

## Luke 20:20-26

We live at a time when respect for the government is at an all-time low. According to a recent poll, approval for the president has been fairly steady at about 41%, but only 18% of the population approves of Congress. Since May of this year, approval for democrats in Congress has fallen from 39% to 20%, approval for Republicans has fallen from 24% to 14%, and for independents from 32% to 21%.<sup>1</sup>

That's true of the Congress, and I would guess that it's true for nearly all forms of government. Some of us might agree that government has over-reached and has become tyrannical in its grab for power. If we feel that way, it might be tempting to just ignore the obligations that government imposes on us. "I don't like what government officials are doing, so I don't have to obey them."

We all know that, if government becomes abusive and tyrannical, the citizens have the right to rebel against that government and replace it with something better.

But short of an outright rebellion, are we still obligated to obey government commands? How would Jesus answer that question?

We now come to one of the most famous of all the sayings of Jesus—"Render unto Caesar..." This short, pithy response is packed with meaning and has many practical consequences for our daily lives.

Jesus tells us there that, under normal conditions, we must fulfill our rightful obligations to the government. We must pay taxes and obey legitimate laws. There may be exceptions to this rule, but as much as we are able, we are supposed to obey those whom God has put in authority over us, including government authorities.

This topic is especially relevant to us today because many of us are quite dissatisfied with certain parts of our government. Government regulations and mandates affect us today more than they have in the past. We see examples of government over-reach and abuse. We see how the government is failing to fulfill its obligations. So we might wonder about our relationship to the government.

Let's look at this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders of the Jews and see what Jesus says about our obligations to government.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316448/congress-approval-drops-trump-steady.aspx>

I. The intent: verbal entrapment .20

- A. “they watched him.” The Jewish leaders were carefully observing him. The word here (παρατηρέω) has the sense “to watch lurkingly,” or “to wait for a chance.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s what the religious leaders were doing. They are looking for an opportunity to discredit Jesus publicly.

- B. They sent spies who pretended to be righteous. They wanted to appear to be sincere and upright people, but in reality, they were trying to destroy him (cf. 19:47).
- C. They hoped to “take hold of his words” so as to get him in trouble with the Roman authorities. They wanted to entice him to say something controversial so they could accuse him before the Roman authorities.

II. The trap

- A. They prepare the trap by flattery. .21

1. You are a “master” – i.e., teacher (Διδάσκαλε), a position of respect and authority.
2. You speak and teach rightly (ὀρθῶς) – correctly, straightly, plainly
3. You don’t play favorites.
4. You teach the way of God in truth.
5. They didn’t believe any of that; they believed just the opposite. So this flattery is just an effort to catch him off guard. Their intent was to disarm Jesus and make him less careful in his answer.

**App:** When people use flattery, there is usually an impure, hidden motive involved. If people are buttering you up, they intend to take you down. Those who are most complementary may turn out to be your worst enemies. Beware of flattery.

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Harald Riesenfeld, “Τηρέω, Τήρησις, Παρατηρέω, Παρατήρησις, Διατηρέω, Συντηρέω,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 147.

B. .22 They spring the trap by their question.

1. The question: “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

a) “lawful”

(1) The word literally means “permissible, able.” Is it right for us to pay taxes?

(2) Obviously, according to Roman law, paying taxes was lawful. The Roman law required the people to pay taxes.

(3) But what about Jewish law or God’s law? This word “lawful” (ἔξεστιν) often refers to God’s law or the will of God. So they were asking what God has commanded or forbidden on this subject. What was Jesus’ interpretation of God’s law?

b) “for us” – i.e., the Jews. Some of the Jews, especially the Zealots, were advocating rebellion against the Romans.

The Jews had a history of rebelling against the Romans and refusing to pay this tax. So there was great controversy among the Jews whether it was right to pay the tyrannical Romans for the privilege of ruling over them.

c) “to give tribute” (KJV) – What is in view here is likely the poll tax or head tax which every adult was required to pay to the Roman government. Paying this tax was very distasteful to the Jews because it reminded them that they were under Roman domination.

2. So they ask Jesus if they have to pay their taxes. No matter how you look at it, this was a loaded question.

a) If he says yes, some of the Jews would be upset because he would appear to be endorsing/supporting the Roman government.

- b) If he says no, he gets in trouble with the Romans. They would get rather upset if the Jews stopped paying taxes. And if Jesus were advocating that, the Jews could accuse Jesus before the Roman authorities.
- 3. So their hope was that Jesus would say something that would get him in trouble one way or another. They wanted to impale him on the horns of a dilemma. They really wanted him to say something offensive to the Romans, so that they could accuse him of rebellion.

