

Part 71: God, Government and Worship

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In 1971, a man named Dan Cooper boarded a flight in Portland, Oregon headed to Seattle, Washington. At some point during the flight Cooper revealed to a stewardess that he had a bomb on board—demanding \$200,000 or he would blow up the plane. When the plane landed in Seattle he exchanged the passengers for the briefcase of cash and a parachute and demanded the pilot to fly to Reno.

But somewhere over the Pacific Northwest, Cooper dawned his parachute, grabbed the money, and jumped out of the plane, slipping into the woods undetected. The FBI maintained an active investigation of the now infamous D.B. Cooper case for over 45 years. They considered over 800 suspects. But the end, they couldn't catch him. It remains to be one of the most famous cases of someone who was always able to give his pursuers "the slip."

We've been working through the book of Luke and way back in Luke 6(11), we read that the religious officials were "filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus." We were in Luke 6 a year and a half ago, and in the actual narrative of Luke it has been nearly two years of plotting, planning and scheming against Jesus in order to destroy him. But despite their best attempts—Jesus appears uncatchable. But now, as Jesus is in Jerusalem the whole choir of his critics have gathered together for a literal murderer's row of traps—yet as we saw last week, and as we will see today—Jesus still gives them the slip.

Last week the leaders tried to trap Jesus and in the end were openly rebuked. Luke tells us that today's attempt to corner Jesus is one part retaliation and one part change of tactics. Luke opens saying, **(Luke 20:19-20)** "The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he told this parable against them, but they feared the people. 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."

Like master tacticians, the officials who just lost in open battle take another angle—espionage, spy-games, guerilla warfare. Instead of outright confronting Jesus, they are going to infiltrate and trap him through the crowds that he so desperately cares for.

Their attempt to trap him is to lure him into the debate we so often fear at dinner parties and with our neighbors: religion and politics, God and government, Christ and Caesar. This is going to be our main point this morning: **In regards to the state, and to the self, Christians render everything to Christ the ruler.**

Now before you try to slip out of the sermon yourself, let me assure you that the point of this sermon is theological not political. In the story of Luke it's Jesus' untamable authority and unassailable character which should catch our eye. But the nature of Jesus does shape the nature of how we view politics.

In fact, Paul tells us in **Colossians 1:16** that by Jesus "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, or rulers or authorities—all things were created

through him and for him." In other words, if the Bible is true, and if Jesus is who he proves himself to be even in this text—the creative and reigning Christ is central to our public and private lives.

To that end we are going to examine three spheres of authority in this text. First we are going to see **Distorted Authority**, then we are going to see **Governmental Authority**, and lastly we will see **Devotional Authority**.

First, let us examine the **Distorted Authority** of the scribes and the chief priests.

In Exodus 20, the glory of God descended in thunder and lightning upon Mount Sinai. At such a display of his holiness and power the people came to Moses in **Exodus 20:19** and said, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

Why is this a significant point when it comes to Luke 20? Because in Exodus 20 the glory of God appeared and the people feared God so much that they were scared to even talk to him. But here, in Luke 20, God came—though not in fire and cloud—in flesh and blood and just told these religious leaders that unless they repent they will be destroyed. And what do these men do?

Verse 19 tells us, they sought to murder Jesus and they feared man. In Exodus 20 the Israelites encountered the authority of God and feared him, in Luke 20 the Israelites encounter the authority of God and fear man. Their sense of authority was distorted. Ed Welch has a great book, with an even better title: "When People Are Big and God is Small".

Isn't that what we see here? These men are upset at Jesus—upset enough to kill him. But what keeps them from doing anything? Their slavery to man's approval. The apostle John tells us that when Jesus rules our hearts his perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). But when man is the authority—fear is never ending.

When man is the authority, when man is big and God is small, it distorts everything. We begin to think that our problems are small enough that a mere man can fix them. So to save ourselves from man, we turn to man. That's what these men did here (**Luke 20:20**), "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 Roman authorities.

Now, notice their language: (**Luke 20:21**), "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 to give tribute to Caesar or not?'"

