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GUILE, GOVERNMENT, & GOD

Luke 20:20-26

By

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Luke Lesson 92

Guile, Government, and God
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With both tax and election seasons being upon us, it is an appropriate time to talk about guile, government, and God. There is nothing like taxes to tempt us to fudge the truth! A cartoon showed a man sitting in front of an IRS agent who said, "Let's begin with where you claim depreciation on your wife." Don't get any ideas, men!

When you throw in religion on top of taxes and government, you've got a built-in formula for hypocrisy. Those three elements—taxes, government, and religion—all play a part in this exchange between the Jewish religious authorities and Jesus over the subject of paying taxes to Caesar. Sometimes a common enemy will bring together strange bedfellows, and that was the case here. Although Luke does not mention it, both Matthew and Mark report that the Herodians and the Pharisees joined forces in this attempt to bring Jesus down. The Herodians backed Herod's rule over Israel; the Pharisees hated Herod and those who backed him. But in order to get rid of Jesus, they teamed up and sent some spies to trap Jesus with a question designed to impale Him on the horns of a dilemma.

After some flattery, they asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" If Jesus answered, "Yes," the Pharisees would accuse Him of being soft towards Rome and certainly not being the Messiah who could deliver the nation from Rome's hated sovereignty. If He answered, "No," the Herodians would report Him to Pilate as being opposed to Caesar's rule, thus guilty of sedition. They thought that they had Him this time.

But Jesus' answer stunned them. In one succinct sentence, He showed that God and Caesar each have legitimate realms of authority with corresponding responsibilities. But if there is a conflict between realms, God is supreme over Caesar. By asking His critics to produce the Roman coin, Jesus underscored the fact that they were enjoying the benefits of Caesar's government. They used

his coinage; they enjoyed many civil improvements and benefits that he provided. Thus they were obligated to give him his due.

And yet, by His final statement, “to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus affirmed that it would be wrong to go along with Caesar’s blasphemous claim to deity, which was stamped on each coin. One side read, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus”; the other read, “Pontifex Maximus” (“Chief Priest”). Jesus meant that above Caesar is God. We must never go so far in rendering unto Caesar that we violate our obligation to God, the supreme sovereign who rules over all. Luke wants us to learn:

We must avoid religious hypocrisy, submit to proper government authority, and submit to God above all.

Luke weaves together three themes: the danger of religious hypocrisy; the duty of submission to government authority; and, the higher duty of obedience to God, especially when He confronts our sin of acting as our own authority.

1. Religious hypocrisy is a dangerous and foolish sin that we all must guard against.

Luke states that these religious leaders sent spies who pretended to be righteous or sincere, but their secret motive was to catch Jesus in some statement so that they could deliver Him up to the rule and authority of the governor. That way, they could look good to the people (“We didn’t do it!”) and let the governor dispose of this troublesome teacher. Their flattery (20:21) is ironic, because even though they did not believe what they were saying, it was totally true: Jesus *did* “speak and teach correctly.” He *was not* “partial to any.” He *did* “teach the way of God in truth.” If these hypocrites had believed what they were saying, they would have submitted themselves to Jesus!

- A. Religious hypocrisy is a dangerous sin because we’re all prone to fall into it.

It’s easy to scoff at the inconsistency of these religious leaders, but we need to look within and admit that we’re all prone toward hypocrisy. It lurks in all of our hearts because we’re all disposed to want to look good to others, while we forget about what God sees. We’re like the little boy who was bragging to his brother about how he had killed a mouse that he caught. He told him how he clob-

bered it with a broom and then it grabbed it by the tail and smashed it against a rock. Just then, the boy looked up and saw that the preacher was visiting the family and was within earshot. Without missing a beat, the boy added, "And then the good Lord called it home."

During the first few weeks that I was a pastor, Marla and I went to look at a house that was for sale. The owner, a rough looking old man, stood out on the porch talking with us. Eventually he asked what I did for a living. As soon as I said that I was the pastor of a church, he grabbed the cigarette that he had just lit, threw it on the porch, and ground it out with his foot while he exclaimed over and over, "Just look at me! Smoking in front of a preacher!" I said to him, "You always smoke in front of God."

