

“Render to Caesar the Things that are Caesar’s and to God the Things that are God’s”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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As we approach the celebration of our country’s declaration of independence 241 years ago it is appropriate to give a little thought to the challenges we all face in reconciling our spiritual duties with our civic duties, especially when they seem to clash in some way. For example, if you believe that any particular law is wrong for spiritual reasons where does your responsibility lie? Can you simply flaunt the law and do instead what *you* think is right? Should you? Or if you believe that the laws are right and your faith is wrong, can you – should you – continue as a member of the church and push for change in what the ministers teach?

The Lord faced just such questions in the last week of His earthly life, and His answer is documented in all three parallel Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). And it is worth noting that *when* He answered, the Pharisees all “marveled” and went away in silence, that is, they were astonished, filled with wonder, and perhaps even admiration – as one who loves a good argument admires someone who can hold his own!

So what prompted the Lord’s teaching? Well, those smarmy Pharisees knew that the Jews hated paying tribute to the Romans, but they could also see that they were deeply impressed with the Lord who had often spoken of “His kingdom” as if they should be loyal to Him *rather than* to Caesar. So they were trying to “entangle Him in (His) talk” (Matt. 22:15), to “catch Him in (His) words” (Mark 12:13), and in fact to “*seize on His words* in order to deliver Him to the power and authority of the governor” (Luke 20:20). In short they were trying to get Him condemned by the state for insurrection.

But the Lord of course knew what was up, and so He didn’t just answer their question, He tied it to His own teaching by saying, “Do what is right for the civil state and for the kingdom of God.” This effectively let them know that He was well aware of their deceitfulness. So they left Him alone – for a while. But questions remain, as we just noted: what if the laws of the civil state and the laws of spiritual life really are at odds?

The story is reminiscent of another incident recounted five chapters earlier in Matthew 17, when some people responsible for collecting another tax in Capernaum approached Peter suggesting that the Lord wasn’t paying that tax as required. Peter said He did pay it, but before he even had a chance to mention the incident to the Lord, He approached Peter asking who should pay tribute to “the kings of the earth,” their own sons, or strangers (meaning foreigners)? When Peter rightly said “strangers,” the Lord’s response was, “Then the sons are free.” But of course they were all “strangers” to the Romans who ruled the land at the time. So the Lord went on to say, “Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for Me and you.” (As a matter of interest, the coin they would find was a Greek stater, just exactly the right amount to cover the tax for two people.)

So, must we pay taxes when we believe the money will support things contrary to the Lord’s Word? The Lord said to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” and the illustration He gave was the image of Caesar on the coin of the realm, an image representing his authority in

civil matters. Yes, we can take issue with many things our civil government does, but we also enjoy tremendous benefits, not least the economic opportunities based on laws of order and the protection provided by its armed services. So we have an obligation to that government. This is all clearly laid out in the doctrine of charity toward the neighbor as noted in our third lesson today (from NJHD 92-93 or TCR 413-414).

But in that same series of teachings we find that true love to the neighbor – which in a compound sense includes one's country – is not just the love of the person or the state, but the love of what is good IN the person or state. So it is perfectly right and good to challenge *bad laws*, as the Lord Himself did many times in confronting the abusive institutions of the Jewish state. Today we call this “civil disobedience,” but remember, the Lord did these things in the full awareness that He would be persecuted and He was fully prepared to take the consequences of His actions. He told His disciples essentially the same thing: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven:” NOT the kingdom of this world, but the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:10). “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; *not as the world gives do I give to you*” (John 14:27). In fact, the Lord warned the disciples repeatedly that they would have to suffer and even die for their faith in Him (Matt. 10:10 & 16:25 e.g.), but that the benefits of eternal life would make it all worthwhile. As He said again, “In the world you will have tribulation, but be confident! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Then again, sometimes the deliberate, conscientious action of even a few can have an important, positive effect in this world, too. The point is not to *resist* or *oppose* the government but to improve it. And in the western world the words of the English parliamentarian, Edmund Burke are especially pertinent: “The price of liberty,” he said, “is eternal vigilance;” and again, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

