrews 11:6). No to mix the government and religion would be disastrous for both.

We do not want to overlook the other important part of Jesus' statement. Yes we are to render Caesar what is his but Jesus calls us to render to God what is God's. What is Jesus telling us there?

The single best gift we can ultimately give society is our lives lived in the faith of Jesus. We live according to the laws of the state but when those laws are too liberal for the righteous person committed to God they live under God's rule. Pornography is an example of something that is legal in our country but is entirely sinful and inappropriate for the person of God. When we live according to the gospel and love of God we find we are transforming the culture and the society around us but we are doing so in a way that is changing people's hearts through the gospel rather than just the law.

Do you want to be a good American? Be a good Christian first. Do you want to be the best person you can be in society? Be deeply committed to Jesus and to living in Him. Amen.