

**Can We Pay Tribute to Trump? Luke 20:20-26 3.22.2026**  
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When I was 19 years old, Donald Trump came down the golden escalator of Trump Tower and announced he was running for President. I'm 30 now. So for almost my entire adult life, Trump has been the guy. The most talked about, most written about, most worried about, most praised, most criticized, most everything.

Normally, I really work on the start of a sermon, to get people invested in whatever 2,000 year old text we're about to read. But today all I have to do is say Trump, and I know you're in. It's like magic. Makes me understand why they always put him in the news. "Trump." And the head turns, and maybe the blood pressure goes up too.

But we don't talk about him here, do we? At least I've never mentioned him in the pulpit since I came here. He's the most talked about man on the planet and yet I've managed to avoid the subject. Why? Should we talk about him? Should we not talk about him? What would Jesus say?

That's what our scripture is about this morning. Our text today is Luke chapter 20 starting at verse 20, which you'll find on page 1019 of your pew Bible if you'd like to follow along. In the weeks leading up to Easter, we've been studying how Jesus spent the last week of his life on earth in Jerusalem. And we've heard how Jesus argued with the scribes and the chief priests, how they were out to get Jesus. And now Luke tells us about their next attempt to get Jesus. Would you all please rise for the reading of the word of God. Our text today is Luke chapter 20, verses 20 through 26 and I'll be reading in the English Standard Version.

So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked him,

“Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”

But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”

They said, “Caesar’s.”

He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” We are all under the authority of God and under the authority of the government. We are subject to two kingdoms, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of heaven. We’re dual citizens. So we render to Caesar and to God. That’s my message for you today: we render to Caesar and to God.

And we’ll look at that in three parts this morning: first, the short answer, Jesus’ quick remark that establishes the basic principle; second, the long answer, how that plays out for us in America today; and third, the non-answer, the things I can’t say as a pastor. The short answer, the long answer, and the non-answer. Let’s start with the short answer.

Like so many stories in the life of Jesus, it starts with a question. And before Luke tells us the question, he tells us the motive for the question: “that they might catch him in something he said.”

The scribes and the chief priests, the Jewish leaders, were trying to catch Jesus saying something against the government. After all, they knew Jesus was against the government, he had ridden into Jerusalem like a king on Palm Sunday, he seemed to be setting himself up as the messiah, the Christ, the prophesied king of Israel. He had to be against the government of Caesar, they just needed him to come out and say it.

So they come up with a gotcha-question, a trap: “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”

It’s a simple question: can we pay taxes to Rome or not? Are the Romans our rightful rulers or not? Are you the king of the Jews or is Caesar the King of the Jews? Whose side are you on?

It’s a simple question, and it’s a trap. If Jesus says: No. Don’t pay your taxes, the Romans are a bunch of pagans, and the people of God need to stop trusting in Caesar and return the Lord, if Jesus says, No! They’ll turn him over to the governor and have him arrested for insurrection, sedition, rebellion.

But if Jesus says, yes. Pay your taxes. The Romans are our rulers. The Divine Caesar August deserves our respect, our loyalty, and our taxes. If Jesus says, Yes! Caesar won’t complain but the people will. The common people who hailed him with “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the LORD” on Palm Sunday will turn on him. The Jews who hate the Romans will abandon Jesus if he says yes.

The question is a trap to get Jesus to take a side either with the Romans or with the people. How will Jesus answer?

Like so many questions in the life of Jesus, it starts with a question and Jesus answers with a question: “Show me a denarius.” That’s a coin. “Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”

“Caesar’s.”

“Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus refuses to give a simple yes or no answer. He gives a qualified yes, a conditional yes, a yes pay the taxes to Caesar, it’s his money after all, with his image on it, but also, don’t forget to give God the things that are God’s. The things that are made in the image of God.

So Jesus’ short answer is the same answer we hear in the rest of the Bible. That kings, government have authority over us, but their authority is under God’s authority. In the Old Testament we read how Daniel served the pagan king of Babylon so long as he could still serve his God, the king of king as well. In the New Testament Paul tells us that the powers that be are established by God, they are the ministers of God, and we should pay them what they’re owed, taxes, revenue, respect, honor. Render to Caesar and to God.