In fact, the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth illustrates the point that we ought to pay due respect to civil authorities and contribute fairly to the welfare of the state. Again, the Writings make this clear in discussing the obligations or duties of charity, where we read specifically, “[These] are the payment of taxes for various necessities and uses in the commonwealth,” and they also include duties of “subordination, obedience, honor and social interaction” (Ch 187). In the book, *True Christian Religion* we read,

“The public duties of charity are especially the payment of tribute and taxes, which ought not to be confused with official duties. Those who are spiritual pay these ... from good will, because they are collected for the preservation of their country, and for its protection *and the protection of the church*, also for the administration of government by officials and governors, to whom salaries and stipends must be paid from the public treasury. Those, therefore, to whom their country and also the church are the neighbor, pay their taxes willingly and cheerfully, and regard it as iniquitous to deceive or defraud. But those to whom their country and the church are not the neighbor pay them unwillingly and with resistance; and at every opportunity defraud and withhold; for to such their own household and their own flesh are the neighbor” (TCR 430).

That said, let's consider some of the many other ways we can “render to Caesar the things that are Ceasar's” while at the same time rendering to God the things that are God's. It is of course a particular challenge in these contentious times to stay focused on principles rather than persons,

but it's important that we try to do so. Even a bad man can serve good uses for others, so whether one is conservative, liberal or some other thing, the real issues revolve around what serves the greatest number of people within the spirit of what we know from the Heavenly Doctrines about human nature and eternal life.

So here's the basic teaching – in a somewhat free and fairly recent translation from the Latin:

“Order cannot be kept in the world without having governors (overseers?) to note everything that happens according to or contrary to order, rewarding those who live orderly lives and punishing those who are disorderly. Failing this, the human race will inevitably perish. For everyone inherits by birth a tendency to wish to rule over others and to possess other people's goods; and this leads to quarrels, envy, hatred, revenge, deceit, cruelty and many other evils. If therefore people were not kept under restraint by laws, rewarding those who do good by advancing their interest, conferring honors and advantages on them, and punishing those who do harm by opposing their interest, threatening the loss of honors, property and even life, the human race would perish.

“So there must be governors to keep human societies in order. They must be learned in the law, wise and God-fearing. There must also be order among governors, to prevent anyone out of a whim or ignorance permitting evils contrary to order, thus destroying it. This is guarded against by having governors of higher and lower rank, so that one is subordinate to another” (NJHD 312-313).

What's being addressed here is of course *external order*, since every person in keeping with the first law of Providence is free to think and will inwardly as he wishes. But the personal caveats for leadership are worth noting: “They must be learned in the law, wise and God-fearing.” How can we determine such things? Well, of course our judgments always must be made in humility, but judge we must, or the teaching has no meaning. And it applies at ALL levels of government. “Who loves a person except from the quality of his will and understanding, that is, from what is good and just in him? For example, who loves a king, a prince, a general, a governor, a consul, any magistrate or judge, except for the judgment from which they act and speak?” (TCR 418).

What, then, is our responsibility as church members toward our elected officials? Very clearly it is to take note of what they say and do, and *not to withhold or deny support from them* but to do whatever we can to be sure they are well informed, well-intentioned and mindful of the common good – which, by the way, includes 8 specific things listed in the Doctrine of Charity #130. But perhaps most of all we have the responsibility as good citizens to act in good faith every day according to the laws of heaven. These laws can't possibly be opposed to good government, and yet when citizens do *not* act according to them no government, no matter what kind or how well organized, can long survive.

Simply put, this means living every day with a good, clear conscience.

