

In Matthew 22:15-22, the Jewish religious leaders wanted to entangle Jesus in his words, so they asked him in verse 17, *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 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.”

If Jesus answered, “Pay your taxes,” then the people will detest him; if he says, “Don’t pay your taxes,” he will make an enemy of Rome. It’s a *“heads I win, tails you lose”* kind of trap.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ pointed response lays the sure foundation of a Christian view of politics and religion.

This class explains how the Church and state possess God-given authority with distinct jurisdictions and how Christians should think about political engagement. My lesson loosely summarizes Jonathan Leeman’s excellent book, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age*. This lesson is profoundly indebted to his material.

Most of us interpret Matthew 22:15-22 to mean that there is one sphere of government and politics and another of church and religion. We must keep things that belong to politics in Caesar’s domain and things that belong to religion in God’s domain. They must not interfere with one another. After all, God controls your worship, and Caesar regulates your taxes. In other words, we should separate Church and state.

But is that *all* that Jesus teaches? Jesus took the Roman coin and asked, *Whose likeness and inscription is this?* It was *Caesar's*. But in whose likeness was Caesar? *God's!* God has all authority in heaven and on earth and always supersedes Caesar.

1st. God Rules Over Caesar.

Giving to God the things that are God's would include Caesar himself because what is Caesar's is ultimately God's. God always rules over Caesar, and governments exist only with his permission! He assigns them their authority, and he will hold the kings and people of the earth accountable for that authority (Rev. 6:15-17).

How should we understand the relationship of Caesar's domain to God's? The coin had a picture of the emperor with the inscription: *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of Divine Augustus*. The Romans emblazoned blasphemy onto the coin, hailing Caesar as Divine. Jesus, by saying, *give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*, skillfully distinguishes between God and Caesar; Caesar and the Divine are not identical. In other words, **1. the state is not God. Christians must not believe that the state has all the answers for life's problems, nor does it have comprehensive authority.**

So, a Christian's allegiance to their country or government is never absolute. **2. We owe our unconditional allegiance to God alone.** The Roman coin reminds us that humans tend to make their vision of government, whether limited or large, an idol that can secure our freedom or meet our needs. God alone has absolute power, and he made you and Caesar in his image. You owe only taxes, respect, and honor (Rom. 13:7) to Caesar, but all of you belongs to God.

3. Therefore, some measure of separation between church and state is desirable. The things we render to Caesar (taxes) and the things we render to God (life of worship) are not the same. Christ is Lord of it all, but he rules over each sphere differently. *Only* in the new heavens and earth will “*The kingdom of this world [become] the kingdom of our Lord and of our Christ*” (Rev. 11:15). **Christians are not Israelites in the promise land but elect exiles in foreign nations.**

4. So, the coin also teaches that religion and politics are impossible to separate because human nature is inescapably political and religious. God made us in his image, and we live under his comprehensive rule. As a result, we can’t easily separate religion, politics, or the private and public spheres. *Everyone* takes some of their religion into the public square and brings morality into politics (**if our nation forbids stealing, it necessarily legislates morality**). **Therefore, Christians must not let their political thinking determine how they read Scripture, but instead, have Scripture determine their political thought.**

Islam fuses state and religion together like two trees with interwoven roots. But Christianity distinguishes between what belongs exclusively to this age and the age to come. **The present age has its institutions: the state** (sword for the government), **marriage** (no coercive power for either spouse), **and the family** (rod for the parents), **and God rules over them sovereignly but *not* ‘savingly.’** God grants the state coercive power, and a mandate to render justice and enable human flourishing. Yet, the present age is passing away.

The eschatological age (age to come) has the Church, where God reigns sovereignly and ‘savingly.’ God granted his Church representative and declarative authority, signified by keys of the Kingdom, to make disciples of all nations. This age already arrived in Christ and exists presently in the church's life and its Spirit-filled members. The eschatological age is eternal.

5. These two ages temporality overlap and exist simultaneously, and Christians live between two worlds. Christians ultimately belong to the *new creation* (age to come) but live at the overlap of the ages, *like a boat moving through the rough waters created when two rivers merge (these ages do and do not mix)*. **God established and sovereignly rules over our world's fundamental institutions.** So, Christians should submit to the institution of the state in the present age. Yet, they anticipate the expiration of the present age and the full advent of the new creation, where everything will radically change into its perfected form.

God rules over all governments. He also sanctions governments existence.

2nd. God Authorizes Government.

America's Founding Fathers generally had a shared understanding of government's authority among themselves. The source of the government's authority depends on the consent of those governed. Consent rightly serves as the human authorization of government in Western political philosophy. However, while not contradicting that principle, the Bible declares that the government's authority comes from a different source: **God authorizes human government.**

Romans 13:1-2, 4: 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**.

