

In the ✠ name of Jesus. Amen.

The relationship between the citizen and the state, between the believer and the state is in view today as Jesus is tested: *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”* And He teaches, *“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

Jesus is being tested; the Pharisees wanted to trick Him. Jesus had entered into Jerusalem as a humble king riding on a donkey, and the people had flocked to Him. *“Look, the world has gone after him”* (John 12:19), the Pharisees complained. With this Jesus, they would be losing power — political power. You see, politics hasn’t changed all that much in 2000 years.

Therefore, they had to trick Jesus into giving an answer that would either discredit Him before the people — the Romans and their emperor were despised by the people — or endanger Him before the Romans — the Romans didn’t take kindly to insurrectionists stirring up trouble by teaching the people to refuse to pay their taxes. But either way, the Pharisees had Him, so they schemed. They would soon be done with Him, so they thought. How wrong they were.

They tried to disarm Jesus with their flattery: *“you are true and teach the way of God truthfully”*; *“you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.”* Of course, even though their excessive praise was insincere, it was all true. That’s exactly who Jesus was — the Truth in the flesh whose word was the truth that sets men free — God in the flesh, who shows no partiality, who healed Jew and Gentile, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

No, the Divine Word would not fall into their trap. Jesus was having none of their attempts to move Him off His singular focus, for Jesus had come to Jerusalem with a purpose—not to fall prey to the Pharisees’ deceptions, but to be betrayed into their hands, not to assuage the concerns of the religious authorities, but to fulfill the will of His Father. Jesus had come not to overthrow the Gentile Roman occupation, but *“to be mocked and flogged and crucified,”* by them (Matt. 20:19). Jesus had come to Jerusalem not to be exalted to earthly kingship, for His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). He had come to serve; He had come *“to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Matt. 20:28). He had come to die and then *“be raised [up again] on the third day”* (Matt. 20:19). He had come to win forgiveness of sins for the world, and to give His church the tools to go forth with this Gospel and build His church. And He was resolute in this purpose; He would not be thwarted. No one was going to take His life from Him; He was going to lay it down of His own accord.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Jesus does not avoid the question as our politicians do today, using their many words to say nothing. Even knowing their evil intent, Jesus does not revert to some “talking points.” He answered them. *“Show me a coin.”* And they did. And He said to them, *“Whose*

likeness and inscription is this?" And 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."* And the people marveled at Jesus—we do, too.

Jesus not only avoided their trap, but He taught us something important regarding our Christian duties. It's in our catechism. *"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."* Give to Caesar what he is owed, as if God commanded it—for He did. And what are Caesar's? You know them: taxes, as much as you owe; revenue, if you owe it. Respect and honor, as though these politicians, mayors and councilmen, governors and legislators, presidents and representatives are God's ministers.

Honor them, even this president? Respect to President Trump? God's minister?

A January 17 Religious News Service article asked the question, perhaps testing us: "Did God choose Trump?" I have to admit, I don't recall this question being asked about the presidents from Nixon through Obama—the ones I'm old enough really to remember. Oh, there have been questions of legitimacy: George W. Bush and the hanging chads; or Barack Obama and the birth certificate. But this question: Did God intervene in the 2016 election that put Donald Trump in the Oval Office? What might that mean? And this story was accompanied by a photo of "members of the clergy [laying] hands and [praying] over [then] Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump...."

The article was interesting, though to me, the answer was obvious from the Scriptures, whether one supported Trump or not. First, St. Paul writes, *"there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God"* (Rom. 13:1). That is, Paul says, God Himself establishes government. And, to be sure, that government can take different forms: republics and empires, dictatorships and democracies. We may consider some forms better than others. Nevertheless, they exist at God's institution.

Second, St. Paul says, it is God Himself who appoints our leaders: *"whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed"* (Rom. 13:2). Moreover, God appoints these leaders for our good: that leader, whether you like him or not, *"is God's servant for your good"* (Rom. 13:4)—therefore, *"let every person be subject to the governing authorities"* (Rom. 13:1).

Cyrus in our Old Testament reading was surely not a godly ruler. He was a pagan Persian. Yet God saw fit to work through him. He called Cyrus *"his anointed,"* *"whose right hand [God had] grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed ...,"* and so forth. And the Lord did it that Cyrus himself might *"know that it is... the LORD, the God of Israel, who [called him] by [his] name."* But He did it especially *"For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen,"* that is, for the church. God establishes government for the sake of His Gospel, that it may

“not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people”—you may recognize those words from a familiar collect.

Nevertheless, not all the theologians in that article agreed it was such an easy answer: “Did God choose Trump?”— and the differences seemed to revolve around the word “choose.” Definitions are important. How did they understand “choose”? Did God intervene actively in choosing Donald Trump? (Indeed does God intervene in the world in that way, micromanaging our lives?) Or was it more indirect?

Did God choose Trump? Well, you won’t find an executive order from the Lord appointing Trump as President. I don’t think you’ll find that God Himself plucked Donald Trump out of Trump Tower and put him into the White House. Rather, God works through means. As He does in the church, so He does in the world. In the U. S. that means through the voters. And so Trump has been appointed, chosen by God through us citizens, to be God’s servant for our good. Recognizing this, then, yes, it’s not only taxes you owe, but honor and respect.

But Jesus also teaches, render “*to God the things that are God’s.*” And there is much more that we owe to God, for the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. To God, we owe fear and love and trust above all things—it’s His first commandment. But more than that, God redeemed us poor sinners in Jesus Christ, by grace — completely undeserved, and there is a “so that” in Luther’s explanation to the 2nd Article of the Creed on redemption: so “that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” God has made me and all creatures—1st Article; He gives me what I need; He defends me — all “out of Fatherly divine goodness and mercy.” And we say, “for all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.” To God, we owe ears that hear His Word and lips that call out to Him for mercy. To God, we owe lives that do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with Him, who came humbly down from heaven to walk with us, who bestowed His kindness to us, and who became our justice. To God, we owe our bodies as living sacrifices, as our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1). To God, we owe lips that “*continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to [Him]*” and hands that “*do not neglect to do good [but that] share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to [Him]*” (Heb. 13:15-16).

“*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” Let us today learn from Jesus. Let us give thanks to God for the governments He establishes for our good, and the leaders He appoints. Let do our Christian duties, because it is God’s law, yes, but even more in joyful response to Him who loved us, and gave Himself up for us, to forgive us and give us the joys of everlasting life. God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.