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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Jerusalem Tea Party

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 12, 2012

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In support of our goal for 2012 of reading through the New Testament, the pastors of this church will regularly be selecting a passage from the daily reading guide for that week to use as our primary text on a Sunday morning. Today we'll be looking at an interesting incident that many of us have just read, and we will be considering its broader meaning to our civic and personal lives.

*Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him (Jesus) in his words. <sup>16</sup>They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup>Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

*<sup>18</sup>But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, <sup>20</sup>and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"*

*<sup>21</sup>"Caesar's," they replied.*

*Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

*<sup>22</sup>When they heard this they were amazed. So they left him and went away.*

*Matthew 22:15-22  
New International Version*

## **American Tea Parties**

The Boston Tea Party of 1773 was a grassroots protest movement that developed among the taxpayers, citizens and business community of New England. It culminated in a late-night action that the Pentagon would today label a “covert op,” as cases of just-arrived tea that were to be loaded with a heavy excise tax were split open and dumped in Boston Harbor. The action, though of minor economic impact, became a great symbolic expression of the frustration people feel about having to pay onerous taxes. And the broader issue of its time was the abuse of power and control by the government (namely, the British Parliament). The American colonists were trying to say, “Enough is enough!” The ultimate result was, of course, a dramatic and history-changing revolution.

The American Tea Party movement of 2009 was another grassroots protest movement, one that openly claimed the Bostonian protests of over two centuries earlier as their ideological ancestors. It expressed itself in rallies and speeches, conventions and candidate endorsements across the country. Though it often focused on federal and local tax codes, its much broader issues were government spending, runaway deficits from local to national levels, and concern about the growth of the power and scope of government. Its ultimate impact is yet to be determined, though many observers credit the Tea Party for a change in the control of the lower house of Congress in the 2010 elections.

## **An Attempted Ambush**

The incident in our Scripture for today I will label the “Jerusalem Tea Party” because, once again, we see some people upset about taxes and government control. And since Jesus of Nazareth was by far the most prominent public figure of His day, both immensely popular and immensely polarizing and divisive—with many people worshiping Him and many others hating Him and threatened by Him—it’s not at all surprising that we find an attempt to suck Jesus into that hot-button, politically-radioactive issue of taxes.

But unlike the two American Tea Parties, this particular confrontation was triggered by the ruling elite, not by a grassroots populist movement. The politicians actually were trying to set Jesus up for a

smear job to destroy Him. And it was clearly a bipartisan effort, as we are told the “Pharisee” party invited their opponents the “Herodian” party to join them in their attempted ambush.

Many of you have watched one or more of the seemingly-endless televised debates of presidential candidates. We have more to come, not only in the primary campaign but in the general election. Whether or not these things actually help us decide who will be the best president, they certainly have become a news media circus. The “questioners” (who usually have an obvious bias or angle) continually try to trick or trip up the candidates, hoping to bait them (like raw meat sitting inside an open bear trap) into saying something that will prove to be an embarrassing sound bite for the next couple days of news cycle. In my mind it’s pretty shameful and unhelpful. But journalists and rival politicians seem to be caught up in this pursuit of the game of “Gotcha,” hoping to catch someone in a gaffe or mistake.

That’s exactly what’s going on in Matthew 22. The politicians, knowing that the Roman government has allowed the tax burden on the Jewish citizens to swell to excessive levels, and that the people are angry and fed up with taxes, are hoping to sink the Jesus ship by tricking Him into a verbal gaffe. They are hoping that He will either come out “pro-tax,” which they will use against Him in a public campaign; or that he will be “anti-tax,” which will be a chargeable offense they can take before the Roman Governor Pilate. It’s a clever trap. But it doesn’t work, because their Adversary is even more clever. In a response that is now legendary and even timeless, Jesus looked at the face of Caesar on the coin and said, “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.*” The next verse says that His inquisitors were left “amazed” (or we could say “stunned,” or even “speechless”), and the debate was instantly over.

