



PART THREE: HONOUR CAESAR, BUT WORSHIP JESUS

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Mark 12:13-17; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17

I. RENDER UNTO CAESAR?

Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Mark 12:17

Jesus' words raise a hard question: How can the King of Kings tell people to give money to an empire that funds oppression and violence?

To say Jesus is Lord must mean Caesar isn't. As Abraham Kuyper once wrote:

“...there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: Mine!”¹

How can the King of Kings allow this king to continue?

Yet, while on earth Jesus recognizes governmental authority. Before Pontius Pilate, He states that political power exists only because it is permitted from above (John 19:11). God's sovereignty can make use of political leaders, even the self-serving political expediency of Pilate.

Returning the coin is symbolic. While humans bear God's image and belong fully to Him, God still permits earthly authorities limited responsibility. Jesus is, in effect, saying:

Honour Caesar, but worship God.

II. HONOUR CAESAR, BUT WORSHIP JESUS

The coins given to Caesar are not the only coins given

out by God. In Matthew 25, Jesus reminds us that each person is entrusted with talents. While talents represent gifts and abilities, they were originally a measurement of silver or gold—roughly six thousand of the denarii Jesus asks for in Mark 12. Caesar’s tax is Caesar’s talent. Like each of us, God has entrusted Caesar with real authority. Like each of us, how our authority is used can bring life or death.

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God's patience with Caesar reflects His patience with us. But Jesus also teaches, "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded;*" (Luke 12:48b). If Caesar fails to steward his authority toward justice, he too will answer to the true King.

Jesus' teaching fits within Scripture's broader story of humanity developing structures of authority. As societies grew from tribes to cities to complex governments, roles became more defined. In Israel kings did not often have the roles of priests or prophets. In God's common grace, there are distinct spheres of human responsibility. Even where God is not acknowledged, authority still operates under His sovereignty. This allows Jesus to say, "...*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's...*" (see Mark 12:17).

Both Paul the Apostle in Romans 13:1-7 and Peter the Apostle in 1 Peter 2:13-17 expand on this teaching. They describe governing authorities as servants of God bearing the sword in at least three important ways:

- Government 'bears the sword' for the maintenance of law and order.
- Government 'bears the sword' against threats to its people.
- Government also 'bears the hammer' to build and maintain public systems and services to promote the general welfare of its people.²

We recognize this authority within God's sovereignty and respect and submit to it, up to a point.

Honour, however, is not the same as worship. Scripture is clear - governmental authority is limited. Jesus, Peter and Paul all faced execution under Roman rule for treason against Caesar. When commanded to stop speaking about Christ by the ruling Jewish council, the apostles declared:

*"Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him?
You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking
about what we have seen and heard."*

Acts 4:19-20

When it is between Caesar and God there is no question
- God always wins.

III. THE DANGER OF WORSHIPPING CAESAR

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Biblical teaching makes room for human government as an expression of God's common grace. Those who bow their knees to Jesus can, in good conscience, offer respect to governing authority. Government can be a gift.

Scripture is realistic about how this gift has been abused. Each of us has a tiny little dictator in our hearts who surfaces when we get power, which is to say, we are sinners. From ancient Egypt to Caesar to Stalin, Mao and Hitler, the provision of government given by God's common grace fights to make itself ultimate.

In the ancient world, this tendency lead to full blown idolatry. In Jesus' day Roman cities had temples and altars to Caesar as a god.

As such, governments, Caesar and his ilk, don't just want to keep us safe; they begin to think they can save us.

Trouble is, idols always take more than they can give.

Israel knew this tension well. They began as tribes bound together under God's rule, raised up judges when crisis came. It was messy. It was inefficient. It was not impressive beside the military and economic strength of surrounding nations. So, the people demanded a king (1 Samuel 8:19-20). Through the prophet Samuel, God issued a warning: He (the king) will take your sons. He will take your daughters. He will take your fields. He will take your wealth (1 Sam. 8:11-18).

He (the king) will take. He will take. He will take.

This is not just monarchy's temptation. Every system of power expands if left unchecked. Today, at their extreme and worst, the political right tends towards a status-quo protecting authoritarianism. The political left tends towards a paternalistic state defining cultural values and morality in coercive ways.

