

A Christian Citizen's Responsibilities
Sermon on Matthew 22:15-22
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: Independence Day Made Us Citizens of the USA

Scripture says: *Blessed are the people of whom this is true; blessed are the people whose God is the Lord.* Amen.

Dear fellow citizens of the United States of America and of the Kingdom of Christ our Savior:

It was two hundred thirty years ago this weekend that our nation's fathers were meeting at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to formulate and to sign the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. In a couple days, we will celebrate those events – as we do annually – on the Fourth of July.

You know, we American citizens rightly treasure the many blessings that are our birthright in these United States. Those blessings make us profoundly grateful, even patriotic, and they make us glad to consider how we might serve as even better citizens.

Theme: A Christian Citizen's Responsibilities

So, it is exceedingly fitting for our dear Lord to talk to us this morning regarding: A CHRISTIAN CITIZEN'S RESPONSIBILITIES. God's Word today will direct us: GIVE TO THE GOVERNMENT WHAT YOU OWE TO IT. God's Word will also say: GIVE TO GOD WHAT YOU OWE TO HIM.

Exposition: Jesus' Words Regarding a Christian Citizens' Responsibilities

The Word of the Lord to us today is Matthew twenty-two, verses fifteen through twenty-two. It's on the first inside page of the bulletin, if you'd like to follow along.

This section of Scripture has an interesting background. It's Tuesday of Holy Week, nineteen hundred seventy-six years ago or so. It's only three days before Christ Jesus will die for our sins. It's only five or six days before Christ Jesus will rise to promise to us eternal life with him. Jesus is teaching in temple courts in Jerusalem.

And we read, and this begins God's Word to us today: **Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.** The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus. Before Jesus had come around, all the people had listened to and honored them, rather than him. And they wanted their own glory back.

They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. We don't know much about the Herodians. Obviously, they were partisans of Herod. Probably they also viewed Jesus as a threat—to Herod's glory, this time. And probably the two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, opposed the present rule of the Romans over the Jews by way of Caesar, who lived in Rome.

So: **"Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are."** Some of this they really meant; it was obvious that Jesus really was his own man. And some of this they didn't mean; they didn't believe for a minute that Jesus was telling the truth. In both cases, the Pharisees and the Herodians were trying to set Jesus up to fall into their trap.

And now they spring it on him: **Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?** They were referring to revenue, according to census, paid by each adult male – probably yearly – to Rome. ...Oh, and they thought they had Jesus!

I mean, if Jesus said that it was proper to pay these taxes to Caesar, he would look unpatriotic. As these Herodian partisans of Herod knew, as these Pharisees who were looking for an earthly messiah-king knew: it really rankled every true-blooded Jew to pay taxes to Caesar. Nor was Caesar at that time any attractive figure. He was Tiberius Caesar, seventy-five years old, suspicious himself and surrounded by treason. He had ruled the Jews from fifteen hundred miles away for two decades. Nobody likes paying taxes, but certainly no Jewish person wanted to pay taxes to him.

But on the other hand, if Jesus said it was not proper to pay taxes to Caesar, he would look treasonous. These enemies of his could accuse him to the Roman governor (and in fact, they did that three days later, although they had to lie about it). And then Jesus would, in fact, prove himself to be a sinner.

And then on the third hand (!), if Jesus simply waffled on the issue, they would – rightly! – be able to say that he wasn't a man of truth, that he didn't teach the way of God, and that he was swayed by people, to whom he paid too much attention.

So, it seemed like a “lose-lose-lose situation” for Jesus and a “win-win-win situation” for his enemies. **But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites – whoa! them's fighting words! – why are you trying to trap me?"** Knowing the sinful nature of people, Jesus saw straight through them.

Then, brilliantly, Jesus said: *Show me the coin* – all currency was in coins made of precious metal back then – **Show me the coin used for paying the tax."** And probably they hollered out to the crowd, “Hey! Does anyone here have a denarius?!” So: **They brought him a denarius**—a silver coin, minted by Rome, the equivalent to us of a hundred dollar bill or more, because it was a whole day's wage.

And he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" On ours we have Ben Franklin and the words the United States of America. On theirs, of course, they had Caesar's name and his picture. So: **"Caesar's," they replied.**

Then he said to them – famously! – **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."** A little more literally: *Give away the things of Caesar to Caesar*—you know: taxes, allegiance, et cetera, *and give away the things of God to God*—which, of course, Jesus' enemies weren't doing: because here they had God talking to them, and rather than honoring God, they were trying to trap God.

Well: **When they heard this, they were amazed.** Who wouldn't have been?! **So they left him and went away.** Jesus had permanently defeated them in debate. They had, finally, rejected him.

And that's it. That's God's Word to us this morning. But now, what do these truths look like in your life this week—and beyond? Well, among A Christian Citizen's Responsibilities – We Give to the Government What We Owe to It, and We Give to God What We Owe to Him.

