Allegiances – **Matthew 22:1-15**
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In this polarized world, it's a challenge—especially in the church—to find a message that all of us can rally around. Preachers' jobs are not to speak to different factions, but to the entire church. And so, no matter where we all stand theologically or politically, the Gospel today speaks to all of us, not just to Republicans or Democrats, but to all of us citizens and people of faith.

We're just over two weeks away from Election Day. In fact, early voting has now begun in many states. As we feel around this time each election season, we will all be glad when the campaigning has come to an end.

I'm sure you join me in praying, whatever the outcomes are to the many races at all levels, that the aftermath of the elections will be peaceful and respectful. (We struggled with that back on January 6, 2021.) If there's one thing that sets America apart from many other countries, it's that after we vote and the winners are declared, we move on together toward making the country more prosperous.

This scripture text this morning from Matthew speaks to the difficulty we face in figuring out, speaking of elections, where our allegiances lie. Specifically, Jesus addresses the age-old questions of how we divide our allegiances between God and our earthly authorities.

"Is it lawful," the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus, "to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Now, the inquirers don't really care about the subject matter of their question. Their main

goal is to entrap Jesus—to find another reason to throw the book at him for the insurrection he's leading—both in religious and civil life.

The question, however, (and Jesus' answer to it) does speak to where we today find ourselves in the midst of another, at times, ugly election season and how we handle the burden and obligation of being both citizens of our country and disciples of Jesus.

Jesus responds, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

He was very clever in this response; he left both the Pharisees (hoping for a defense of right godly behavior) and the Herodians (hoping for a defense of right citizen behavior) amazed and their entrapment strategy in tatters.

What do we make of Jesus' response, however? In a world where we are called to many allegiances, how does his answer help us?

All of us do some form of prioritizing our many allegiances. We have allegiances to God, to our country, our families, our spouses, our employers, communities, and churches. We rank them as to which are most important.

A little boy one day was given two dollars -- one for Sunday School and one for an ice cream cone. Walking along the street one of the dollar bills slipped out of his hand and fell through some grillwork into the drain below. The little boy raised his face toward heaven and said with genuine sorrow, "Well, God, there goes your dollar."

That little boy was faced with a choice. When faced with deciding which entity—God or himself—would lose out on a dollar, God was on the losing end.

The story is a microcosm of how we often think about God and the world in which we live. We have a tendency to think that there is always a choice. We are always choosing, we think, between God and worldly things. That it's always an either-or situation. You can't have both; we must choose God or the world.

Jesus would contend that our first allegiance is always to the God who made us. But in this text, he makes the case for giving to both the government and to God.

In varying degrees, we have allegiance to both. Both must be maintained and adhered to. As people of faith, we don't have a problem with the theory of giving to God what is God's. (We don't do it all the time, but we have no problem acknowledging its validity.) When it comes to giving to the emperor (or government) what is the emperor's, however, that's where we tend to have a problem.

There's one thing all of us, no matter our political persuasion, can agree on: We all disagree at times with our local, state, or federal governments and their leaders. We're united on this. We all at times have a problem with what government does.

And there are egregious things our governments do—acts that, depending on where you fall on an issue, leave you annoyed or angered and, in some cases, defiant.

Defiant enough, even, for you to maybe consider not paying your taxes. This was the issue Jesus was confronted with.

And Jesus no doubt had issues with the Roman empire. He wasn't all in on what Caesar was doing to the people he ruled over. He no doubt had problems with the injustice his government was imposing on many of its citizens.

Still, though, Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's." Adhere to the law of the land. It's what being a

citizen of any jurisdiction requires for that jurisdiction to function in an orderly fashion and not out of chaos.

A week or so ago, our secretary of state Marco Rubio gave a speech in Greece championing the values of Western Civilization.

Brett Stephens, an opinion writer for the *New York Times*, saw this as an opportunity to define what the pillars of Western Civilization are.

They include three things.

First is the quest for truth, which "requires a combination of scrupulous honesty and self-scrutiny, as well as courageous skepticism of all prevailing beliefs, including religious and ideological ones."

Second is the worth and dignity of every human being. "It's an immense idea. It sacralizes human life. It enjoins us not to sacrifice children, or murder brothers or strangers, or kill except for self-defense. It establishes a basis of equality between rich and poor, clever and dumb, strong and weak."

And the third pillar of Western Civilization, Stephens reminds us, "is the rule of law: law that stands above the convenience of the privileged and the caprice of the powerful."

Citizens, all citizens, in Western civilizations, need to obey the law. Today, whether it's paying taxes, obeying traffic lights, not assaulting your neighbor, or obeying zoning regulations, citizens have a duty to adhere to the laws governments have established. Whether we agree with some of these laws or not, adherence by the citizenry ensures that society functions in orderly and peaceful ways. Without this expectation, there would be chaos on the streets.

Jesus recognized the importance of communities of people living peacefully together. And even though he took liberty with

some of Rome's laws and had trouble with the emperor, he insisted that people obey them for the purpose of maintaining a civilized society. "There may be injustice with regard to the government's oppression of its people, but give to the emperor what is the emperor's."

So what happens if we then oppose many of the government's laws? What do we do then? We work to change the laws.

This is where Jesus' other command comes into play: "Give to the emperor what is the emperor, *and give to God what is God's*." What do we have that belongs to God? It is an allegiance rooted in the behavior God wants us to embrace ourselves.

And what behavior is that? Micah 6:8 defines it for us: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

While obeying the laws of the land, we are also called to work for justice. That is what God requires of us, and so we work to change laws that reflect that justice, kindness, and humility.

And that's hard work. It requires determination and discipline. And yet, within the confines of the law, all citizens of the world should aspire to this work. Giving to God what is God's doesn't just mean giving our money; it means giving our best effort to guarantee the other things God treasures: love, justice, and mercy.

When we don't like the laws that our governments enforce, we don't not follow those laws. We work peacefully and within the confines of the law to change them.

This happens when we respectfully raise our voices so that our leaders hear our complaints. That comes in letters to the

editors of our newspapers, in telephone calls or emails to our elected officials, and in peaceful protests.

The first amendment to our constitution guarantees the right to peaceful protest. It's a right we all should treasure, whether or not we agree with any cause being advanced through them. We all know there are countries around the world whose citizens do not enjoy this right.

The freedom we all have to lift our voices peacefully in disagreement with government policies should never be taken for granted.

Nor should the right all of us Americans have to vote. The right to vote may indeed be the most effective way each of us can rally to a cause that impacts the way governments operate.

America wins when more of its citizens exercise this constitutional right.

"Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's." Some have always read this passage as Jesus' advocacy for the separation of church and state. I think our giving to both as Jesus commands are intertwined. For the good of the country, we obey the laws of the land. For the good of the country and for the entire world, we give to God what is God's so that greater justice is found and enacted through government.

Again, this conversation in Matthew 22 between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians had more to do with an attempt to entrap Jesus then it did with prioritizing allegiances. And yet, Jesus' words about what we give of ourselves—to both earthly authorities and to God has had long-lasting impacts even until today. Being good citizens and being good disciples go hand-in-hand.

So, obey the law, but use the power of your voices to uphold or change laws that guarantee justice for all. Besides what we have in our pocketbooks, it's what God wants.