To be clear, all of us at some point were slaves to a distorted authority. The first thing most of us did in our lives was come out of the womb yelling at our parents already! But more than that—being born in Adam all of our hearts inherited his natural rebellion against God.

But, let us be warned of those who come to Jesus with false sincerity—seeking to be seen as saints but secretly having the heart of spies. The 11th century pastor and thinker Anselm once said that the Christian life is "faith seeking understanding." It is not wrong to seek to know more about Jesus, it's not wrong to realize that the worldview of Christian faith is often contrary to the worldview of man—questioning, examining, and critically understanding that division is often a very good and godly work.

But often times our seemingly sincere questions of apologetics, or authority, or interpretations come not out of sincerity to submit to Jesus and his word as the authority—but instead we make ourselves the authority, distorting God’s truth and placing it under our own perception. Anselm described the positive response to this tension when he said, “**For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.**”

There is kind of person who seeks to understand so that they may believe—we call those people non-believers!

But those of us who claim belief in Jesus let us realize that when we come to him we come to the authority not as the authority. It’s all too simple to present as sincere in our examination of Jesus while being uncritical in the examination of our own heart. If that’s you I’d commend to you that the path of wisdom begins not with reason but with reasoned repentance towards Jesus. And it is perhaps your bristling at that idea which further confirms that it is authority, not reason that stands in your way. It’s not what you can’t believe, but what you won’t believe.

When we are big...God is small. I love Luke’s understated irony on this issue, (**Luke 20:20**), "that they might catch him in something he said." But notice how this scene ends, (**Luke 20:26**), "And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said."

None of us will ever catch Jesus. He didn’t come to be caught. He came to lay down his life. That’s why we cannot begin our examination of Jesus with worldly eyes. Nothing about Jesus makes sense by our own logic. No one would willingly give themselves over to unjust, malevolent enemies.

But the cross of Jesus was not the triumph of man’s authority—but of God’s. Jesus says this in **John 10:17-18**, "...I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my father."

Jesus went to the cross not because wicked men triumphed but because as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "it was the will of the Lord to crush him." Because Jesus’ own ministry was in submission to the Father’s authority so to must we seek to devote what sin distorts and realize the world makes the most sense according to God, not man.

It’s from this perspective that we address the heart of the challenge in the text: how do God and man interact in regards to **Governmental Authority**.

In **Luke 20:21**, the spies say that they want to be faithful to “the way of God,” but how can they do so when there are other authorities—in this instance the Caesar of the Roman empire—calling for their allegiance.

This issue of taxes and Caesar was of great debate during Jesus time because it intersected three spheres of culture. First, the Romans were to revere the Caesar as a god—so there was a potential religious element to their interaction with the state. Second, there was a moral element, in Judea it was estimated that over 1/3 of a person’s income was taken by Rome for various and often frivolous taxes—but more than that the Jewish tax collectors who sympathized with Rome often extorted even more out of their own people. And lastly, there was the issue of greatest importance during the time—the

political element. Was Caesar the king of God's people, in God's city? Or was God the King? Was the land Rome's or Israel's?

The question therefore, was brilliant. Not only would Jesus' answer stir up differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. His critics knew that among Jesus' own disciples there were Jewish zealots like Simon and Rome-positive tax collectors like Matthew.

So there were two options: Affirm Rome's legitimacy and rule, fail to meet messianic expectations, and tear the already politically diverse base of his disciples apart and be destroyed from the inside—or—as verse 20 shows us their preferred plan, say something negative about Rome so that Jesus would be guilty of treason. This was preferred because it was only Rome who had the authority to put someone to death.

It was a perfect plan. Until it met a perfect person.

Notice how Jesus answers the question: **(Luke 20:23-25)** "'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.'"

This is a line that most of us have probably heard at one point or another. But notice the response people had to this: **Luke 20:26** "marveling at his answer they became silent."

Whatever Jesus just said, when properly understood, was marvelous, devastating, and truly the way of God. It has a profound effect not only on how we view the government, but how we view God himself. There's not an era of church history that hasn't wrestled with this issue, so it does us well in our own politically charged moment to consider the implications of this.

