

The King greater than Caesar

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- [0 : 0 0] and let us pray one more time. Heavenly Father, as we come to you, help us today to receive your word as a word from our King.
- Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, hearts to believe, and the feet to leave this place ready to live the way you want us to.
- All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen. Are you a smart aleck? I've been one.
- When I was a young boy, I attended Chinese night school, and let's just say that Mandarin wasn't my strong suit. One day we had a test where we had to construct sentences using the given words.
- So, you know, Bina Ayat, basically. So, I had a bright idea. Why not memorize the Mandarin phrase for I don't know the meaning of and use it to answer every single question?
- [1 : 1 2] So, if the sentence said, you know, make a sentence using the words ■■ or something like that, I'll just write ■■■■■■■■■■■■ and that I don't know the meaning of and then repeat that for 20 questions.
- I thought I was so clever, a real smart aleck. Let's just say my teacher wasn't impressed. Now, you might laugh, but let's be honest, in reality, nobody really likes a smart aleck.
- You know, the type, someone who acts as if they can boss you around because they are so sure they are smarter than you. The Oxford English Dictionary even calls a smart aleck someone who is irritating because they behave as if they know everything.
- And none of us want to be that person. And yet, here is the uncomfortable truth. Sometimes, we can act just like that with God.
- God is the one with all authority. He gets to call the shots. But sometimes, we are not sure if we like that. Certainly, the chief priests and the scribes in Jesus' day didn't, as Elder Hong Park showed us last week.
- [2 : 3 2] They were used to being the ones who get to run the show. But now, Jesus has come and challenged their authority, even speaking judgment on them via the parable of the tenants.
- So, no surprise, they are very upset. And in today's passage, they will decide to be smart alecks with Jesus. They are certain they can outsmart him.
- And sometimes, we can be like that too. We are not keen for God to have the final say, so we look for loopholes in God's commands.
- We try to outmaneuver his will. So, for example, we might try to take one half of a verse that matches our desires, while conveniently ignoring the second half of that verse that that doesn't.
- Or we take two passages that seem on the surface to contradict one another, and we use that as a get-out card against God. But today's passage will show us that being a smart aleck with Jesus is futile.
- [3 : 3 9] Try to corner him, and he will turn the tables on us and expose our hearts in the process. But Jesus doesn't just want to expose us, he also wants to teach us.

And so today, even as he asks us to check our hearts, he will also help us understand what proper submission to authority looks like in his will.

Those are the main lessons he wants us to get today. So make sure your Bibles are open still to Luke 20, verse 20 to 26, and what we will do first is to work our way through this short episode before exploring the significance of it for us today.

And we'll do that under three headings. Here is the first one, the crafty conundrum, the crafty conundrum. As we begin today's passage, we notice the chief priests and teachers have set up a surveillance operation.

Verse 20, they are keeping a close watch on him. But why? Is it because they are the adoring fan club of the latest celebrity in town?

[4 : 54] Not a chance. Their intentions are far more sinister. Just look back at verse 19. The teachers of the law and the chief priests look for a way to arrest him immediately because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.

They want to get rid of Jesus now. But they didn't have to respond that way, did they? After Jesus confronted them last week, they could have humbled themselves.

They could have said, you know what, Jesus? You're right. I don't want to follow in the footsteps of my forefathers who killed the prophets.

I'll turn to you instead. But they didn't. Instead, they hardened their hearts just as their ancestors did before them and resolved to do the same thing they did.

But that left them with a problem. They couldn't just arrest Jesus outright because, end of verse 19, they were afraid of the crowds turning against them.

[6 : 06] So what did they do? They took a more subtle approach. They enlisted spies to engage in a sting operation. And look at verse 20 again.

Their plan was simple. Catch Jesus saying something incriminating. If they could get him to say the wrong thing, they can land him in hot soup, not just with the Jews, but with the Roman authorities as well.

That was their real goal, to have Jesus handed over to the Roman governor. Because he's the guy who can actually say, guilty, death penalty.

