

QUESTION #17: “WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SOCIALISM?” (Matthew 22:15-22)

9.15.19

INTRODUCTION

This is one of the more challenging questions I have been asked to consider in our “Big Questions” series. Why? We live in a time of very passionate politics, a time of a very divided and divisive political landscape, and, in the midst of all that, national elections coming up. There are a lot of names and labels being thrown around, and “socialist” and “socialism” are two of the more frequent ones these days — often being used as a label meant to incite a specific reaction toward either a politician or a political stance. So while we will look at the idea of “socialism” this morning, and what the Bible might have to say about that, we are also going to be entertaining the bigger questions of government and citizenship. How are we to function, how are we expected to respond, as Christians to the political and governmental environment in which we find ourselves? Good stuff, and important stuff, so let’s get started — with a story of how Jesus Christ handled an issue of governmental authority in his day.

TEXT (including Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26)

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap [Jesus] in his words. [Keeping a close watch on (Jesus), they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor (Pilate) — Luke 20:20]. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth [you speak and teach what is right — Luke 20:21a]. You aren’t swayed by others [you do not show partiality — Luke 20:21b], because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not [Should we pay or shouldn’t we? — Mark 12:15a]?” But Jesus [saw through their duplicity — Luke 20:23a], knowing their evil intent [their hypocrisy], said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax [Bring me a denarius and let me look at it — Mark 12:15b].” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed. [They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent — Luke 20:26.] So they left him and went away — Matthew 22:15-22.

ANALYSIS

- 1) Pharisees objected to paying taxes to Rome. The other group taking part in this attempt to trip up Jesus was the Herodians, who threw their allegiance behind the family line of Herods that Rome had installed as “client” kings of Israel (rulers of Israel but at the discretion of the governing Roman authorities), who supported the paying of such taxes. Herodians were Jews of wealth and influence who favored Greek customs and Roman law. They often sided with Sadducees in their pro-Roman politics, which meant that they were normally opposed to the Pharisees. But their opposition to Jesus and his perceived threat to the “status quo” sometimes wound up uniting them, as on this occasion. On the surface, it appears that Jesus would be in trouble with one of those two groups. But Jesus’ brilliant answer underscores a principle that supporting the state (in this case, Rome) was part of obeying God’s rule by recognizing his sovereign right to establish kingdoms (and their

laws) as he saw fit. He affirms God's sovereignty without any apparent infringement on Roman rule.

- 2) The specific tax being referred to here, the "imperial" tax, was a tax imposed only on subject peoples, not on Roman citizens. The Romans initiated the direct collection of taxes in 6 AD. It was extremely unpopular, and some Jews refused to pay because it implied that an idolatrous emperor ("Caesar") was their king — not God.
- 3) The two-pronged attack boils down to this in the minds of the Pharisees: a "yes, pay the tax" from Jesus will undoubtedly anger the crowds that were constantly surrounding him and proving him far more popular than they were by clearing siding on the issue with the hated Roman Empire; on the other hand, a "no, don't pay the tax" would enable them to accuse Jesus before the Roman authorities as a rebel and a lawbreaker.
- 4) The denarius was a silver coin required for paying the tax and was equal to a day's wages for the average worker. On one side of the coin was an image of Caesar, and on the other side was an inscription that read: "Son of divine Augustus"; both the image and the inscription would have been deeply offending to observant Jews.
- 5) The term "Caesar" originally came from the name "Gaius Julius Caesar," the uncle of the first Roman emperor Augustus (who was emperor at the time of Christ's birth) but, over time, it became the accepted title for all Roman emperors, and was also used as a general reference to Roman imperial power. At this time, Tiberius was the actual emperor in Rome.

DEFINITIONS

Socialism (thought to have entered the English language around 1830). There are many definitions that could be used but we'll use this one for now: Any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods, and in which private property and the distribution of income are subject to social control.

In practice, the conception of social control has varied, and the term has been interpreted in widely diverging ways. In the modern era, pure socialism has been seen only rarely and usually only briefly in a few Communist regimes. Far more common are systems of social democracy.

Social democracy (democratic socialism): a system in which extensive state regulation, with limited state ownership, has been employed by democratically elected governments (as in Sweden and Denmark) in the belief that it produces a fair distribution of income without impairing economic growth.

Politically speaking, there is a fear among people that America is growing more socialist, that government is growing bigger and therefore government is growing more influential and controlling — and that strikes at the very heart of the independence that Americans see as their inherent right. Now, with an election looming in the not-too-distant future, and with the divisiveness and accompanying nastiness of our "anything goes" campaign styles, we are hearing the word a lot, and virtually always as a negative, along with the accompanying word "progressive." As campaigns heat it, so does the fear of what the electing of certain individuals, and the adoption of certain party platforms, could mean for our nation and our individual liberties moving forward.

