Dual Citizenship

Scripture: Matthew 22: 15-22
Reverend Ted Warner
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In the immortal words of Admiral Ackbar, “It’s a Trap!!!” The Herodians and Pharisees, who usually have their differences, have teamed up to put Jesus on the spot. The stakes are high. Rome demands census taxes while Jews despise them. If Jesus rejects the tax, he can be accused of sedition against Rome, while if he endorses the tax, Jewish leaders might view him as compromising with imperial oppression of God’s people. Jesus offers a response that handles the overarching issue of claiming loyalty and identity.

First, Jesus points out the trap by asking, “why do you put me to the test?” Jesus then asks to see the denarius, which bears Caesar’s image. Image in the ancient world typically symbolized ownership and authority. Caesar’s image contrasts humanity bearing the image of God. Furthermore, the inscription on the coin says, “Tiberius Ceasar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” So, who is the Son of God and who claims human beings?

Jesus acknowledges political and national structures without giving them the ultimate authority. He says, “give the emperor (or Caeser) the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s. A human being in Rome can pay taxes and still belong to God. Jesus is not splitting the sacred and secular here, but rather showing that Caesar’s claim is quite small and limited compared to God’s. Caesar’s image can go on a coin and be collected, but God’s image is on every human face across the globe. All humans are loved and treasured by God despite what value governments assign to them. Governments have real authority, but by no means have ultimate authority. Our allegiance to God should compel us to both civic responsibility, and prophetic critique when necessary.

The crowd is amazed as Jesus neither sidesteps the question nor takes a side of the trap. He reframes the discussion entirely to consider to whom we belong and what does it mean to do our civic duty as citizens of God’s kingdom?

We can certainly relate to this in our own context. Our identities and competing loyalties are just as important today as they were in the time of Matthew’s writing. If we are life-long Americans, we are born into the office of citizen. Though birthright citizenship is under pushback by many today, anyone born in the United States is born into a political position as citizens. Most of us were politicians from birth as we were born here. For us, what does it mean to have dual citizenship in God’s kingdom and the United States?

As citizens and consumers, we have power to influence what is happening in our own communities. It is important to remember our priorities and our citizenship in the kingdom of God while considering how best to practice our civic duties. It becomes a question of how we approach our civic life as image-bearers of God. How do we use our time and talent for church,

community, and among our families? Certainly, doing no harm goes a long way, for harm seems to be all too common. If we feel called to feed people, we might not be in a position to feed 5,000 as Jesus did, but we might be able to feed one hungry person. For us, the magic number of people we can feed is about 120 from our Sunday Meals program.

I got to observe and join in on the work of the faithful just yesterday as our dining room was full of helping hands. We were productive, saved labor expenses, and got the chance for some good fellowship. Working together is an act of communion in and of itself.

Soon, we will observe a similar effort in our community with the establishment of a local Habitat for Humanity. Can we picture people standing side by side building homes in our area? This is much like those at the soup kitchen serving weekly. Or those involved with our missions right here at church.

What is important to think about today as we ponder our text is not what we might give to the state, but rather, how will we give ourselves fully to God. Certainly the state will benefit when we give ourselves fully to God. God's mission of mutual flourishing is good for all of society.

There is no better time than the present to consider what it means to give ourselves fully to God. As we are into our stewardship campaign, what does it look like to give ourselves fully to God. What does that look like in our home lives, in the life of the church, in our work and/or volunteer experiences, and even into our finances? How do we fully live out the reality of being God's image-bearers?

Every smile we offer to a stranger, every piece of trash we pick up walking through the community, and every good deed we do all take some part in living out God's kingdom on earth. The good news is we don't need to do this to perfection. We all get it wrong sometimes. God offers us amazing grace far beyond what we deserve. When we extend that grace to others, we begin to really live the gospel. And the world has another chance to live for the mutual benefit of each other.

Another election is upon us. Have you ever written a letter to a representative? Maybe now is the time, or immediately following the election. Let our representatives know that we are praying for them, that they make wise decisions and conduct themselves in a manner worthy of their position. Maybe we are overdue to write to family or friends. But whatever we do, remember that we are image-bearers of God, we are valuable, and we can make a difference for the kingdom that has no end. As dual citizens, we can be peacemakers in a world that is otherwise chaotic.