The religious leaders had no authority to execute, but Pilate, the Roman governor, did. And actually, that's pretty convenient because if they succeed, then Jesus is gone, but at the same time, they can claim they bear no responsibility for Jesus' death.

Pretty brilliant plan, don't you think? So what is your setup? You have to admit, it really is quite clever. First off, they try to butter Jesus up, verse 21.

[7 : 31] Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Now what is ironic, of course, is that every word they say is true.

They just don't believe a word of it. they only, verse 20, pretend to be sincere. And having flattered him, they then hope to catch him off guard with what they ask next, in verse 22.

Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Sounds like a reasonable, practical question, right?

But as we will see, it's not an honest one. It's designed to put Jesus in a no-win situation. Let's see how.

First off, what if Jesus says, yes, we should pay our taxes to Caesar? Then Jesus better be prepared for the wrath of many of his fellow Jews.

[8 : 45] You see, back in Jesus' day, paying taxes wasn't just a minor annoyance to grumble about in the kopitiam. No, it made the Israelites' blood boil.

Why? Was it because the tax would have taken about 30-40% of their annual income? No, although that's true.

Rather, it's because this tax, called the poll tax, would have been paid directly to Caesar. In other words, it was a direct reminder of their current status.

What were they? A conquered nation. An occupied nation, taken over by a foreign power that didn't even acknowledge Israel's God.

And that was a bitter pill to swallow. Israel. This wasn't how Israel was supposed to be. Back in the Old Testament, Israel was meant to be God's place, where his presence dwelt in the temple, and where he ruled and blessed his people through a son of David.

[10 : 01] But now, now they were under the rule of a godless pagan empire who couldn't care less about them. And so to ask, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?

Sounds like it has an obvious answer. Is it right? Is it right that I, a Jew, am being oppressed in my own land?

That I have to give my money to a foreign ruler who uses it to maintain his empire and to keep us under his control, contrary to God's promises?

do you even have to ask? And the religious leaders know all that. They know that if Jesus says yes, that would really hurt his standing amongst all his fellow nationalistic countrymen.

Now here they are whispering excitedly among themselves that, oh, maybe, finally, a son of David has really come at last to get rid of these hated Romans once and for all.

[11 : 09] But if Jesus says yes, then he has just let them down badly. He can forget about their support. Indeed, he can count on their disgust.

But what if Jesus says no? Well, then he better be prepared for the wrath of Rome. You see, this option had been tried before as the religious leaders also very well knew.

Some 30 years before Jesus, there had been another Galilean named Judas. Now, this isn't the same guy as the Judas who belongs to Jesus' 12 disciples.

It's a different guy. And the Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that this guy really hated the idea of paying taxes to the Romans. To him, to do so was the same as saying, Caesar is your lord, and that, of course, is unacceptable.

So he instigated a rebellion, believing that to be the only right response. But as Luke himself tells us in Acts 5, later on, this revolt failed.

[12 : 28] Rome made sure of it. they crushed these rebels. And so if Jesus says, no, then you can be sure that some of these religious leaders would be falling all over themselves to go and bang on Pilate's door, alerting him that he better go crush another rebel leader before another rebellion gets underway.

Either way, they win. It's a very clever plan. So at this point, the religious leaders are probably patting themselves on the back.

Ah, Jesus, weren't you a bit of a smart aleck last week when you asked us about John's baptism? Well, two can play the game. We'll put you between a rock and a hard place too.

Say, yes, suffer the wrath of your fellow Jews. Say, no, suffer the wrath of Rome. Game over, Jesus.

No doubt about it, they are very crafty. You could say, as crafty as even the serpent in the garden.

[13 : 45] God will do it. So it looks like Jesus has no way out. He's been outsmarted. Or has he? We come now to our second heading for today, the remarkable reply.

The remarkable reply. you see, do you remember what the spies said rather insincerely about Jesus back in verse 21?

He speaks and teaches what is right. He teaches God's way in line with the truth. And Jesus is about to prove them right, just not in the way they expected.

Oh, you think I'm truthful and impartial? Well, okay, then let me show you how right you are. Let me, verse 23, expose your duplicity, expose your craftiness.

