

WHAT SHALL WE RENDER TO CAESAR? (2):

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Mark 12:13-17.

As we saw last time in the Lord's answer to the scribe's question (Mark 12:28-34), love for God and love for neighbour are inseparable. In our societies with an increased role for Government beyond what previous generations have known, 'Caesar' attempts to represent the interests of our neighbour across an ever broader range of issues. 'He' then instructs us how we are to love our neighbour. In effect, 'Caesar' then loves our neighbour on our behalf. Where we, as Christians, are clear that 'Caesar' is protecting the lives of others from the harm we might cause them, we can understand the rationale for the restrictions we are living with. It is to do with the Sixth Commandment and not killing people.

But because the Government, by following that understanding, has advised against, most especially, singing, we are denying, as we will see clearly in a moment, what usually we would believe God is due. This has led to people within churches and people in different churches, coming to different conclusions about what 'Caesar' is due. Some then ask if 'he' has overstepped the mark and taken away what should be given to God.

A recent Editorial in *Evangelical Times* has captured the effect of this on Pastors and Church Officers well, describing the weariness and tiredness that many are reporting. The stop-start nature of the nation's emerging from all-out lockdown has been harder to deal with than the period when the all-out lockdown prevailed. What is more, we none of us know how long this situation will go on. Indeed, as we saw last time, we are not convinced that 'Caesar' is very sure either what 'he' is expecting of 'his' citizens as there have been so many policy U-turns.

1. Caesar's rightful claims

In the trick question that the Pharisees set the Lord about the paying of taxes, the Lord masterfully set the context for what we are to render to Caesar within the bigger context of what we are to render to God. Clearly from what He taught there, the believer is required by God to render to Caesar what is due to Caesar. We are to expect of ourselves, as believers, to have an attitude of obedience toward the ruling powers as we see in Romans 13:7 and 1 Peter 2:17. We may have opinions about particular politicians or particular political parties, but we are under a God-given obligation to respect the institution of Government, as something ordained by God for the good of society. The alternative would be anarchy.

Of course, as we have seen in other sermons earlier in the pandemic, we do not follow Caesar where he requires us to clearly violate God-given commandments and mandates. It would not be my opinion that in England, the present Government is not deliberately trying to make life difficult for the evangelical church. The same restrictions apply to followers of all faiths and people in secular occupations and activities too. The church has not been singled out. That said, we do clearly recognize within the present culture, there are forces of a political nature that would be happy to muzzle the church and curtail our freedom to follow our conscience and would compel us to agree to things that conflict with the will of God.

What we must recognize is that powers that even recently have been introduced are the most significant erosion of personal liberty since the Second World War. Restrictions on our freedom of movement and freedom of assembly constitute a huge and unprecedented infringement upon our civil liberties. We must not be careless or uncritical about this. As seen in an earlier sermon, we regard these liberties as on loan to the Government but we are eager and impatient to see them returned, not only to the church, but to all citizens of the UK. The reason for this unprecedented loss of liberty is, as we understand it, the unprecedented threat that COVID-19 presents to us. That is how 'Caesar' has explained it so that we are to understand our loss of liberty, including our liberty to gather together as a local church during the all-out lockdown, and, at present, the restrictions placed upon public singing.

It is important, however, even if we concede Caesar his point, that we are vigilant and not uncritical about whether 'Caesar' is justified to impose the limitations that we, as believers, for example, are having to endure. After all, consider the exhortation to us to sing to the Lord. There are so many in Scripture. A small sample would include Psalm 89:1; Psalm 92:1-2; Psalm 95:1; and Psalm 96:1-3. There are many more.

This should be disturbing to us that 'Caesar' should require us not to render to God what He is due. Likewise it is an intrusion into our observance of the Fourth Commandment and what we would regard as its proper use in the worship of God. 'Caesar's' case is not above contradiction or scrutiny. We must not accept 'his' case as automatically right.

For example, there is a lot of controversy within scientific circles about the benefit or otherwise of wearing face masks as a way of preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Likewise, there is no clear-cut case that singing in a room like ours, which is well ventilated, constitutes a significant risk to the health of others. We might ask if the logic of the present situation would require us to stop singing and wear masks every time there was the emergence of a particularly virulent strain of flu, for example. Or indeed whether there are other behaviours we barely give a second thought to, that might significantly increase the risk of death or harm to others, such as driving to church, where if we stayed at home, we would be 'saving lives'. It is important that we are thinking actively about these issues even while we are holding ourselves obligated to follow the Government advice.

2. Our position

There is no easy answer to any of these questions. That is why we, as individuals, have come to different personal convictions and why different churches have come to different conclusions, which we can understand, even if we opt to follow a different line.

The pandemic was always going to be something that the Lord had sent upon the world, among other things, to teach us to be mature. We have to be mature in how we differ from one another and express the different opinions we have. We have to be mature in how we speak of one another, especially those who are Church Officers. They do not have an easy task.

But we should be eager for change, even if we are not able to change yet, and indeed, may not be able to do for a while yet. We should be impatient to be able to render to God what He is due. We are to be praying towards the full restoration of our liberties which are 'on loan'. We are ready to render Caesar what is his, but we are ready to be part of a challenge to him to explain himself fully where our 'love to our neighbour', as conceived by Caesar, means that the expression of our love and worship to God is stunted and below the Biblical expectation. We are not to be slavishly obedient and uncritical. But neither are we to be deliberately rebellious or overly suspicious of the intentions of Government. It requires much patience and love for one another.