



Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber, God and Government

28 January 2024

Series Introduction



Famous Last Words... 'Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub.' So said Conrad Hilton, the founder of Hilton Hotels, in response to being asked if he had any final words of wisdom.

Famous Last Words... 'Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.' So said Oscar Wilde – and then he did.

When asked if he had any last words, Karl Marx said, 'Go away – last words are for fools who have not yet said enough!'

Famous Last Words... Today we begin a new sermon series called exactly that. Though perhaps it's not really new, but rather the final instalment in what has been a series of Matthew series over the last 6 or 7 years.

And this year, in this series, we reach the end of Matthew as we work through Matthew 22-28 looking at "**Famous Last Words - the final words of Jesus in his final week.**"

In Matthew 21 we read of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on 'Palm Sunday.' This marks the beginning of what is often referred to as 'Holy Week' - Jesus' final week leading up to his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and on the third day, his resurrection.

We are picking it up a day or two into that week in Matthew 22 and the series will take us through to Easter, and 40 days later, to Jesus final, final words of the Great Commission.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem there is confrontation with the Jewish leaders and by the end of Matthew 21 they are 'looking for a way to arrest Jesus, but they were afraid of the crowd (21:46). And the confrontation with Jesus continues as we pick it up in the middle of Matthew 22.

Readings Matthew 22:15-22; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Introduction

As the final verse of the Matthew reading said, 'When they heard this, they were amazed.' And people have been amazed at Jesus wise answer ever since. It's right up there with Solomon's wise answer about the baby (1 Kings 3). And Jesus spoke of Solomon when he said, 'The Queen of the South came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.' (Matthew 12:42)



Jesus is the one greater and wiser than Solomon. So let's pray as we look at Jesus' wise answer to the trick question and what it tells us about **our relationship with Governments and with God.**

Prayer

The Trick Question

Talk about unlikely allies – the Pharisees and the Herodians (22:15).

The Pharisees were very nationalistic, very pro-Israel, but the Herodians were in with the occupying power of the Romans and with the Herods; the puppet kings.

The Pharisees represented Conservative Judaism, but the Herodians were more liberal and syncretistic.

The Pharisees resisted Rome; the Herodians accommodated Rome.

The Pharisees were religious; the Herodians were what we might call secular.

But they are drawn together by their antipathy towards Jesus. He could ruin their agendas, so their mutual hatred of Jesus leads to a wicked solidarity and they 'laid plans to trap him in his words.' (22:15)

And they've come up with a trick question. However Jesus answers, someone is going to get angry – it might be the Romans, it might be the Jews. It's classic wedge politics.

We see a lot of wedging going in politics - climate change, covid-restrictions, the Voice referendum, changes to the date of Australia Day, Stage 3 Tax Cuts - a broken promise or proper response to changing circumstances? – lots of wedging - one political party messing with the other.

And so here they accost Jesus with insincere flattery designed to disarm. 'Teacher, 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.' (22:16) It's a somewhat ironic approach because Jesus did speak truth and now he will speak the truth, as always.



So after the buttering up comes the trick question. 'Is it right to pay the imperial-tax to Caesar or not?' (22:17)

If he answers "yes" the Jews would hate him as a collaborator with the occupiers and so Jesus' popularity would wane.

If he answers "no"... well Rome had no room for political diversity and they would remove the trouble maker.

The Pharisees want him so say "yes" and the Herodians - want him to say "no" but either will do for either. They can't lose, it's a win/win! And any silence or delay on Jesus would be a disaster all round. It's the perfect wedge but weren't counting on the brilliant answer.

The Brilliant Answer #1



Jesus, knowing their evil intent [*it wouldn't have been hard!*] says, 'You hypocrites, Why are you trying to trap me?' (22:18)

And so he gives his answer, 'Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius. (22:19)



The Denarius was a small coin.

On one side was Tiberius Caesar, son of Divine Augustus.

On the other was Pompey Maximus the Roman (pagan) High Priest.

The Denarius had to be used to pay the imperial tax to the occupying Roman empire. The coin was hated because it had on it image of Caesar representing the occupying force of Roman Empire and because the Romans ascribed divinity to the emperor, it was an affront to the Jews.



They brought a denarius, and *[after what I imagine was a dramatic pause as he holds it up]* he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?' (22:19-20)

This is not a trick question. There is only one possible answer they can give: 'Caesar's' (22:21) and rather than Jesus being wedged, they are wedged.

'Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?' (22:17) was the trick question. 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's' (22:21) is the brilliant response. It's an unexpected and astounding answer. There is nothing they could say. The Sovereign whose image was on the coin owned the coin (no matter who was holding it). The wedgers are wedged. There was nothing they could do. They were amazed at him. So they left him and went away. (22:22)

It's interesting, Jesus assumes the validity of the human state, the political power, even when the ruler is pretending to be a god. The interaction of God's people with Governments needs to recognise that. It was true at the time of the Roman Empire. It was true at the time of the Babylonian exile.

That's at least part of the point of the letter that Jeremiah sent to the exiles that was in our Old Testament reading. They had to work with what they had and where they were. They had every reason to be against everything that Babylon or Rome stood for, but what does God say? 'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper' (Jeremiah 29:7).

Israel, as the people of God, existed as a geo-political nation and for much of their history the 'political' and the 'religious' aspects were intertwined. Though at times, as we have noted, the political power lies with a conquering world power.

But always for us as the New Covenant people of God, we are not a political nation. Australia is not a Christian Nation, collectively the People of Australia are not the People of God. Under the New Covenant the People of God is the church – worldwide. There is no such thing as a Christian nation and as Christians our relationship with the state is not like the internal workings of Israel at its best times. We are not to view Australia as somehow equivalent to Ancient Israel in the way we do our politics, rather we hear the word of God to the exiles in Babylon and we hear the words of Jesus in answer to the trick question.