So Jesus makes a simple request, verse 24. Show me a denarius. Sounds innocent enough, right?

[14 : 57] And while the text doesn't explicitly say they handed him one, it is obvious they did because they immediately start discussing the image and inscription on it.

But here's the thing. The moment they did so, they have fallen into Jesus' trap. Why? Because the very coin they have just pulled out is exactly what you need to pay this tax.

you see, Israel circulated its own copper coins, which did not have any images on it. But you couldn't use that to pay the tax.

It's not legal tender for those purposes. You had to use the Roman currency. So if these people already carried Roman currency in their own pockets, the currency required to pay the tax, why are they even asking if it's lawful?

After all, by using Rome's money, they have already accepted Rome's system. So even though Luke doesn't dwell on this point, Jesus has already exposed their hypocrisy.

[16 : 22] Anyone watching would see their question for what it really is. Insincere. But Jesus is just getting started.

Having made the request, he now asks a further question, verse 24. Whose image and inscription are on it? And of course, everyone present knows the answer.

It has Caesar's face. You can see it on screen. You could say that this coin was made in Caesar's image. And everyone present also understood this.

What bears Caesar's image belongs to him. It's a mark of ownership. Indeed, in the ancient world, having your image stamped on the coin was a clear sign of authority.

So, if this coin belongs to Caesar, if it is a sign of his authority, authority, then, Jesus says, verse 25, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.

[17 : 30] It's only logical. If you have something in your possession that belongs to someone else, the right thing to do is to return it to them.

So, in other words, yes, pay your taxes. Give Caesar his coins. But here is where Jesus' brilliance shines through.

He doesn't actually answer their question simply by saying yes or no. That would mean buying into their false either/or way of thinking.

Instead, he reframes the entire conversation. And so, he doesn't just say, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's full stop.

Instead, he continues, give back to God what is God's. And that sentence in full, Jesus says, is the true way of God.

[18 : 37] It is the right thing to do. What a masterstroke of a reply. You see, what is Jesus getting at? Well, follow the logic.

We already know that the coin bears Caesar's image, which is why it belongs to him. Now, think back to Genesis 1. Who bears God's image?

We do. So, if Caesar's image on the coin means it belongs to Caesar, then who do the images of God, that is us, belong to?

Answer, God. So, go ahead, give Caesar what is due to him, but don't forget to give to God what ultimately belongs to him, your very selves.

do you see how brilliant Jesus' answer is? He doesn't just escape their trap, he turns the tables and puts them on the spot, because hidden within his the marketplace of corruption, a den of thieves.

[20 : 33] They weren't giving to God, they were taking for themselves, no wonder verse 26, they have no reply for him. They want to present Jesus guilty before Pilate, but now Jesus has exposed their own guilt before God.

It is simply astonishing. And so that's the story, just six verses, but filled with fireworks.

words. But what exactly is the significance of this episode for us today? Well, that brings us to our third heading, the inescapable implications.

And I want to highlight three key implications, two directly from Jesus' teaching in verse 25, and the third from the story as a whole. So first implication, we should respect legitimate human authority that God has put in place.

We should respect legitimate human authority that God has put in place. You see, when Jesus says, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, what is he really teaching?

[21 : 46] He is telling us that in God's world, human government has its place. His opponents have tried to set up a false dichotomy by getting him to choose between human authority and divine authority.

But Jesus is teaching here that you are not automatically forced to choose between the two. Jesus' point is not that God has no rights over Caesar, but that God's right do not exclude Caesar's.

There is a legitimate place for human government. authority. Now, to be fair, the Jews of Jesus' day almost certainly would have accepted that.

After all, heaven may be ruled by Jewish kings for centuries. But what would have shocked them was Jesus affirming not just Jewish authority, but even a pagan emperor as a legitimate authority.

how could that be? Because, Jesus says, the kingdom he is bringing in is really the start of a new era.

[23 : 04] Previously, God's people were conceived as a particular nation, distinct from those around them, but with Christ's coming, everything changed.

Now, under the new covenant, God's kingdom is no longer tied to a specific ethnic group or nation-state. You don't have to move to Jerusalem or to adopt Jewish customs to become part of his people.

