

North Korea used to be very much a Christian country before the Communists took over in 1945. Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, was once called “the Jerusalem of Asia.”

But now, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the government in North Korea suppresses all independent religious activity. People who engage in public religious expression or other unauthorized religious activities continue to be arrested and imprisoned.

In April 1999, eyewitnesses testified before Congress that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs were treated worse than other inmates.

One woman reported seeing Christians killed when molten steel was poured on them. She also stated that Christian prisoners were often not given clothes and were treated like animals.

According to ICC, an estimated 400 Christians were executed during 1999 alone. Most of them were killed by public firing squads after being convicted on trumped up criminal charges.

In 2000, ICC reported, Younghee Lee was executed by firing squad in a market place in North Province. She was accused of being a traitor to the Labor Party. Younghee had received Christ as her Savior after escaping to China in 1998 and had returned to North Korea to preach the Gospel.

How far should Christians go in obeying their government? How much authority does a civil government have? Should Christians in North Korea obey their government? Since Christians are said to be “Citizens of heaven” are they exempt from obeying the law?

How about civil disobedience? Should we as Christians break the law and try to bring about change when laws are unjust? How are those of us who are Christians to respond to the secular government under which we live?

**Turn to Luke 20 pg 1017**

Luke chapter 20 is bringing us to the culmination of Jesus’ earthly ministry. He’s less than a week away from his death on the cross at this point. These final days of

Christ's life are packed with events that are crucial for us to understand.

On Sunday, which is the first day of the Jewish week, Jesus entered Jerusalem and was hailed by the people as King. Jerusalem was packed with Passover pilgrims and they laid down their cloaks in the road to give Jesus a "red carpet" welcome. They hailed Him as Israel's long awaited Messiah.

All of this attention caught the attention of someone else too, that was the religious leadership in Jerusalem.

These guys were the heavies. They were the powerbrokers. They had control.

Now suddenly this lightweight rabbi from a hick town in Galilee was grabbing the spotlight and they didn't like it.

The real icing on the cake though, came when Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and threw out the moneychangers and those who sold animals, and then commandeered the chief spot of authoritative by teaching.

For several days Jesus boldly taught with authority in the temple. It was bad enough when he was moving around the countryside preaching and gathering a following, but this had gone too far.

So in chapter 20 and verse 1 we read: *...the chief priests and the scribes, together with the elders, confronted Him and spoke to Him, saying, "Tell us, by what authority are You doing these things? Or who is he who gave You this authority?"*

Who do you think you are coming in here and taking over?

By the time we get to our passage for today these men are absolutely livid. They are so mad at Jesus they can't stand it.

Verse 19 lays the groundwork for what we're going to see today.

**Read vs 19**

Follow this now. As we saw last week Jesus had answered the challenge of the Jewish leadership, first with an embarrassing question, and then with a parable. They understood both quite clearly, and their response was dramatic. They attempted to arrest Jesus on the spot, it says, they *sought to lay hands on Him*.

Matthew's account is more specific here:

*Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet. (Matthew 21:45-46).*

I believe the leaders actually tried to place Jesus under house arrest. This provoked such a strong reaction from the people that the leaders had to back off, and to develop a strategy.

First they directly challenge Jesus' authority and it backfires and they're embarrassed before all the people. Then they try to arrest Jesus and that bombs out too.

These men weren't interested in truth, they were out to get this troublemaker. Back in chapter 19 we were told *the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him*.

At that point it was just a matter of control. Now it's gotten personal.

I want us to see two things about God and government that grow out of the events that follow. The first is this: *Some People Want To Treat The Government As God*

## **Read vs 20**

The parallel passage in Mark reads: *Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words.*

Two things stand out in that verse. First, Jesus' enemies knew if they were going to trap Him it had to be by His words. Why? Because His actions were unimpeachable. They wouldn't even consider taking Jesus on in the area of His lifestyle.