And they take. And they take. And they take.

They take from us, promising to bring heaven on earth. But can they deliver?

In Daniel 2, the emperor Nebuchadnezzar II dreams of a towering statue representing successive world empires. The empires crumble through the introduction of "...a rock cut out, but not by human hands" (Daniel 2:34b). The dream is a tangible reminder to a historical 'Caesar,' his kingdom is not ultimate. God's Kingdom will come and transcend all earthly kingdoms.

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This Kingdom is in and among the kingdoms. As such, we have to be politically realistic instead of idealistic. Jesus later tells us that wheat and weeds will grow together until His return. Good and evil remain tangled in history. Politics can accomplish real good, but it will not bring heaven down to earth.

When politics becomes ultimate, it reshapes the human heart. Those who worship Caesar are driven by fear, obsessed with image, hungry for power and desperate for results now. Scripture invites us into a better allegiance – honouring earthly authority while placing our ultimate hope in the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

What does it look like to worship the political? What are the motivations and desires which drive us? Those who worship Caesar are driven by fear, obsessed with image, hungry for worldly power and they want it now.

A. DRIVEN BY FEAR

When it comes to motivation, the Bible gives us two options: love or fear. Worshipping Caesar is always motivated by fear - not helpful biological fear, but short-sighted self-preservation fear. Jesus characterizes this wrong kind of fear by saying some fear those who can “...*kill the body but cannot kill the soul*.”(Matthew 10:28).

Much political discourse runs on fear, fear of being on the wrong side of history or economic destruction.

How do I know I'm worshipping Caesar?

When I vote, post or argue to save one person: me. When my engagement with politics is about protecting my place in the middle class or proving my righteousness, fear is driving me—not love.

B. OBSESSED WITH IMAGE

Fear feeds obsession with image. We may not burn incense to the prime minister, but we signal our allegiance through slogans, talking points, hashtags and bumper stickers. As Patrick J. Deneen observes, left vs. right has replaced family, faith and community as markers of identity.³

Within Christian circles, politics often trumps Scripture. Historic teachings on morality and care for the poor are justified away for party loyalty.

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Jesus warns:

*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front
of others to be seen by them.*

Matthew 6:1a

How do I know I'm worshipping Caesar?

When our voice protects image over God's truth, we
worship Caesar.

C. HUNGRY FOR WORLDLY POWER

A shorthand used throughout history for political
worship, and other tendencies like it, is being
'worldly.' Living within the worldly frame is short-
sighted, self-preservative and, usually, combative.
Living 'in the world' is the devouring, biting and
destroying indicative of living 'in the flesh' (see
Galatians 5:16-17).

Power and authority are part of God's good ordering
of the universe. But there are 'worldly' and 'Kingdom'
ways of using power.

*"...You know that those who are regarded as rulers of
the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials
exercise authority over them. Not so with you..."*

Mark 10:42b-43a

Worldly power is inherently coercive, abusive and
domineering. Because, without a God in heaven, our
issues are up to us to solve. It is the inherent atheism
of modern politics which lends it a fevered pitch.

How do I know I'm worshipping Caesar?

When fear and image drive us to abuse, manipulate
and destroy enemies because their existence
threatens our party or power.

D. DESPERATE FOR IT NOW

Political worship is urgent, impatient and narrow.
When each election cycle is an apocalypse, every
opponent an anti-Christ, then we have bent the knee
to the wrong lord.

How do I know I'm worshipping Caesar?

When I cannot think past today, this election or these
borders.

IV. WORSHIPPING JESUS

Christianity's central claim, its organizing reality, is
the total lordship of Jesus Christ. We come into faith
by proclaiming Jesus is Lord *overall*.

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Christian public witness has built the goods of the western world. The question cannot be whether to participate in public life. The question is:

What is my public engagement flowing from, fear for myself or worship to King Jesus?

When our public engagement and political life flow from our devotion to Jesus, a new and redemptive portrait emerges. Those who worship Jesus, while honoring Caesar, are led by love, humbly faithful, diligent in service and sowing in hope.