Now that doesn’t mean the government has authority over this and the church has authority over that. It’s not the government’s over here and God’s over there. It also doesn’t mean we have to do whatever the government says. Rather it means that the government has real authority but not ultimate authority. The government doesn’t have the final say. The government is under the authority of God who has final authority.

This is just like the other calls to submission in the Bible. Servants submit to your masters. Wives submit to your husbands. Children submit to your parents. Christians submit to one another. In all of these we submit to authorities which are under the authority of God. And that means if those authorities ask us to do something contrary to what God asks us to do, we obey God rather than men. So render to Caesar and to God. That’s the short simple answer.

And they marvelled at his answer. What a good answer. So simple, so clear. That guy should really go into politics. He has a gift. Nothing more to say really. They became silent.

But I imagine, and this is speculation, it's not in the text, I imagine, after the scribes and chief priests and the people left, they probably talked about it.

And a scribe said "I guess he really is ok with the government since he said we have to pay taxes."

But a commoner said "What? No he's not ok with the government, Everything belongs to God, not Caesar, so render everything to God."

"Now look Caesar's emperor and we have to follow the law."

"Caesar can keep his stupid coins with his stupid face on it, but everything else is God's."

And back and forth they'd go. Jesus' answer left a lot of wiggle room, didn't it? It leaves space for people to decide where exactly to draw the line between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.

And Christians have been drawing that line in different places for 2,000 years now. Some Christians put the government under religious authority. Some Christians stay as far as possible from government authority, won't serve in public office, won't serve in the military. Some Christians make the head of the state should also be the head of the church. There are so many questions left open, by Jesus' short answer. Should there be a separation of church and state? How much is the government allowed to ask of us? Can we ever overthrow the government?

For a moment, the short simple answer leaves us marveling in silence. But once we start talking about the answer with our neighbor, we'll find they heard the short answer very differently than we did.

And soon the short answer, will be no answer at all. Jesus' short answer demands a little more explanation and that brings us to our second point, the long answer, how that answer applies to us today.

And to do that, we should consider how Jesus applied it, how Jesus himself lived out 'render to Caesar and to God.' When we do two things come into focus:

First, Jesus participated in unjust systems. Jesus participated in unjust systems. What do I mean by that? The Roman Empire was not just. They were not what any Christian would call a good government. They worshipped pagan gods. They tortured people. They forced criminals and slaves to fight to death in order to amuse the masses. And to that government, Jesus said, pay your taxes, and in the gospel of Matthew we even see him actually pay the tax. Even though the system was unjust on the whole, Jesus still paid his taxes.

Jesus was not afraid of cooperating with bad people or bad systems. Jesus hung out with tax-collectors and prostitutes and sinners. Jesus' disciples included both Matthew, a tax collector, a crooked collaborator with the Romans, and Simon the Zealot, who wanted to overthrow the Romans. Jesus ate food with tax collectors, food paid for by oppressive Roman taxes. More than that, it's a plain historical fact that living in the 1st century Roman Empire, Jesus would have eaten food grown, prepared, and served by slaves.

Jesus did not go around saying "I can't eat that, it wasn't ethically harvested." "I can't pay that tax because the government is going to use the money for evil" "I can't worship at the temple because it's full of crooks." Jesus lived in the world as it was. With all its imperfections. Jesus participated in unjust systems.

But on the other hand, the second thing that becomes clear when we look at Jesus' life, at how he lived out "render to Caesar and to God:" is that Jesus never compromised on his own actions. Jesus never compromised on his own actions.

Jesus paid taxes to the Romans that they used to build pagan temples and make gladiators fight to the death, but Jesus never worshiped in those temple, never watched the gladiators. Jesus ate with tax collectors, but he didn't become one. Jesus was not afraid to heal on the sabbath even though the Pharisees forbid it. In his own actions, in his own words, in the things he could humanly control, Jesus always did what was right.

