

JESUS AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

According to my records, it was March 15, 2020, when we had our last normal indoor service. California was one of the first states to be hit by the pandemic. On March 12 Governor Newsom banned gatherings of 250 or more. Additional restrictions followed. Churches were prohibited from having singing and chanting. All inside church meetings were eventually shut down.

Last July Grace Community Church (PROJECTOR ON--- GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH) near Los Angeles announced that the church was resuming indoor services. The county took the church to court in an effort to stop the indoor meetings. Court cases with the church have continued since then.

In an August sermon Pastor John MacArthur (JOHN MACARTHUR) argued that there was no real pandemic and that reports of covid deaths were greatly inflated. Attendees reported that there were thousands of people at the church services, and most of them were not wearing masks.

Meanwhile, the LA county health department issued orders requiring organizations and businesses to report outbreaks of covid among employees and customers and parishioners so that they could address outbreaks. In early October Grace Community Church reported five covid cases among the staff and none among the parishioners. Christian journalist Julie Roys reported that staff and members were being pressured not to report cases. In one fellowship group alone in the church she found that twelve members had active covid cases.

In November the US Supreme Court ruled in a case involving a San Diego church that it was unconstitutional to totally close down churches. A maximum number of 25% of building capacity was deemed reasonable. The court also ruled that restrictions on singing and chanting were OK. Grace Community Church continued to have large crowds with people not wearing masks. In late December Pastor MacArthur disappeared from the pulpit for a month. When he returned, he admitted that he had been sick but did not identify the illness.

In his first sermon delivered upon his return, he declared, **“I don’t even support religious freedom. Religious freedom is what sends people to hell. To say, ‘I support religious freedom’ is to say, ‘I support idolatry!’ Is to say, ‘I support lies! I support hell!’ ... No Christian with half a brain would say, ‘We support religious freedom.’”** (The Roys Report, 1/23/2021) (PROJECTOR OFF)

So what are we Christians to make of this? Where are we to draw the lines in these conflicts between church and state? It is obviously a relevant issue in these days in

which we live. Our local church has been relatively blessed to be able to have indoor services and outdoor services without too much restriction. And we have figured out how to do live streaming and video and audio recording. Many larger churches have harder times in determining how to do church in this environment.

Our subject is civil government. We have looked at the Old Testament to see what kind of governance we humans need and what kind of governors we should seek. We have looked at policies of justice that the Lord seems to desire in good government. Last week we looked at a couple of examples of godly people who lived under hostile governments and tried to see what lessons we could learn from them. Today we are going to move into the New Testament and see how Jesus interacted with the civil government of His day. We will have time only to hit the highlights of these interactions.

I.

First, we are going to consider JESUS AND HEROD THE GREAT. (PROJECTOR ON-- - I. JESUS AND HEROD THE GREAT) We left off last time in our tour through the Bible with Daniel living under Babylonian and Persian rule in the 600s BC. The Persians under Cyrus allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judea. Later the Greeks under Alexander the Great came through the Holy Land. After Alexander's premature death, the Greek empire was divided up among four of his generals and their descendants. That was in the 300s BC.

There was a brief time of Jewish independence in the 100s BC. But then the Romans showed up on the scene. In 63 BC the Roman general Pompey sacked Jerusalem. That marked the beginning of Roman control of the holy land for centuries to come. Herod the Great gradually gained power and the backing of the Romans. Though he was a practicing Jew, he was a descendant of the Edomites, who traced their origin to Esau, the brother of Jacob. In 37 BC the Roman senate declared Herod to be "King of the Jews." (JUDEA MAP 6) They put him in charge of the Roman province of Judea.

So Herod the King was ruling when Jesus was born. Luke 1 & 2 and Matthew 1 & 2 give us the Christmas story. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and Joseph in Nazareth to tell them that they were going to be the earthly parents of Israel's Messiah. Roman emperor Caesar Augustus called for a census to be taken. This meant that Joseph had to return to the town of his origin in Bethlehem. (NAZARETH TO BETHLEHEM MAP) This call for a census was sovereignly used by God to see that the prophecy of Micah #5 v. 2 was fulfilled, which declared that the Messiah was to be born in this small town, originally part of the tribe of Judah.