A. LED BY LOVE

Soon after the 'render unto Caesar' moment, Jesus names the greatest commandment: love God and love your neighbor (Mark 12:28ff). C.S. Lewis captures this beautifully:

"Things are to be many, yet somehow also one. The good of one self is to be the good of another. This impossibility [Jesus] calls love..."⁴

Love is not short-sighted self-preservation. It is the selfless seeking of another's good. In the Kingdom, paradoxically, the good of another becomes our good. Those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will find it (see Mark 8:35). Christian political engagement begins with love—love of God flowing into love for our neighbors, willing to lay down even our lives for their good.

We worship Jesus when our engagement is motivated not by fear, but by sacrificial love.

B. HUMBLY FAITHFUL

Love is complex. Political ideologies reduce life to simplified slogans—abortion or MAID, government programs or free markets—but Jesus refuses political simplicity. In His Kingdom, we serve as a body, each with specific tasks: prophets, pastors, commentators, podcasters. We trust that God guides His people to where they are needed, and not every problem is ours to solve.

We are seeking to be *faithful* to Jesus' leading, not to look good in the eyes of our day's Pharisees.

Faithfulness is humble. Isaiah's ministry would see no visible effect (Isaiah 6:1-10). God's ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Many labor in obscurity, as Ananias did in Acts 9—he healed Paul, setting in motion a historical reshaping

of the world.

We worship Jesus when we trust Him to guide us, even when unseen.

C. DILIGENT IN SERVICE

God works publicly as well as privately. Jesus calls us to be salt and light (Matthew 5:16), shining without dominating. Kingdom power is service:

“...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

Mark 10:43b-44

Daniel rose in Babylon not by politicking but by integrity. Joseph became second in Egypt through wisdom, not coercion. Jesus warns against ‘seeking the seat of honor’, against seeking power through association:

“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 14:11

We worship Jesus when we are faithful with what is put before us, working diligently and with integrity. When we are faithful with a little we are given more, our integrity often leads us to places of influence.

D. SOWING IN HOPE

Kingdom work is patient work. Many feel a ‘culture war’ urgency, looking to the political as the primary means of societal transformation; but history shows true transformation often begins small.

We honor political realities but participate in them: with votes, petitions, and non-violent acts of resistance when necessary. We also know our community and growth are cultural change as well. When working with God, the yield is greater than the investment. The seed which sticks bears fruit thirty, sixty, a hundred times over.

Jesus will be all in all, in the end. No work done for Him is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58), because He will return and set all things right. We may not see the fruit of our efforts, but on the other side of this worldly veil we will rise in the eternal Kingdom.

So, give Caesar his coins. Jesus will get His in the end.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Kuyper, Abraham (1837-1920). Lectures on Calvinism: "Sphere Sovereignty". Hendrickson Publishers. pdf version of the chapter available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599639df03596e6169d48bba/t/62cdc5d25b16643ad790dc88/1657652695090/Sphere+Sovereignty%5B...%5Dper.pdf>
2. *Ibid.* chapter: "Calvinism and Politics". pdf version of the chapter available at: <https://goodhopepca.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/kuyper-calvinism-and-politics.pdf>
3. Deneen, Patrick J. (9 Jan 2018). Why Liberalism Failed. Yale University Press.
4. *Ibid.*



Open Up

What did you grow up expecting from government? How have you had to correct or grow in your understanding of it and its role?

Dig In

1. **Re-read Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17, John 19:11**
2. Make space to share openly without judgment. Trust the Spirit will lead us through the process of engaging in these questions together.
 - What do you think ‘honoring the emperor’ means in our democratic context?
 - If we’re connected to people who ‘worship Caesar’—lead with their political affiliations—how can we encourage them to put the political back in its proper sphere?
 - How do we engage in the political while being realistic about human sinfulness?
 - What issues connected to public life has the Spirit most placed on your heart? What ways, both political and through private action, is He calling you to act?
 - How do we keep our hope before us when bombarded by hopeless rhetoric?

Prayer:

Perhaps there are some in your group engaged in a way which is bring healing and transformation to culture. Take time to encourage each other in the work you are doing.

Perhaps someone in your group has a potential gift for a more public expression of witness, encourage them as such.

Take time to pray for our leaders and our country, pray against the continuing rise in all forms of extremism. Pray for the Kingdom to come.