

**Matthew 22:15-22**

**TO HONOUR AND SERVE**

Have you ever been in the situation where someone has either asked you something or said something to you, and you were so disappointed with how you responded that you thought about it over and over, and then too late came up with the perfect response? Or, like something from a perfectly scripted in a TV show, have you ever seen and heard someone in real life come up with that perfect response to something which has been said to them? Many years ago when I was a student I worked at a jet-ski hire business near where my parents lived in Goolwa, South Australia. As part of hiring out the jet-skis we gave customers a safety briefing about staying in our marked area, staying away from each other, etc. One day my boss, Frank, was giving this briefing to a group of Italian people, and one guy was not listening but too busy being smart in front of the ladies in the group, so Frank said to him, ‘mate, if you don’t want to listen, I’ll just give your money back and you can watch everyone else have fun’. The guy called Frank a ‘not very nice name’ in Italian, and then Frank turned back to him and said, in perfect Italian, “mate, who’s the ‘not very nice name’, you or me?” The look on the guy’s face was, as they say, priceless. He didn’t know that Frank was himself Italian and had grown up in an Italian speaking family. That response, and the stunned reaction from the smart guy, I’ve often thought I’d love to replicate in situations I’ve been in but sadly I just never seem to be quick thinking enough.

The enemies of Jesus often asked Him questions designed to trick Him and get Him in trouble, but, not surprisingly, He always had good responses to them. The account in today’s Bible reading happens on Tuesday of what we call Holy Week, so just two days before Jesus is arrested, and three days before His death. In a case of ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’, two groups who were normally against each other come to try and trick Jesus; there are the Pharisees or religious leaders who are very much against the Roman occupiers, and then the supporters of King Herod, the puppet king of the Romans, who naturally support Roman rule. After buttering Jesus up with some false flattery, they ask Him what they believe is the ‘impossible question’: “is it right to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” If Jesus says, ‘yes it is’, He will put all of the people, His supporters, offside. If He says “no”, they’ve got Him! They can take Him to the Romans accusing Him of treason against the Emperor; a death sentence.

Instead, Jesus gives that perfect answer we probably all wish we could come up with in a situation like this. ‘Whose image is on the coin used to pay taxes?’ ‘The Emperors’. ‘Then give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and give the God what belongs to God’. Impossible question dealt with, and Jesus’ enemies just had to go away. Wouldn’t you have loved to have witnessed that?

It is course not just a question about whether or not God’s people should pay taxes, and it’s also not just a question designed to trap Jesus. It is a very real question for Christians, even today, about how we live in this world and relate to the leaders and rulers in this world; be they governments, parents, employers, teachers, and other leaders. As Christians, who do we obey, who do we follow; earthly leaders, or God? And as I ask this, I remember something I often take for granted; that I live in a country where I can ask this question publicly without any fear of getting in trouble for it. While we might often criticise the government, and ask, ‘what has the government ever done for us?’, we are reminded every time we watch news from overseas, that we live in a democratic country, and have a government which is fair and just, provides us with defence, policing and security, we have good health, welfare, education systems, good roads, water and electricity, and the list goes on. While none of these things are perfect, and there are still things which aren’t done well or right, we would most likely have to agree that we can thank God for the government and all the systems we have here in Australia.

As part of His caring for us in our lives in this world, God gives us parents, teachers, governments, and other leaders, to provide order and care for us. Martin Luther in the *Small Catechism* in explaining the Fourth Commandment to, ‘Honour your father and your mother’, writes: ‘We should honour and love God, and so we should not look down on our parents and others in authority or make them angry. Instead, we should respect and love them, and help and obey them.’ So, it’s not an ‘either/or’ for us when it comes to obeying God or leaders in this world, but a ‘both/and’. Not all governments are good, or even democratic. Some straight out go against God, and that makes it hard for those who are under them. As in all other areas of life, sin does come into leaders also. And that’s not ok or something people should just accept; sometimes people do have to protest against, work against, even fight against, bad leaders, for the sake of both protecting others and being able to live out their faith. On the other side, God at times works through even bad governments, like the Egyptian Pharaoh at the time of Joseph, who God used to save all His people from famine.

