
Article XVII. Religious Liberty

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

Genesis 1:27; 2:7; Matthew 6:6-7,24; 16:26; 22:21; John 8:36; Acts 4:19-20; Romans 6:1-2; 13:1-7; Galatians 5:1,13; Philippians 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; James 4:12; 1 Peter 2:12-17; 3:11-17; 4:12-19.

(Sermon Title)

Matthew 22:15-22

Today's message is a subject I care a great deal about. In fact, I cared so deeply about it that the Lord gave me the desires of my heart and allowed me to serve as a Chaplain for 20 years serving both my God and my country, while compromising my commitment to neither.

I teach this very subject in one of my classes and approach it from an historical perspective. I love history, enjoy teaching it, but even more so, I am amazed at the way God, the beginner of history, remains actively involved in history, and looking forward to that day that He brings history to a close so that we can enter into the realm of eternity

with Him. My desire is that this would be proclamation from the scripture which is glorifying to the Lord and not one of my history lectures.

This is not to say that history is unimportant. I believe it is vital to the understanding of who we are as Southern Baptists. I believe placing the Baptist Faith and Message in a proper historical context is important, just as I believe it is imperative that we reaffirm what we believe and why. We have a long history in the efforts with regard to religious liberty. However, I would be the first to say that we should not hold to a belief simply because we have historically held to it. Nor should we reject it solely because it is a part of our past. Instead, we should search the scriptures to find what God teaches about the various doctrines and from that, find ways to apply it to our lives.

One of the supporting texts for the section on religious liberty is Matthew 22:21. I would like for us to look together at that passage, but placing it in its context. Let's begin in Matthew 22 with verse 15.

As we look at the passage from Matthew, we find that Jesus was being challenged by the Pharisees. This encounter probably took place on Tuesday during the Passion Week. The enemy had escalated attempts to find fault with Jesus and now resorts to posing a question of loyalties. I can just hear these men, clothed in their piety, sneeringly asking the question, cloaked in sarcastic flattery: "Teacher, we *know* that you are truthful and teach *truthfully* the way of God. You defer to no one, for you don't show partiality. Therefore, tell us what *you* think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" What they really were trying to do is get him to deny that Jesus' followers were obligated to pay taxes to an oppressive government. If he did so, the answer would be popular with the Jewish people, but he would be charged with disobedience to the state. If he said people were obligated to pay the unpopular tax, he would lose his popularity with the masses. Either way, they felt that he would be silenced. In fact, it was not only an unpopular tax; the Jews felt it was immoral. The Romans were pagans who elevated Caesar to the level of a god. In fact, the inscription on the coin would have read,

“Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus” on one side and “*pontifex maximus*” which Jesus would have understand as “high priest” on the other. However, Jesus answered with the wisdom that only comes from the God-man.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees really sets forth the principles that we as Southern Baptists, people of The Book, hold dear. Jesus said in effect to give to the government that which is rightfully theirs, while at the same time giving to God that which is rightfully His. This leads us to the question, what is rightfully God’s? Jesus himself gave us the answer to that.

Just a few verses after this encounter, Jesus was asked to prioritize the law into the one with the greatest importance. Jesus was very clear in this when he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment.” (Matt. 22:37-38a, NKJV). The principle involved is this:

I. God is due our total and unfailing allegiance

This quote was from both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The terms “heart,” “soul,” and “mind” mean that we are to love God with our whole person, our every faculty and capacity. We are not to allow anything to stand between our relationship with God; not our neuroses, not our work, not other people, not even our religion. Instead, we should be so totally devoted to God that our love relationship with Him is evident to the world. It should not be displayed in the form of a sickening sense of sanctimony, nor should it be acted out in a pitiful preachy piety, but should be a genuine reflection of the glory of God that only comes as a result of being in His presence. And I assure you, when we have been in the presence of the Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, our faces may not shine like Moses, but our hearts will absolutely radiate the love of the same I Am who spoke us into existence to begin with.