But preachers are prone to hypocrisy also. It's easy to want to look more righteous in front of people than you really are. If you're not careful, you can give the impression in sermons that you have it all together spiritually, when you really don't. Sometimes someone will make a comment about my level of piety that goes beyond the truth: "You must spend hours in prayer each week!" No, as a matter of fact, I struggle with prayer just like you do! But if I let the comment go uncorrected, thinking, "What will it hurt?" I fall into hypocrisy.

I am not suggesting that we should share all our inner struggles with every person we meet. That is neither wise nor necessary. But to avoid hypocrisy, we must not convey false impressions to make ourselves look better to others than we know we really are.

- B. Religious hypocrisy is a foolish sin because Jesus always sees right through it.

Jesus saw right through their trickery (the word is used of Satan's craftiness in deceiving Eve, 2 Cor. 11:3). Jesus always sees through hypocrisy! As Hebrews 4:13 says, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." Paul said that he lived, "not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:4). Let us learn from the pretense of these religious men that we sometimes can fool others, but we can never fool God. Be on guard against the sin of religious hypocrisy.

2. We must submit to proper government authority.

By His statement, “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” Jesus acknowledged that God has ordained civil government and given it a proper sphere of authority.

A. God ordained civil government for the good of society.

Paul explains this in Romans 13:1-7, where he commands, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (13:1). He goes on to state that the government “is a minister of God to you for good” (13:4). When Paul wrote this, the godless Nero was emperor. Thus we must conclude that we are not free to disobey or rebel against wicked rulers, unless they command us to violate God’s higher law. There are two ways that government ought to promote our good:

(1) Government should promote justice for all.

The government “bears the sword” to “bring wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Rom. 13:4). By upholding just laws and by punishing wrongdoers, the government should protect the innocent, especially those who are weak and defenseless, from those who would selfishly take advantage of them. When governments become corrupt and fail to enforce laws with sufficient punishments to deter crime, law-abiding citizens suffer and the government comes under God’s judgment.

(2) Government should promote peace and order in society and between societies.

Proper government authority should enable its citizens to “lead a tranquil and quiet life” (1 Tim. 2:2). The government should protect its citizens from bandits and con men. Its laws should uphold honest business practices and property rights. It should ensure religious liberty within the bounds of human safety and dignity. Between nations, governments should maintain adequate national defense and treaties so that totalitarian regimes do not overpower weaker nations. It follows that ...

B. Since God ordained government, Christian citizens have a number of obligations toward it.

I can only touch on these for sake of time:

- (1) Christians should submit to the government and cooperate with it whenever possible.

Romans 13:1 is pretty clear: "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities." To a persecuted church, Peter wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right" (1 Pet. 2:13-14). When the government oversteps its jurisdiction and commands or tries to force its citizens to disobey God, then we must obey God and disobey the government (Daniel 3 & 6; Acts 5:29). Although some Christians, such as John Knox in Scotland and our own American forefathers, led armed rebellion against tyrannical governments, I find that hard to support biblically. Neither Jesus nor the apostles advocated overthrowing the corrupt governments of their day.

- (2) Christians should honor government leaders when possible.

First Peter 2:17 tells us to "honor the king." The reason I add, "if possible," is that there are times when a government leader deserves censure, not honor. Jesus called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32) and John the Baptist denounced him publicly for his immorality. But usually we should grant honor to those in authority, even if we disagree strongly with their views or behavior.

- (3) Christians should pay their required taxes.

Jesus' words here refer specifically to paying a poll tax that Caesar imposed on his subjects. In Romans 13:7, Paul states that we must pay "tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom." It is not good stewardship to pay more tax than you owe, and so it is right to take advantage of legitimate tax deductions, such as charitable contributions. But it is wrong to knowingly cheat on our taxes, just because "everyone else does." And we should not withhold a portion of our taxes because we disagree with how the government spends it (such as abortion funding, war, etc.).