Regardless of who you are and where you are, all you have to do to become part of God's people or God's kingdom is to believe the gospel. And that means that whoever you are and wherever you are, you can be Christian no matter what kind of government you live under.

You are a citizen of heaven. And yet, at the same time, you and I remain citizens of earthly nations under their governments.

And that means they can make certain claims on us, even if they are not Christian, because they have been authorized by God. Consider the time of Jesus.

[24 : 26] Tiberius Caesar was the emperor in charge, and you can be certain that he is definitely no worshipper of God. In fact, do you know what the inscription on the Roman coin bearing his face says?

Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, son of a god, in other words.

And then on the other side of the coin, it would have an image of his mother, Livia, along with something along the lines of her being the high priestess of peace.

I mean, all that is pretty blasphemous, right? But Jesus says, non-Christian governments, even anti-Christian governments, still have a legitimate claim.

God has put them there for his purposes. Now, we will see later that it is a limited claim, not an absolute one. But it is a legitimate claim still.

[25 : 35] And that's why Paul says something similar to Jesus in Romans 13, verse 1. be subject to the governing authorities. That's why Peter says in 1 Peter 2, verse 17, to honour the emperor.

That's a non-Christian emperor, don't forget. Because that is part of faithfully following Jesus. It is not inherently contradictory to our faith to do just that.

God So what does that mean for us? Well, one pretty direct application, especially as tax season is coming up soon, is to pay your taxes honestly.

Don't try to fiddle with the numbers in a way that is untruthful. That's how we obey Jesus. It means respecting the speed limit. It means, generally speaking, keeping the laws that are in place, even if we don't always like them.

And it means asking the Holy Spirit to work on our hearts so that we don't have a naturally rebellious anti-authority streak in us. It means asking God to grow our trust in him.

[26 : 48] because when we do so, it enables us not to fear submitting to imperfect human authorities, because we know he directs their steps.

And it means praying for our governments. According to 1 Timothy 2 verse 1 to 3, we are urged to pray for them so that we can live godly and quiet lives.

In other words, we pray that they will govern in such a way that promotes peace and justice and thus create the ideal conditions for the gospel to be preached.

So we should respect the legitimate human authorities God has put in place. And while I have focused on the government, since that is the question that Jesus has been addressing, this applies to all forms of authority.

God has made the world such that parents have a certain kind of authority with their young children, teachers have a certain kind of authority in the classroom, and elders have a certain kind of authority in the church.

[27 : 59] And they are all legitimate. So give the honour due to those officers. Don't tolerate abuse of authority for sure, but don't tolerate blatant disrespect of authority either.

That is the teaching of Jesus. But here is the second implication. We should submit ultimately to divine authority.

And that is the second half of Jesus' teaching in verse 25. Give to God what is God's. Now sometimes verse 25 has been misunderstood to mean that life can be partitioned into two parts.

There is Caesar's part, maybe we call that the secular world, and there is God's part, maybe we call that the sacred world or something like that.

And we think that the two are to be kept separate always, as if God is only confined to church matters and has no jurisdiction beyond that. But that is not what Jesus means at all.

[29 : 07] In fact, he is saying the very opposite. Caesar can have his taxes, but he cannot have your whole being.

Because there is only one God and one Lord in this universe, and his name isn't Tiberius Caesar or Donald Trump or Xi Jinping or Anwar Ibrahim.

and only the Lord deserves our ultimate allegiance. By saying what he says, Jesus is not outrightly rejecting Caesar's authority, but he is relativizing it.

He is saying, yes, Caesar has authority, but it is a limited one because it can only operate under God's authority. So if Caesar were ever to command something that is in violation of God's will or something that will directly obstruct the mission of the church, he has exceeded the limits of his God given authority.

We don't have to obey him. For our submission is ultimately to define authority. That's why Peter in 1 Peter 2 doesn't just say, honour the emperor.

[30 : 29] He says, fear God. God. And if our ultimate allegiance is to God, then we should do all we can to reflect his image in this world and to promote his kingdom values in every sphere of life.

