

WHAT SHALL WE RENDER TO CAESAR? (Summary of Sermon)

Mark 12:13-17.

Reading: Mark 12:13-17.

The relationship between the true believer and the state is a complex one. The same is true for the relationship between local churches and the state. That relationship has at times in history been a strained one. Individual believers and local churches have had to dissent on occasions. In the passage before us, Caesar, the name for the Roman Emperor, stands for the power of the state or government. In this context we are to ask what we should render to Caesar in our present time.

1. An important question asked by the wrong people

Today's journalists often try to catch politicians out with a difficult question which they hope will embarrass them or extract an answer that can be used against them. This is exactly what the religious leaders were seeking to do in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. The question looked at the issue of the relationship of disciples of God and the state. What duties and obligations did someone, who was trying to honour God, need to have towards the governing powers?

The people who asked the question were the wrong people. They were trying to flatter the Lord (v14) but He saw through their hypocrisy (v15). They were not really interested in the answer He might give to the question. They wanted Him to answer from the law, hence they asked Him whether it was lawful or not to pay taxes to Caesar. They were trying to extract a Yes/No answer. If He said it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, they could accuse Him of being pro-Caesar and against the Jewish nation. If He said it was not lawful to pay taxes they would accuse Him to the Roman Governor of rebellion.

They thought it was the perfect trap but the Lord was too wise to give them a Yes/No answer. We should not think that the Bible simply supplies us with easy answers. It may be requiring us to do a lot of thinking. When the Lord gave the answer that He did, He showed that He was not against the state receiving the money it needs to do the work that it is ordained by God to do. So the Lord was not anti-Caesar. But in saying that we needed to give God His due, He was showing that He was not anti the law and obeying God. He answered a better question than they asked and gave a better answer than they deserved. In so doing He left us a principle that is so much more than a Yes/No answer. He showed us that we owe God total obedience in all that we have. We then work out our relationship to Caesar in the light of our relationship to God. In fact it is God who obliges us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But it is God who defines what Caesar is due.

Later on the Lord gives another memorable answer in Mark 12:28-34. He is asked to state what is the most important commandment. The Lord's answer sets out what we are to give God but the Lord immediately adds that we have an obligation to love our neighbour and that this obligation is inseparable from our obligation to love God. Caesar, in many ways in the modern state, represents our neighbour. He is there to ensure that we do no harm to our neighbour. As much as Caesar informs us he is implementing regulations aimed at saving lives, we are duty bound to take these seriously, given that these come under the Sixth Commandment.

2. Caesar – a complex character

Today's 'Caesar', the modern state consists of Prime Ministers, other Government Ministers, Parliament, advisors, judges and the police. It gets complicated because 'Caesar' does not speak with one voice. In fact, at this present time during the Coronavirus crisis, 'Caesar' has been changing his mind and performing lots of U-turns. We are left wondering if 'Caesar' is out of his depth, trying to handle this exceptional crisis.

It is made more difficult that the 'science' is often conflicting and lay people are required to decide between competing experts and their often widely differing opinions.

Yet the Christian is ready in principle to continue to render to 'Caesar' his due as he stands as a proxy for our neighbour and our neighbour's best interest. We are still ready to follow the principle of Romans 13:7 and 1 Peter 2:17. We do not see revolution and rebellion as somehow a necessary part of what we stand for.

3. But a definite change

But there is a definite change now from where we were in the earliest days of the lockdown. Then we were facing an unknown quantity. We were told we might expect something that was possibly going to inflict death on a massive scale upon us. That this did not happen is evident. During that period, we anticipated the return of something like normal, including the re-opening of the churches again. We have been able to hold services for over two months but subject to restrictions and impositions upon what we can and cannot do.

That we have been to re-start services is a cause of thanksgiving. This has not been possible in lots of places. We have, however, felt our hope deferred with the introduction of mask-wearing in church a few weeks back. In the meantime there has been an increasing difference of opinion between churches in their practice and a difference of opinion within churches. Some are becoming more defiant in the light of the slow progress and the continuing restrictions upon such things as singing and fellowship. There is a thought that Caesar is expecting too much and has exceeded what he is due. This has brought tension.

We all assess evidence and risks differently and think through, or do not think through, our responsibilities to our neighbour differently. As individuals we need to be convinced in our own minds (Romans 14:5), what risks we are prepared to take personally, how stringently we will follow guidelines in our own personal lives.

It is more complicated when it comes to what we do as a local church. We are not just responsible for ourselves but for each other, and the reputation of the church in the eyes of people around. We have to take into consideration the needs of others and not be judgmental of their behaviour or their concerns (Romans 14:10-13). It is only too easy to cause offence. But we all of us have a duty to inform our minds and understand the situation as best we can. Caesar is not above criticism.