For the church as God's New Covenant People, Jesus statement is clear: 'Give to Caesar.' There is a political environment and there is the People of God who live and work within a political environment. Jesus' statement must shape our interaction with the secular state. And it's backed up by plenty of other verses in the New Testament.

When Paul was writing to the church in Rome, Paul says, 'Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities' (Romans 13:1). And what does Paul later write to Timothy? 'Pray for kings and those in authority' (1 Timothy 2:1-2). In both cases he's talking about the Roman Empire which was not exactly pro-Christian! We do have an earthly, temporal allegiance. We are to 'give to Caesar.'

Perhaps the most obvious application from the passage is, How's your Tax Return? Are you upfront and honest in paying your taxes? We have a God-given obligation to the political state in which we live. And even if the secular state misuses or even abuses its power, it is still a valid institution and we are to give to Caesar. Even though our prime allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, here we are in a kingdom of man and we are to be a part of it.

And so we do things in our situation in contemporary Australia such as vote in elections and participate in our community. We work with the Show Committee and the Shire Council so our grounds can be used for parking for a secular event.

We are to be law-abiding citizens, regardless of what we think of the government of the day. In our democratic society as Christians we are able to have a say, to talk to our politicians, we are able to lobby, to be involved in peaceful protest – perhaps even civil disobedience – though great care is needed in doing those things and we do need to be very careful who we align with as we can get into unhelpful territory quite easily. But we should use the privileges and rights and indeed the responsibilities afforded us in our modern, liberal democratic society.

There is no perfect political party, no perfect government; no one side has a monopoly on ‘good government’ and however we get involved and whoever we may be involved with, what is clear is that we are to pray for governments and for leaders in our state and our nation.

Whatever our complaints with our political leaders, we actually have it pretty good, so keep in mind and in your prayers the Christians who live in places where the political power actively persecutes the church collectively and individual Christians. Certainly pray for ourselves, but remember, we are part of the worldwide People of God and pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ in places where it is really tough.

We are to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. It’s a brilliant answer, and it’s only the first half of the answer and the answer becomes even more brilliant.

The Brilliant Answer #2



“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”. (22:21) And that second part of the answer is really the heart of the passage, the heart of the matter – “Give to God what is God’s.”

When Jesus says, ‘Give to God’ it’s an implicit denial of Caesar’s claim to divinity and it completely subsumes everything else – “Give to God what is God’s.”

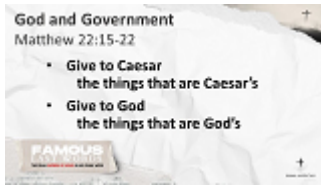
On the coin the image of Caesar was imprinted - it belongs to him, but whose image is imprinted on us? In the opening chapter of the Bible we read, “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)



The image of God – at the very least we belong to Him and we can be fairly sure that the Jewish hearers would have got the unstated play on words.

We are made with the image of God and that image has been tarnished by the fall, by the sin of Adam and Eve, by our sin, but in his grace God restores that image when we turn to him that first time in repentance and place our faith in him, trusting in Jesus and all he is done, trusting in Jesus who ‘is the perfect image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 2:15). And not only that, ‘when you believed, you were marked in Christ with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit’ (Ephesians 1:13) In the same way that the wax seal is the image of ownership.

And even more, with the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives we are to ‘take off the old self, put on the new which is being renewed in knowledge, in the image of its creator’ (Colossians 3:10). And so we are to ‘clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, forgiving one another, putting on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity’ (Colossians 3:12-14).



As we do that, as we live that out, we are giving to God, the things that are God's. And giving to God the things that are God's is really submitting to him as Lord in all things. Jesus' answer to the trick question orders and prioritises our allegiances. We are to 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's' and first and foremost we are to 'Give to God what is God's' - our time and energy, our possessions, our everything.

So how do we hold those two sides together. What happens when we cannot do both? Remember that time when Peter says, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29)? When is that point reached? Can we refuse to pay taxes because some of our taxes are used for ungodly purposes?

When did Peter and the Apostles make that statement? Where did they draw the line? It was when they had been commanded not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:19-20, 28, 40-42) and then they did it anyway.

We need to think biblically, prayerfully, thoughtfully about where the lines are to be drawn in our time.

For some Christians in the pandemic, it was a case of, 'They are telling us not to meet together but God says not to neglect meeting together (Hebrews 10:25) so we are going to obey God and not man and we are going to meet anyway.' Is that where we draw the line?

We might have had questions and concerns but it was a temporary measure in a health crisis and I think in that situation we should be seen to be obeying the government for the good of all, remembering that it was a public health order for all. It wasn't directed at Christians and churches, and in fact churches were actually given some exemptions that others were not.

So where is the line where we have to obey God rather than man? In our society at this time there are laws coming into effect in Victoria (and NSW seems to want to go the same way) that aim to limit what we can say to people and pray with people.

Is it frustrating? Yes! But where it is not in conflict with what God says, we are to obey the authorities. Indeed, we seek the best for our society so we can share the good news. There are not easy answers, so in the coming months and years we need to watch carefully and think prayerfully as these things unfold and understand where obeying man effectively means denying Christ.

As difficult as the times may be, it doesn't remove the essential clarity of what Jesus says. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Give to God the things that are God's." And as 2024 gets underway, are you giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar's? Are you giving to God the things that are God's?

Conclusion

As Christians we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, weird to the world around us, but to those whom God has called, Paul tells us, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God - our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:23, 30) So may we exercise true wisdom as we give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give to God the things that are God's.

Prayer