What about us? If someone wanted to bring us down would they have to look somewhere other than how we live our lives, or could they get us on our actions? Are we living lives that take God's Word seriously? Obviously we're not going to be sinless like Christ, but are we serious about obeying God? Is that something that other people can pick up on in our lives?

The second thing that jumps out of this verse is that they wanted *to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor*.

Now you have to know a little about the historical context to appreciate this. The Jewish people weren't living under a Jewish government. They were a repressed people. Israel was conquered territory and the conqueror was the world super power of the time: Rome.

Israel was a nation literally created by God. He chose out a man named Abraham and promised to make his descendants a great nation. He gave them the land and made them great promises.

The problem was their disobedience. At this point in their history God was using the iron boot of Rome to chastise them.

Now the Jews were monotheists. They worshiped Jehovah God. The Romans were polytheists. They worshiped a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. They even got to the point where they declared their emperor divine.

The Jews hated the Romans and the Romans hated the Jews. So when these priests and scribes plot on how they can deliver *Him to the power and the authority of the governor* it means the Roman governor.

The solution to their problem, as the Jewish leaders reasoned, was a political one, not a spiritual one. They didn't say, "Let's pray about this." They didn't sit down with Him and ask Him to justify Himself biblically.

They said, "We'll let the government deal with this."

The Pharisees see themselves as the "devout" Jews: sworn enemies of the Romans and of the preoccupation that they exert over the land. The Herodians, on the other hand, were of the household and family of Herod: they were members of the wealthy and privileged class who gladly collaborated with the enemy helping them rule the Jews in exchange for status and power in society....Enemies of Rome and friends of Rome partners in conspiracy.

**Read 21** Jesus, we just want you to know how much we value your opinion. Help us out with something.

We're in kind of a quandary and we really need your spiritual discernment to answer a question we've been wrestling with. **Read vs 22**

We pay taxes today and there were taxes at this point in Israel. No one likes taxes. There was a land tax that required a portion of everything that was grown be given to the government. Then, there was an income tax of about 1% and then there was this tax.

This was a particular tax that was known as a "poll tax" or "tribute tax" that was payable directly to Caesar: one denarius (about one days wage). Of all the taxes of the day, this tribute tax was most problematic for the Jews.

Many Jews believed that paying it violated the first commandment- the one about not worshipping or bearing any graven images of other gods. The tribute tax was required to be paid in a unique currency that bore the image of Caesar, the "graven image" of Caesar, and paying it was, in effect a renewal of allegiance and devotion to the almighty emperor: as it said on every coin, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus."

"OK, now then, Jesus," they ask, "Is it right for good Jews to pay this tribute tax?"

Now how was Jesus supposed to answer this question? Once again they figured they had Jesus backed into a corner with no way out. If he answered "Yes" then he would offend the pious Jews in the audience. If he answered, "No" then the Herodians would have evidence of treason.

A couple of observations:

(1) The question isn't whether we should pay their taxes, but whether or not taxes should be paid to an unjust government.

(2) The issue is posed as a problem of God's law, not as a matter of rebellion or personal preference. The question is, "Is it lawful?" The question is, "What does the Bible say?"

(3) The question is posed assuming that there's conflict between God and government, between "church and state."

(4) The question is posed so that Jesus is limited to only one answer out of two choices, which they conveniently already provided. They didn't pose the question to give Jesus the freedom to answer as He chose, but rather as they chose.

One of the reasons we should be real careful when we hear results of surveys and opinion poles is that the answer can be influenced by the way the question's asked.

They were trying to ask the question in a way that would trap Jesus and put Him in a no-win situation.

So here's the question: "Shall we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" That's not a bad question, when you think of it. A sincere Israelite could have asked it. Should God's people pay taxes to a pagan government?

That could present a real dilemma in countries where the State persecutes Christians and demands their religious allegiance away from Christ. Do you pay taxes as a citizen of North Korea when you know part of your tax money supports a regime that imprisons and tortures Christians?