### **God and Government: New Testament Insights**

Not only did Jesus avoid falling into the baited trap, He also gave an intriguing and thought-provoking redefinition of the debate. And for nearly 2000 years Christians have been trying to figure out the meaning of “giving to Caesar and to God” what each is due. But verse 21 of our

text does not provide the full answer. That is for us, in each country and each successive generation and era, to wrestle with and decide. It's a hot issue down to our own time: What is the relationship between the State and the Church, between our loyalty to the civil powers and authorities over us and our loyalty to God's Word and His Kingdom?

Other portions of the New Testament, which we will encounter in our reading throughout this year, add further insights to this challenging and tricky issue of God and Government.

In Romans 13 the Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says this: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities ... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes." Those who are extreme libertarians have a hard time with this portion of scripture, because clearly there is a proper role for civil government—and Christians are to be obedient and supportive of lawful and just authority.

In Acts chapter 5, we find the Apostle Peter—threatened by the same Pharisees who tried to eliminate Jesus and ordered by them not to proclaim His resurrection—defiantly saying, "We must obey God rather than men." This statement makes it clear there are times when governments will misuse their powers and act contrary to God's principles—and that when they do so, they must be opposed out of obedience to God. This was a strong motivator for the American revolutionaries who recognized tyrannical abuse of power by the English king.

Throughout the Book of Acts and the letters of the Apostles we find that the paranoid government of the Roman Caesar persecuted and threatened the first generation of Christians, claiming they were disloyal to the state because they refused to worship the Emperor. Christians proclaimed that Jesus was their Lord, and that no human being could ever receive their final allegiance over Him. (History tells us this is what resulted in the apostles Paul and Peter being executed and John being exiled.) The courage and martyrdom of those first he-

roes of our faith makes it clear that any time government tries to restrict our faith and conscience, we must oppose it even at our own risk.

The Apostle Peter in his first letter makes it clear that Christians, in spite of the lies of their opponents, actually were the best of citizens in all nations. He commands us to “show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

The priority of values given to us: (1) God is our final authority, whom we “fear” as being the ultimate Power, the final Judge, and the Lord of our hearts; (2) the church and its leaders we submit to willingly and mutually out of “love”; and (3) the secular state we “honor” and obey to the extent that it doesn’t interfere with **our higher loyalties** to God and His Kingdom or Church.

### **God and Government: An Ongoing Challenge**

The complex issues of an individual Christian and the Church’s relationship to the civil government is a complex and constantly-challenging one. Through nearly 2000 years people have struggled to find the right balance. In the waning days of the Roman Empire, St. Augustine wrote the classic early study of a Christian approach to government called *The City of God*, in which he spells out basic principles for both the Church (“The City of God,” in his terminology) and the State (“The City of Man”).

Throughout European history we find the pendulum swinging back and forth: at times the Church, through popes and their armies, tried to control the State; at times the State (through kings and empires) tried to control the Church. Both extremes led to disaster and conflict. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the English Reformation was about a King (Henry VIII) wanting to control the Church; the Scottish Reformation that I talked about two weeks ago (*Adopting a Heritage*, January 29, 2012) was about the Church refusing to bow to the King.

In American history we saw the Massachusetts Bay Colony impose a Church control over the State, and then Rhode Island was formed as a reaction—putting restrictions on the Church. The First Amendment

was all about protecting the Church from State interference (as the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision reaffirmed last month, blocking the attempts of an overreaching government that was trying to restrict the freedom of churches to choose their leaders). Back and forth the tug-of-war has gone. Finding that mid-point that satisfies the teachings of scripture and protects the rights and interests of both believers and unbelievers has never been easy.

Some secular-minded people will quote (quite out of context) a private letter by Thomas Jefferson referring to a “wall of separation” between Church and State. They will imply that these words are constitutional, the “law of the land,” when they are not. And they will imply that any Christian who speaks of his or her values and faith in their public life is somehow violating the essence of American freedom. But Jefferson was not the “apostle of secularism” that some would claim him to be. During his presidency, the largest-attended Christian worship service in the District of Columbia was held in the Capitol building each Sunday, and Jefferson was in attendance each week.