In the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel we learn that wise men from the east showed up in Jerusalem a year or two later to see the newborn king of the Jews. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is still a bit uncertain as to how their stargazing led them to this conclusion. But in Jerusalem they went to Herod to ask him about this special child. Herod didn't want any competitors for his title. But he consulted with the priests to see what they could tell him. They referred Herod to the prophecy of Micah #5. So the king

sent them to Bethlehem with the request that they report back to him so that he could worship this baby, too. That was, of course, a lie.

An angel appeared to these wise men--- we are not told how many of them there were-- - and they returned to their homeland by another route. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 2:13) In v. 13 of #2 9p. 808) we read, **“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’”** So Jesus and His family become refugees in Egypt. The valuable gifts which the wise men gave them were probably used to support the family in this time of exile.

Verse 16 of #2 (MATTHEW 2:16) tells us what happened next: **“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.”** After Herod died a year or two later, the family returned to Nazareth, where Jesus would grow into adulthood. Learning this story as a child could have produced a resentment toward the Roman government and the rulers whom they appointed to govern the Jews. Jesus was not a normal human being, however.

Are there any lessons that we can take away from this early interaction which Jesus had with civil government? Given the fact that there was divine intervention to get Jesus and his family out of the country, it seems to me reasonable to conclude that it is OK for the people of God to flee situations where lives of family members are threatened by hostile governments. That may not be the plan that God has for every Christian. Clearly it was God’s plan here.

It also means that good governments should have compassion for refugees who flee evil governments who are trying to kill them because of their religious faith. That does not mean necessarily that we should have open borders. But as followers of Jesus we should remember that our Savior was once a refugee whose family was fleeing from religious persecution.

II.

(II. JESUS AND THE TAX COLLECTORS) A second interaction that our Savior has with civil government involves JESUS AND THE TAX COLLECTORS. This is the subject of Mark 2 vv. 13-17. (p. 837) This happens early in Jesus’ public ministry. He has made Capernaum in Galilee His home base. (CAPERNAUM MAP 2)

This is the story that we find in vv. 13-17: **“He [Jesus] went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him. 15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the**

Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

So the characters here are Jesus, Levi, other tax collectors and sinners, the scribes of the Pharisees, and the disciples of Jesus. The scribes were rabbis. Most of them belonged to the religious party called the Pharisees. They were the dominant religious group in Judea. They were the traditionalists. They were legalists. They insisted upon following the Law of Moses and the interpretations which they had made of it. They disliked the Romans who ruled their land, but they were not revolutionaries.

The tax collectors were collaborators with the Romans. The Roman governor over Judea at this time was Pontius Pilate. He was told to raise a certain amount of revenue for Rome. So he sold contracts to people to raise this money. These tax collectors were usually Jews. They were given certain general rules to follow in raising money. But they had a pretty free hand to collect this money. Anything they collected beyond the requirement of their contract was theirs to keep. So these tax collectors were not very popular. They had a bad reputation. The religious leaders barred them from attending Jewish synagogues.

So Jesus amazingly picks a tax collector to be one of his twelve apostles. This is Levi, also known as Matthew. Jesus goes even further by hanging out with Matthew and his tax collector friends. He seems to enjoy their company. This goes against the religiously correct thinking of Jesus' day. But Jesus justifies it by pointing out that His mission was to save sinners.

What application can we make from this? I have heard the line over the years from business people that when someone shows up saying that they are from the government, and they are here to help you, then guard your wallet. We do live in a business environment that has lots of regulations. Some of us have to deal with IRS agents and OSHA representatives and health department inspectors and other regulators. They aren't always the most popular people.

But the example of Jesus tells us that these kinds of people are sometimes open to the love of God. So we need to see them as opportunities and not pains. They have tough jobs. They need the love of Jesus.

III.

A third encounter with civil government involves **JESUS AND THE CENTURION**. (III. JESUS AND THE CENTURION) That is the subject of Luke #7 vv. 1-10 (p. 863) The incident happens further along in the public ministry of Jesus. The setting is also the town of Capernaum.

In Luke #7 we find what happened: **"After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 Now a centurion had a servant**

who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. 3 When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.' 6 And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. 7 Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, "Go," and he goes; and to another, "Come," and he comes; and to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.' 9 When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' 10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well."