²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what **God has appointed**, and those who resist will incur judgment ⁴ for he is **God's servant** for your good.

In other words, the government's authority comes from God. Jesus describes this reality in his conversation with Pilate: *Jesus answered him, "You would **have no authority** over me at all unless it had been **given you from above** (John 19:10-11).* The government's ultimate authority comes from God, not the consent of the governed.

God gives us the purpose for government in Genesis 1:28, *God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion... So, God instituted human government so humans may flourish in the world he created and as a means of loving one another. Therefore, Christians care about their government to love and for human flourishing.*

Of course, humankind rejected God’s plan, and God cursed them and their world. Humans attempt to rule themselves in vain, and *Cain’s murder of Abel illustrates this new, sinful dynamic in human relations.* Humankind can no longer spread the utopia of Eden. Humanity’s dominion now only preserves the created order instead of progressing creation toward paradise.

Yet, God reinstates human government after the flood with different provisions:

And for your lifeblood I will **require a reckoning**: from every beast I will require it and from man. **From his fellow man** I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

⁶“Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image (Genesis 9:5-6).

What are the purposes of a fallen human government? The first purpose of human government after the Fall is to render justice. God authorizes human governments to use coercive force with one another to execute justice for justice’s sake. In Genesis 9:5-6, **God gives us the principle that the punishment should fit the crime.** *There is “life for life,” not “life for breaking and entering.”* God requires justice, defined as “giving to each one what he or she is due and securing the God given rights and equal protection for all under good and impartial laws.” *Justice is the administration of righteous judgments, respect for the God-given rights of every person, the defense of the rights of the defenseless, and the distribution of fair retribution for crimes.* Justice affirms the life and value of image bearers.

Government wields the sword of justice and possesses the threat of legitimate force in the face of injustice. So, Romans 13:4 says, *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.*

God did not establish a particular form of government in these verses, whether monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy; but Genesis 9 also applies to those in power. God mandates governments to protect their citizens, not abuse them. Rulers may not use excessive force or go beyond their given jurisdiction. *So, police officers, for instance, who use excessive force in a minor altercation, should have 'the sword' (justice) used against them. God does not authorize the government to use force unjustly, and he will them accountable.*

Christians will disagree over how far the demands of justice warrant such activity from the government (health care, tax structure, carbon dioxide emissions). *But Martin Luther King Jr. described government's mandate to protect human life well, "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."*

The government's second purpose is to maintain peace and order. Romans 13:3 *do what is good, and you will receive his approval...* Governments promote what is good, defined as facilitating God's commission to: *be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it*" (Gen. 9:7). Paul urges us to pray regularly *for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way* (1 Tim. 2:2). *For instance, governments regulate our roads to establish peace and order. They decide where to place stoplights, what side of the road to drive on, and speed limits. These systems enable us to travel safely.* Peace and order create a thriving platform for the gospel's advance. Peace within a nation enables God's people to establish churches and share the gospel there.

Beloved, government is a gift from God, even in a fallen world. Christians can be good citizens and submit to authority even if they think the government is terrible. Remember, the Roman coin affirmed idolatry, and Jesus *still* taught us to pay our taxes and give honor. No matter how much you may dislike the US government, there are far worse ones in history and presently around the world. Americans have much to be thankful for, despite America's weaknesses and faults. Even bad government is preferable to no government (anarchy).

Furthermore, allegiance to God and submission to the government are not always inherently incompatible. Jesus said, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.*" Many duties rendered to the government do not infringe on our ultimate allegiance to God. We honor authorities in good conscience because a greater authority has instituted them.

God rules over and authorizes human government. As his servant, government represents God. But what about the church?

3rd. The Church Represents Heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is God's *redemptive* rule and reign (vs. general rule). Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven on earth through his incarnation and mission. Today, God manifests and expresses his redemptive rule on earth through his church.

What is a local church? Jonathan Leeman says the local church is an embassy of heaven in time and space, representing Christ's eternal kingdom and the ultimate end-time gathering. The church and the kingdom are related but not the same. For example, the American embassy within Saudi Arabia is not the same as the homeland of America. The embassy in Saudi Arabia is America's diplomatic outpost for its representatives in the foreign

land. The embassy *represents* the full power of the American government and flies the American flag over what is considered *sovereign* American soil. *But it's not exactly the same as the America itself.* Imagine the Saudi people invaded and occupied the embassy. We would acknowledge it as an attack on America. Still, the invaders could not claim they *rule* America. The embassy manifested and expressed America's ruling interests, but it is not *America itself*.