So what is a Christian to do? How do we look at government, and politics, and our leaders — whichever side of the political fence they sit on?

APPLICATION

Let's look at some things to consider as we try to navigate the political landscape in which we find ourselves:

- 1) First, we need to remember that, as Paul said so well, ***[O]ur citizenship is in heaven — Paul, Philippians 3:20a***. Paul is directing those words to the church — to Christians. That means that ultimately, heaven, God's kingdom, is the kingdom to which we owe our deepest, most sincere loyalty. Why? Two huge reasons:
 - a) The ruler of that kingdom died to offer us that citizenship (what other government leader can claim that?). While many times we hear about those who have paid the ultimate price to save our freedoms, only one person ever died to save our souls.
 - b) Our "end times" Bible study has recounted many of the past kingdoms that have ruled in our world: the Assyrian empire, the Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar, the Medo-Persian empire of Darius and Cyrus, the Greek empire of Alexander the Great, and the Roman Empire (which was firmly entrenched at the time of Christ). In more recent times, we have observed the British empire (so worldwide that it was once said, "The sun never sets on the British empire"). One could argue that the Soviet Union was an empire, controlling the nations that make up Central Europe. And our own nation, the United States, while maybe not an empire in the classical sense of the term, has had extreme worldwide influence essentially since World War II. But all those kingdoms were as finite as the people who ruled them; in other words, over the course of time, they passed away into history. Not so the kingdom to which Paul says Christians claim citizenship. That kingdom will never pass away; it is an eternal kingdom, and our eternal residence.

It is on that basis that Peter and the apostles with him declared before the Sanhedrin (and I like how the ESV translates this): ***"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. . . . We must obey God rather than men" — Peter, John and the apostles, Acts 4:19b-20, 5:29b (ESV)***. Whenever a directive in governmental leadership or law compels us to have to choose between God's declared commands and those of the world, it is God's word that must be obeyed; there is no option there.

- 2) Second, we cannot forget that the world (and its nations and governments) have everything about them established by God as part of his perfect plans for the world. Paul said it this way when he was sharing with a group of philosophers in Athens: ***"From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" — Paul, Acts 17:26***. Essentially Paul is saying that God is the sovereign ruler of this planet and, despite the plans and calculations of world leaders, it is God who designs, constructs and guides history. Just as with each individual human being, the lifetimes of nations and empires are determined by God before one of them comes to be. Job saw this even in his time, as he shared with his friends: ***"[God] makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them — Job 12:23***. And as David, a king in his own right, declared: ***[D]ominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations — David, Psalm 22:28***.
- 3) Third, while we are concerned with how certain politicians could legislate the varied social issues of our times, consider the social issues that Jesus could have chosen to address as he

ministered in the world. It was a world system filled with flaws. Consider just these three items:

- a) Slavery was an integral part of the culture and the economy. And while there were some legal aids to those in slavery, it was nevertheless an ongoing part of that world. For conquered peoples, their rights as slaves were minimal, and their treatment could be extremely harsh, with nothing in place to plead their case. Yet Jesus said nothing. In fact, as the church grew out of Christ's ministry, slaves were in fact told to continue in their place and even find the joy of Christ in it; as Paul said to Timothy in his first letter: ***"All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare of their slaves — Paul, I Timothy 6:1-2a.*** Peter added to this, telling his readers: ***Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. [Why?]. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God — I Peter 2:18-19.*** In fact, it is Paul who writes to a slaveowner named Philemon, urging him to take the runaway slave Onesimus back into his household.
- b) There was a system of taxation that literally begged for corruption. Tax collectors could essentially charge as much as they could get away with; as long as Rome maintained their revenue stream from the territories they had conquered, the collectors and the managers above them were free to do virtually anything they wanted. The stories of Jesus intermingling with the common people are filled with references to "tax collectors and other sinners," lumping them together because their wrongdoing was so obvious. Yet Jesus paid his taxes and, as we heard earlier this morning, Christians were told to do the same thing. Even though the system could be incredibly corrupt, not once is the system challenged by either Jesus or his followers.
- c) The cult of emperor worship, imposing deity on these leaders, whether living or dead, became the state religion throughout the Roman Empire. Its roots, however, were found in the simple gratitude of people for the stability that Roman rule brought to their lives. Temples were erected to honor the memory of Julius Caesar not long after his death (44 BC) and then to his nephew Augustus while he was still alive and ruling. Initially it was seen as a means of flattering the Emperor, and it was not intended to become a substitute for other religious practices. However, over time, this recognition became less about gratitude and more about loyalty to the empire. There were bound to be repercussions if this show of loyalty was refused. After some initial persecution, Emperor Claudius exempted Jews from this practice. Christians, however, never received that clemency and, as their numbers increased to make their existence more obvious, the response of the Empire became more hostile. It is this hostility that Peter addressed in his first letter: ***Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. . . . if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name —***

I Peter 4:12-14, 16. But despite the fact that much of this suffering was, in fact, sanctioned by the Empire, there was no talk of rebellion, but only that their response reflect the Master whose name they bear.