If your a citizen of Iraq do you pay your taxes when you know your taxes help pay for Saddam's family to live in luxury while others around you starve?

The only thing wrong with the question they put to Jesus was the intent.

What these men were doing was substituting the government for God. They were looking to the government to do God's work. They were doing it in an underhanded sort of way but we can fall into the same trap.

There's always a danger that the bigger government gets the more we want the government to be the provider. So suddenly when someone loses their job or needs financial help we say "the government will handle it."

And so more and more we look to the government in a dependent, trusting way and begin to forget about God's plan to use His people to minister to others.

I. *Some Want To Treat The Government As God*

II. *Christians Recognize The Authority Of Both God And Government*

### **Read vs 23 - 24a**

Matthew adds: *"Show Me the tax money."* So they brought Him a denarius.

Two weeks ago we talked about the temple tax and how it could only be paid in shekels. There was a lot of different coinage around and the Jews said only a Jewish shekle could be used in the temple. No foreign money from pagan nations allowed.

The Romans said, "We don't want any foreign money either. When you pay your tribute it can only be with a Roman denarius. So, this was a tribute tax that could only be paid in denarii.

Jesus asks for the specific coin that would be used and asks whose picture's on the thing? **Read 24b They answered and said, "Caesar's."**

Here's what was on the coin: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the deified Augustus," and on the other side an image of the emperor's mother Livia as an incarnation of the goddess Pax (peace), with the words "High Priest."

### **Read vs 25**

The coin bore Caesar's image : give it back to him. You bear God's image: so give yourself back to him.

### **Read vs 26**

You'd think they'd learn by now, don't try to take on Jesus.

In one sentence He sums up God's outlook on church and state. We're dual citizens. Make sure you show both God and government the proper respect.

What really strikes me here is the fact that Jesus didn't say, "Rome is an illegitimate oppressor, withhold your taxes."

The Bible doesn't teach what we call "civil disobedience." Jesus said pay what you owe. And that holds true whether you're in Israel, Rome, North Korea, Cuba, or the United States of America.

In fact, turn with me to **Romans 13** to see where government comes from in the first place. **Pg 1095**

### **read 13:1-7**

Think about the implications of these verses:

1. The Christian citizen is to respect and obey governmental authority even if his government hasn't conducted itself in a respectable way.
2. The form of government isn't mentioned because the form of government isn't the issue. Whether it's communistic, Islamic, democratic, or fascist isn't the issue. A Christian is to be subject to his government.
3. It seems clear that this command extends not only to every form of government, but to every level. This not only applies to presidents, but also to senators, congressmen, mayors, police offices, and IRS agents.
4. And then probably the most difficult to grasp, but it applies to all qualities of governments. Both Jesus in Luke 20 and Paul here in Romans are talking about the governments that will eventually execute them.

I read one commentary on Romans 13 that said that that this was a description of an ideal government. This is government the way it should be. And of course the conclusion was, if our government isn't perfect then our obedience doesn't have to be either.

That's not at all what the Bible teaches. Listen to Peter's words in I Peter 2 *Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (I Peter 2:13-17)*

Those words were written during the final years of Nero's reign. Nero was so obsessed with himself after he had his mother poisoned he had her body mutilated because he wanted to see the womb that bore him.

He tortured and murdered Christians. He was the most powerful man in the world but ended up committing suicide.

We submit to our government because, as Romans 13 explains government itself is ordained of God. Human government is God's creation and even though some would want to corrupt it it still carries God's authority.



Government has a purpose and that's to keep law and order. Even in North Korea there are laws against rape and armed robbery. Even in a dictatorship there are laws designed to keep order.

A Christian is the citizen of his or her country as well as a citizen of heaven and they need to show the proper allegiance to both. Romans 13 says we do that "for conscience sake."

We obey the law, not just because we'll get arrested if we don't but, because God tells us to.

