

# God's Kingdom and Human Government

Thomas Robinson, *Jesus and the Presence of God 5*, July 5, 2015

**Matthew 22:15-22** (ESV Adapted; Cf Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26)

<sup>15</sup> Then the **Pharisees** went and plotted how to **entangle him in his words**. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. **Is it lawful to pay census tax to Caesar, or not?**"

<sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "**Why put me to the test**, by putting on an act? <sup>19</sup> Show me the official **coin** for the **census tax**."

And they brought him a **denarius**.

<sup>20</sup> And Jesus says to them, "Whose **image** and **inscription** is this?"

<sup>21</sup> They say to him, "**Caesar's**."

And he says to them, "**Then give back Caesar's things to Caesar, and God's things to God.**"

<sup>22</sup> When they heard it, they **marveled**. And they left him and went away.



Denarius Coin: AUGUSTUS  
TI. CAESAR DIVI AUG. F.  
(Augustus Tiberius Caesar,  
Son of the Divine Augustus).

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**Acts 5:37** Gamaliel refers to the uprising at the time of the tax census in ad 6.

<sup>37</sup> Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census registration and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

**Matthew 20:25-28** Jesus teaches his disciples when some ask for prominent roles in his kingdom.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus ... said, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever wishes to become great among you will be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you will be your slave, <sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

**Matthew 26:52** Jesus instructs Peter in Gethsemane when Peter tries to defend Jesus.

<sup>52</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

**John 18:36** Jesus speaks to Pontius Pilate during Jesus' trial.

<sup>36</sup> Jesus answered (Pilate), "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jewish leaders."

**1 Peter 2:11-17** Peter instructs Christians about living in the Roman empire.

<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and resident aliens to hold back from the desires that promote the flesh, which wage war against your true life. <sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the nations/Gentiles honorable/beautiful, so that when they are speaking against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of his royal visitation.

<sup>13</sup> Be subject to every human creation/institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the emperor/king as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish evildoers and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as free people, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Honor all people. Love the family of believers. Reverence God. Honor the emperor.

**Revelation 17:5-6** A symbolic description of the Roman empire in John's vision.

<sup>5</sup> "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations. [She is] drunk with the blood of the saints, the martyrs of Jesus."

## Pharisees and Herodians Challenge Jesus

Since Jesus arrived at the Temple for Passover, Mt has described the growing conflict with the chief priests – like the prophets’ condemnation of Jerusalem leaders before the exile.

Passover was a time of intense feeling about deliverance from oppression as in the Exodus.

Rome had overthrown the last independent Jewish kings, and used the upstart Herod to drive out Parthian forces and secure the region. When Herod died, they divided it among three sons. The son that they put over Judea & Samaria, Archelaus, was a poor ruler. Rome deposed him in ad 6 and took over direct rule under a Roman prefect (now Pontius Pilate).

They carried out a tax census and imposed direct head tax on the population (Zacchaeus).

Many devout Jews were radicalized (became Zealots), like Judas the Galilean [Acts 5:37] and other Pharisees: Jews must recognize no Lord but God, pay no taxes, drive out oppressors. Herodians hated the expulsion of a Herodian ruler. The census tax embodied oppression. That Roman control/census enforced by oppressive governors led to war in ad 66-73.

Jesus steps into that volatile scene talking about God’s kingdom. People know only one way that kingdoms collide. Surely God’s kingdom is on our side against oppression – just war! Wouldn’t it have been great for Jesus to take over the government – Caiaphas & Caesar!?

They ask Jesus the question, backed with flattering expectations. Jesus pushes them to look at coin they hold. It’s Caesar’s coin – his image, his claims of divinity – given by him, that they’re using. Give it back to him! Pay the tax? Get rid of such a coin? Jesus’s response is terse and ambiguous, a response to the entrapping question, not a detailed policy.

## Giving God’s Things to God

But Jesus doesn’t stop. He adds what’s most important: *“and give God’s things to God.”* The questioners might puzzle over *“Caesar’s things”* – from the coin to all the claims that governments good and bad make on those under their rule. But the far vaster category is *“God’s things.”* What exactly falls in that category. Is there any part of life that is outside? And how do I give *“God’s things to God”*? *“Seek first his kingdom...”* [Mt 6:33]. Jesus whole teaching about life and discipleship is his answer to the question – remaking all of life.

Jesus helps his disciples see that God’s kingdom functions on a basis fundamentally different from any and every nation/empire/government of our world. Every government works by the control of power/force. Sometimes well-used, sometimes oppressive. Often both at the same time. No nation works by *“obedience unto death, even death on a cross”* which embodies God’s love that is the very heart of Jesus’ kingdom. [Mt 20:25-28; 26:52; Jn 18:36].

Jesus’ disciples knew the world’s way of greatness and defending the right with the sword.

Jesus helped them trust a different reality. When Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. claimed to see a vision telling him to conquer rival armies by the sign of Christ, it wasn’t from Jesus. The Roman empire did not become a Christian empire, it became an empire of this world that used some of the structures of Christianity to enforce its purposes. The church lost.

## Living the Kingdom of God inside the World’s empires

Most people have a natural love of ‘father-land,’ patriotism. We share a nation’s life, know its culture, love/hate its political leaders, etc. It’s home. Christians have a larger patriotism.

Our father’s land is the whole earth. We give *“God’s to God”* including all of culture.

We’re called to participate well/beautifully in all parts of human life including government, to bring our best to all that contributes to the common good now. But always knowing that this passes away. What will last is that love embodied in the cross that is the heart of God.