The answer of Jesus upheld two seemingly opposed truths. Jesus affirmed the legitimacy of Rome and human rule. But he also placed all of that under the greater rule and authority of God himself. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's.

At that time the Caesar was Tiberius Caesar. And when Jesus said, "Give the denarius to Caesar," he was in effect validating the social, economic and governmental legitimacy of Rome. To walk in the way of God is to give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Taxation might be theft on your bumper sticker, but according to Jesus it's also part of the way of God. Depending upon what country you are in at any given point in history—you may be afforded by that government proper means to vote, challenge, protest and prescribe different uses for your taxes. But this is a conditional right, not a divine one.

Thought it may prick our flesh and boil our politically charged blood, Jesus' command to "render" in the Greek is an imperative. It is an obligation, not an option.

The remainder of the New Testament shows how the government often mistreated and murdered the apostles but notice what Peter said to the churches scattered across modern day Turkey and East Asia, **1 Peter 2:13-14**, "Be subject to the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good."

Or of Paul writing to saints the epicenter of Roman power in **Romans 13:1**, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

The default position the Bible holds out towards the government is that of obedience. Why? Peter tells us they are sent ones by God. Paul tells us they are instituted/established by God. God is sovereign over every government official. An early church pastor named Tertullian said this, "**Christ bids the denarius of man's imprint to be rendered to His Caesar. His Caesar I say, not the Caesar of a strange God.**"

Caesar is God's Caesar. Our President is God's president. The Queen of England is God's Queen. Oba of Benin, Africa is God's Oba. There is no sultan or sheik, no prince or prime minister, no monarch or magistrate who is not God's.

While this legitimizes human leaders, it also gives them an expiration dates. All human authority is derivative and dependent upon God. One day all human authorities will go away. The relief for us as citizens is that we don't carry on our shoulders the responsibility of flawed or evil governments. In Revelation the kings of the world are called to account before the King of kings, their actions will be judged by him to whom they will give an account. And while their authority and our obedience to it will one day go away, the rule of King Jesus endures forever.

In this way, Christians are never permitted to disobey. We are only permitted to obey. We obey Jesus by obeying the government. And if we are to disobey the government we must only and exclusively do so in order to obey Jesus.

A civil command was given to the disciples in Acts 5 to stop preaching the gospel. But they responded, **Acts 5:29**, "We must obey God rather than men."

But how do we make sure we are modeling this tension in a way that is truly biblical? How do we know what the way of God is in regards to public politics.

Jesus here models that our default is submission, but Paul adds another default: prayer. **1 Timothy 2:1-2**, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."

Isn't it telling that our heart typically wants to begin a discussion on government with protests but scripture calls us to begin with prayer?

The idea that Paul calls us to pray for peace at the hands of the government assumes that not all governments will yield peace! In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve lived in the perfect authority and direct rule of God, but they strained to be their own authority and the political problem began. We were made to be ruled by God—but now we are apart from him.

In other words the political problems we have today, the political longings we have today, the political unrest we have today is because we have rejected God as king. We love, loath and long for human leaders because we were made to be ruled. But a longing for human leaders to fix what's wrong only

works if the problem is as small as a human one. But we sinned against God, we have a divine problem. Therefore it needed a divine fixing.

But then something happened—a king came. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man came and spoke right here in Luke 20. He is who Isaiah speaks of in **Isaiah 9:6-7**, "the government shall be on his shoulder...of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."

But that day of exclusive kingship is not yet today. That's why Jesus calls us first to pray—prayer orients our hearts to who is really in charge.

And we will need Jesus' help to live in light of this. Because sometimes obedience to that ultimate king puts us at odds with human kings. Sometimes we are asked to do what Jesus prohibits, or sometimes we are told to stop what Jesus commands. When these moments happen we ought to soberly, seriously, prayerfully and with much reason offer ourselves to God—and not to man.

That's because this is not merely a political distinction, it's a worship distinction. This is truly the way of God. This is our final point this morning: **Devotional Authority**.