And these are just three social issues. Yet what was Christ's focus? The heart. That was his priority. He understood that the only change that matters is change in the human heart — from being driven by human desires to being driven by God's desires. What were his first words of ministry (coming immediately after his time of temptation in the wilderness)? ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:17b.***

So what are our responsibilities as citizens? How do we support our government? How do we oppose issues and decisions with which we do not agree? Some ideas:

- 1) First of all, the Bible makes very clear we do have a responsibility as Christians to all those who may be in positions of authority over us to honor and respect their positions:
 - a) ***Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities — Paul, Romans 13:1a.*** The idea in the Greek here is “to be submissive” to those whom God has placed over us. Part of this is that, as Christians, we should be at the forefront of understanding governments as part of God's providential ordering of the world, and submitting to them as a result of their place in God's rule — a point that Jesus made during his time speaking with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate: ***“Where do you come from?” Pilate asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”*** [And what was Christ's response?] ***Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” — John 19:9b-11a.***
 - b) In fact, Peter takes it even farther in his first letter, telling his audience: ***Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority . . . Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor — I Peter 2:13a, 17.*** Two really important points to make:
 - i) Notice that our submitting to every human authority is being done “for the Lord's sake.” Remember that Paul said to the Colossian church: ***Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus — Paul, Colossians 3:17a.*** Living for the Lord's sake, reflecting our Master in all we do and say, should be the cornerstone for our lives from which all else is built — including submitting ourselves to the authorities over us.
 - ii) Notice that Peter says: ***Honor the emperor***; in fact, Peter even calls him their “supreme authority.” The emperor at this time was Nero. If that is true, Peter is treating as completely irrelevant how the emperor (or king or president or governor) is — good, bad, godly, godless or whatever. His readers are simply told to honor him — period. The Greek word here means to literally “fix a value.” Nero, as Peter tells it, for the Lord's sake, should receive everybody's highest value — shown by external obedience reflecting inner respect. Keep in mind that, if historical tradition is correct, it was under the rule of Nero that both Peter and Paul were martyred for the cause of Christ.
- 2) Second, the Bible makes very clear that we are to be a praying people, and that includes praying quite literally for everybody; Paul said it like this in his first letter to Timothy: ***I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for***

all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior — Paul, I Timothy 2:1-3. Our prayers in this sense should be made for “all” people — Democrats as well as Republicans, liberals as well as conservatives, people we don’t agree with as well as people we do agree with. Paul telling this to Timothy here reflects the same thought as Christ himself, who said: ***“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. . . . If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. . . . But love your enemies, do good to them” — Jesus Christ, Luke 6:27b-28, 32-33, 35a.*** But be warned: If you are praying for somebody, you are asking God to provide his very best for them. You are telling God that His best is exactly what you want for that person. So, if wanting the best for Ilhan Omar or Nancy Pelosi or Hillary Clinton or anybody else makes you hesitate, then I respectfully submit that you have more immediate spiritual issues and needs to address — because wanting God’s best for them is exactly what God wants us to do.

- 3) When feeling called to protest or otherwise push back against laws or government decisions that are contrary to God’s law — for instance, abortion — we must do so by still remaining respectful and honoring of the authorities over us. Maybe Peter said it best when summing up Christ’s experience in sacrificing himself for us: ***When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly — I Peter 2:23.*** Certainly the disciples followed that pattern; when Luke tells us in the book of Acts that Peter and John were flogged for disobeying the Sanhedrin regarding preaching in Jesus’ name, what was their response? ***The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace (being flogged) for the Name — Acts 5:41.*** Whatever the consequence of their stand, they made sure their reaction reflected their Master. That was the only thing that would make their opposition have God’s meaning.