That's how Jesus lived, he took part in unjust systems, he was in the world, but he was not of the world, he never compromised on his own actions. And that's a model we can all follow: it's ok to take part in an unjust system, but it's never ok to be unjust ourselves.

Let's walk through one example of what this means for us. It's tax season. If you haven't already filed, you've got less than a month now to do your income taxes. And when you do your income taxes, as you write the check or put in your bank information, as you prepare to watch thousands of dollars disappear from your bank account, you may wonder what will they do with my money?

And your mind probably won't go to something pleasant like the social security check for the sweet old lady who lives down the road or maintaining our national parks. Your mind probably won't go to the just and wise use of your money, but to the worst wastes you've heard of. I'll leave it to your imagination, whether it's a missile or a bribe to nowhere or someone's salary or healthcare fraud or a kickback contract. And as a Christian, as a sensible human being, you won't want to pay into that unjust system. But Jesus says render to Caesar. The government has the authority to tax us and we have the duty to pay.

But also, when you're filing your taxes, and that money's about to disappear from your account, you might have an idea. You might forget about that side-hustle. You might not mention those checks you got. You might exaggerate

those business expenses and charitable deductions. You might give yourself a little kickback. I mean who would notice? And what do they need the money for?

And to that, Jesus says “Render to Caesar.” “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed.” In our own actions, we cannot compromise, no matter how bad the system we’re living in gets.

And with that in mind, I want to turn to: voting. How Christians vote is a controversy within churches and it’s a stumbling block for people considering Christianity. For many people, how one votes has become a measure of our character. The quickest easiest way to sort someone into good or bad today is by how they vote. And voting for one party or the other is seen as an endorsement of the worst of that party. A republican vote is seen as an endorsement of Donald Trump’s character, and a democratic vote is seen as a vote for abortion.

But when we do that, we misunderstand what voting really is. Voting is like paying taxes. Voting is a duty required of us by our government. Voting is participation in an unjust system. Whether we vote democrat or republican or third party, whoever gets elected will do some things that are unjust.

When Jesus paid taxes to Caesar, when Jesus gave money to the Romans which they would use for pagan temples and gladiator fights and wars of conquest, that was in no way an endorsement of what the Romans did or who the Romans were. And in the same way when the government asks us to vote, asks us to give our opinion of who should be in office, that vote is not an endorsement of everything that person does or everything the government does. And therefore we shouldn’t make who we vote for such a fundamental moral issue.

Eating a cheeseburger at MacDonald’s does not mean you endorse factory farming. Wearing Nike does not mean you endorse child labor. Going to a hospital does not mean you endorse every procedure that goes on there.

Giving your money through taxes to the government does not mean you endorse everything they do with your money. And giving your honest opinion to the government through voting does not mean you endorse everything they do with your vote.

That's how I understand it. You can agree or disagree. I've said it before and I'll say it again. I don't expect you to agree with everything I say. And if you do agree with everything I say, I'm not doing my job. If you want to talk more about it, I'm leading adult Sunday school today or we can meet sometime.

And all that said, even though we participate in these unjust systems, we must never sink to their level. There is no excuse for, no justification from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, for compromising our morals in politics. Politics does not give us a license to live like the world, to live in the flesh. "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy... Jesus never compromised in his actions. Jesus shows us a different way to live.

But to many the example Jesus set for us seems foolish or naive. This past week a politician, a non-Christian politician articulated how many people think today when he said this about the war in Iran:

"Jesus Christ has no advantage over Genghis Khan. Because if you are strong enough, ruthless enough, powerful enough, evil will overcome good. Aggression will overcome moderation."

Like many people, this politician sees the world as a brutal place where might makes right. But this view is first of all historically inaccurate. It's just not true even from a secular perspective.

The people who have changed history most have not been the strongest and most ruthless. The dictators and warlords and conquerors come and go like the weather compared to the enduring influence of great thinkers like Jesus.