“Some examples will illustrate the nature of conscience. If someone has in his possession someone else's goods, without the owner's knowledge, so that he can enjoy them without fear of legal action or losing his honors or reputation, but still gives them back to the other person, because they are not his, such a person has a

conscience. For he does good for good's sake and justice for justice's sake. There may also be someone who could claim an office, but knows that some other candidate is more useful to his country; if he yields place to the other for his country's good, he has a good conscience; and so on in other cases" (NJHD 136).

The same applies to our dealings with banks, insurance companies, employers, contractors and retail businesses. If people would just behave themselves and take responsibility for what they do our legislators and governors would have an easy time. Not only that, but the costs to the economy would be greatly reduced and many more people would be able to prosper.

Most people think this country was founded on a principle of separation of church and state, but actually the first amendment of our constitution simply says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, *or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*" The real purpose of this amendment, then, was to provide for the *freedom* of Americans to *practice* their religion. In fact many individual states continued to have established religions for decades under this provision. And the support of the civil authority by churches even today is recognized in the form of tax deductions for donations to it, which deductions represent a positive endorsement of the good churches bring to society by promoting the life of charity and faith.

Finally, since there is such a *strong connection* between the church and state, we have to ask again, what if the state contradicts or even condemns the teachings of the church? Must we comply or should we resist? Can we let the state or even society's ever-changing values affect what we believe from revelation? No! Of course not. The church is our "neighbor" in a higher degree than the state and should take precedence in our allegiance, even in the face of persecution. BUT... sometimes our civil and social experience can open new windows of understanding about what the Lord is really saying in His Word. This is a *very delicate matter*, and has to be handled with great care. The Writings for the New Church are quite clear that it is everyone's right *and responsibility* to question the doctrines of the church and to confirm them from the Word – not from the culture around us but from the Word. So if anyone sees something wrong in the doctrine or practice of the church and can show that it *is* wrong from the Word, then he or she has a responsibility to bring that to our attention.

The effect in this case is not that the standards of the world should dictate to the church, but that the Lord Himself, through His influence in the world, can lead us back to His Word and help us understand it and apply it with greater enlightenment for the spiritual welfare of all, not just in the church but through the church throughout the world. After all, the light of the world varies from age to age, but the steady light of heaven is forever.

We may "render, therefore, to Caesar the things that are Caesars" by recognizing the authority of the Lord at every level of life and by rendering to Him the things that are His – faith, charity, and a life of integrity in useful service – for the spiritual good of everyone right here, right now.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew 22:15-22* (with context)
 Children's talk about True Patriotism
 Deuteronomy 8
 New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine #92-93

Prayers for this service

1

Heavenly Father, as we reflect today on the history and special blessings of our country, grant that we may put a particular focus on the parts each of us can play to keep it strong and free. Help us to appreciate the close relationship between the things of this world and the things of heaven, so that we can make the sort of choices that benefit both.

Lord, help us to realize especially that there is no government on earth that can function apart from Your Divine Providence, and that whatever happens has something to do with our preparation for eternal life. So grant that in honoring our country we may truly honor YOU, and serve the common good at every level, in every possible way. Amen.

2

(for the children)

O Lord, our Father, You know that we often struggle to understand and do what is best in this world. Help us, therefore, to be mindful of Your Word each day, and to remember that You can not only teach us but also strengthen us in ways that will truly make our country and our world a better place.

Lord, please give us the courage to make good decisions, to stay safe and to help other people stay safe, so that Your will may be done on this earth, especially in this place, just as it is in heaven. Amen.

3

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to acknowledge Your Divine Providence in every aspect of our spiritual and natural lives. Teach us and lead us in particular to a cheerful understanding of how all the events and challenges this nation faces can contribute to our preparation for eternal life in heaven.

So help us, Lord, to find some good in every challenge, to make intelligent, informed decisions, and to do what supports the best in this country's institutions, leaders and policies. So grant that we may act with genuine charity toward the greater neighbor here at home, and through our government, among other nations, informed as we must be by our faith in You and Your Word. Amen.