Pontius Pilate is the Roman governor ruling over Judea to the south. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, has been assigned by the Romans to govern Galilee and the region east of the Jordan River. So this centurion is probably part of the army of Herod Antipas. Clearly he is a Gentile. Generally there was resentment toward all of the people who were working for Herod Antipas, who was working for the Romans. They were tolerated, but not generally liked.

This centurion was different. Centurions of this time generally were officers over eighty men, or sometimes fewer. They were well paid. This guy has a great reputation with the religious leaders. They tell Jesus that he loves the Jews. He helped them build their synagogue. He may well have contributed money toward its construction. Perhaps he had his men provide labor to build it.

(CAPERNAUM SITE) Archaeologists believe that they have found this synagogue. (It is believed to be below the reconstructed synagogue shown in the center of this picture.) It was probably a place where Jesus spoke.

So this centurion has a servant who is sick, and he sends Jewish religious leaders to Jesus to ask for his help. He has heard stories about Jesus' miraculous powers. He is aware that religious Jews like Jesus would not normally enter a Gentile's home. So he sends word to Jesus that he does not expect this rabbi to come to his house. He has faith and respect in Jesus such that he believes that if Jesus just says the word, his servant will be healed. Jesus marvels at this Gentile's faith, and he heals his servant.

The part of this story that is relevant to our topic is Jesus' treatment of this man as a military officer. If the pacifist view of war and military service was correct, I would expect that Jesus might encourage this guy to give up his military career. Centurion, if you truly have faith in me, lay down your arms and become one of My disciples. He doesn't do that.

Centurions appear a number of times in the New Testament. They always seem to be regarded with respect. Paul has dealings with centurions on several occasions. We never find any encouragement from him toward these military officers to give up their occupation. This is in spite of the fact that they represent a Gentile power which is generally hostile to the Jews.

So what we might take away from this is that military service is a legitimate occupation, perhaps even deserving of respect. Often military officers are honorable people. They generally have leadership abilities and personal qualifications that deserve respect. That is not to say that we can't find occasional scum bags in this occupation as we might find in any other. But it would seem to me that there is a Biblical basis for respecting members of the military. Certainly Jesus and the Apostle Paul had that kind of respect.

IV.

We come finally to JESUS AND TAXES AND SECULAR GOVERNMENT. (IV. JESUS AND TAXES AND...) We move along chronologically to the week before Jesus' crucifixion. Opposition from the religious leaders is growing. Jesus is in Jerusalem with other religious pilgrims for celebration of the Feast of Passover. The passage which we are going to consider is Matthew #22 vv. 15-22. (p. 827) The religious leaders are out to get Jesus.

According to vv. 15 & 16 of Matthew 22, **“Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.’”**

The Pharisees, remember, were the traditionalists and legalists. They had developed applications of the Old Testament law that they put on a par with the Old Testament law itself. They had decided that healing on the Sabbath was work. So no one claiming to be the Messiah would ever heal on the Sabbath. Jesus almost seemed to relish healing people on the Sabbath. So that was one of the reasons they were rejecting Jesus.

The Herodians were defenders of the family of King Herod. These guys were perhaps on the government payroll or benefitted in some way from the rule of Herod the Great and his sons, including Herod Antipas. So they were negative toward anyone else who came along claiming to be King of the Jews. Just a few days earlier, when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, a lot of people were hailing this Jesus as King of the Jews. The Pharisees and the Herodians were not natural allies. But here they were united in their opposition to Jesus. So they were trying to set Him up for a trap.

The plotters in v. 17 address Jesus: **“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”** The tax in question was a relatively small amount charged to every adult. It was resented by most Jews. For the money went directly to the Romans.

Usually it was paid in Roman coinage. Thus it was a constant reminder to the Jews of their subservience to their Gentile overlords.

The dilemma which the Herodians and Pharisees are presenting to Jesus is an either-or situation. Either Jesus says that everyone must pay the tax, which will be unpopular with the masses, or He says that they should not pay the tax, which will subject Jesus to a charge of promoting rebellion against the Roman Empire.

In v. 18 Jesus addresses the motive behind the question: **“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?’**” These guys are pretending to respect Jesus, but they do not.

