

November 8, 2015

Counterculture: *The Gospel and Politics: Left, Right or Center?*

Matthew 22:15 – 22

I got an email the other day that announced '**You can make America more conservative**'. Which got me to thinking. Is that what I want to do? Would America be a better place if it were more conservative? What does that actually mean? Is being conservative better than being liberal? Would America be better off, would the world be better off, if we all held conservative views? It wasn't conservative views in 19th century England that finally saw the abolition of the slave trade. It was the radical liberal views of men like William Wilberforce and John Newton that ended that abomination. It wasn't conservative views that launched a revolution with the words, '*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*'¹ Those words were penned by radical liberal leftists. It wasn't conservative views that added the 14th Amendment to the Constitution granting citizenship to all people of every color in the United States, and it certainly wasn't conservatives who marched on Washington for equal rights in 1963. Clearly, a more conservative America is not necessarily always a good thing.

But neither is the opposite – a liberal America. If this is beginning to sound like I'm more in favor of liberal views, I'm not. It was a more liberal view of the explanation of the origins of man that introduced the idea of evolution and a man-centered view of the universe into our schools and popular philosophy. It is a liberal view of the Constitution that legalized abortion and so-called 'gay marriage' in our day. It was liberal theologians who promoted liberation theology that has led to so much bloodshed around the world, particularly in South America.² It is a liberal view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture that has led a large part of the church to discard the uncomfortable doctrines of the wrath of God and hell and eternal punishment.

But lot of people who hold to conservative values, also promote those same values as Christian, and they say things like 'It's time to return to being a godly nation' as if America was once a godly nation, founded on biblical principles. Now I know that I might be stepping on some philosophical toes here, but it is hard to argue with history. On the one hand, were many of our Founding Fathers men of deep Christian faith and did that faith help inform their thinking and their writing? Absolutely! But on the other hand, was their intent to found a sort of religious Christian theocracy? Absolutely not. Most of the founders believed that Christianity was absolutely necessary for maintaining moral virtue and assumed that the America would remain culturally Christian. But America also '*...became the first nation in history to abolish religious disqualifications from officeholding and civic engagement. The founders purposely created a nation that based its legitimacy on popular will, not on some higher power.*'³ They also quickly moved to make good on the disestablishment clause in the First Amendment whose clear intention was to prevent a sort of nationally approved religion.

While many of them would have agreed with George Washington who is reported by some to have said, '*It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible,*' they also would have agreed with Jefferson who said, '*(I)t does me no injury for my neighbor to believe in twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.*'⁴ In the writings we have from this period, roughly 1765-1790, including speeches, debates, letters, pamphlets, and even sermons, what we see reflected is the overwhelming influence of Enlightenment, Whig (read: liberal), and classical republican theories, as well as Biblical justifications.⁵ The Treaty of Tripoli in 1796 unambiguously states in its second article, that the: '*...Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...*'⁶ The impact of that statement is made even greater by the fact that at the signing of this treaty, John Adams was president and it was ratified by a Senate still half-filled by signers of the Constitution.

1 Declaration of Independence, July 2, 1776

2 <http://web.wm.edu/so/monitor/issues/07-1/6-williams.htm>

3 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/02/living/america-christian-nation/>

4 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/02/living/america-christian-nation/>

5 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/02/living/america-christian-nation/>

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Tripoli

So the reality is that America has never been a 'Christian' nation. Rather it has been a nation that has embraced Christianity to such a degree that Christian values and morals have been the mainstream of our cultural life for a long time. It has more to do with the periodic episodes of real revival and spiritual awakening that have swept through American life for more than three centuries than anything else, starting with the Great Awakening in the 1740's, through the revivals that hit in the early 1800's, in the great 'Prayer Revival' in the 1850's and the revivals that swept through both the Confederate and Union armies during the Civil War. Every century has seen at least three or four massive movements of the Holy Spirit in revival. Starting with the Azusa Street Revival in the beginning of the 20th century, on through the post-WWII revival highlighted by Billy Graham's evangelistic preaching, and into the 70's with the Jesus Movement, American culture has absorbed Christian values and morals and teaching.

