

Rendering To God and Caesar

Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon United Church of Christ
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As I see it, there are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover's quarrel with their country. —William Sloane Coffin

Love of country is a wonderful thing, but why should love stop at the border? —Pablo Casals

Readings: Romans 13:1-7
Matthew 22:15-22

Today is a national holiday, the 4th of July, the celebration of this nation's beginning. And I want to talk this morning about patriotism, the love of one's country, within the context of our faith.

The passage that we have today is about misplaced love and confused allegiances. Here was the situation:

After 6 CE, there was a Roman poll tax which the Zealots, the nationalistic party, refused to pay. The Pharisees, although they were separatists and legalists within the Jewish community, were also somewhat politically conservative, for want of a better word. So even though the Pharisees refused to take an oath of allegiance to Herod, for example, they did not resist too much. They had somewhat of a truce with the Roman government and paid their taxes. They reluctantly co-existed.

So it was a strange alliance of the Pharisees, who had sent a delegation to interrogate Jesus, and the Herodians, who ruled on behalf of Rome. Yet the temple elite and the emperor had one thing in common: they both exploited, oppressed and sapped the very life from the people.

And so the famous question: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" Now, this was not an honest question in search of an answer; it was a trap. Matthew says, "The Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle Jesus in his talk" (vs. 15). They really weren't interested whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. All they wanted was to get Jesus. It was not just a tough theological question; it was a trick.

The Pharisees had created a no-win situation: Jesus will be damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. If he said, "No, it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar," then the Herodians and the Roman authorities would have him killed for treason. If Jesus said,

“Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then the Jewish nationalists and much of the crowd would rise up against him.

According to Matthew, Jesus saw through this, knew their true intent, and called them “hypocrites” or “play actors.”

Jesus’ response, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” was amazing. Matthew says, “When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away” (vs. 21-22). It was amazing because it was not a complete answer at all; it simply defined the nature of the problem. And yet, he was still able to get his point across. Reading between the lines, everyone knew exactly what he meant. There was no way the Pharisees could twist his response and trap him. In fact, he threw is right back at them. His answer backed *them* into a corner because it begs the question: Which things are God’s and which are Caesar’s?

As Robert McAfee Brown said in his book, *Saying Yes and Saying No*, this splendid principle offers little practical help. It does not give us a simple answer. It is not like an ethical cookbook which we might follow in some recipe style. Jesus rejects in principle any ready-made formula. It requires his followers to think and to struggle with their choices.

The real issue in this passage is not just taxes or even the church vs. state; the real issue is to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance. “I am the Lord you God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

If we hold our highest allegiance to God, we must struggle with every situation. Discerning what is God’s and Caesar’s is not easy task; it is a real test. Because Caesar is neither “Lord,” nor is he “Satan.” Caesar is sometimes with and sometimes against God’s will. So we need to be continually evaluating.

That great preacher and social prophet, William Sloane Coffin, wrote:

For Christians to render everything to Caesar—their minds, their consciences—is to become evangelical nationalists. That’s not a distortion of the gospel; that desertion.

There are things that do not belong to Caesar. No country is beyond evaluation and criticism. Coffin said,

“American, love it or leave it.” I believe that. The trouble with that slogan, which found its way onto endless bumpers during the Vietnam War, was that it didn’t mean what it said. It meant “America, obey it or leave it,” as if national unity were more patriotic than national debate...Love of country, like love of parents, is never to be equated with blind obedience, as Jesus himself in both cases so poignantly demonstrated.

We render too much unto Caesar when the country is absolutized and above reproach.

Robert McAfee Brown's point is that sometimes it is necessary to say "no" to the state if we are to say "yes" to God. Sometimes, he says, to render unto God means that we must withhold from Caesar. God alone is perfect; no country ever is.

So one temptation is to give too much to Caesar and the other is not to give enough to Caesar. It was Grover Norquist who famously said that he wanted to make "the government small enough to drown it in the bathtub." He has lots of followers these days. And lately we have seen a movement in this country and in Arizona to continually call for less and less taxes and for a reduction in the size of our government, except, it appears, for growing military spending. But the government or "Caesar" does have a right to some of our money. It is not just our patriotic duty, it is our Christian duty as well. Jesus said, "give Caesar his due." In Romans 13, Paul wrote, "Let every person be subject to the governmental authorities." Why? Because the government often serves the purpose of God. Governments restrict bad conduct; they protect the weak from violence; they provide essential needs for their citizens; they support the poor and vulnerable; and they help the common good, the well-being of all the people. "For this reason you pay taxes," wrote Paul, "for the authorities are God's servants... Pay to all what is due them."

