

In God We Trust

Matthew 22: 15-22

4th of July Weekend

07 04 2010 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Our nation celebrates its 234th birthday today. **Independence Day** will be observed with picnics, parades, and fireworks. The Fourth of July has become our country's focal point for patriotic celebration.

No one could have guessed the outcome of our founding fathers' efforts over two hundred years ago. On July 4, 1776, King George III of England wrote in his diary: "*Nothing of importance happened today.*" However, the American Revolution changed both this continent and the entire world. Today we recognize the hard won prize of freedom.

Patriotic fervor affects our churches today. Congregations across the land are singing "*God Bless America*" or "*America the Beautiful*" while ministers preach on the theme "*In God We Trust*" or "*One Nation under God.*" Sanctuaries are adorned with the American flag, a reminder of our heritage and freedom's price.

Since the Fourth of July fell on Sunday this year, we wanted to spend this time of worship reflecting about our dual citizenship as God's people. We are both citizens of the United States of America and the kingdom of God.

I. Church and State: the United States of America

The **history of the church and state** in North America are inseparably interwoven. Many of the early settlers came to this land seeking religious freedom. *The Declaration of Independence* proclaims a belief in "*certain, God-given, inalienable rights.*" The first act of the United States Congress was the selection of a chaplain. The second act authorized the purchase of 20,000 Bibles to be given to the American Indians.

The *Pledge of Allegiance* declares this to be "*One nation under God.*" Money is minted with the phrase "*In God We Trust.*" The president is sworn into office with his right hand placed upon a Bible. Each session of Congress is opened with prayer. The Christian faith has shaped American history indelibly.

In the 1830s, French author, **Alexis de Tocqueville**, toured the United States and wrote about his experience. He said:

"I have toured America, and I have seen most of what you offer. I've seen the richness of the fields and the wealth of your mines. I've seen your industrial might, the beauties of the rivers, the streams, the lakes, and the grandeur of the mountains. I've noticed the abundance of the forests and the marvelous climate with which you are blessed. In none of these things did I see the cause for the greatness of America. It wasn't until I went into your churches that I saw the reason for America's greatness. America is great because America is good; and

as long as America is good, America will be great. If it ever ceases to be good, it will cease to be great.

The Christian faith has certainly shaped our country's history and character. However, our nation's founders also recognized the dangers of mixing patriotism and religion. Many came from European countries where state religions dictated how people could worship and what they could believe. They sought to establish a nation where everyone could freely worship according to the dictates of conscience.

The First Amendment of *The United States Constitution* contains two religious clauses that are called "**The Establishment Clause**" and "**The Freedom Clause.**" Together they declare: *"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."*

It is unconstitutional for our government to establish any form of official religion. People often describe this as "*the separation of church and state.*" Although this phrase does not appear in *The United States Constitution*, it has become a governing principle of our courts.

II. Church and State: New Testament Times

A somewhat similar situation existed in New Testament times. The New Testament church existed within the political context of the **Roman Empire**. For centuries, Rome was one of the most dominant world powers in history. The Romans controlled the Mediterranean basin, and their empire stretched through Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

In many respects, the Roman Empire was a magnificent period in history. Latin roads, amphitheaters, aqueducts, and fortresses still stand 2,000 years after their construction. Roman thought and culture continue to shape law, medicine, architecture, government, and literature. The Caesars also established "*Pax Romana*" or "*Roman Peace.*" Through military might, they unified diverse cultures and countries.

For the most part, the Roman Empire gave its subjected peoples a fair amount of religious freedom. Each religion could worship as it chose.

The New Testament church flourished under Roman rule. The enforcement of "*Roman Peace*" along with a secure transportation system enabled the early Christian **missionaries** to spread the Gospel throughout the known world. The apostle **Paul** was a Roman citizen, and Latin soldiers saved his life several times from angry mobs. Centuries later in 327 A.D., the Roman emperor, Constantine, made Christianity the official religion of the HOLY Roman Empire. Rome became the center of the Christian faith.

In turn, the church was eager to show its loyalty to the state. The New Testament includes these passages:

- *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established." (Romans 13: 1)*
- *"I urge the supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life." (1 Timothy 2: 1-2)*

- “Be submissive to the rulers and authorities.” (Titus 3: 1)
- “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution . . . honor the emperor.” (1 Peter 2: 13, 17)

The early Christians honored and obeyed the Roman government’s authority for two reasons. On a **practical level**, the Empire’s benefits of peace and transportation aided the church’s work. Christians sought to avoid persecution as much as possible.

On a more **theological level**, the New Testament teaches that we are all involved in relationships of authority and submission that have been ordained by God. At its best, government is a divine gift that creates order from chaos. Therefore, Christians are called to be the best citizens in the land, supporting the state’s authority.

However, this does not mean that government cannot also be sinful and evil. Over the years some Roman rulers viewed the Christian church with suspicion that led to periodic persecution. In the 60s, Emperor **Nero** blamed Christian scapegoats for the burning of Rome. Both Paul and Simon Peter were martyred during Nero’s reign.

Some of the Roman rulers also emphasized emperor worship and required their subjects to treat them like gods. During the 90s, an insane emperor named **Domitian** came to power. He forced everyone to worship him as God. Christians were violently persecuted as traitors to the Roman Empire.

During Domitian’s reign, a Christian minister named **John** was exiled to the penal colony of Patmos for his faith. He was sentenced to hard labor in the island’s salt mines. There he experienced a vision from God that we now know as the final book of the New Testament entitled “**Revelation**.”