For years, we had assumed that because Christian values were in large part championed by political leaders and formed the majority opinion, that we were in fact a Christian nation. There was a time not too far removed from this that most people could tell you what the Ten Commandments were. There was a time not so long ago that most Americans heartily disapproved of adultery, fornication, homosexuality, divorce and abortion, and there were actually laws against most of these things. But obviously that is no longer the case. And conservatives find themselves railing against the present evils and calling for a return to the fundamental Christian principles that built this country. Only to find radical liberal thinking at the bottom. Again, I'm not suggesting that those who founded our country did not view Christianity as a vital component of who we are and what we are about. Almost to a man they were Christians who had a deep and unswerving devotion to God and saw His laws and His rule as the most important thing.

But what they did not say, as many are saying today, both conservative and liberal, is that you are wrong if you don't agree with me. America is polarized politically and socially to a degree we've never seen before. You can hardly talk with people about the issues of the day, abortion, same-sex marriage, LGBT issues, or global warming, without the flamethrowers coming out. And sadly, the political scene is quickly becoming a question of whether you are on the side of progress – liberals, or the side of retrenchment – conservatives. I found it very disturbing to see Donald Trump, a Republican presidential hopeful, pull out a Bible he says is his, complete with his mother's handwriting and his old home address, in order to appeal to conservative Christian voters. Privately I wonder if he's ever read anything but the inscription. The problem with this present atmosphere is that too often, conservatives see themselves and those who agree with them as being on God's side, and the enemy is everybody else on the other side. Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, speaking on *How the Gospel Reshapes Evangelical Political Engagement* at the 2015 National Convention said: '*Christian political engagement has often been a political agenda in search of a gospel useful enough to accommodate it.*'⁷

So the question is, what does being a Christian in this current political environment look like? Or, as we have been looking at various social and political issues in our current series, what does counter-cultural with regards to politics look like? How do we reconcile the gospel and politics? Should we lean left or right or stay securely in the middle? Or more importantly, what are Jesus' politics? Where does He stand? I think this passage this morning gives us a clear, consistent, unambiguous answer to this. This is one of the few places in Scripture we see Jesus engaged in the political arena. And He doesn't give a political answer, or beg off the question, and I think this passage speaks very clearly and very loudly to how we ought to behave as Christians in the political arena. Three of the gospels record this confrontation Jesus had with the political parties of His day. It happens during the last week of His life, after He cleanses the Temple and chases out the money changers and the animal sellers. He's approached by the Pharisees and the Herodians and essentially they ask Him, 'Are you a conservative or a liberal? Whose side are you on? What are your politics, Jesus?'

This confrontation is very different from all the others recorded in the gospels. Usually Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Those are basically two Jewish denominations. They're religious. But here it is the Herodians and the Pharisees. That makes it political. The Pharisees represented the conservative Jewish political wing. They wanted to drive the hated Romans out of Palestine and reinstitute a religious theocracy. The Herodians were the Jewish liberal party who supported Roman rule and didn't follow Jewish religious laws. And the point of all this was to make Jesus declare Himself for one side or the other.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1EjbidCMdA>

Now these guys had thought long and hard about the question they wanted to ask Jesus. And it was a good question. A well-thought out question. It was basically a yes or no question. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* And the gospel of Mark says they clarified the question: *'...should we pay them or should we not?'* To understand why this was a really good question on their part, you need to understand something about this tax. As taxes go, it wasn't a lot of money – one denarius, basically a day's wage for the poorest. But the issue was not about the amount but what it represented. There were lots of taxes people had to pay at this time, but this was a head tax for the Roman government. Everybody had to pay this tax for the privilege of living under the generous rule of Rome. And the Jews hated this tax in particular because it represented their subjection to Rome. And when this tax went into effect a couple of decades earlier, imposed strangely enough by the governor of the province, Quirinius of the gospel of Luke fame, it sparked an insurrection by a man named Judas the Galilean.

