

18th October 2020 6pm How involved should Christians be in Society?

Service led by Val Whiteman and Felicity Hawke, Sermon by Val Whiteman

Bible readings by Felicity Hawke and Geoff Whiteman. Prayers by Felicity Hawke

This transcript is only of the readings and the sermon.

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1 [NIV 1984]

[Felicity:]

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **3** We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6** You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **7** And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8** The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, **9** for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22 [NIVUSA]

[Geoff Whiteman:]

Payng the Imperial tax to Caesar

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “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. **17** Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?”

19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Sermon

[Val Whiteman:]

Thank you, Geoff.

The title of the talk today is 'How Involved Should Christians Be In Society?' And I think, you know, given the COVID situation, we'd all answer, "Well, we'd really like to be very involved in society at the moment and we're not and we can't be." So if we're looking at this story that Geoff just read to us, I think it's a wonderful story and it's so clever. And I expect we all know about the setup. Jesus is being challenged by two different groups, the Herodians, who didn't mind paying the taxes to the Romans, and the Pharisees, who did. And they thought of this brilliant way to trap Jesus into showing His views, which would mean He would alienate at least one part of the Jewish nation whatever He said, because if He said 'yes' to taxes, He would offend most of the Jews, who hated Roman rule. And if He said 'no', He'd run the risk of getting arrested as a troublemaker. So it was a really clever trap, except that Jesus has no trouble, as we heard, in dealing with all their schemes, and He makes it clear that He knows exactly what they're up to. And His answer is really clever and really ambiguous.

What does He mean - "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's?" I expect like you I've heard quite a lot of explanations for this over my time in sermons and various things. The most extreme I remember was from Richard Wurmbbrand. I don't know whether... (probably you have to be quite old to remember him at all¹) but he was a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned by the communist state in the 70s, and we met him when he came over to meet a friend of ours while we were at university. He said, and he spoke from the knowledge of a very repressive regime that had imprisoned and tortured him, "What do dictators deserve from us? A kick up the backside! No more, no less. And that's what you can interpret Jesus is saying." I'm not sure I go along with that entirely. But you have to remember that for Jesus, He was in an occupied country: the Romans were not kindly towards people who wanted freedom, and certainly not understanding of Jewish people who weren't going to acknowledge Caesar as lord. You note in the story that Jesus has to ask for a denarius. So he's not exactly made of money: He has to ask somebody else to give it to Him. He is so poor in worldly goods, in money, that He doesn't possess one, one assumes. God who makes absolutely everything doesn't have the economic clout to pay the taxes for Himself. Do you remember that really odd story in Matthew 17², where Peter asks Jesus whether they had to pay the temple tax or tax to the Romans, and Jesus told him to go and fish, and he'd find a coin fish with a coin in its mouth, which he should use to pay the taxes for Jesus and for himself. Jesus makes the point in that story that the children of God should be exempt. But because He doesn't want to cause offence, He would pay the tax.

In *this* case, Jesus has a coin given to Him. And on the coin is the head of Caesar (I have to say this is actually a very innocuous George III coin so it has got stuff written on it but it doesn't say what it did around Caesar's coins). It would be a coin denarius minted with the words around it, which would suggest that Tiberius, the Caesar at the time, was related by Augustus his father to the gods, because Augustus was deified when he died. Roman emperors after Augustus were quite routinely deified. Not all took it as seriously as possibly Augustus did. You remember that Vespasian allegedly said on his deathbed, "Deary me! I think I'm becoming a god!" It was



1 Born 1909, died 2001

2 Verses 24-27

handy to link religion with state power. After all, if your leader was a god you worshipped Him and you didn't question where the power came from. That would be wrong.

So political and religious power were entwined in Rome, which is why Christians got into such trouble in the early Church. They were absolutely model citizens, apart from their refusal to acknowledge the Emperor as God. Jesus here appears to be saying, "If you profit from the Roman state, that is, you use their roads, you are well-governed, you keep their laws and their laws keep you safe, if you benefit from all of that, then it's right you should pay the taxes. However, just as the coin is stamped with its image of Caesar, so all human beings are stamped with the image of God. So we pay back to God what belongs to Him, namely ourselves." And I think that clarifies it a bit.

In the Thessalonians passage. Paul holds the church there as a model of what witnesses to Jesus should be. They're known throughout the area as being wholeheartedly for God, even under persecution. They grow in faith and knowledge as they proclaim the Word of God to people around them, and they don't compromise with the world, but they work to ensure that everyone knows how they can be saved. You remember that there's this division between the world and the Church, the world and spirits, which grew over time. And extremely, people would completely divide them and have nothing whatsoever to do with the world, and try to live outside it, as it were, simply in the spiritual realm. I don't think Jesus or Paul is saying anything like that at all. Jesus says, If you benefit from the state, you give back to the state: that is right and proper, but what you don't do is give *yourself* to the state because that belongs to God.

So, what do we do? Well, very little at the moment, and we can't, can we? But we are very privileged to live in a prosperous country, even with the difficulties that COVID brings. We're privileged to be able to pay taxes too, and I know that might not sound too popular, but for me it's a really amazing thing that I earn enough to be able to pay taxes, so that those who are not as fortunate as I am can be helped. Because we have a duty, according to Jesus, to bring our talents and our money to ensure that we continue to be rightly governed. We don't live under a dictatorship, we don't live under occupation, we vote for our government, and many of the reasons that we have such a liberal democracy is because of the Christian faith we adhere to. We must pray that we continue to be rightly governed. We need to stand up for the right, and make sure, where there's a conflict between us as Christians, and the government, then we *do* stand up for rights as we see it, not being swayed by current thinking. And I'm not saying exactly (because I haven't got time) what those rights might be, where you'd make a dividing line. I think we get caught up sometimes in the moral aspects of faith. Well, what Jesus is actually saying is that as God's children, we must be concerned to become like Him, because we are made, and we continue to become being made, in His image. That's the focus. Jesus gave up His life for us. And we do the same for our brothers and sisters, some of whom don't know God yet. Do you remember in 1 John 3:16 it says,

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

What we don't do is sit in judgement on them. So, principally we worry about ourselves and our relationship with God, and the amazing privilege we have of being stamped clear-through with the image of God. So we have a duty to be model citizens of our country, to encourage good governance, to play our parts, but not to the extent that we forget our allegiance to God, who made us, by His grace, makes us citizens of His Kingdom.
Amen.

Can we spend a moment just thinking about some of the things I've said, whether you agree with them or not, get it straight in your head what you think God is saying to you about how you should live.

[pause]

[Felicity:]

Thank you, Val, for those thought-provoking words. We'll take those into the coming week, I think. It's not always easy, is it, to decide where our loyalties should lie and how we should react to things that we don't agree with.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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