In John’s writings, the state and emperor are no longer viewed as God’s appointed instruments of government. Instead, the Roman Empire is an evil institution embodying Satan’s rule. Christians are urged to oppose the government and remain firm in their beliefs. In Revelation 18: 2-3, John describes Rome when he writes:

*“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become the dwelling place of demons,
a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird;
for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion,
and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her,
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.”*

This is a far cry from Paul and Peter’s words to honor the emperor and pray for the governing authorities! However, Revelation recognizes that even good gifts like government can be perverted and twisted for demonic ends.

III. Church and State: Jesus Christ

This same tension is reflected in **Jesus’ ministry**. Today’s Gospel lesson comes from Matthew 22 during Christ’s final days in Jerusalem. One afternoon while Jesus was teaching in the Temple, his religious enemies attempted to entrap him. They said:

“Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (Matthew 22: 16-17)

It was a clever **trap**. The yearly poll tax of one denarius was a touchy issue for the Jews. For once, it really was the PRINCIPLE of the thing rather than the MONEY. A denarius was equivalent to about twenty cents today. Yet many of Israel’s religious leaders said that the Jews should only pay tribute to God. Others objected on more patriotic reasons, seeing the tax as a reminder of Rome’s occupation of their country.

Christ’s enemies seemed to have him on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, most of Jesus’ followers opposed Rome’s rule. If Jesus spoke in favor of the tribute, then he would lose many of his followers on theological and patriotic grounds. On the other hand, if he spoke against the tax, then Jesus would technically be guilty of treason. His enemies would have an excuse to arrest him prematurely.

“Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not?” In the pregnant silence that followed, Jesus said: *“Show me the coin used for paying the tax.”* Holding the denarius in his hand, Christ asked, *“Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”*

The **denarius** was a special coin minted specifically for the payment of the yearly tax. The coin bore the image of the current Roman emperor wearing a laurel wreath. The inscription read: *“Tiberius Caesar, son of the deified Augustus.”*

Jesus answered by saying: *“Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

The trap sprung shut, but the intended victim escaped. Christ’s words spoke eloquently to the Christian’s obligation to the government. More than a clever response, Jesus’ answer gives Christians an understanding of how church and state relate.

A. Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Jesus recognized the important role that government plays in the world. The state is an institution established by God to provide law and order. Christians are called to submit to the state’s rightful authority.

Christ’s words continue to describe our responsibilities as Christian citizens today. We actually hold **dual citizenship** in the United States of America and the Kingdom of God. Christians should be the best citizens of the land. We are to be involved in civic affairs, educated on the issues, and expressive of our opinions. We need to know the officials who represent us and the issues for which they stand. We are called to involvement on a local, state, national, and global level.

One way we exercise this responsibility is through the right to vote. Our form of government espouses majority rule. However, the reality is a minority of the population votes in most elections.

B. “. . . and give to God the things that are God’s.”

Christ's words both affirmed and limited the state's power. While Christians should submit to the government's lawful demands, the state can require more than disciples should give. The doctrine of sin warns that everything earthly is in danger of constant corruption, both individuals and institutions. The state cannot command our ultimate loyalty.

The coin that Jesus held belonged to Caesar. Therefore, Christian citizens should pay the tribute demanded. However, the coin also bore the image of the king and declared that he was a god; and here the emperor overstepped the limits of his authority.

Although we are called to support our nation, we must always remember that we owe a higher allegiance to God. Christians ultimately stand above and beyond any national ties. Our first citizenship belongs to God's kingdom.

The United States of America is not the Kingdom of God. U. S. policy does not always reflect God's will. The Republican, Democrat, and Libertarian parties do not have a corner on truth. My own political sentiments might not be your own. We can both be Christians and agree to disagree on certain issues.

The church's task is to stand as a prophetic voice beyond any worldly clamor. We serve as a critical agent of change that constantly calls our government to higher bound.

Conclusion

On February 15, 2007, the United States' Mint began issuing a new series of **dollar coins** that would honor each American president in turn. The sides of the coin are stamped with the year, "*E Pluribus Unum*," and "*In God We Trust*."

The first issue of 300 million coins featured George Washington. However, something went wrong at the Philadelphia Mint. Approximately 50,000 coins were released into circulation without the inscription, "*In God We Trust*."

In the coin world, these dollar coins quickly became known as "Godless Dollars!" According to the latest *E-Bay* "Buy Now" values, the relatively rare coins are worth about 100 times their face value withOUT the phrase "*In God We Trust*."

I've been preaching too long to miss a hanging curve-ball like that! This is a statement not only about coin collecting but also about the world today. Our society prizes the worldly and passing but places little value on the heavenly and eternal.

However, today a people of faith remember in whom we trust. We do possess dual citizenship. We pledge allegiance to the United States of America; however, our ultimate allegiance is owed to God alone.

Every day is Independence Day for God's people—we realize that true liberty and freedom only come through Jesus Christ. We have been freed from sin for forgiveness. We have been freed from death for life. We have been freed from time for ever.

Recall Alexis de Tocqueville words:

"It wasn't until I went into your churches that I saw the reason for America's greatness. America is great because America is good; and as long as America is good, America will be great."

The second stanza of *America the Beautiful* is a wonderful prayer that can be on each of our lips today:

*“America, America, may God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness and every gain divine.*

May God continue to bless America—land that we love. Amen.