

Double Citizenship Matthew 22:15-22

As a way of review, in the past few weeks we've seen Jesus attack the orthodox Jewish leaders by telling the story of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32). The Jewish leaders are the son who did not do the father's will. Last week in the story of the King's feast (Matthew 22:1-14), the religious leaders are the condemned guests who turn down the invitation.

In today's passage the Jewish leaders are launching a counterattack by asking him embarrassing questions in public. The Pharisees ask, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Let's listen to that passage now.

In debate this is called a dilemma question, kind of like asking "do you still beat your dog?" If he said that they should not pay it, they would report him to the government. If he said that he should pay it, the people would be angry because they, like us, don't like to pay taxes

It should be noted that there were three taxes the Romans extracted from these people:

1. A ground tax - a man must pay 1/10th of his grain and 1/5th of the oil and wine which he produced.
2. An income tax – which was 1% of a person's income.
3. A poll tax - every male person from age fourteen to 65 and every female from age twelve to 75 must pay one day's wages annually.

The tax here in question was this poll tax - one day's wages every year. The Jews resented the tax because they saw God was the only king. To pay taxes to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship and thus insult God.

Verse 15 says that the Pharisees and Herodians joined forces to attack Jesus. Which is really odd. The Pharisees were super-religious and viewed paying a tax to a foreign king as an insult to their god. The Herodians were loyal to Herod, King of Galilee, who had joined the Romans and owed their power to them.

Further, Matthew penned this lesson in the days when the temple had been destroyed and Jews were forced to still pay the temple tax, but the money went to Temple Jupiter in Rome.

Jesus asked to see a coin - " 'Show me the money for the tax.' And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' "

In those times, as soon as a king began to rule, he had his own coinage issued, and that coinage was held to be the property of that king. Jesus said that if Caesar's picture is on the coin, it is his, and so give it to him. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

So here's a great principle laid down by Jesus. **A Christian, a disciple of Jesus, is a person with double citizenship.** We are citizens of the country and world in which we live, and we are fortunate to live here!

In 1954 Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren said, "I believe no one can read the history of our country without realizing that the Good Book and the Spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses ... Whether we look to the first

Charter of Virginia ... or to the Charter of New England ... or to the Charter of Massachusetts Bay

... or to the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut... the same objective is present: a Christian land governed by Christian principles ... I believe the entire Bill of Rights came into being because of the knowledge our forefathers had of the Bible and their belief in it.

Freedom of belief, or expression, or assembly, or petition; the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of the home, equal justice under law, and the reservation of power to the people ... I like to believe we are living today in the spirit of the Christian religion. I like also to believe that as long as we do so, no great harm can come to our country."ⁱ

We owe a lot to this country! We all benefit from public services: law and order, government, fire protection, clean streets, clear water, sound education, Social Security. And because of those benefits we have a responsibility to our country, state, and community.

Which in turn means that Christians are obligated to be good citizens. When we have a debt, we must meet it. When we have an obligation, we keep it. When we make a commitment, we're good for it. Whatever we do, we do well and we should do our part and take our responsibilities seriously.

In an invocation prayer at the United States Senate, Peter Marshall said, "Lord Jesus, Thou who art the way, the truth, and the life, hear us as we pray for the truth that shall make men free. Teach us that liberty is not only to be loved but also to be lived. Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. It costs too much to be hoarded. Make us to see that our liberty is not the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to please to do what is right."ⁱⁱ

It's unthinkable to me that a Christian would not vote, that Christians would not run for public office, or withdraw from the responsibility of taking part in public life. Christians have a responsibility to Caesar for all the privileges which Caesar brings. We are citizens of this world and must be good ones, if we are Christ's disciples.

Which brings me to a second: not only are we citizens of this world, **we are citizens of heaven**. Because God is our final allegiance, because God is our creator, our final authority, our top loyalty is to our God.

When our citizenship in this world clashes with God's will - it is God's will that must be done. You see, we are not only citizens, but the conscience of our government. We carry an extra responsibility with our citizenship.

When we're sure that something is God's will, we must see that it is upheld. When we're sure that something is against God's will, we must resist, oppose, bring our influence to bear, that it not be done. In both cases, we do so peacefully, purposely, and prayerfully.

A good citizen says Jesus is both a good citizen of his country and of the Kingdom of God serving both his fellow citizens and our creator God. Peter said it succinctly in 1 Peter 2:17: "Fear God and honor the king".

There is a fine line between the two kingdoms - the two areas of loyalty and responsibility, and our conscience must enlighten us and be our guide.

I doubt that Jesus was trying to give us here for all time the relationship between church and state. He was dealing with a specific situation at a specific time in history.

We must apply the principles and implications for our time with the help of God's spirit. Our participation in community must be as prayerful and holy as our participation in the church and the sacraments. We must not divide everything in our lives into holy and secular; but, rather, bring to bear the holy in our daily routine, our responsibilities of this life.

Jesus said to these Jews: "Pay the tax; it's their coinage that provides some benefits. Revolution will only make things worse for you." But the Jews didn't take his advice, and there was a great deal of bloodshed as a result.

It began as an attempt to trap Jesus with a dilemma question and ended up with a for all Christians on our double citizenship: to this world and our country; to the Kingdom of God and our Savior. As disciples, we bind these two together in how we live as Christians in this great democracy called America.

ⁱ "Breakfast at Washington," *Time* magazine, February 14, 1954, p. 49.

ⁱⁱ <https://bible.org/illustration/peter-marshall%E2%80%99s-prayer>