To give to God what is God's is to give him control over all our time, is to give him influence over the way we treat others, is to give him sway over the way we work, it is to give him priority over every other authority in our lives, even those that we treasure, like the approval of our parents or our bosses.

And we must never confuse God's kingdom with human politics or patriotism. The commentator James Edwards observes that in his response to the religious leaders, Jesus doesn't follow any of the main Jewish factions of his day.

He does not echo the politics of the zealots who were bent on armed combat with Rome, or of the Sadducees who accommodated the state, or of the Pharisees who followed an independent course indifferent to the state.

In other words, Jesus never neatly aligns with any political party or political agenda. And that, I believe, shows us that we should exercise caution never to give our whole selves to a political grouping, no matter how sympathetic the Christians they claim to be.

[32 : 14] By all means, love our country and desire what is best for it. Get involved in politics as a way to serve Christ. but never ever worship our country or any political party.

Never let the flag, even the Jalo Gemilang, cover the cross. And that leads us to our third and final implication for today.

We should therefore submit to our good King Jesus and not try to outsmart him. You see, maybe as you hear that call to give our whole selves to God, you may be wondering whether that's really a good idea.

After all, it can be really scary to surrender our all to someone else's authority, right? Who's to say that such trust wouldn't be abused?

And certainly if Jesus were like this religious leaders, then I would never want to do so. I mean, just jump ahead with me for a second to look, chapter 23, verse 2. Now, at this point, the leaders have actually brought Jesus before Pilate and notice that what they accuse him of.

[33 : 37] We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar. I mean, wow, talk about blatant slander.

Jesus has clearly been teaching the very opposite. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But these people don't care about truth. They just want to stop Jesus from having a rightful claim to be the Messiah and therefore to be king over their lives.

And they will slander to get him killed if they have to. But here is the good news of Christianity. King Jesus is not like that. His kingdom is of a different nature to these leaders and to Caesar.

You see, we are made in the image of God. But King Jesus is the very image of God himself. Every emperor and governor by right should bow to him.

And yet, John chapter 19 tells us that as he stands before Pilate, he submits to him. Pilate says to him, do you know I have the authority to execute you?

[34 : 53] And Jesus replies, well, actually, no, you don't. Any authority given to you only comes from my heavenly father. And so Jesus affirms what he has just been teaching in Luke chapter 20.

But then look at how he acts. He says, I know all this, but rather than indulgently exercise my own power for my own gain, I willingly submit myself to death on the cross.

I give over my entire body to Caesar so that you and I can be free and given back to God. That is our king.

And that's why we can trust him. That is why we can submit ourselves to him. And think about this. Not only are we submitting ourselves to a good king, we are also submitting ourselves to the cleverest person ever.

Perhaps this is not what usually comes to our mind whenever we think about Jesus. But isn't his intelligence breathtakingly on display in this little episode?

[36 : 01] The leaders thought they were smart Alex, but Jesus shows that it's actually foolish to think that we can ever outsmart him. So church, let God check our hearts today.

Are we trying to outsmart Jesus by giving all sorts of excuses and justifications not to give him our all? God says don't even try.

He will leave us with eggs on our faces. Instead, simply be glad that we have such a smart saviour on our side.

Be reassured that no scheme of man or Satan can ever surprise him or trip him up. And as those we created in the image of Christ, let us seek to increasingly bear his image.

That's what this passage at its heart is really all about. Not so much about tax policy, but our identity. Jesus is asking us, do you acknowledge you belong to God?

[37 : 08] You bear his image? You are under his rule? If so, then by all means, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but at the end of the day, give to God what belongs to God, yourself.

Choose you this day whom you will serve. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I just pray, Lord, that we will ponder the words that we've just heard.

I pray that we will not be so foolish as to try to outfox you, outsmart you, but Father, help us instead to gladly submit to your wisdom and to your authority, because you are the good and gracious king.

And so Father, please help us to obey you in every area of our lives, help us to submit to the legitimate human authorities that you have placed over us, but at the same time, help us to bow the knee to you only and no one else.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.