The “wall of separation” (and the more precise wording of the First Amendment) is a wall meant to keep the government from encroaching upon the freedom of all people to worship, to believe or not believe as they choose, and to express their beliefs in the public square without fear or intimidation.

### **Christians and Politics**

Should churches be openly involved in politics? Should pastors endorse and pressure their church members to vote for a particular party or candidate? Some in the news media have criticized Christians for not being a more organized voting bloc. When the leaders of some spiritually-focused organizations met early in the primary season and couldn't agree on a single candidate for the Republican nomination, a CNN reporter ridiculed them on-air: “The Evangelical Christians clearly are a disorganized group, and they have lost their influence.” That is exactly what we might expect to be the thinking of people who do not understand the Biblical perspective, and who believe that the “City of Man” or governmental power is all that matters.

But thoughtful Christians through the ages have recognized the dangers lurking within secular political involvement. If the Church as a Church becomes too enmeshed in government, it risks being corrupted—as we have seen repeatedly. Christians cannot risk being compromised or turning their focus away from their highest calling and deepest spiritual values and loyalties.

A most brilliant and thoughtful observer of the unique experiment in American democracy was a Frenchman named Alexis de Tocqueville, who early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to our young country and studied it. In his remarkable two-volume book *Democracy in America* he put his finger on our political, moral and spiritual pulse. Regarding the role of the Church in politics, here is what de Tocqueville had to say:

If the Americans, who change their head of state every four years and their legislators every two years, had not placed their religion outside of government, what could it hold onto in the ebb and flow of human opinions? In the midst of the parties' struggles, faith would lose its place. In Europe, Christianity has permitted itself to be intimately united with the powers of the earth. Today these powers are falling and it is almost buried under the debris.

His warning to us: no matter how much we want to see our values expressed in our government, we must not form a “Christian Party.” For if we did so, we would lose our most important role in a democratic society. And though we might win some elections, we would lose others. And the message of Christ that is for all people and stands above all people, liberals and conservatives, young and old, blue and red, would be cheapened and narrowed by becoming partisan.

### **Our Highest Loyalty**

A friend of mine was pastor for a number of years of a congregation in Washington, D.C. Seated in his pews every Sunday were congressmen and women, cabinet officers, diplomats and government bureaucrats of both parties. We talked once about what this unique calling was like for him.

What was most helpful to me in talking with my friend was to hear from him insights about the place of worship in a highly-charged political environment. He took very seriously his role of a pastor who intentionally stayed out of the partisan mud. Each Sunday, as he saw people who had been locked in combat over political issues throughout the week sprinkled through the pews, he knew that the time of worship on God's Turf of the Church (not man's church of money and power) was the one place where they could gather as equals, as brothers and sisters, and where they could lift their eyes together to a common authority (the Scriptures) and a Higher Power even than the U.S. Government (the King and Emperor of the Universe). That is the greatest calling of the Church: to help and challenge us all to "give to God the things that are God's."

When we go into a voting booth, when we serve in our community (or our state or our nation), when we perform our jobs (in private business or a medical office or a law court or a classroom), and when we carry out our volunteer tasks, we do all of that as followers of Jesus Christ. We take our values and our highest loyalty with us. And not only do we honor God by trying to be consistent and faithful in our actions, we are also providing the greatest service we can to our fellow citizens. We "give to Caesar what is Caesar's" because our Lord has told us to. But we never forget Who is Number One in our mind and heart and loyalty. ■

*For those who wish to do personal reading and study in the area of the relationship between church and state, Pastor Pratt recommends the following books:*

**American Gospel**, by Jon Meacham, Random House, 2006

Meacham is an experienced journalist, a committed Christian, generally left-of-center in American politics, who has written an accurate summary of the faith of the Founding Fathers and politicians since then, summarizing the general consensus of freedom for both believers and unbelievers.

**The Sky Is Not Falling**, by Charles Colson, Worthy Publishing, 2011

Colson is a former White House Counsel and founder of Prison Fellowship, a committed Christian, generally right-of-center in American politics, who has written a number of essays on the current (21<sup>st</sup> century) status of faith and culture in America, summarizing the role of the Church in an increasingly secular era.



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