Application One: Give to the Government What You Owe to It

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to the government what you owe to the government. That's still God's command to us today. So, what do we owe to our government? What do we citizens of the United States of America owe to our governing authorities and to our people in the year two thousand six? – Well, let me suggest to you five things especially....

- Sort of obviously, from what we just read: we owe our TAXES, right? We owe all our taxes—every penny, no cheating. We owe all our taxes—with a smile on our faces! Yes! And that's because it is a delight for us to do whatever God commands us—like paying our taxes. Besides, we know that money is bound to help somebody somewhere.

- Second: Besides our taxes, we obviously owe to our government our OBEDIENCE. We need to obey the big laws we agree with, and we need to obey the little laws we don't agree with—because the government is in God's place in our lives and to obey our government is to obey our God.

- Third: We also owe our government our LOYALTY, since it is God who put it in place over us. So, we won't seek our government's downfall. We won't work against our government. And we won't even do so in our hearts either.

- Fourth: From that, it's natural to understand that we owe it to our government to PRAY for our governing authorities. First of all, that means it's a very good idea to get to church, because pretty regularly we pray for our government here. It's also a very good idea to cultivate the habit of stopping and praying for any worry that crosses our minds—also in regard to our government: maybe especially when we are watching or listening to our reading the news. It's also a good idea to keep a list of things for which to pray—also in regard to our government. We ought to pray for our president, his people, the supreme court, our senators and representatives, our governor, his people, our state supreme court, our assemblymen, our mayor, our municipal judge, our alderman, our armed forces, our police forces, and many others.

- And fifth and finally: let me say that – at least in this country, at least with freedom of speech and press and assembly and religion – we owe our government and our people the vigorous exercise of our free SPEECH. I mean: Why is it that freaky and evil religions are beginning to predominate in our land? Why is it that so many fellow citizens are doing such freaky and evil things? Well, it's because of the sinful nature that dwells inside each of us. But it's also because we Christians have not sufficiently countered that sinful nature by speaking up with God's law and God's gospel.

So, let me do that.... Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism are worthless religions. I'm not suggesting we pass a law against them. But I will vigorously speak up and say that they don't offer the forgiveness of sins and the victory over death that we all need—the way Jesus does. Another few things: homosexuality is a perversion, lesbianism is a perversion, any sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is perversion, as is any of my lust and any of yours. And abortion is an abomination, as is my greed, and my gossip, and all my ungodliness and yours.

And Jesus forgave it all. And Jesus forgives us all. Trust him, and you will enjoy eternal life with him in glory. Reject him, and you will spend eternity with Satan in hell.

There, I've spoken up, and no one is going to put me in jail for it. And if they did, I'd be willing to go, because I have to obey God rather than mere mortals. And see: this is the way you're willing to speak up, too. We owe that to our people.

Application Two: Give to God What You Owe to Him

Okay, we have given to Caesar what is Caesar's. Now, let's: *Give to God what is God's*. And what do we owe to God? Well, in a word or two: totally everything! God has given us everlasting life with him – body and soul –through Jesus Christ. He has freed us from our guilt through the same Jesus Christ. His Spirit has comforted us in every distress. His Fatherly goodness made us and has provided for us our food, our clothing, our shelter, our everything. We owe him everything. We ought to wake up in

the morning thinking, “Okay, how am I going to serve God today?” And we ought to go to bed at night thinking, “Now, how am I going to serve God better tomorrow?”

But to get specific, how about this...?

- If we owe the government taxes, and if the government takes pretty much pushing half our income in FICA taxes, income taxes, sales taxes, property taxes, business taxes (which we consumers pay), and all the attendant regulations government makes—doesn't it seem like we should owe God the other half of our income? And that makes – let's say – ten percent seem almost kind of minimal...

- Again: If we owe our government obedience, don't we owe God even more obedience? We'll want carefully to follow his will both in the big things and in the little things he commands us.

- Third: If we owe our government loyalty, don't we owe God even more loyalty? So, we will defend him and what he stands for when God is blasphemed in the movies, on television, and on the radio.

- Fourth: if we owe it to our government that we pray for the government, don't we owe it to God to pray even more that his name be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done? We will pray – let me suggest daily! – especially for the proclamation of God's good news that Jesus is the world's Savior.

- And finally: if we owe it to our government and to our people to speak up against evil and for the good, don't we owe that all the more to God? So, we will continue to tell others that Jesus has overcome the death of their bodies, and Jesus has forgiven the sin of their souls, and Jesus is, finally, all that really matters for them also.

Conclusion: Christ Made Us Citizens of His Church

It was two hundred thirty years ago this weekend that we Americans were freed from foreign rule. It was some nineteen and three quarters centuries ago that we Christians were freed from Satan's rule by the blood and victory of Christ our Savior.

That means that, as Christian citizens, we are delighted boldly to carry out our responsibilities. We'll give to the government what we owe to it—here and now. And we'll give to God what we owe to him—here and hereafter. Amen.

Scripture has us praying: *May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you.* Amen.