Jesus continues in vv. 19-21: **“‘Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’”** The coin (DENARIUS--- TIBERIUS) was a Roman denarius. On one side was the face of the Roman emperor Tiberius. On the other side was a picture of the emperor seated on a throne and wearing a crown and the garments of a priest. Also present on this side were the words “Pontifex Maximus”--- High Priest.

In the rest of v. 21 and in v. 22 we read, **“Then he said to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”** Jesus’ accusers were wanting an either-or answer. Jesus gave them a both-and answer. Honor the king and honor God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the ideal form of government presented in the Old Testament God was the political ruler of Israel. But Israel had turned away from that form of government. So Israel was subjected to civil government led by Gentiles and unbelievers. Civil government was, and still is, a divine institution. It was created by God for good purposes, and the claim of the Bible is that He is still in charge. He is ultimately responsible for bringing people into power over civil government for His purposes.

So the follower of the true God has responsibilities to two spheres. He has a responsibility toward civil government no matter who is in charge, even if it is Caesar. The believer has a responsibility to pay his or her taxes, even though part of that money may be used for bad purposes. The believer also has responsibilities to the divine sphere. We are responsible to obey God. When those two spheres come into conflict, our highest loyalty must be to God. For He ultimately rules supreme over civil government.

About 150 years after the time of Jesus a church leader by the name of Tertullian commented on this passage: **“We have, for Caesar, the image of Caesar which is impressed upon the coin, for God the image of God which is impressed on human beings. Give Caesar his money; give yourself to God.”**

Since the time of Jesus conflict has come when one of these two spheres seeks to dominate the other and take on its role. In the Middle Ages the Church became strong in Europe and sought to control civil government. The pope claimed to be supreme in the Holy Roman Empire. He wanted the power to appoint the kings over Europe. This led only to corruption in the church and political intrigue in civil government.

In too many parts of the world today dictators seek to remain supreme over the sphere of the divine. In China there are estimates that the number of genuine Christians may number into the hundreds of millions. The Communist government perceives this as a threat to its sovereign control. So it seeks to squash and control the church. Christians are regularly faced with the threat of persecution and the temptation to disobey God by giving ultimate honor to the realm of civil government rather than to God.

So what is it that falls into the legitimate realm and sphere of control of civil government? We have seen from our study of the Old Testament that matters of justice are an important responsibility of civil government. Civil government has a responsibility to defend its citizens from outside threats. Indeed, we have seen that a fundamental responsibility of civil government is to respect the image of God and to protect life from the womb to the tomb.

So it would seem logical that good civil government has some kind of responsibility in the area of public health. When its citizens are threatened by a global pandemic, it needs to take action to defend the well-being of its citizens. Now we may not personally agree with all of the applications of the public policies that government chooses to impose to protect public health. When civil governments treat churches more harshly than casinos in terms of their rights to gather, then we have a right to speak up.

But when we as churches and Christians flout public health rules in refusing to wear masks and refusing to practice any kind of social distancing and gathering by the thousands in large church services in defiance of public health rules, then it seems to me that we are doing wrong in going against an area of responsibility over which civil government has a legitimate say. We may not personally agree with all of the rules. Many of us are getting the vaccines, and the need for masks and social distancing may be passing away. Local and state governments may be slow to catch on to the best science and medical practices. But still we Christians need to show a certain respect toward civil government which has a right and a responsibility to protect public health.

In the past year I have read a number of stories about pastors and churches who have felt that they had some kind of divine guarantee against harm and did not need to follow any of the public health rules, and too many of them and their family members have not only ended up sick but also dead. There is a fellow pastor whom I know whom I never saw wearing a mask around people in the last year, and he ended up very sick in the hospital and is still suffering from lingering effects of the corona virus.

So the lesson from Jesus is that civil government does have a legitimate sphere of operation that includes the responsibility of God's people to pay taxes, to administer

justice, to protect public health, to defend the country. Our ultimate allegiance, however, is to God. When the state tries to keep us from obeying God, then we need to disobey the state.

In this season of Lent we Christians are reminded that civil government can be nasty and evil. For it was civil government which crucified the only sinless human being who ever lived. But because Jesus Christ was also God, the sacrifice that He made resulted in benefit for us. For the promise of God is that if we put our trust in this Jesus we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. For that we can be eternally grateful.