

# THE CITY OF GOD AND THE CITY OF MAN

Matthew 24:15:22

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Are you up for a quiz this morning? I will make it easy for you. All you have to do is fill in the blanks.

1. The only two things you can always count on are death and...
2. My country, right or...
3. April 15th is my \_\_\_\_\_ day of the year.
4. America, love it or...
5. On this 4<sup>th</sup> of July I am so thankful for my...

All of these statements relate to the idea of...government. They remind us that government has a lot of influence in our life. It should come as no surprise that the Bible has a lot to say about this subject.

Our passage today from Matthew is one of the places the Bible helps us understand the relationship between God and government; between what we should render to Caesar and what we should render to Jesus.

For in this question, Jesus is asked directly: **Is it right to pay taxes or not?** (Matthew 22:17). Now the Pharisees asked this question to trap Jesus. If He said "Yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar," His opponents could call Him a traitor to the Jewish nation and faith. But if He said "No," the Pharisees could report Him to Rome as a rebel. But here Jesus confounded His enemies with His reply of, **Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's** (Matthew 22:21). Yes, it is an acceptable good thing to pay taxes that provide for human government. But it is far better to give all of who we are to God who provides for all that we are and have.

In a sense Jesus was saying, "Yes, the coin bears Caesar's image; so give him a portion of what you have. But your lives bear the image of God, reminding you that you belong to God. So give to Him your life and your highest devotion."

His answer was confounding to the enemies of Christ, but at the same time, it was profoundly challenging to the disciples of Christ. In that day, it was required to swear loyalty to the emperor by saying the Latin phrase *Kaiser Kurios*, Caesar is Lord.

This is where the early church drew a big, bold, bright line in the sand. For they knew that to become a Christian was to say from the heart, *Christos Kurios*, not Caesar but Christ is Lord. All the Christians had to do was offer a pinch of incense and a few words and they would be free to go their own way and live their lives in peace. But that would be disloyalty to Christ. And so throughout the Roman Empire, these early disciples made the decision to give Caesar his coin, but not their lives.

Here Jesus was reminding us that we live our lives in two realms: the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God.

St. Augustine, who lived in the fifth century, described it this way. We live in the city of man and in the City of God. He wrote that the city of man is shaped by the love of self, even to the contempt of God. In contrast, the City of God is shaped by the love of God, even to the contempt of self.

More importantly, he noted that the city of man comes and goes. Because this city is built by men and women, it can be destroyed in the cycle of politics and history.

Question: How long will the results of the last election last? Answer: Until the next election!

Question: How long does a life changed by Jesus Christ last? Answer: Forever

Even if we believe that we have good government (and I for one surely believe that is the case in America); we should be just as clear that government is not the answer to our deeper needs. Yes, in the city of man we can build a better world, where people are protected, fed, dressed, educated and even insured! Yes, the city of man can improve our conditions, but it cannot cure our souls.

For as Jesus told us, **the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it** (Matthew 16:18). It may be persecuted and attacked, but ultimately the City of God will be established in the new heaven and earth, ushered in by the return of Christ.

All of us live with this dual citizenship. We live in the city of man, but belong to the City of God. Yes, we are citizens of an earthly realm, but by way of contrast, our identification with God's people is so much greater. Peter says it's as if we are **aliens and strangers** to our culture (1 Peter 2:11).

From God's perspective, our **citizenship is in heaven** (Philippians 3:20). For all eternity, our self-image will not be that we are American Christians or Asian Christians, but rather, that we belong to a tribe gathered from every nation, every tongue and every race (Revelation 14:6).

**BUT LET'S REMEMBER THAT IN THIS WORLD WE DO NEED GOVERNMENT.**

In Romans 13 the Apostle Paul writes: **Governing authorities... have been established by God... For [the one in authority] is God's servant to do you good** (Romans 13:1,4).

This good purpose of government has been beautifully set forth in the Preamble of the Constitution. There we read that the purpose of government is, "To establish justice, insure domestic tranquility,

provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.”

But a grand purpose does not ensure justice. Whenever the evil doer senses they can break the law and not be punished—chaos and anarchy are wrapped.

And the second purpose of government is to **bear the sword**... an agent of wrath to bring **punishment on the wrong doer** (Romans 13:4). The sword communicates the idea of lethal force. God has given the state the authority to coerce its citizens to do what is fair, just and right and to defend itself.

**FROM THIS DESCRIPTION OF GOVERNMENT, WE CAN SEE THAT THE CITY OF MAN HAS A VERY DIFFERENT PURPOSE IN OUR LIVES THAN THE CITY OF GOD.**

Pastor Joel Hunter in his book, *A New Kind of Conservative*, outlines the difference between what the government can do and what the church is called to do. He writes:

Our government is concerned with the order of the group so that the individual may prosper... Christianity is concerned with the individual so that the group may prosper.