Judas the Galilean first of all called on all Jews to refuse to pay the tax. And then he took his army and cleansed the temple, throwing out the Romans, and proclaimed a Jewish state as a republic recognizing God alone as king and ruler and His laws as supreme. In essence he was proclaiming the establishment of the kingdom of God. But it didn't take the Romans long to squash the rebellion, capture Judas and execute him. And now it's 25 years later, and these guys are still asking the question – 'Should we pay the tax or not?' It's an incredibly insightful question. Twenty-five years later, here comes a Galilean proclaiming the kingdom of God. That was the foundation of Jesus' message. Everybody knew that. And He's just cleansed the temple. The only thing He hasn't done is call people to refuse to pay the tax. You see they're not just asking Him the question to make Him unpopular with one side or the other. What they're asking Him is 'Are you calling for a revolution? Are you another Judas the Galilean?'

For Jesus to answer yes or no to that question is not just a matter of popularity. If He says 'No, don't pay the tax' then He'll be executed by the Romans, and these guys will have done their job. But if He says, 'Yes, pay the tax' then all His talk about the kingdom of God will have been so much empty rhetoric and the people will know He's an imposter. You see when Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, what Jews immediately thought of was a reinstatement of a theocracy. This wasn't some spiritual kingdom they envisioned. It was a kingdom ruled by the descendent of David that would come in and wipe out the Romans and set up a physical kingdom. Jesus seemed to reinforce that idea all along by quoting Old Testament prophets like Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor;*⁸

But if Jesus said, 'Go ahead and pay the tax' they would know His message was just empty rhetoric. If He says 'Pay the tax' He'll lose the people; and if He says, 'Don't pay the tax' He'll lose His life. It was a very good question. But you have to marvel at the way Jesus handles these guys. He refuses to be drawn in to a yes or no answer. And He refuses to be a moderate. He doesn't end up on the right or the left, nor does He end up in the middle. When He is asked how we ought to relate to the state, Jesus doesn't give a yes or no answer: Yes obey the state, or no, don't obey the state, because the question goes much deeper than yes or no. So Jesus does what He often does, He answers a question with one of His own: *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."*

First of all, **Jesus upholds the legitimacy of human government.** Human government is profoundly biblical. From the opening chapters of Genesis to the end of the New Testament we see this laid out. God gives Adam and Eve dominion and authority – He institutes government – at the very beginning. *"And God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*⁹ In the New Testament, Paul tells us: *'...there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.'*¹⁰

8 Isaiah 61:1-2, ESV

9 Genesis 1:

10 Romans 13:1

So Jesus says, '*Show Me the coin for the tax.*' And they hand Him a denarius. A denarius was a Roman coin, which at this time had the image of the emperor Tiberius Caesar on it. It was literally his, minted out of his wealth. The image was his and the inscription read, 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the God Augustus, Pontifex Maximus'. The claim was that Caesar was not only divine, he was the high priest as well, that's what Pontifex Maximus meant. And Jesus says, '*This is Caesar's coin, it's got his picture and description on it, so give him what is his.*' In other words, Jesus was affirming the legitimacy of Roman rule, and in doing so, upholding the legitimacy of all human government. But at the same time He was also limiting the authority of human government. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesars. It's got his image and his inscription. It's his money, you have to give it.' But there are boundaries to his domain. 'Give to God what is God's.' He upholds the legitimacy of human government, but He also undermines it. Caesar gets what Caesar owns – but that's it.

This was a stunning answer to both the Pharisees and the Herodians, whose claims to legitimate government both appealed to divine authority. In fact all governments during this time held that the rule of kings or emperors or governors had divine authority, and to rebel against them was to rebel against the gods. And here is Jesus saying, 'You must give Caesar what is his, but there's a limit'. In fact some commentators see this as the first mention of limited government in history. Jesus is affirming the legitimacy of human government, **and at the same time setting limits on it.** He's affirming Caesar's authority, and He's limiting it. 'Give Caesar what has his image on it – but give God what has His image on it. Give Caesar his money, but don't give him what belongs to another. Give him what's his, but don't give him what's not his'. In one sentence Jesus upholds Caesar's rights, and destroys his claim to be god.