How then do we live out what Jesus teaches here in our lives? In the first place we can pray for our government and leaders at all levels. This is something we do in our worship services regularly, and I encourage you to do it also in your own prayer life. Many years ago in a church I was at, one of the church members came up to me one day and said, in reference to our Prime Minister at the time; ‘Pastor, you always pray for that man, and I just can’t do that, he is evil’. It was one of those many times I wish I’d come up with the perfect answer on the spot, but didn’t. I pointed out to Him that respecting and praying for our leaders is something we are called to do as Christians. I could’ve added that at the same time we can thank God that we live in a democratic country, that we can openly speak our mind about how we feel about our leaders, and if we really don’t agree with them we can do what we can to have them voted out at the next election. In praying for our leaders, whether we agree with them or not, we are thanking God for their gifts, for their service, and for the structures and other services they put in place to help and protect us all.

And then, we can honour and serve our leaders. And that is both easy, and hard. To do things like obey road rules so that our roads are safe and orderly, support laws which protect life and property, and generally live and conduct ourselves in a way which is part of an ordered society; for most of us, that’s pretty straight forward. In those cases we can both honour and serve our leaders, and also God.

But just like in Jesus’ time paying taxes wasn’t straight forward for the Jewish people because the money was going to the Roman occupiers, we also today sometimes face decisions about whether obeying our leaders makes us go against what God is calling us to do. Can you think of any examples? One which often comes up is Christians serving in the military and going to war. We say we can fight in a ‘just war’, but how is that defined? For some it is only when our own homes and country are under threat, while for others defending people overseas against tyranny justifies war. Still other Christians will not fight in any circumstances. Doctors, nurses, and allied health staff may sometimes have to make decisions or be involved in medical situations which challenge what they think is right and wrong based on their faith. We saw an example the dilemma we can all face during COVID lockdowns and restrictions three years ago, when, while most of us followed government rules on lockdowns and public gatherings, even in this country some Christian groups still met together, saying that obeying God’s call to come together and worship was above what any

government said. We are called to follow and serve our earthly leaders except when they go against God and our living our lives for Him, but where that line is isn't always clear for us.

So, what do we do then? How do we know where that line is for us? Jesus' answer here to the question meant to trap Him gives a great insight into this. Whose image is on the coin? The Emperor's, so pay him your taxes with that coin. Whose image is on you? At the beginning of the Bible, in Creation, we are told that God makes us, people, in His image. As part of a baptism service the sign of the cross is made on the person being baptised; if you like, they are being stamped with the image of God's love for them. 'Give to God what belongs to God', Jesus says here. As those who bear His name, who bear His image both through Creation and in our baptism, we belong to God. A part of living out what that means is that we support and obey our leaders, as much as we can. But it is also recognising, and living out, that while those leaders are a part of God's care for us, they also come under Him and His rule. Knowing God's love for us, knowing His forgiveness for us, we then try to make our decisions with the best intention to also honour and serve God, in all things. This still doesn't make some of those situations black and white for us, but it does remind us that in the end it is Him we serve above everything and everyone else.

This is certainly not a teaching from the Bible which people most want to hear, nor the one pastors are most thanked for teaching. But it is there: The reminder that the leaders we have in this world are just as much a part of God's care for us as are the sun, the rain, and everything our world gives us. In our lives, we honour and serve them. But they are still human, and flawed, so sometimes we need to make decisions and choices around that. Over all that, is the way we honour and serve God, the One who puts His image on us, who because of that image promises us His love and forgiveness, and in all things calls us to live lives which worship Him and share out His love. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Can you think of any situations in which you only thought later of a good reply you could make to someone, or of a time when you saw and heard someone deliver a great response?
- In what situations do you feel that Christians in general, and you in particular, might have to make a choice between following God and obeying our earthly leaders?
- How does being stamped in God's image, with His love and His name, help us in this sometimes-balancing act of living in this world and living as God call us to?

Pray: thank God for the blessing of parents, governments, and other leaders. Ask for His help to both honour and serve them, but also to put our worship and service to Him about above all else.

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