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Mark 12:13-17

Gospel of Mark series: "Christian & American"

In our church, we have two flags: a Christian flag, an American flag. On this Fourth of July, we celebrate our nation and we celebrate our God. We live in the USA, and we live in the kingdom of God. We're subject to the authority of our human government; and, at the same time, we're subject to the authority of our omnipotent, sovereign God. How, exactly, does this all work?

If a person is a true believer in God, and accepts God's ultimate authority, how then does a human government also have authority over that person? How far does that authority go? Does government have the final say? Or does God? This relationship, between followers of God and their human government, has always been tricky.

It's especially tricky these days, isn't it? I've recently heard good, reputable Christian people say things like this: "I don't accept this person as my president, or my governor. I refuse to acknowledge this official's authority, or that agency's authority, over me." Do we have the right, just because we are Christians, to reject the government that's over us? How, exactly, does this tricky relationship, between followers of God and our human government, work?

No preacher on earth is going to be able to explore this complex topic fully in one sermon. But let me do two quick things in this sermon today. First, let's briefly review a few general principles the Bible lays out about how Christians are supposed to relate to their government. And, second, let's pay special attention to what Jesus says and does, when this topic is raised with him.

First, the general principles. And let me warn you, these are broad-spectrum statements. The Bible doesn't give us explicit instructions on how to handle every single situation. People in Bible days struggled with these government issues, and so will we. But these general principles from the Word are a good place to start.

1. Governments are ordained by God.

The Bible makes it clear that God works through human governments, and God puts human governments in place to keep order in the civil realm. That's not to say that every government is godly, or that God would agree with every law and court decision in our land. But, whether they are wicked or good, the Bible tells us that God has given power and authority to human governments.

2. Christians are subject to governmental authority.

The Word of God teaches us, clearly, that we are to obey the government, to submit to the authorities over us. And, I know, this can be a very bitter pill to swallow. It wasn't easy for Christians to be subject to those horrible Roman emperors back in the New Testament era. But here's what the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write to the Christian church in Rome: *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."* (Romans 13:1-2)

3. Christians practice love by obeying.

The Scriptures challenge us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to live quiet, peaceful lives; to set a good example in society; to be a light for the world; to respect and speak well of others; to pray for our human rulers and authority figures; to show love to our church family, to our neighbors, and to everyone.

We don't show the love of Christ when we insult and denigrate our political opponents, when we show contempt for the government and its authority. We practice love by obeying, the Scriptures urge.

But what about when the government commands us to do something that goes against God's Word? Do we still obey? The Bible teaches ... **4. Christians can resist with words and Word, not with force.**

There are times when a human government goes too far, when civil laws directly contradict God's commands. Remember in the book of Acts, chapter 5, when the apostles of Jesus were arrested, then commanded to stop teaching in the name of Jesus? They resisted, saying, "We must obey God rather than men." They resisted with words. They held fast to the Word of God. But they didn't revolt. They didn't organize an army. They knew God was on their side, and so they kept preaching and teaching, sharing love, spreading the Gospel.

Now could talk for hours more about all of this; but these are four general Scripture principles for people like us, who are Christians and Americans.

One more quick point to consider today. And, finally, we get to our sermon text from Mark 12. As you're wrestling with the Christian and American relationship, remember what Jesus did and said in our story.

It's just a few days before his crucifixion. Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital city, and the leaders of his nation are determined to get rid of him. They try to catch Jesus with a tricky question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or not?" See, everyone in the land hates the Romans conquerors, everyone despises Caesar,

and everyone bitterly resents the oppressive taxes they are forced to pay. They think they can get Jesus to publicly complain about the government, and then they can get him in trouble.

But Jesus knows what they're trying to do. So he answers their question in a brilliant, simple way, showing an image of Caesar inscribed on a coin. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," he tells them, "and to God the things that are God's."

See, Jesus isn't going to let anything divert him from his mission. He's not there to debate politics. His top priority isn't to kick out the Romans. Jesus has come to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world, to bring forgiveness and salvation from God to sinners. Nothing is more important than that.

Nothing, in our day and age, is more important than that. We, the church of Christ cannot let anything divert us from our mission. Our foremost priority is bringing Christ to our neighbors, and bringing our neighbors to Christ. No political stance, no personal feeling about the government, can ever get in the way of what God says is most important. Bring Christ to your neighbors, and bring your neighbors to Christ. No matter how they vote, they are sinners just like us. They are God's children, and they all need the Savior, Jesus. Ultimately, whether we have a government we like, or a government we detest, we have a job to do, in Jesus' name, a mission to carry out for God.

On this Fourth of July, we celebrate that we are Christians, and we are Americans. We have a tricky relationship, as followers of God, with our government. But we have a mission from the Lord himself that's always more important. God bless our church, God bless the work we do and the love we share in his name, and God bless our nation. Amen.