Jesus’ response is not some witty way of getting out of a predicament. Instead, it shows its full awareness of a major development in redemption history. Jesus does *not* side with the Zealots or with any who expected his messiahship to bring instant political independence from Rome. The messianic community he established must render to

whatever Caesar is in power whatever belongs to him, while never turning from our obligations to God. I realize that Jesus' statement is not a religious statute that resolves every conceivable issue. Where Caesar claims what is God's, the claims of God have priority. Still it does lay down the basis for the proper relationship of God's people to government.

One problem that many people face is the tendency to try to separate their Christian life from the rest of their lives. When I began taking classes at Florida State, I took a class in the Religion Department. The professor had a Ph.D. in religion from a university in Virginia. She had asked us each to tell something about ourselves, such as where we had studied and what, as well as what our vocational interests were. After we had all introduced ourselves, I asked her to tell us something about herself. After she gave her academic credentials, I asked her about her religious background. This person who had a Ph.D. in religion stated that she was still uncertain about her religious beliefs, then wanted to know why I was asking. I told her that since this was a Bioethics class being taught by the religion department I was wondering how her religious beliefs influenced her work in bioethics. Her reply was, "I am pretty good at separating my religious beliefs from my work so that one doesn't interfere with the other." Please understand that for the Christian it means that our religious beliefs cannot be removed from any area of our lives, whether it is work, play, conversation or any other area of life.

If we give our heart, mind, and soul to God, it allows us to fulfill our obligations to everything else out of a sense of sacrifice for the other, not selfishness. Remember that this is all part of the redemption story. God sacrificed His rightful place in glory in order to live among us, knowing that it would also require Him to sacrifice even his own life on the cross. This is the same attitude and heart that we are to have toward others. If we are to give God all that we have, we must take on the mind of Christ.

Paul reminded us that we are not to be conformed to the world, but we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. In other words, we are to think and live the way Christ thinks and lived among us. We can do this only through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. When we live for God, we do so with a sense of service to

others, even to the state. But in living a life of service, it also leads us to a life of sacrifice.

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that God is the one to whom we give our undivided allegiance. Even more so, we should be firm in our hearts and in our minds that we have been purchased by the blood of Jesus, the unblemished Lamb of God. We should be so firmly committed to this that we are willing to endure any hardship, pay any price, even give up our lives for the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is not only our obligation, as Southern Baptists it is part of our history.

In 1651, John Clarke and Obadiah Holmes were arrested for the crime of holding religious services. They were taken before the constable and fined, Clarke in the amount of 20 pounds and Holmes for 30 pounds. Should they fail to pay, they were to be whipped. Clarke's fine was paid by a friend and he was released, but Holmes refused and chose to be whipped instead. All of this was for the crime of preaching the gospel and for the denial of infant baptism. Yes, religious liberty is something dear to us, but not nearly as dear as the undiluted gospel message which must be proclaimed to a lost and dying world. But let's move on.

II. A free church and a free state each protect the other.

This would have been a shift in thought for Jesus' audience, because paganism usually insisted on the unity of what we would think of as our civic and religious responsibilities. History is filled with examples of the struggle for power, even when there has been an established state religion. The book of Romans reminds us that we have the duty as Christians to be obedient to those in authority over us, because God has placed them in those very positions. But the role of government is intended to act on behalf of its citizens, not restrict their liberties. If it is the role of government to protect its people, that same government must be active in protecting people's right to worship in accordance with their own conscience.

When God brought His people out of bondage in Egypt, he gave them the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. He knew that in order for His people to safely live with each other, they needed to have rules and guidelines to keep them from harming each other.

But he placed the laws at the beginning that we are first to maintain a proper relationship with God. This would enable us to maintain a right relationship with others. However, we also realize that there are those in our society who do not follow the laws of God, so He placed rulers over us to govern all of society, not just the people of God. The purpose of government is to protect its citizens, not act in a way that would harm them.