CONCLUSION

The bigger points to be made are these:

- 1) We are not here for political purposes or government purposes or even our own purposes. We are here for God’s purposes. He designed us for his purpose. He gave us life for his purpose. And our purpose is His Kingdom. The eternal life that he has graced us with is intended for everybody. We are his hands and feet and eyes and ears and tongues to communicate that message in every way possible.
- 2) The Bible does not endorse ANY particular form of government — one huge reason why being that we are not here for the considerations of this world as what we are to spend our energies on. God doesn’t depend on “God-friendly” governments to advance his kingdom. He simply needs slaves sold out for him. In practical terms, that means that Christianity has grown in literally EVERY type of government under which people have found themselves. The kings of Israel were autocrats — they held absolute and total power and control over their people. In the Christian Era, in fact, beginning in the New Testament era, God took what started out as 12 uneducated guys and, from that seed, started a revolution that, in roughly three centuries, made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire — an empire that initially was incredibly hostile and even deadly to

Christians. But from Jesus on down, the focus was not on whatever human authority was over them; instead, it was about the mission that Jesus had declared for himself and his followers — paraphrasing Mark 16: “Go to all, preach to every.” As for opposition, Jesus himself said: **“You will be hated by everyone because of me” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:22a.** Paul famously told the church in Corinth that opposition to their faith amounted to no more than **“light and momentary troubles” — Paul, II Corinthians 4:17a,** reminding them (and us) that our lives are heading for ***an eternal glory that far outweighs [every one of those light and momentary troubles]* — Paul, II Corinthians 4:17b,** affirming that, whatever is going on in this world, ***what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* — Paul, II Corinthians 4:18b.**

- 3) God through his people on the ground expanded his kingdom in Germany under the Nazis, in Russia under Stalin, in China under Mao. His kingdom is expanding even today in North Korea under Kim Jung-Un, in multiple Muslim nations governed by Sharia law (currently 15 such nations around the world, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran and Iraq), in Russia under Vladimir Putin, in Turkey under President Erdogan, in Syria under President Assad, and China under President Xi. Paul, writing in an environment every bit as difficult and treacherous as any that Christians have experienced, said this: ***Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained* — Paul, II Timothy 2:8-9.** Physically, God’s people can be stopped. Spiritually? God’s message? No chance! Since we are alive and present on planet earth for the business of God’s kingdom, and since the power of that kingdom cannot be shut down even as God’s word cannot be shut down, taking advantage of every opportunity to share God’s word should be our primary concern.
- 4) Sinners sin; that’s what they do. Godless people make decisions that have nothing to do with God; that’s what godless people do. But when we interject Jesus Christ into their lives, into their issues — all of a sudden their answers change. If we absolutely believe: ***[I]f anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* — Paul, II Corinthians 5:17,** then we should base our outreach, our Sunday School teaching, our worship and praise, and everything else we do around here on that promise of God — that ALL things will become new! The fact is, there is no legislation that will ever change people’s hearts. Changed hearts come from God, and those changed hearts are the only hearts that will make a difference. And that’s the deal: We can change the world — but it will happen one heart and one life at a time. But the goal is not to change the world for ourselves. The goal is to change the world for Jesus Christ.
- 5) I know that there are deep political passions here. But our passions don’t even register when compared to God’s passion. And you know what his passion is? That people come to faith in him through his Son, Jesus Christ. That people are washed from their sins by the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. If that’s his passion, how can it not be ours?
- 6) And in the midst of those passions, I know that it is very easy to get angered and frustrated by the words and actions of other political persuasions. But consider this: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16-17.*** Praise God that includes each and every one of us. But guess what? If those words from John 3 are true, Jesus Christ died for Ilhan Omar too. Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross for

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez too. Jesus Christ was slaughtered for Nancy Pelosi too, and Chuck Schumer and Tim Walz and Amy Klobuchar and Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton and everybody else on the planet.

- 7) And the fact is, they are on the planet because God wanted them on the planet. God designed them as much as he designed any of us. God's desire for their salvation is as passionate for them as it was for us. He has a purpose for them — His purpose; that's why they're here. They didn't arrive on the scene because the D-N-C wanted them here. They arrived because the G-O-D wanted them here. And that's why all the labels and stuff flying around are so dangerous, because they get in the way of our identifying people as we should. In other words, when cultural labels get in the way, when politics or any other filters blind us to seeing other people the way God sees them, we are in serious trouble. No one is going to heaven because they are a Republican. They are only going to heaven based upon their surrender to Jesus Christ — their confession of their sins, their sin being washed by his blood, and God seeing his beloved Son's life in their life — period.
- 8) Their coming to Christ is no less likely than any one of us. If God can save me, why is their salvation any less likely? What is more important to us — their political defeat or their eternal life?

That is the biggest question of all: What consideration is the most important one? A moment in time now, or an eternal life? The spiritual health of our church, and certainly our spiritual strength moving forward, reflects in our priorities. Who do those priorities reflect — us or God? Our prayers, our concerns, the things that make us reach out to the world, will all be impacted by the basis for our priorities. Are they God's — only God's? Let's pray!