**Quote:** While [pretending] innocence, they thought they had lured their enemy into a trap from which, as they saw it, he would not be able to escape.<sup>3</sup>

So they are not looking for the truth; they are setting a trap.

**App:** Many of the opponents of Christianity are not looking for the truth. They've exchanged the truth for a lie, and in order to avoid the truth, they'll try to discredit the one telling the truth. If we are telling the truth, we should not be surprised if we face opposition and hostility.

A very good question to ask is, "If Christianity were true, would you believe it?"

**Trans:** They've set the trap. Let's see if Jesus falls into it.

### III. The response

#### A. Jesus recognizes the trap. .23

"he perceived their craftiness." The word (πανουργία) has a negative sense, usually meaning "slyness, cunning." These "just men" (vs. 20) were not what they appeared to be. They were pretending to be righteous, but they were the opposite.

#### B. Jesus asks for a coin. .24

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<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 902.

1. “penny” (KJV) is “denarius.” This was a small, silver Roman coin equal to the value of one day’s labor. It was also the cost of the poll tax.
2. Jesus asks to see a coin, and it appears as if those who asked this question provided the coin; it likely came out of their pocket or coin purse. That’s important, because having the coin suggests that they were using it and benefitting from it. They had already accepted the obligations implied by using Roman coins.

**App:** I don’t know anyone who enjoys paying taxes, but we do enjoy some of the things that our tax money pays for. E.g., roads, military, police. We might be very upset about what some of our tax money goes for, but we should not reject the concept of paying taxes.

We should remember that it’s our elected representatives who determine how our tax money is spent. Congress holds the purse strings. So if we don’t like how Congress is spending our tax money, we can elect a new set of representatives.

If you don’t vote, then you have no right to complain about how the government spends your money.

3. The coin had an image of Caesar on one side and writing on the other side. It would have said, in Latin, Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, *Pontif Maxim*, meaning “high priest.”
4. So who did the coin belong to? Caesar’s image and name were on the coin, so it must be his. The Jews had their own coins, but you could not pay the tax with Jewish coins; you had to use the Roman money to pay the tax.

C. .25 Jesus gives his answer.

1. Some things belong to Caesar, and we are obligated to give Caesar what he deserves. In other words, “Yes, pay the tax.”

- a) The word “render” (ἀποδίδωμι) is literally “give, give back, pay.” The coins obviously belonged to Caesar, so it would be lawful to give him what is his.
- b) “Caesar” is the head of the government, so to “render to Caesar” is to give to the government what it requires; Caesar makes a rightful demand. Therefore, pay your taxes.

**App:** The broader implication is that we must fulfill our obligations as citizens of the state and nation. We have obligations as citizens that we cannot avoid and should not seek to avoid. The government has a legitimate role to play in our society.

Today we have anarchists setting cities ablaze. Anarchy means “no government, no rules, no authority.” Sometimes the government is so corrupt and inefficient that we perhaps wish there were no government. But even a bad government is better than no government at all.

**Illus.:** Think of failed states like Sudan or Somalia—things are far worse where the government does not function at all than they are where they government is too strong.

I’ve heard a lot of bad things about the state government in California. And I would not want to live there. But think of how bad things would be if there were no government at all. It would be anarchy and chaos.

So the concept of government is good. God gave us the institution of human government. And we have certain responsibilities to the government as citizens.

c) We must give to Caesar “the things that are Caesar’s.” Some things fall naturally under the control of the government. As citizens, and as beneficiaries of government programs, it’s right and fair that we pay our taxes and cooperate with the government. We support the military, the police, and representative government.

As much as is possible, we are supposed to submit ourselves to legitimate government in those areas where the government has a legitimate role.

d) We are to give Caesar his due, *but not more* than what he is due. The Bible teaches that we are *not* obligated to obey the government in some cases.

- (1) If the gov’t tries to make us do something sinful
- (2) If the gov’t tries to prevent us from fulfilling a biblical obligation
- (3) If the gov’t tries to intrude into spiritual matters
- (4) Whenever the claims of government conflict with our duty to God, we have the right to disobey the government.
- (5) In such cases, “we must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29).

**App:** Many Christians today believe that they have had to disobey the government in order to obey God. Various state governments have shut down or drastically limited church attendance. In some places, the government does not want churches to meet indoors at all. Or the government tries to dictate what the church can or cannot do; they impose unrealistic limitations or regulations that prevent churches from operating. Some churches are disobeying government mandates not to meet (e.g., GCC/MacArthur).