In answering the question, Jesus subtly changes the verb. They ask Him 'Should we pay?' which is a word that literally means to give as a gift. 'Should we give Caesar the tax?' And Jesus in answering says, 'Render to Caesar what is Caesars', a word that means 'Pay Caesar what he deserves. And 'Render to God what is His', that is 'Pay God what He deserves'. What does Caesar deserve? He deserves his money, but he doesn't deserve your ultimate allegiance. He deserves his money with his image, but you bear the image of God. On the one hand He's actually saying, 'You must submit to the government!'; but on the other He's saying 'You must not give your ultimate allegiance to any government. You must not worship this so-called god'. Caesar may deserve his money, but God deserves your worship. Caesar may have thought himself to be divine, but Jesus points to the real divinity. His face is on the coin, but God's face is on you.

In this whole encounter, Jesus is also confronting a couple of groups in His day on the extreme left and right. Both refused to pay their taxes. On the right you had the Essenes who reacted to Roman rule by simply dropping out of the system. They took off for the desert and built self-sustaining communities out in the wilderness. They basically said, 'We're not going to be part of your corrupt, tyrannical system anymore. We're going to just move out'. And Jesus says, 'No, you can't opt out of the system. Pay your taxes. Political apathy is not the solution.' On the other side you had the Zealots who preached political resistance and armed revolt against the system, and caused a lot of trouble as a result. And the message here is 'Political extremism is not the way to go either'. It's not about left or right, or even center. What Jesus is saying is that **His followers need to be good citizens** of whatever government we are under. Because all authority comes from God, and because the authorities have been instituted by God, we are bound to obey them.

You see, Jesus doesn't call His followers to be left, right or center. We have an altogether different political agenda. We are all citizens of some earthly nation, under various kinds of political rule, some good, some bad, some middle of the road. Some of those political systems are persecuting and killing Christians today, just as they have for 2,000 years. And yet we are called to be good citizens of whatever kind of political rule we are under. Listen to what Peter tells us: *13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*¹¹ This is from a guy who has seen His Lord crucified on a Roman cross. He's witnessed his friends persecuted, stoned and beheaded. And this is a guy who knows that one day he'll be killed for the sake of the Name because Jesus told him that would happen.

11 1 Peter 2:13-17 ESV

But what about those governments that are clearly abusive and even morally reprehensible? Are we supposed to obey them as well? Again, the answer Jesus gave is unambiguous. 'Render to Caesar' and 'Render to God'. The lines of authority are laid out here. Caesar has a realm over which he rules. But God rules over everything. And if Caesar usurps the authority that is only held by God, then the rule of God prevails. There are lots of examples in the Bible, but the best one is in Acts where the disciples are ordered by the authorities not to preach in Jesus' name. But they ignored that command and were thrown in jail. When they were asked why they continued to preach in Jesus' name, Peter tells them, '*We must obey God rather than man*'. In other words, when a government forbids what God commands, or commands what God forbids, you must disobey that government. **No government on earth commands a believers unqualified obedience.**

But Christians ought to be the best citizens of any country because they are citizens of a transcendent heavenly country. With this one sentence, Jesus untethers Christian allegiance from resting in any one earthly kingdom. When Jesus said 'Render to Caesar what is Caesars' He was pointing out that the legitimacy of any human government was not determined by whether or not it recognized God as Lord of all, or whether it even allowed the worship of the one true God. In fact His followers, after His death and resurrection, quickly became victims of a Roman government that insisted they worship Caesar and not this Jesus as supreme. And if Christians are called to support this government, to pay taxes to this government, what government could they not be required to support? This is the government that ultimately sanctioned the crucifixion of Jesus; this was the government that persecuted Christians and fed them to the lions. And here Jesus is telling them, 'Pay for it. Pay your taxes.' Not because what they are doing is righteous or moral or ethical, but because all authority comes from God and reflects His authority. And as **THE** authority, God Himself will deal with all injustice and unrighteousness.