Likewise, the church is an embassy of God's kingdom, representing his rule. The Kingdom creates the church, but the church is not the kingdom itself. *The church is not tied to any one nation and is inherently nonpartisan.* The Kingdom of God does not come on earth through political means. Mark Dever wrote,

Jesus' approval of paying taxes to Rome was revolutionary. By this, Jesus shows us that the legitimacy of a government is not determined by whether it supports the worship of the one true God, or even allows for it. By Jesus not requiring those who follow Him only to support states which are formally allied to the true God as Old Testament Israel had done, Jesus unhitches His followers from any particular nation" (*God and Politics*, 27).

The state has the sword; the church has the keys: Matthew 18:18-20 says, *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* Through the keys, Jesus grants the church authority to represent *him*.

God gave the state authority to recognize its citizens, administer justice, promote good, and secure peace and order. **But God did not empower the state to define church doctrine, declare what a church is or isn't, or determine who a Christian is or isn't. He does not authorize them to redefine the issues of human flourishing, marriage or the family.** So, the church says "no" to the state when the state corrupts core convictions. **Further, Genesis 9 does not authorize governments to prosecute crimes against God, only against man** (*Israel was*

the exception because of its unique role in history and its covenant with God). Churches and Pastors should not wield the sword, either.

So, we must not confuse the Kingdom of God with earthly political propaganda nor conflate national citizenship with Christian identity. The church is a prophetic community, not tied to any one nation or ethnicity. It models the Heavenly society to the nations and persuasively calls people to justification by repentance and faith in Christ.

Concluding Implications.

How should Christians engage politically? First, join a church and prioritize being an ambassador of Christ. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:20 *we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us*. Focus on living redeemed lives with the redeemed people of God, not on redeeming the nation. Representing Jesus and his kingdom is your most important political activity in this world.

Second, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Solomon asked God, “*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.*” We need God’s wisdom to know what is right in any given situation.

Third, obey and honor the government, except in idolatry. Peter wrote, *Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor* (1 Peter 2:17). We need the fear of God to help us know how to honor the emperor. The fear of God keeps us from speaking evil of our leaders and keeps us from honoring our leaders over God. The Bible gives us good, illustrative examples: Joseph and Pharaoh, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, and Paul and Caesar.

Fourth, make use of whatever political stewardship you possess. There is no direct command in the Bible to take direct political action. Still, Christians are free to and engage in political activity by faith, utilizing practical wisdom in obedience to the two greatest commandments. In addition, Christians should be concerned that all citizens have equal rights and protections under good and just laws. Christians are also free to serve in government since the government itself is a servant of God. ([See Paul's appeal to Caesar in Acts](#)).

Fifth, know your parties' strengths and weaknesses and hold your party affiliation loosely. Jonathan Leeman gives his evaluation of party strengths and weaknesses:

Republican Strength: Emphasis on personal responsibility.

Republican Weakness: amoral libertarianism (sacrifice few for the many) and overlook structural realities that negatively impact the poor or the minority.

Democratic Strength: They intend to represent the disenfranchised.

Democratic Weakness: They treat the government as a savior and platform sexual immorality and abortion.

He encourages Christians to engage their parties as an ambassador of Christ and not over-identify with it. Instead, he says, affirm “*the good, denounce the bad and push your own party toward justice.*” ([Read Leeman's book on how to pursue justice](#)).

Sixth, expect the nation's rage. **Honoring government does not mean it is above criticism.** Sometimes, we must speak out against our government's unjust actions or laws for God's glory and righteousness's sake ([slavery, segregation, abortion, racism, etc.](#)). Not all criticism is speaking evil. [John the Baptist spoke the truth to Herod, and Herod took offense. He offended the mighty Herod but, in doing so, glorified Almighty God. Remember Psalm 2:1-2: Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and](#)

the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed. America is/will be one of the nations that rage, and no ‘*American Exception*’ exists in this category. **Many governments in the Bible sought to devour God’s people: Pharaoh in the time of Moses, Sennacherrub, Pilate, and the Beast of Revelation. Like the three Hebrews that refused to bow down to false gods and the apostles before the Sanhedrin, “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).**

Seventh, love your brothers, sisters, and neighbors. Please remember that many political positions are not matters of explicit Biblical command but practical wisdom. Some may be far wiser than others, and others far more foolish. But Christians must exercise charity and allow for freedom of conscience on less significant and clear matters. Churches and Christians bind consciences on important and clear issues but leave less clear points to Christian liberty.

Eight, who should you vote for in the next election? Christians should vote for the candidate or the legislation understanding what the government has been authorized and ordered by God to do. They must exercise judgment and execute justice; to protect life and maintain peace, order, and flourishing.

God Authorizes and Rules over Caesar. He redeemed and rules over his church, which represents him to the nations. Do not put hope in government, but don’t give up on it either.

Questions?