When I joined the Navy, I went to Chaplain School in Newport, Rhode Island. In fact, that is where I first met Mr. Parker. One interesting thing about the Chaplain Corps was its motto, "Cooperation without Compromise." The point of the motto was that all chaplains were to work together in a pluralistic environment without anyone being required to compromise his or her conviction. Some chaplains were more successful than others. Some remained true to their convictions, but it appeared that the concept of cooperation with others was one that was completely foreign to them. Others, however, were so good at compromising that it looked like they had no convictions at all. One person I knew, not only compromised his religious beliefs, he compromised his morality and integrity. It ultimately destroyed his marriage, his ministry and more areas of his life than you can imagine. You need to know this because the world will constantly ask you to compromise your relationship with God, the gospel message and anything else it can. Hold fast! Work with others, but never compromise what you believe, even for the government.

When government tries to interfere in the relationships between God and man, it cannot be successful. We must recognize that a relationship with God is something that no laws or government can regulate. Instead, it is the working of the Holy Spirit within our hearts that leads us to Him. However, we also realize that God has instilled in each of us a free will that will either accept His plan for our lives or reject it. The government cannot possibly control that. In order to have a productive and healthy society the people must be allowed to worship free of interference from the government. But the government must also be free to act on behalf of its citizens without interference from any religious group or institution. Just as the state should act to protect the rights of the

individual to act and believe as God leads him, the church has the responsibility to ensure that the state is free to act in areas that God has placed in its charge.

When the church begins raising its own army, you end up with people going on Crusades, committing atrocities in the name of religion. This does not glorify God. That is not to say that we should remove ourselves from civic involvement. On the contrary. We are to be involved as loyal and faithful citizens, but we should ensure that the operation of the government and the worship of God remain distinct and different. Jesus required his followers to be obedient to both God and the state.

So, what do we do when the government requires actions of its citizens which are clearly in violation of God's commands? This leads us to the third principle: III. Obedience to God requires obedience to the state insofar as it does not violate our allegiance to God. However, we must be careful not to try to twist our own wishes and desires to appear to be what God wants. None of us are particularly eager to pay taxes, and it is easy to find fault with the way our tax dollars are spent. We see instances of government waste, fraud, and abuse of power and privilege. It is done on a large and grand scale. However, how eager would any pastor or other minister be to invite the scrutiny of our church members into our personal finances, in order to adequately evaluate how we spend the tithe that God's people give which pay our salaries? I know that I don't particularly want anyone to question how I spend my money or to look at my finances. But when the government misspends our funds, it is not necessarily a clear violation of God's will.

But we should remember that misspending of funds is not necessarily evil in itself. Keep in mind that Jesus' listeners were Jews, descended from those who had been taken into captivity in Babylon. They had the view, I believe correctly, that God uses governments sometimes to punish his chosen people for their disobedience to Him. He used the Assyrians to bring judgment on the nation of Israel and the Babylonians to punish the nation of Judah. He used the Persians to return them to their land of inheritance and even to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. The God who directs history uses governments to accomplish His divine will.

However, when we are required to directly perform acts that are in violation of God's word, we are commanded to follow God's will, even at the risk of loss of employment, imprisonment or death. In the 1990s, the President of the United States was going to attempt to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military. Some of you may be too young to remember this, but it caused such a furor among the active duty members that it was never done. Instead the "don't ask, don't tell" policy was brought in. During this time of controversy, however, many chaplains were afraid that restriction would be placed upon them which would prohibit them from speaking out against the sin of homosexuality. I was stationed in Okinawa at the time and I can remember someone asking me if I would preach against that sin specifically. I responded that I actually go farther than that; I preach against *any* sex outside of marriage.

I can tell you this, though; no government has the power or authority to silence the Word of God. We can call it politically incorrect, unpopular, and anything else we choose, but we will never silence God's word from being proclaimed. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey the people cried, "Hosanna! Save us!" When Jesus was told to silence the people, Jesus responded that if they were silenced, the very rocks would cry out! God's work will never be silenced as long as there are people crying out for salvation. And I tell you; even should they quit asking for salvation, we cannot cease to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. We have no greater calling, no greater command, and no greater mandate. As long as we have breath, until our tongues are stilled in death, even though any government or power try to silence us, let us proclaim Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, sinless, giving his life on a cross for our sins, buried, resurrected and coming again!

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