In other words, the government provides order which allows us to live freely. And in that freedom, we have the opportunity to embrace faith which calls us to love God and to love our neighbor. This in turn plays a key role in building the moral foundation of the nation.

Hunter goes on to make the distinction that the essential characteristic of government is power. In contrast, the essential characteristic of the church is persuasion. He writes:

Civil government's ultimate strength is its ability to use force... Christianity is strongest when it's only force is persuasion... God grants Christianity only the power of influence to invite compliance. Our government concerns itself with proper behavior; hence the threat of force is appropriate, since force can moderate behavior. Christianity's concern is the heart... [the] thinking and will of a person in such a deep realm that only faith is effective.

The late Adrian Rogers puts it this way:

The church should never attempt to use the power of the government for spiritual goals. The government is here to protect us, but it cannot improve us morally or spiritually. The government is here to restrain evil. The church is here to call us to goodness. The government is national. The church is international. The government is to protect our neighbor. The church calls us to love our neighbor. The church is to carry out the great commission. The state is to preserve peace so that it is possible for us to promote our faith freely and in peace.

Today, I see a lot of handwringing, fear and even hatred among Christians who hold the opposite political view. But let's just say you

were given the power to remake the political landscape. It would be as if you had a magic wand. With this wand you could transform from top to bottom according to your political perspective. This new day would be led by all of the politicians you favor.

Nonetheless, it would still be true that human sin dominates in every heart. We will still find ways to invent lesser gods that we will love and serve. And the vast majority of humanity is still rushing headlong into a Christ-less eternity.

From an eternal perspective, what have we gained? What have we gained if we gained the whole political world and souls continue to be lost? What have we gained if our politics ensure that we can better feed, educate, govern, and insure comfort in old age; and then drop people off at the gates of hell?

This is why our energy and our resources and the passion of our life are given to the City of God and not the changing fortunes of the politics of this world.

And so our calling as Christians is to make our first and highest priority building the City of God. And at the heart of what it means to live for the City of God is to love our neighbor as ourselves. And that means we are going to care about the issues and the wider society that touch upon human dignity, the sacredness of life and basic human freedoms. Among other things, that means we are going to care about how we use whatever political influence we have to further the common good and support a framework that will allow us to preach the gospel freely.

What then does it mean to live faithfully in the city of man? What does it mean to wisely steward the gift of political influence that we have as individuals and with others? Let's consider some practical ways we can practice good citizenship in the city of man.

### **1. Good citizenship means to pray for our leaders.**

Here's the command of Scripture: **I, urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness** (1 Timothy 2:1,2). Have you ever noticed that it's much easier to be a criticizer than an intercessor? And that's especially true with the government. It's so easy to find ourselves being critical of our government, but how much do we pray for those in authority?

### **2. Christian citizenship means to honor what is righteous.**

The Apostle Peter gives us some very clear guidance as to how to live in the city of man when he writes, **Show proper respect to everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God, honor the king** (1 Peter 2:17). Now our deepest love is reserved for God and the brotherhood. Our ultimate allegiance belongs to the City of God. But here it is clear that living a God-fearing life is perfectly consistent with honoring your country. And

consider this. Peter wrote these words when the government was anything but friendly. For various Roman emperors, including the infamous Nero, were calling for persecution of Christians .

Peter calls us to honor the king. Honor goes beyond respect. Peter says **Show respect to everyone** (1 Peter 2:16). You show respect and obedience. But you show honor through appreciation. On Mother's Day, we honor our mothers by appreciating and valuing all they do. In the same way, we honor our government by praising it when it acts righteously.

And by the way, appreciating what is right about America doesn't mean that we disrespect and devalue other people and other cultures in the world. It simply means that we are grateful for the blessings that come to us as Americans.

- We can praise America because our nation and our Constitution was founded on Christian principles.
- We can praise America because it allows us freedom to worship and to proclaim Christ in the marketplace of ideas.
- We can praise America because we can enjoy the fruit of our labor.
- We can praise America for its lofty goal of fairness and justice for all.
- We can praise America because it is striving to extend the circle of opportunity.
- We can praise America for the wisdom found in its Constitution.
- We can praise America because it allows us the freedom to criticize what we believe to be wrong about America.

### **3. Good citizenship means loyalty to your country.**

Now, I know that there are those who tell us we can't wave a flag and call ourselves Christians. But being a patriot can be consistent with our Christian faith. Indeed, a true Christian patriotism is simply one way of expressing love for one's neighbor. Here's the way some of the great minds in the church of express this.