The government does not have the right to regulate church worship, even during a pandemic. God has given us freedom of religion, and our constitution protects that God-given right. So these churches refuse to obey, and they may be facing large fines or even arrest and jail time.

**Illus.:** MacArthur expects to be arrested, and if so, he'll start a jail ministry.

The constitution supposedly guarantees our rights. The government should not threaten our freedom of religion. The laws of the land are supposed to protect that freedom. We'll see if the government upholds that freedom or not. In some places, the government is overstepping its authority; and in those cases, the church must obey God rather than man.

- e) Still, as much as we are able, we are supposed to obey government authorities and fulfill our civic responsibilities.

**App:** The next election is coming up in about five weeks. We are obligated, as Christian citizens, to vote. Make sure to vote for those who will uphold and defend Christian values, especially the freedom of religion.

2. .25end Some things belong to God.

What things belong to God?

- a) Everything belongs to God (Ps 24:1).
- b) But here, I think Jesus is making a distinction between things the government has control over, like taxes, and things within God's purview, like worship, faith, and the church. Government has no spiritual authority. It should have no control over religion.
- c) We should not give glory, honor, and worship to government or anyone in government. Glory, honor, and worship belongs to God, not man.

- d) The government should have no control over spiritual matters or church matters. Jesus' statement seems to affirm that there is a separation between the interests of the church and the interests of the state.
- e) As concerned as we are about paying taxes, we should be more concerned about giving to God what he deserves—faith, love, praise, glory, and obedience.
- f) Just as we are to be good citizens of the state, so we should be good citizens of the church. If we are careful about fulfilling our obligations to the state, how much more should we be careful about fulfilling our obligations to God and to his church.

**App:** Some Christians, unfortunately, are much more concerned about the state of the nation than they are about the state of the church. They spend much more time, effort, and money on political matters than they do about spiritual matters. They talk much more about politics than they do about God or the Bible.

As much as we are concerned about political matters, we should be at least or more concerned about spiritual matters.

We are obligated to do both—to give to Caesar what is his and to give to God what is his. Both of these realms are important; but obviously, our obligations to God are higher than our obligations to the state or nation.

The government *forces* us to give them what is theirs. The government has the power to confiscate and coerce. God doesn't force us to give him what is his. We give to God voluntarily. So are you giving God what is his—time, talents, treasures? Remember Matt 6:33 “Seek ye first...” Our obligations to God far outweigh our obligations to government.

IV. .26 The failure: they could not trap him in his words.

A. Luke uses an interesting word here (ἰσχυσαν), meaning “to be able, to have strength.” They had no ability/strength to catch him in his words. Try as they might—and they kept on trying—they never could trap Jesus verbally.

- B. Their intent was to do this “before the people.” They wanted to discredit Jesus publicly, so the people would turn away from him; but were unable.
- C. They marveled and “held their peace” – literally “kept silent” (ἔσίγησαν). They had no response to Jesus. His answer was so profound that they could not challenge it. They wanted to seize him, but he ended up seizing them. They were left speechless.

John 7:45-46 *the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why have you not brought Him?” The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”*

- D. Even Jesus’ opponents attested to the truth of his teaching. Although they were not sincere when they said it, they had to admit that Jesus taught the way of God rightly.

**Quote:** Jesus had gotten the better of them. His wisdom had overcome their plot, and his opponents, who reluctantly had to marvel at his answer, were reduced to silence.<sup>4</sup>

This passage teaches that Christians are to be good citizens of both church and state. As much as we might hate to admit it, government has legitimate claims on its citizens. As much as we can, we are supposed to fulfill our obligations to the state. We must “render unto Caesar the things that a Caesar’s.” That means that we must pay our taxes and fulfill our other obligations as citizens, whether we want to or not. However, we must not “render unto Caesar” *more* than what he is due. No one in government deserves glory or worship. We should *not* be more concerned about political things than we are about spiritual things. Our ultimate concern should be for God and his work, not for the political situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 496.

I am very concerned about our government and about the political situation, both in the state and in the nation. But I also realize that God is ultimately in control. He sets people in authority and he removes them according to his will and purpose. We are obligated to fulfill our responsibilities as good citizens, and we trust that God will accomplish his purposes through either good government or bad. We certainly should pray for good government and vote for those we believe will be good leaders.

We must render to God what is due to him—faith, hope, love, worship, and obedience. Are we as concerned about paying what we owe God as we are about paying what we owe the government? We must give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but we must be even more diligent to render to God what is God's.