My ethics professor in college, Richard Mouw, who later went on to be president of Fuller Seminary, used to say that we need to balance Romans 13 with Revelation 13. We need to balance the image of the state as the servant of God with the image of the state as "the beast" or God's enemy. For both Paul and John were writing not about two different countries but the *same Roman empire!*

And so we love our country but we don't worship it. When we come together on this day at this hour each week, we set aside this time to worship, and we worship God and God alone. Jesus implied that there is certain territory of God's into which Caesar cannot intrude! There are things that belong to God that Caesar has no right to claim. "It's wonderful to love one's country," said Coffin, "but faith is for God." Worship is for God alone.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating. One of the foundational aspects to Reformed Theology is the awareness, to use Richard Niebuhr's phrase, of the human tendency to "absolutize the relative." That is, we take human dogma, doctrine, principles and then turn them into absolutes.

And this human tendency is a root problem of faith, since there is only one absolute: God. Paul Tillich coined the term "protestant principle," which is the protest against all human and institutional pretensions to unconditional or absolute authority. In other words, God dethrones all our absolutes. Theologically, the love of one's country is a relative good which we cannot turn into an absolute good.

The classical language speaks of “idolatry” and the “sovereignty of God.” If God alone is sovereign, then everything else, including one’s country, must be measured in its conformity to the divine purposes. Nothing is exempt, and nothing ever totally measures up completely.

Whenever we say that something is exempt, we place that object, policy or principle on the same level as God. This is what making an idol of something means. This is a universal human condition—we all do it. It’s not something that only “other people” do. There are many idols: countries, theologies, denominations, churches, lifestyle, affluence, even family and friends.

Every Fourth of July I have found it helpful, for many years now, to meditate of this wonderful little quote from William Sloane Coffin:

As I see it, there are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.

Let us each strive to become good patriots. As Albert Camus once wrote:

I should like to love my country and still love justice.

In our text this morning we have a radical statement by Jesus. It is a statement that implies we ought never to abandon our absolute allegiance to God.

We celebrate our commitments to family and friends, but we give our ultimate allegiance to God and temper our relationships with love and respect. We pledge our loyalties to church and state, but we give our ultimate allegiance to God and stand up for compassion and justice.

We render unto God that which belongs to God, and just what doesn’t belong to God?

*We shall render unto God our ultimate allegiance. We shall so truly desire it that we shall weep for it. We shall want it so much that it will be reflected in our tears, even at great personal risk. Nothing shall be more important. Nothing shall command more loyalty. It is an allegiance
to the way of love,
to compassion for the poor and weak,
to the tears of the suffering and exploited,
to the way of justice and fairness.*

It is an allegiance to something stronger than any army or country or institution or any earthly force. An allegiance to the one true God.

One of the most important religious documents of our time is the Barmen Declaration written in May of 1934, when Hitler was well into the second year of consolidating unlimited power. Most of Germany had capitulated to the Nazi vision. Even the church was taken over by the so-called “German Christian,” a group that was willing to follow the directives of the Nazi party. The church had lost its critical distance.

But, there was a small minority called the “Confessing Church,” who spoke out at great personal risk. Led by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Martin Niemoller, they drafted this declaration that called for the rendering unto God those things that are God’s. In other words, they pledged their highest allegiance not to the German nation and church, but to the way, the truth and the life of Jesus.

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace...

We reject the false doctrine, that the State... should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church’s vocation as well...

We reject the false doctrine, that the Church... should and could appropriate the characteristics of the State, thus becoming an organ of the State.

I want you to understand how courageous they were to say this, how they were accused of treason, how many lost their lives and how they embodied the highest form of patriotism.

Bill Coffin asked,

How do you love America? Don’t say, “My country, right or wrong.” That’s like saying, “My grandmother, drunk or sober”; it doesn’t get you anywhere.

How do you love America? With the vision and compassion of Christ, with a transcendent ethic that alone can fulfill “the patriot’s dream that sees beyond the years.”

We remember those original lyrics of Katharine Lee Bates that call for best kind of patriots to continue the lovers quarrel:

*America! America! God mend thine every flaw
Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law.*

*America! America! May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!*