The Bible makes it clear that we have a higher calling, an allegiance to another country that supercedes our earthly allegiance. *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,*¹² Christians must never forget that we are ultimately accountable to heaven. Earthly Caesars may require taxes, but our heavenly king requires our lives. Earthly rulers are owed something, but you owe God everything. You see Jesus took the argument about politics completely out of the left, right, center debate. He wasn't interested in a revolution against Rome. He was engaged in a greater revolution against the dominion of sin and death in all of us. When Jesus asked about the image and inscription on Caesar's coin, He immediately made the connection for us that Caesar may own all the coins, but God owns all of us. Jesus didn't even have coin. He had to ask for one. Here's an irony. A king without a coin. '*...though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.*'¹³

Just prior to this, Jesus had told a parable to this group about a landowner who rented out his vineyard to evil men. When it was time for the harvest, he sent his slaves to these guys to collect his money, but they beat one, killed another and stoned a third. He sent three more and they ended up in the same boat. And then he sent his son and these evil guys conspired together and killed the landowners son. And when these Pharisees and Herodians heard the story, they knew Jesus was talking about them. They were the wicked tenants. They recognized themselves in the story. They owed God all that they had. Jesus the Son was there. And they were even then rejecting Him. They had come to trap Him. And the Son had come to collect what was due. And guess what is due? You are. That's exactly what He was saying, and that's what they were hearing. And they were refusing to pay what was due.

And if you look back a moment in chapter 21 verse 42 and 43, Jesus asks them what is supposed to happen to those who refuse to pay: *When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."*¹⁴ They obviously knew the penalty for nonpayment. And that is exactly the point. Jesus is saying, 'You owe God everything. It's His image stamped on your face. And you haven't paid. Therefore, what's supposed to happen? What happens to those who refuse to pay Caesar? They get crucified just like Judas the Galilean'. I'm sure they made the connection. And you need to make the same connection.

12 Philippians 3:20 ESV

13 2 Corinthians 8:9 ESV

14 Matthew 21:42-43 ESV

Jesus is not interested in the politics of the left, right or center. He's has a much bigger agenda. You see, God has stamped His image in all of us and He says, 'Give to Me what is mine.' And yet we haven't. We rebelled just like Judas the Galilean. And we've been caught, and the sentence is death. But Jesus steps into the picture and says, 'I'll pay what they owe. Charge it to my account'. He paid with His life what we owed with ours. And at one stroke freed us to give Him our highest allegiance.

When it comes to politics, where do we land? On the one hand we engage. We render to Caesar what is Caesar's by paying taxes. We engage in politics by voting, lobbying, lawyering, or running for office. Even under the evil rule of a pagan emperor, Paul, for the sake of the gospel, pulled the political levers he had. He invoked his citizenship and appealed to Caesar. But on the other hand, we avoid leaning left, right or center. We pray for kings and those in authority; we also call them to account to the great King. We work for justice and good in the world, and we refuse to demonize those with whom we disagree. We extend love to our enemies, and do good to those who hate us, we bless those who curse us and pray for those who persecute us. We live in this world as exiles and strangers, citizens of earth and citizens of heaven, awaiting the appearing of our true King and proclaiming the good news of His triumph in the world to everyone.

Our good and gracious God,

You sent Your Son into the world, not to build some kind of political party or generate some kind of temporal revolution, but to destroy the dominion of sin and death and hell, and build Your kingdom where righteousness rules. Grant that we would refuse all earthly attempts to pigeon-hole us on the left or the right or in the center. But let us be a people who reflect Your righteous rule and love wherever we live and whatever Caesar we serve. As those who bear Your image, empower us to give You the allegiance and worship You are owed, and help us point others to the coming King and His reign, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, Amen.