And secondly it's unbiblical. Scripture tells us that it is God who "changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." The Word of God does not say "evil will overcome good." The Word of God says "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And we see this most clearly in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who paid taxes to the government that sentenced him to death. Jesus Christ who would not tell a lie or change his mind even though it cost him his life. Jesus Christ who established a kingdom not by killing, but by dying. Jesus Christ who was not strong enough or ruthless enough or powerful enough to flee Jerusalem or escape the trial or come down from the cross. No, Jesus Christ laid down his life on the cross. Suffering for his enemies, taking the punishment we deserved so that we could be forgiven. And though for a day or two, it seemed that Caesar had an advantage over Christ, although for two days he lay dead in the tomb, on the third day, he rose from the dead and he ascended to the right hand of God the Father where he rules over the kingdom of God. And to all who say Jesus is Lord, he promises forgiveness for our past, strength for our present, and a future of eternal life. And that is the gospel.

Now that I've said so much about politics, I have to admit, part of me just wants to tell you how to vote. I've said that it's permissible for Christians to vote and that we shouldn't hold one another accountable for the worst things the system does with our vote. But I haven't said who you should or shouldn't vote for.

That's not because I don't have an answer. I do vote and have strong political opinions; my mailman can tell you that I do get political mailings. And it's not because I'm afraid to tell you. Part of being a preacher means telling the truth even if it's unpopular or will lead to conflict. It's not because of the separation of church and state, or that I'm afraid the church could lose tax-exempt status if I get political. The reason why I won't tell you who to vote for is that it would interfere with my real job. And that brings us to our last point: the non-answer, I won't tell you how to vote.

My job as a minister of Jesus Christ is to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. And while the gospel has implications for every aspect of life, including political life, from foreign policy abroad to zoning laws at home, the gospel is first and foremost for your souls. And if I start spouting my opinion on foreign policy and taxes and zoning, the untrained, inexperienced, political opinions of a 30 year old who read a substack article the other week, it might make it harder for people to hear the gospel from me. It will be harder both because I'm liable to get things wrong and because it will take up time in the pulpit better spent on the issues that actually affect your lives: human sin and God's love.

And there are other Christians you can listen to for politics. There are Christian politicians and Christian political commentators you can listen to, rather than expecting your politically-untrained local church pastor to do it. Christianity has a lot to say about politics from foreign policy to zoning, but it doesn't need to be said in a pulpit by your pastor. That's someone else's job, not mine.

I'll close with a story. In 1622 King James told all the preachers in England to shut up about political controversies. England was at a breaking point. The continent of Europe was falling into the 30 years war, a war driven in part by religious divisions between Christians. And in England the uneasy truce between Catholics, regular Anglicans, and Puritans seemed close to breaking.

King James led several reform efforts to keep the country together, including commissioning a new English translation of the Bible which would appease all but the most extreme factions, the translation we now call the King James Version.

And another reform was his 1622 *Directions to Preachers* which ordered them to stop doing 3 controversial things: 1) no arguing about predestiantion, which was one of the main disagreements between Puritans and regular Anglicans, unless you're qualified to discuss it, 2) no meddling in government businesss by preaching about what the king can and can't do, and 3) no more dunking on catholics or puritans, but modestly critique them only as the text calls for it.

Soon after King James told all the preachers to shut up about the controversial stuff, a man named John Donne stepped into the pulpit. John Donne was dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London; he was the most popular preacher in England. Donne had been a lawyer, a soldier, a politician, a diplomat, and a poet, before he went into the ministry, and the people would crowd into the church, standing-room only to hear him talk for 1 hour straight about 1 verse of scripture. He was the guy. When Shakespeare was England's greatest playwright, Donne was their greatest preacher.

And after King James told all the preachers to shut up on the controversy and the politics, Donne climbed into the pulpit and this is what he said: "The king is right. We need to stick to the gospel, to the fundamentals of the faith, to the enemies within our souls, not the enemies outside us." But they didn't listen. And instead two decades later the church divided and the nation fell into a brutal civil war.

Let us pray.