Now the obvious question comes, "But what if the government and God butt heads? What if I live in North Korea and the government tells me I can't teach the Bible to my children, or I live in China and I'm told my wife has to have an abortion if she gets pregnant with our second child?

We render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. There's two spheres of authority and when Caesar touches on things that pertain to God then we must obey God rather than men.

The only time we can biblically disobey our government is when the government either tells us we can't do something God has commanded, or we have to do something God has prohibited.

The Bible only sanctions religious disobedience, never civil disobedience.

We have some biblical examples:

Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon (which is modern day Iraq) has over run Jerusalem and taken Jews captive. He issues an order that everyone has to bow down before his golden image.

The music sounds, everyone bows, and three guys are left standing. Three Jewish young men who couldn't bow.

A later king, Darius, issues a decree that no one pray to any god but him for 30 days. Daniel immediately goes home, opens his window and bows down in prayer.

When Caesar moves into the realm of our obedience to God we must obey God.

Just remember this, in every Biblical example of religious disobedience, they do it without rebelling or revolting against the constituted authority. And they do it prepared to face the consequences of their disobedience.

This is easy preaching and hard living.

What if you were a Christian living in Iraq today? Today there are 1.2 million Assyrian Christians in Iraq, many in their historic lands, primarily near the city of Nineveh.

Here's the question. You're an Iraqi Christian and your inducted into the army. Do you serve? What do you do? I would say, from what I read in Scripture, your country commands you to serve, you serve.

But now what if you're commanded to use poison gas on innocent civilians the way Saddam did in 1988.

Now the government has stepped into the realm of God and God would say, no! To disobey an order could mean the firing squad, but that's the only option. Caesar gets mad when his orders are opposed!

Christians Recognize The Authority Of Both God And Government. The Apostle Peter wrote: *having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works, which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

If people criticize you as a Christian there shouldn't be anything in your life that they can find fault with. Your life should be a demonstration of honesty and good citizenship. We are in the world to shine as lights in the world.

We need to be careful that we don't let anything ever dim that testimony. Whatever we do, even in our relationship with our government, do it all to the glory of God.

We've covered some pretty heavy things this morning. Some things that are necessary for us to put into practice in our daily lives right now, and some principles that will become more and more important as we approach the end of the age and we as Christians possibly come more and more into conflict with the state.

But there's one last thing that's absolutely crucial to cover. You could do all these things and still not be a Christian. Obeying the law, paying your taxes, living a moral life can't make you a Christian. Only a personal relationship with Christ can do that.

We hear the word "Christian" used a lot in our culture, even to the point of people calling this a Christian nation. But according to the Bible a true Christian isn't a follower of a religion, but someone who knows Christ personally.

We have to *render...to God the things that are God's*. Over and above everything else God commands that we come to Him by faith.

A Christian is someone who has come to realize that before God they are a guilty sinner. Someone who hasn't always rendered to God the things due Him.

They're someone who has come to realize that God in His love has gave Jesus Christ to die for our sins. A Christian is someone who has personally trusted Jesus Christ as Savior. Someone who is depending on the finished work of Christ for forgiveness.

Not on church membership, not on good works, not on religious actions, not even on submission to the government. But on the cross of Christ.

This morning I wonder, are you a Christian in the Biblical sense of the word? Are you a truth seeker, or are you like Israel's leaders at the time of Christ? What are you depending on for forgiveness? Is it Christ plus nothing?

What would compel Younghee Lee to return to North Korea after escaping to safety? She came back and gave her life to preach the Gospel. She came back to the oppression of North Korea because she knew that Jesus makes the difference between heaven and hell and her people needed to hear about Him.

She was willing to obey God rather than Caesar in an area that God clearly commanded. She didn't revolt. She lived out her faith and it cost her her life. All around the globe her story is being repeated.

Suppose the government you lived under suddenly denied you all the social and political freedoms you now enjoy. How would you respond?

*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*