- (4) Christians should pray for government leaders.

Paul urged Timothy to direct the churches to pray "for kings and all who are in authority" (1 Tim. 2:1, 2). The aim of such prayers is "that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and

dignity.” We also should pray for the conversion and moral courage of our leaders.

- (5) Christians should evangelize and disciple government leaders when opportunities arise.

Whenever Paul stood before government authorities, he used the opportunity to preach the gospel. He bore witness to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, with their wives (Acts 24:10-23, 26; 25:23; 26:1-29). He led many in Caesar’s household to faith in Christ (Phil. 1:13; 4:22). Christians who hold public office and discharge their duties with integrity can have widespread influence for Christ.

- (6) Christians should respectfully confront government leaders who are unrighteous.

Daniel appealed to Nebuchadnezzar to turn from his sins and to do rightly (Dan. 4:27). He strongly confronted Belshazzar for his spiritual and moral negligence (5:18-28). Many Old Testament prophets confronted sinful kings for their wrongs. John the Baptist exposed Herod’s sin of taking his brother’s wife (Luke 3:19). Paul spoke with Felix and his wife about “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). Except for the Old Testament kings, none of the rulers just cited were believers or a part of the covenant nation. Yet in each case, God’s spokesmen reminded these leaders that they would one day give an account to God for their evil deeds unless they repented.

Those who want to silence the church from speaking out on moral issues have carried the argument for the separation of church and state to ridiculous extremes. While I agree that the government should not establish any religion, that does not mean that Christian citizens should not speak out on moral issues that threaten the well-being of our society. We are called to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16) and to bear witness in this evil world. Sometimes that witness involves confronting sin before we share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

- (7) Christians should be involved in government in accordance with their gifts and calling.

Each believer has different gifts and callings from God. Each of us must seek His wisdom and direction as to how and where He wants us to serve Him. We have biblical examples of men like Jo-

seph, Nehemiah, and Daniel who served high positions in pagan governments. In our democratic form of government, it seems to me that our minimum responsibility as Christian citizens is that we vote for candidates and issues that will best further Christian values in our land. In the 1998 general election, more than 126 million people who were eligible to vote did not, and many of them were Christians (cited by James Dobson, Feb., 2000 newsletter). Some may be called to greater involvement, but to do nothing when God has given us the right to vote seems to me to be irresponsible.

There is currently a hot debate in evangelical circles about how much we as Christians should be involved in the political process and how far we can push Christian morality in a secular state. Leaders such as James Dobson, James Kennedy, Bill Bright, Gary Bauer, and Tim and Beverly LaHaye urge Christians to heavy involvement in the political process. Jerry Falwell has drawn back from his earlier involvement when he led the Moral Majority. One of his former top leaders, Ed Dobson, now a pastor in Grand Rapids, and newspaper columnist Cal Thomas have written a book criticizing the efforts of the Religious Right. Dave Hunt argues that Christians have no business "getting Caesar, though he cannot be converted, to support God's side" ("The Berean Call," 6/99). So I want to deal briefly with the question:

- C. How far should we push Christian morality in a secular society?

I offer four thoughts:

- (1) Evangelism, not political power, is God's primary means of dealing with society's problems.

If we forget this, we fall into the trap of the social gospel. The major problems in this evil world stem from sin in the human heart. The only lasting remedy for sin is the gospel that changes people from rebellion against God to submission to God. While it is fine to elect Christians to public office and to pass legislation that upholds Christian moral values, we need to keep in mind the limits of those objectives. Such things will not turn our nation from its current evil course. Only the gospel can do that. Thus we need to focus on proclaiming the gospel from our pulpits and individually.

But, for Christians to withdraw completely from the political process seems to me to deny that God uses Christians and the institution of secular government to restrain evil. Thus I urge involvement according to one's gifts and calling as long as the person keeps the priority of the gospel at the heart of matters and remembers the limited value of political action.

- (2) In the political arena, Christians should major on the majors, not on minor issues or gray areas.