The early church father, Thomas Aquinas, said that someone who serves in military service to defend the innocent is acting out of Christian love. You can love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and also love your country as a way of loving your neighbor.

Regarding patriotism, St. Augustine argued: "As Christians we are commanded to love the whole world; practically speaking we cannot do so since we are placed, as if by 'divine lot' in a particular nation state. We love the world by loving the specific community in which we live. It is God's calling that we 'pay special regard' to those around us in that state."

C.S. Lewis compares our love of country to our love for the home and community in which we were raised. And further, such love makes us more loving toward a stranger. He writes: "In any mind that has a pennyworth of imagination, [patriotism] produces a good attitude

toward foreigners. How can I love my home without coming to realize that other men, no less rightly, love theirs?"

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spoke of love for his country even as he attempted to change its laws. And so he wrote, "Whom you would change, you must first love."

Many people know Chuck Colson as a man who went from the shame of Watergate to a Christ-centered prison ministry of love and compassion. But he was also a proud Marine. He writes, "As a military man, I served my country proudly and would do so again. A military man takes an oath to support the Constitution because it is God's ordained instrument to preserve order. Otherwise you have chaos."

#### 4. Good citizenship means to work for the common good.

In Jeremiah, God commanded: **...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper** (Jeremiah 29:7). This would translate in our day to "seek the welfare that God has for America."

Christians, down through the centuries, have witnessed with one voice that there are moral concerns God has for all people in every nation. These include:

- the sanctity of life
- marriage as the cornerstone of society
- justice for the poor
- compassion for the hurting and hungry
- peace making among the nations
- guarding basic human rights
- religious freedom
- maintaining and protecting the environment
- freeing those caught in sex trafficking and slavery
- right of personal property and economic freedoms

Jeremiah adds, **you too will prosper**. Our faith becomes more real as we share God's love in the city of man.

#### 5. Good citizenship means to work against what is wrong.

It was this understanding of patriotism that led Carl Schurz, an American senator and a Union Army General, to make this now famous quote about patriotism:

The Senator from Wisconsin cannot frighten me by exclaiming, "My country, right or wrong." In one sense I say so too. My country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right."

It's time to work for change when marriage becomes expendable and alternative lifestyles are being beneficial to society.

It's time to work for change when the sexual experimentation of our young people is considered healthy if they use all the right techniques.

It's time to work for change when human life is considered expendable at the entrance gates (through abortion) and the exit gates of life (through euthanasia).

It's time to work for change when the Supreme Court tells us that gambling is entertainment and unspeakable pornography is art.

It's time to work for change when public officials want to make government and public life a religion-free zone.

It's time work for change when the gap grows between the very rich and the very poor.

It's time to work for change when sex trafficking is taking place among our young people.

It's time to work for change when half the people have the idea that you don't have to work and the other half believe that it's not good to work because what they earn will be unfairly given to others.

## **6. Christian citizenship calls us to participate in government where possible.**

The most important way we can participate is by using the right and the privilege of the vote. But we can also vote with our life.

True citizenship looks like helping the homeless in your community or joining with a community action group to fight pornography. Citizenship can be teaching a Sunday School class on social action issues affecting Christians or writing or calling your Congressman on a key political issue being faced in Congress.

How do we change America? Responsibly participating in the city of man and passionately participating in the City of God. Making a difference one heart at a time, one loving act, one witness to God's love, one caring gesture, one helping hand to the poor or needy.

As we participate in the city of man, the outcome is uncertain. Sometimes in the city of man, things can look bleak. If you went back to the first century and stood on the streets of Rome—on one side of the street, you see a prison. Within you would find a man with a physical deformity. He is busy writing letters of encouragement to churches that he founded. Despite his chains, he is full of hope for the future.

If you look in the other direction, you will see an awesome coliseum. On that day, it is filled with tens of thousands of Roman citizens. They're all waiting for one man to appear. When they see him, they stand to salute and cry out, "Hail Caesar! Hail Caesar!"

Which of the two men do you think would make a greater impact on history? One we associate with ancient ruins, and the other a living faith that has transformed the world. That's the difference between the city of man and the City of God!

Closing prayer:

Dear God, we thank You that when You made us, You pressed Your image into our being. You endowed us with dignity and human rights. We thank You for the great heritage of our government and the abundance of our land. Help us to bring blessing and opportunity to a wider circle as we love our neighbor and work passionately for the common good. But stir our highest devotion to live out the gospel to the world so that others may come to know Christ—so the world can see that in Jesus Christ there is a new order and a new kingdom coming. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.