

**“One Nation, Under God”**  
**Luke 20:19-26 (and Romans 13:1-7) GNT**

Is anyone else stressed-out these days, or is it just me?

We all have been under tremendous strain for the past year – with the threat to our lives by a pandemic, the mounting death-toll, and the economic fallout. Pile on top of that an extremely contentious election that has divided Americans, families, and friends into camps of “us – vs – them” or even “good – vs – evil” – rhetoric that has pushed imbalanced people on both extremes of the political spectrum to resort to violence to try to impose their political will...

Because of ALL THAT – it’s likely that we all may be suffering with symptoms of PTSD- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Psychologists now recognize the impact of PTSD on soldiers when they return from war, offering them treatment, and showing them compassion and understanding. I have never been to war, but I suspect I am experiencing at least some of the symptoms. Maybe you are, too.

The prolonged anxiety and stress of war makes it very difficult for soldiers returning from combat to function in healthy ways. If they can recognize what is happening within them and seek help, they can recover. In the same way, I think it is wise for you and me to recognize that we are all emotionally and physically exhausted, and it is causing us depression and triggering us to strike out against others in ways we would never do under normal circumstances. If we can recognize that we all are suffering from a mild form of PTSD that is causing us to react to family and friends in destructive ways we never would under normal conditions, maybe we can show each other some compassion and understanding. It’s time we all took a deep breath, and cut each other a little slack.

That being said, the circumstances of the last few weeks, the coming inauguration, and the threats of violence are forcing us to reflect on what it means to be an “American.” At least, I have been wrestling with that issue.

America is going through a time of soul searching, as we as a people are grappling with “who we are” and “who we want to become.” I have been struggling with all this and have come to this conclusion: While, on the surface, our division may seem to be political, beneath the surface lies a more basic conflict-of-views about the nature of America.

America is divided on many things, but one of the basic questions that is at the root of our division seems to be: Are we a “Christian” nation (or at least one founded on Christian principles), or are we a “secular” nation, cut loose from the Judeo-Christian foundations that have defined us in the past?

One view says that America was founded by Christians, and therefore the American government must reflect Christian values and morals – or at least not discount our nation’s religious heritage. The other view says that America was founded by immigrants who fled to this country because of religious persecution and religious wars, and therefore established a secular government that would not sanction or oppress any religion. That view says that if America is going to truly be a land where religious liberty for all is guaranteed, the state must remain completely neutral when it comes to imposing religious morality and values. One view says that our Founders did not intend to create an absolute separation of church and state, the other view says that is precisely what they did.

You know, I can empathize with both views, as in some ways, both are true. But as our nation continues to try to form “a more perfect union,” we are still confronted by this contradiction in our American psyche. And, I think this tension is at the root of most of the issues that torment our culture today. What should be the relationship between religion and civil governments?

It is important to realize that 21<sup>st</sup> century America is not the only place and time that has struggled with issues like these. The relationship between religion and the state was also a hot-topic in Jesus’ day. No matter what century we live in, believers have had to reconcile the “dual citizenship” we hold – we are citizens, both of an earthly kingdom and the Kingdom of God. Sometimes those two loyalties are in harmony. At other times they are in conflict, and we might be forced to choose one over the other.

So this morning, I’d like for us to spend a few moments thinking about the dual citizenship we hold. What is the proper relationship between being a citizen of an earthly kingdom and a citizen of the Kingdom of God?

Our scripture text from Luke helps us to clarify that relationship better. But in order to understand the meaning of this passage, we have to know its context in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus’ earthly ministry was drawing to a close – the events of Holy Week were lurking ominously on the horizon. The Scribes and Pharisees, who had been monitoring Jesus’s ministry, and who felt threatened by his popularity with the people, wanted to trick him into saying something that would get him into trouble.

The 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke contains one confrontation after another between Jesus and his adversaries. Immediately before the text that was read, Jesus had told a thinly-veiled parable, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, that exposed the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Jewish Religious leaders.

There can be no doubt that the religious leaders understood the meaning of this parable, and they were not pleased with Jesus, to say the least.

So, our text this morning is just one episode of a larger dramatic confrontation – one more volley in a “battle of wits” between Jesus and his adversaries.

The Sanhedrin, who were the Roman-approved religious rulers of Israel, had sent spies to mingle with the crowds. In our text, one of these spies asks Jesus a question, pretending to be sincerely troubled about the morality of paying taxes to Caesar. The tax in question was the annual poll tax of one denarius, which was equal to an ordinary person’s daily wage. Whether or not to pay this “tribute to Caesar” was a burning question in Palestine (I imagine, today it would be an issue “trending on social media”). It was a hot-button issue that was the cause of more than one rebellion that the Romans had had to put down by force.

But, there wasn’t merely a financial question at stake. The tax wasn’t a particularly heavy burden on people. It was really quite modest, as compared to today. The real issue was this: fanatical Jews proclaimed loyalty to no king but God, and insisted that it was wrong to pay tribute to anyone but God. The question was actually a religious question – an issue for which many were willing to die.

So the Sanhedrin attempted to lay a verbal trap for Jesus, a trap which would present him with a dilemma: If he said that tribute should NOT be paid, the spies would report it to Pilate, the Roman Governor, and Jesus would be arrested for treason. If he said that taxes SHOULD be paid, that would alienate many of Jesus’ supporters who hated the Romans. It seemed to be a “no-win-situation.”