Abortion is clearly a major issue, since it involves killing human life for personal convenience, which is clearly against God's Word. I think that prayer in the public schools is more of a gray area, especially since we cannot stipulate *Christian* prayers. I would not want Buddhist or Muslim prayers offered alongside Christian prayers. Laws that mandate teaching in our public schools that homosexuality is a valid lifestyle are a far more serious threat and Christians are right to mount opposition to such laws or to pull their children out of the schools if they are passed. We need God's wisdom in picking our battles.

- (3) Christians should argue issues in the public arena on the basis of social merit apart from the Bible.

Our secular society does not accept the Bible as God's standard for morality, and if we argue, "the Bible says," we will not be heard. But if we argue on the broader basis of wide social merit and commonly held values, then we can pass laws that protect the family and that promote overall well-being. You can argue against convenience abortion simply on the basis of protecting human life and having compassion for babies. You can argue against pornography because it degrades women. You can urge stiffer penalties on drunk drivers out of concern for public safety. As Christians, we have biblical reasons for each of these issues, but if we haul out the Bible to promote our view, we will be ignored.

- (4) In the political arena, a reasonable compromise that has a good chance of passing is better than the uncompromised position that probably will lose.

I am not saying that we should compromise our moral position as Christians. I am saying that in a fallen world, we may have to settle for less than the Christian ideal. For example, in the area

of abortion, while it is wrong to kill any child in the womb, unless the mother's life is at stake, if we hold out for a measure that bans *all* abortions, we will never stop abortions. But if there is a chance of passing a law that bans abortion except in cases of rape, incest, severe deformity, or a threat to the mother's life, we should go for it, even though we disagree with the exceptions. We would instantly stop over 95 percent of all abortions! By holding out for all or nothing, we often end up with nothing.

Jesus' confrontation with these Jewish leaders teaches us that we must avoid religious hypocrisy and we must submit to proper government authority. But there is a third theme:

3. We must submit to God above all.

"Render ... to God the things that are God's." Jesus' statement implies that just as the Roman coin had Caesar's image stamped on it and thus rightfully fell under his jurisdiction, so every person has God's image stamped on him or her and thus rightfully belongs to God. Just as Caesar had sole authority to issue coins stamped with his image, so God is the only one who creates human beings stamped with His image. We owe God our very existence. He rightfully owns us, our possessions, our money, and our time. If we are not yielding ourselves completely to His sovereign lordship, we are disobeying the supreme authority of the universe!

By challenging Jesus, these Pharisees and Herodians were guilty of not rendering to God the things that are God's. They came to Jesus, not to obey Him, but to trap Him. They acted as if they were sincerely interested in His opinion about a moral issue, but they had no intention of obeying what He said. But the only way you can come to Christ is to come honestly, confessing your sins, being willing to obey Him. If you come to contend with Him in order to get your own way, beware! He knows the secret motives of every heart! One day every knee will bow before Him.

So the overarching principle is that we must submit all of our lives to the absolute sovereignty of God, the supreme ruler of the universe. He sets up rulers and takes them down according to His will. As Daniel 4 repeats three times, "The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes" (vss.

17, 25, 32). When God's authority confronts our authority to rule our lives, we must submit to Him or face His judgment.

Conclusion

We've all got to do business with God who examines our hearts. Don't risk playing games with Him! It always causes great damage to the cause of Christ when a man who has crusaded against pornography gets caught with a prostitute. We need to judge our hypocrisy and live with integrity before God.

A few years ago, the late Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson told about a senator who was speaking at a church men's dinner. The senator asked how many men believed in prayer in the public schools. Almost every hand went up. He then asked, "How many of you pray daily with your children in your home?" Only a few hands were raised. Ouch!

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But above all, render to God the things that are God's.

Discussion Questions

1. How far should religious freedom extend? To polygamists? To "religious" drug users? Where do we draw the line?
2. Should Christians ever get involved in revolution? What about assassinating an evil man like Hitler?
3. Should Christians in a place like Communist China support their government? How?
4. Where do you line up in the current debate about the degree of Christian involvement in politics? What Scriptures support your position?

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