

## Separation Of Church And State

Luke 20:20-26

Archibald Wallace

Two days before our national mid-term elections finds many states locked in tight political races. Politicians past and present are crisscrossing America to help their favorite candidates get the last few votes. In many contests religious organizations are involved, for they see issues they deem within their religious view, such as abortion or the right to life, or famine, or war or epidemic. Politics and the church have long banged heads and they have not always been able to draw the line where one ends and the next begins. The American Constitution of 1789 tried to enunciate such a line, saying congress should not enact laws establishing a religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The hope was for a separation of church and state, but the lines are hazy and they shift in different cultures and under different regimes. The idea of the proper place for church and state is not new. We can find it in the Bible. One example is our New Testament text for today, where Jesus has to address the question of submission to the two interests and which has priority.

The story we are going to hear takes place late in Jesus' preaching career. Jesus has been drawing big crowds in the cross-roads of Galilee, where world trade and travel paths crossed. His fame was great. People hundreds of miles away knew about him and came to see him. Once there, the people were flocking to him. He was infectious and charismatic, like Billy Graham---but on steroids. His fame and influence were so great, that the church leaders in Jerusalem—the Pharisees-- and the ruling religious party in Jerusalem—the Sadducees--were worried; Jesus was a threat, they had been pushed off center stage, and they had to act or lose it all. So they sent spies out to follow Jesus to see if they could trap him into doing or saying something that would enable them to get the Roman authorities to remove him. In today's text they came up with a great trap. They would ask Jesus a question that would either have him reject the God he was preaching or reject and attack Rome and its authority over the realm.

The question they had was of this style—you try and answer it:

Have you stopped beating your wife?

Either a yes or a no is a bad answer. It's a "gotcha" question, the kind opposing politicians and TV reporters love to ask.

Let's hear how Jesus did with the question as we hear God's word for us from Luke 20:20-26

Luke 20

20 Keeping a close watch on him, they (the Pharisees—the teachers of the law, and the Sadducees (the ruling party of chief priests) sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so they might hand him over to the power and authority of the (Roman) governor.

21 So the spies questioned him:

Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

22 Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'

23 Jesus saw through them,

24 "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?"

25 "Ceaser's," they replied.

So, he said to them:

“Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”

26 They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public.  
And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

### **The Word Of The Lord!**

There are so many things going on in this text.

1. One is the story of how Jesus is set up to fail. If he says don’t pay taxes, he will incur the wrath of Rome, and it could be the end of his ministry –shut down by Rome. If he says Rome is OK, he will turn off the people who are following him, and God’s kingdom might be rejected. Either choice would be costly.

2. A second thing going on is the danger of hypocrisy in the church. The church’s leaders were focused on keeping their power and control instead of listening to God. They were the ones who should have known best who Jesus was and is. Instead, they were afraid of Jesus; the Jesus that was there was causing them to lose power,  
causing them to have to take back their false statements and wrong direction  
leadership,  
causing them to see they had their idea of what God was going to do all wrong.

These opponents were churchmen, leaders of two of the political groups within the church, and they were out to trick and trap Jesus. They came to him pretending he was doing so well; they flattered his teaching—it’s the only truth they told, but they didn’t mean to. Jesus saw right through their efforts to butter him up; he knew they wanted him to fail. Hypocrisy, and the teaching point is, there is no place for hypocrisy in the church. Christ is all about truth.

But, hypocrisy in the church hasn’t gone away. It’s still here. Consider these examples.

We pray the Lord’s Prayer, but we aren’t willing to forgive. Instead, we want revenge as we cry for justice.

We say we love, but we reserve the right to hate those who disagree, especially if their politics differ.

We say we believe in the sanctity of life, and we show it by our abortion stand, but we give an exception to our sanctity of life thinking if the life is taken with a gun.

We say our preachers are free to bring God’s word, as God opens it to them, but all preachers know to beware if their preaching disagrees with the views of a power in the church.

We say we stand for folks having high moral character, but we look the other way if they don’t, if they are our politicians but we raise a ruckus when they’re yours.

If you say this isn’t hypocrisy, if it exists among your friends or is something that exists in your own life. Jesus would say –buy a mirror.

