

DEFENDING THE KINGDOM

Happy Independence Day! When I was a kid the Fourth of July was one of my favorite holidays. We lived out in the country and we would put on our own fireworks show in a field behind our house. Every time I went to bed on the night before July 4th I worried that it would rain the next day and keep us from having our fireworks show. In those less-regulated days you could buy some pretty impressive ordnance. My particular favorites were cherry bombs and M-80's which packed a pretty good wallop. I remember buying a box of 500 cherry bombs one summer and spending an afternoon with a friend of mine lighting them and throwing them like grenades into a small tree my father had recently planted. 500 cherry bombs later the tree was denuded of all its leaves. My father was thrilled. On another occasion I was informed by a friend that cherry bombs would go off underwater. I tested that proposition by flushing one down the toilet. Not pretty. Ahh—those were the good old days. I have to admit, though, that amidst the melee of the mini-rockets' red glare and the mini-bombs bursting in air, I didn't pay much attention to the real reason for the holiday, which was to celebrate the birth of our nation. I wasn't much of a student but on one of those rare occasions where I was actually paying attention in class, I did learn that in America we believed that the church and the state should be kept separate.

Actually, as far as I have been able to find out, the American idea of the separation of church and state was new. In ancient Rome the emperors had no problem controlling the religious practices of their citizens. On one occasion, the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome and his successor, Nero, used Christians as human torches to light his dinner parties. In the Middle Ages the balance of power was reversed and the Church exerted considerable influence on the monarchs of Europe. Today, in Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia Islamic leaders have significant power in governing the nation and Iran is basically a theocracy. But in America we have committed ourselves to keeping church and state separate. In the past half-century however controversy has arisen over exactly what separation entails. So it's appropriate to consider what Jesus said when He was asked about the subject. Let's hear Matthew's account of this event one more time. [Read Matt. 22:15-22]

Matthew 22:15-22 Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ 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 aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?
¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “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.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

The Pharisees were trying to lay a trap for Jesus. They wanted to discredit him and undermine his ministry because he posed an enormous threat to them. First of all he claimed to be the Son of God, which, if true, gave him absolute authority over them. Second, he had drawn many disciples away from the Pharisees who now looked to him for religious instruction rather than them. Third, he had performed miracles—healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, even raising the dead to life—miracles which they could not perform. Finally, he had publically challenged their authority and knowledge regarding the Law of Moses and then gotten the better of them in disputations that followed. It’s no wonder they wanted to be rid of Jesus once and for all. In the present instance, they had enlisted the help of the Herodians to lay a trap for Him whereby he might publically embarrass himself—or worse.

The trap lay in their question: *“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”* The idea was to put Jesus in a lose/lose position. If He said that it was wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, He was committing an act of sedition by exhorting His followers to withhold their taxes from Rome. That alone merited the death penalty under Roman law. On the other hand, if he said it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, he was affirming the legitimacy of Roman rule over the Jews—an idea which was so offensive to them that it would seriously damage his leadership. The question seemed to admit of only two answers: one was treason and the other political suicide.

But just as God’s foolishness is higher than the wisdom of man, God’s knowledge is higher than the cleverness of man, and Jesus’ answer completely silences them: *“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”*

But what exactly does this mean? What is Caesar’s and what is God’s?

Luther offers us a helpful way of understanding the difference. God, he says, has established and rules through two different kingdoms. He calls these the right-handed and left-handed kingdoms of God. The right-handed kingdom is the kingdom of the Church, which has the authority to bind and loose sins. This kingdom entered through faith in Jesus Christ and is an eternal kingdom. The left-handed kingdom is the kingdom of secular government, which has the authority to punish those who transgress its laws. This kingdom is entered by birthright or citizenship and will last only as long as the world lasts. Christians live in both kingdoms: we are disciples of Jesus Christ and we are citizens of the state. Both kingdoms are parts of God’s plan of salvation for mankind. Through the left-handed kingdom the social order is preserved so that in the right-handed kingdom the Gospel can be preached and souls can be saved. The two kingdoms are separate and should be kept so.

So far, so good. But maybe not so good, because the Bible also makes clear that the left-handed kingdom will always be jealous of any authority beyond its own and that includes the authority of the right-handed kingdom. We read in *Psalms 2*: “*The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and cast off their shackles.’*” (*Psalms 2:2-3*) In other words, it is in the nature of the state to try to try to undermine the Church. Our founding fathers were aware of this which is why they provided protection for the church against the intrusion of the state in the 1st Amendment to the Constitution, which reads: **“Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibit the free exercise thereof...”** This means that the government may not establish a church and that people should be free to have and express their religious convictions. Unfortunately, the clear language of what has been called “the least ambiguous Amendment to the Constitution” has not kept the courts of this country for the past fifty or so years from restricting the free expression of religion. The judges (or Justices) who have rendered these decisions have often defended them by referring to the “wall of separation” between church and state. But the words “wall of separation” are not found in the Constitution, only in a personal letter of Thomas Jefferson to a friend. The net effect of these restrictions has been to suppress the free exercise of religious expression rather than protect it. And that is something we shouldn’t stand for.

So what do we do? That’s easy: we go to war. That’s right—I’m advocating warfare. Another myth of our time is that war is the worst of all things. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said “WAR NEVER SOLVED ANYTHING EXCEPT STOPPING SLAVERY, ENDING THE HOLOCAUST AND SAVING US FROM SPEAKING JAPANESE.” The philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote the following: “*War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight...is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.*” Some things are worth fighting for. And the freedom to express our Christian faith is one of them. Not only is it worth fighting for, it’s a Biblical imperative.

A man by the name of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who has been called the father of Lutheranism in America, wrote the following in his diary after the War of Independence had been won by the colonies. “*The true Christian religion still has few roots and assured fruits in America. The pity is that too many do not understand the word freedom and do not want to understand it, because they think now that they are also independent of the Saviour of the world and His laws....Christendom must now become either hot or cold.*” My friends, we may not have become cold, but we’ve gotten about as lukewarm as it’s possible to get when it comes to talking about our faith outside the doors of our church. And you know what Jesus said about lukewarm Christians: “*I am about the spit you out of my mouth.*” (*Revelation 3:16*)

One of the most interesting definitions of a Christian I've ever heard was given to me by a seminary professor: "*Christians,*" he said, "*are guerilla soldiers sent behind enemy lines to rescue spiritual prisoners of war.*" God has sent us behind enemy lines to rescue prisoners of our enemy Satan. He has given us two powerful weapons: our mouths and the truth. He has told us that there is only one reason that this world is being preserved and that is so that the Gospel can be proclaimed to all nations. He has also told us that every single one of us is commissioned to be a proclaimer.

Sadly, we have failed to do this—so much so that America has become a mission field where churches in Africa send their missionaries.

So as we celebrate our religious freedom today let us remember what our religious freedom is for: it's not just the freedom to worship where and when we choose. It's also the freedom to go behind enemy lines and tell prisoners of war what they desperately need to hear. God has called us to battle: let's not be faint of heart!

Happy Independence Day!

Amen.

Psalm 2

¹ Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
² The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his
anointed, saying,
³ "Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."

⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
⁶ "I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain."
¹⁰ Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.

1 Peter 3:13-16

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.