

## WHAT IS OUR DUTY TOWARD OUR GOVERNMENT

What is our duty toward the government? It was with a question regarding responsibility toward earthly government that the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus, recorded for us in Matthew 22. After trying hypocritically to flatter Jesus, they asked the question, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*” (Matt. 22:17) This is a subtle trap. If Jesus says, “No, it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then He is guilty of treason against Rome, and the political Herodians would be the first to report Him. If Jesus says, “Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then He is guilty of disloyalty to Israel, and the religious leaders could use threats to turn the people against Him.

How did Jesus answer this trick question and escape their trap? Jesus asked to be shown the money. Then Jesus said, “*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (v. 21).

The name of the Caesar or Emperor at Jesus’ time was Tiberias. The denarius, a coin worth a day’s wage, had a portrait of Tiberias on one side, and a picture of him seated on his throne on the other. The inscription declared Tiberias to be “Maxim Pontiff,” great ruler. Tiberias was not a particularly savoury or honourable fellow, but he was the ruler. Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Render unto Tiberias,” but rather “*Render unto Caesar.*” By His words, Jesus teaches us to look to the office which He established and not so much to the person in the office. The office is God’s gift, and we are to give to this divinely established office the honour it deserves. God is the One who has established the governing authorities. They may often abuse their authority. They may not even realise that they have a divine calling. But as Christians, we are to honour them as servants of God nonetheless. For by honouring them, we are really honouring God Himself.

Are we always supposed to submit to our rulers? This issue is especially troubling when Christians live under bad or oppressive rulers. Were the Christians of Germany obliged to submit to Hitler and to participate in his murderous, blasphemous schemes? Are there not unjust laws, made by evil regimes, some directly contradicting the commandments of Scripture? For example, in the early church Roman law demanded that citizens burn incense as a way to acknowledge the divinity of the Emperor. Or more recently, the law in many Islamic states forbids anyone from trying to convert a Muslim to Christianity. Christian missionaries can be subject to the death penalty for telling someone about Jesus. Should Christians not evangelise the lost in nations whose leaders forbid it?

Is it ever right to disobey the authorities? In almost every instance a Christian should, in Peter’s words, “*be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution*” (1 Peter 2:13). We may or may not like a particular governing official. But if God has allowed him to be established in office, then we are to honour him for God’s sake, paying our taxes and obeying whatever laws are in force, as long as they do not cause us to sin against God. In the words of the Augsburg Confession, “*Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws except when commanded to sin. For then they owe greater obedience to God than to human beings*” (AC XXVI). The confessors cited Acts 5:29. When the disciples were forbidden by law to preach the Gospel, they answered, “*We must obey God rather than men.*”

“*Render unto Caesar*” also has special applications for those of us in Australia. As Christians and Australian citizens we are obligated to take an active part in government, that is, obeying its laws, paying our taxes, voting, and honouring those in elected office. 1 Timothy 2 reminds us also to pray for our governing officials, “*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in godliness and reverence*” (1 Tim. 2:1).