

Render to Caesar 06-06-2021

And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Matthew 22:20-21

In Matthew 22, Jesus was being tested by His adversaries. They thought they could trick Him by asking Him about the payment of taxes to the Romans. His answer became the basis of the authority of part of the law of Christ: Submit to your leaders for the sake of Christ. This teaching was elaborated on in Romans 13:1-7 and again in 1 Peter 2:12-17. There Paul and Peter told us that the authority of all rulers comes from God; therefore, our submission to them is expected as part of our submission to God.

These are difficult commandments, mainly because the governments of men almost never have the will of God as their purpose or directive. God established government to punish evildoers and to reward the righteous. Yet even Jesus foresaw that it might be governments themselves that persecute Christians (John 16:2, Matthew 10:18). Paul was provoked to exasperation by the rulers of the people to the degree he even transgressed this command in Acts 23:1-5.

This command is also difficult because it is not always clear how we execute our part of this law. We must determine the context of the passage to understand it. The context of Romans 13 is found in Romans 12:17-18, where Paul tells us that obeying this command is "As much as it depends on you"; this is to say, it is our liberty where this command is followed. Consider too the context of Context of 1 Peter 2 found in 1 Peter 2:12. There Peter says that the purpose of this command is to have our "conduct honorable" in the sight of unbelievers; Paul says the same in Romans 12 saying we do "What is right in the sight of men". We are submitting with a purpose, to enforce our respect for authority.

Understanding the purpose of our submission answers an important question: Is violating man's law equal to violating God's law? We should understand that this is not the case. God's law is not equal to man's law; it is not a "sin" to be in legal violation, but it is sinful to go against honorable things. Thus we need to pursue things that make for peace between us and those in the world, and not be punished as evildoers.

There tends to be two ways in which Christians fall short of this commandment. First is a mindset of rebellion. Sometimes we declare that as Americans we have the right to "say what I want" or to "refuse to submit"; we speak evil of our leaders because we have an American right, forgetting we are citizens of the kingdom, and subject to that law first. In the other extreme are those who over esteem the laws of men. They have a mindset of surrender; when given rules that violate the laws of Christ, they accept that they "cannot fulfill God's command". When man's law transgresses God's law, we must obey God rather than men. As well, we are not the keepers of the law of men; it is not our job to enforce the rules of men to the church.

This command was always hard. It was hard for those who received it, whether they were Roman Christians who would be persecuted by the Romans, or Judean Christians persecuted by the Jews. It is hard for us too, trying to navigate a world that has attempted to restrict our assembly and stands against virtue. But to be obedient is the way we glorify God.