But Jesus declined to answer their question directly. Instead, he asked them for a coin. Now, in the ancient world (as in the world today) the sign of kingship rested in the power to issue currency. For instance, one hundred fifty years before Jesus, the Jewish people, led by Judas Maccabeus, were successful in revolting against the Syrians, and for the first time in centuries, the Jewish state was independent – at least until the Romans came along. What was the first thing the Maccabean rulers did when they came to power? They issued new coinage. Those in power have the right to mint currency. Furthermore, it was universally accepted that the right to issue currency carried with it the right to levy taxes.

So Jesus was given a coin, and he asked, “Whose face and name are these on it?” They answered, “The Emperor’s.” “Well then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to him, and pay to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus was saying that, if you accept Caesar’s currency, you are bound to accept Caesar’s right to impose taxes. But he was also insisting that there is a domain in which Caesar has no authority – a domain that belongs solely to God.

With this distinction, Jesus defined our dual citizenship. If we live in a nation and enjoy all its privileges, we cannot divorce ourselves from it. We are obligated to be good citizens of that country, to accept all the responsibilities of citizenship, and to respect the authority of its leaders and the laws of the land.

As Paul writes in the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans, “Everyone must obey state authorities, because no authority exists without God’s permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God. Whoever opposes the existing authority opposes what God has ordered... That is also why you pay taxes, because the authorities are working for God when they fulfill their duties.”

And Paul goes on: “Pay, then, what you owe them; pay them your personal and property taxes, and show respect and honor for them all.”

By the way, this should be a cautionary word to all of us Christians, whether conservatives or liberals – There is no place for the hateful and slanderous ways we speak of our nation’s leaders we disagree with. The Bible clearly says we should show respect as a witness to our Christian character. That means – what we post on social media, or forward through email, or discuss among friends.

It is no secret that I have strongly-held political opinions, and am often upset by the broken politics of today. In my passion, I have not always used good judgment in posting my views. I must confess to you that I have sometimes been guilty of this. So, if you have ever been offended by any of my social media posts, I apologize. I will try to do better.

That being said, there are times when we Christians, like the Prophets of old, feel compelled to speak up for the values of the Kingdom of God, even if others may not like what we say. Yes, we can certainly have opinions and criticize the policies and actions of those in authority – but insults and character assassination is not acceptable Christian behavior.

You see, there should be no better or more conscientious citizen of any nation than its Christian population. Every Christian should pay their taxes, respect those leaders who strive to govern justly and honorably, obey the laws of the land, and vote. The Scripture clearly tells us that this is our responsibility.

So, on one hand, we are to be good citizens of the kingdoms of this world. But we, as Christians, are also citizens of another Kingdom – the Kingdom of God. We must always remember that, in the life of the Christian, GOD has the last word, not the state. The voice of conscience is louder than man-made laws. As Christians, we are not simply called to be servants of the state, or blindly-loyal to any political party or leaders, but to act as its moral conscience, as well.

It is precisely BECAUSE we ARE good citizens, that we may sometimes feel compelled to resist something our government or political leaders ask of us,- or to resist certain laws because they require things which we, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, cannot in good conscience do.

The same Bible that tells believers to obey the state authorities also gives many examples of defiance of worldly powers – when the demands of earthly leaders conflicted with the commands of God. We see this several times in the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, among other places.

For example, in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts, we find the account of Peter and John standing as prisoners before the authorities. They had been commanded to stop preaching the Gospel of Jesus. This is what the scriptures record, *“So they called them back in and told them that, under no condition were they to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, ‘You yourselves judge which is right in God’s sight, to obey you or to obey God. For we cannot stop speaking of what we ourselves have seen and heard.’”*

Throughout history and in many parts of the world today, believers have had to take a stand for Jesus – often at great personal cost.

My friends, this is a timely reminder in our current situation in America and in our troubled world:

- Even in America, where we are blessed to have a government that was founded on Christian principles...
- Even in America, where the vast majority of our leaders still call themselves believers...
- Even in America, a nation that has recognized its ultimate dependence on God by placing “In God we trust,” on our currency, and “One nation, under God” in the pledge of allegiance to the flag...
- Even in America, there are moments when Christians must take a stand against certain actions of our national leaders, and policies and laws of our government that fly in the face of our Christian convictions...
- And even in America, taking a stand for God can come at a high personal price.

So, as patriotic Americans who offer thanksgiving to God for our beloved nation, we as Christians must be crystal-clear in our own minds about the relationship between our citizenship in worldly kingdoms (which come and go), and our citizenship in the Kingdom of God (which is eternal) - our loyalties to political figures and movements and our loyalty to God.

Where do YOUR ultimate loyalties lie?

Yes, we are called to be model citizens of the United States. But, when requirements of national citizenship are in conflict with the ideals of the Kingdom of God, we must always –

ALWAYS - remain loyal citizens of God's Kingdom, and resist sinful or immoral policies and laws of our country by doing our best to change them – through peaceful and legal means.

As patriotic Americans, then, let us celebrate and give thanks to God for this wonderful country in which we live. Let us do all we can to safeguard the values and noble principles that ensure our freedoms – that we might fulfill the words of the Preamble of our Constitution – striving together to “form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

But let us never forget that our ultimate loyalty as Christians is to the One God, whose laws are perfect and eternal, and whose Kingdom stretches beyond all time and space.

As citizens of that Kingdom, we look forward to that wonderful day, foretold by John in the Book of Revelation, when Jesus will reign as “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords,” a glorious vision set to music by the composer, Handel, in his wonderful oratorio, Messiah: *“The kingdom of this world – is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ... and He shall reign forever and ever.”*

So, no matter what our political preferences and views, may we set aside our differences, come together as one people, - and declare with one voice: “God Bless America,”  
– that America may always be “One Nation, UNDER God.”