The stunning part of Jesus' call for a denarius is precisely what he points out: the image and the inscription. The image was the image of Tiberius Caesar, and was therefore due to him. But the inscription on those coins read: "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." The Caesars saw themselves as God, and even the coin was in a way attached to the worship of it. Yet Jesus drew a distinction which befuddle everyone, and must be settled in our own hearts.

He affirmed the giving of taxes to Caesar, but refused to affirm the divinity of Caesar. In essence he says, "Give your wages to Caesar, and your worship to God."

In Genesis 1, we read that God made us in the image of God. Just as those coins bore the image of Caesar, we bear the image of God. We belong to him. But through our sin we have sullied and scandalized the one to whom we belong. Like a coin found caked in dirt, the image is there, but it's hardly discernable behind the filth of our sins. We don't know what it looks like to offer ourselves because we can hardly see to whom we should offer ourselves.

But look at how Paul talks about Jesus in **Colossians 1:15**, "He [Jesus] is the image of God, the firstborn of all creation." There is our image! The image restored. And what is the inscription what is written on us? Paul continues, (**Colossians 1:16**) "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him."

Why is this significant? Because the critics were after who gets the coins. Jesus was after who gets the worship. We often are concerned with what we are to do with our purses, but Jesus calls us his purse. Augustine says it this way: **"We are God's money. But we are like coins that have wandered away from the treasury. What was once stamped upon us has been worn down by our wandering. The One who restamps his image upon us is the One who first formed us. He himself seeks his own coin, as Caesar sought his coin."**

Here's why this is so incredibly significant. Remember what the hope of the religious officials was in **Luke 20:20**, their hope was "to deliver him up to the authority and the jurisdiction of the governor."

While protesting the taxation of Rome, they hoped in the redemption of Rome. But our only hope is that we are redeemed by a greater King. We are not redeemed by Caesar, we are not redeemed by Presidents, we are not redeemed by politics. Because we are not made in the image of man—we are made in the image of God. Christ, not Caesar is our image. Christ, not Caesar is our hope.

So what do we do? We offer all of our devotion, all of our worship, all of our allegiance and affection to him. Isn't it funny how we often see, and participate in public criticism of the government but at the end of the day very few of us break any of its laws? But conversely how many of us extol the name of the King of kings but find no problem disregarding his rule and right to our worship, our sex lives, our finances or our families?

While Jesus makes a distinction between God and government, he doesn't disconnect the two. There is no sacred and secular divide. When we are in the secular sphere we are image bearers of Christ. Our conversion pulls our hope out of the secular sphere, but it doesn't pull us out of the secular sphere.

We are to engage "secular" spaces as people re-stamped, reclaimed and redeemed people. To do this we need wisdom. Paul says that our interaction with the government is meant to provide us a "clean conscience" (Romans 13:5). And in order for us to have a clean conscience we must make sure we have a Christ-shaped conscience. We must therefore soberly assess where our conscience is groomed by personal preference and where it is groomed by careful submission to Jesus and to his word.

Let me remind you that Jesus himself showed that a coin marked in Caesar's divinity was not sinful when used for buying groceries—but it would have been sinful if the riches and protection of Caesar subtly became the hope of Jesus' people.

If the government told me that in order to preach Christ, I must preach with a monkey on my head I would find myself a monkey. But if the government told me that I could not preach Christ, I'd need you to bail me out of jail.

Now in instances like that, I would hope obedience would be clear. But what about places where there is not a clear biblical command? You might find it interesting that the apostles seem to think that submission to such burdensome governments is a greater witness for Christ than resistance to it.

After Paul calls us to pray for our leaders he says (**1 Timothy 2:4**), "This is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Notice what Peter says after he calls us to be subjected to every human authority, (**1 Peter 2:15-17**) "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

Because our King is global, so too is our witness. Because our king has redeemed the whole of our lives, the whole of our lives are different. Everything we do is an act of worship in some way, so let us bring our own lives under willing worship to him who saves us.

The whole of our lives rendered to King Jesus is our greatest purpose and our single joy. **Colossians 1:18**.