Hypocrisy is all around us, just like it was in Jesus’ day. And, it needs to be addressed with as much wisdom and cleverness as Jesus used in his day. And know this: it was wrong then, and it is wrong now.

A second message from Luke 20 is that it shows the hostility that was building against Jesus. The church's leaders and the secular leaders had sent spies to see what Jesus was doing, spies who were charged with trying to trick or trap Jesus. This time Jesus shut them down, but they weren't through and within months, Jesus would be at their mercy before Pilate.

A third message in the text is that it was asking Jesus to commit sedition. If he said don't pay the taxes because you belong to God's kingdom, he would have been doing a classical seditious act—acting to prevent the enforcement of a law of the state. Sedition was a crime then in the Roman Empire. It is and always has been in every country. The United States has had laws against sedition from its earliest days. As I said, every country does. Can you imagine the chaos that would follow if everyone decided for themselves which laws to follow and which not, which laws were OK and which ones they would act to prevent folks from doing.

Jesus saw this, saw the danger in the question, and went another way.

Jesus saw two kingdoms, not one, in which one was temporal, it would be here for a while and then gone, like every country that has ever been, and the second—God's kingdom, the kingdom he had brought and established, the kingdom that would have no end, and it hasn't. Two kingdoms. In the same place, but different. Jesus recognized we have duties to each, differing duties, but duties. We must do what Caesar lawfully requires us to do, and we must do what God requires us to do. And when the two run into each other and conflict, we must obey God first.

Hitler required the removal and the execution of the Jewish people in the German state. That law was wrong and Nuremberg told us there are some crimes, crimes against humanity, which the members of a state must not obey. Another happened in Viet Nam when an order was given to kill unarmed civilians—it was a dividing line Lieutenant William Calley crossed.

The point is, the two kingdoms are not equal. God's has a higher priority, a greater call on our lives, but both exist.

One is subordinate—man's,  
one is triumphant—God's.  
One commands your feet and hands and pocket book,  
one commands your heart.

Jesus was acknowledging two separate kingdoms in his answer, one with borders and land and Rules, the other limitless, over all.

This two kingdom idea with one being higher and over all can be seen in the rituals of our country. In America's Pledge of Allegiance, we say we are one nation, under God. When our President is sworn in, the oath to follow the US Constitution ends with, "So help me God." Our money has a motto printed on every bill—"In God we trust." In our Declaration of Independence, we acknowledge a creator who has endowed each of us with certain inalienable rights—rights that come from God and speak of God—freedom, justice, order, safety. As a country we acknowledge this other kingdom, the one Jesus is talking about—this kingdom of God.

Our job then as Christians is to know what God demands, where the line is, where the divide is of that thing we call separation of church and state. I submit to you any law, any act, any urging, and plan, any scheme, any conspiracy has a limit, a line. And that line cannot shift just because it suits us. I believe the line has to lie on the side of

justice—equal treatment for all, no matter what or who,  
that it has to include rather than exclude,  
that it means all, not some, and

that each person is a child of God, no matter who or where;  
that the line is on the right side of truth, not our shadings or twisting to make it fit what  
we want to believe,  
that the line that marks God's kingdom has to include forgiving and caring and feeding  
and clothing and helping those who can't do for themselves.

If I put the line on the wrong side of any of these, then I stand before Christ as just  
another hypocrite, right next to the Sadducees and Pharisees with my own "gotcha" question.

The ideal of our political kingdom calls for the separation of church and state, and Christ would  
agree, and when my state crosses one of these lines which marks the edges of God's kingdom, then it is  
wrong, and I must stand with the Christ of wisdom and render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God,  
what is God's.

Having said all of this, my last words today are to vote, whenever you can in both kingdoms, for  
that is how you give worth to each of the two kingdoms, that is how you show tangibly that you are an  
engaged member of both kingdoms, . But always know in your heart, there are boundary lines dividing  
the kingdoms, and pray for Christ to show you where they are.

Job 19:23-27

- 23 Oh that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll  
24 that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever.  
25 I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand on the earth.  
26 And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.  
27 I myself will see him, with my own eyes—I and not another.  
How my heart yearns within me (for that day).