

July 3, 2016
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THE KING AND I
Matthew 22:15-22

I have seen the closing scene from *Saving Private Ryan* many times, but every time I see it I get choked up and tears start clouding my vision. I can't understand why that scene affects me that way. What am I so sentimental about? Why does it still affect me after seeing it so many times? It makes no sense, but it is consistent. I confess I am ridiculously sentimental. Part of my sentimentality is that I have a wide patriotic streak that runs deep in me. I get misty eyed when I see those scenes of a member of our military returning home and surprising his family. I have what is probably exaggerated pride in our son-in-law, Michael. He is a noble and good man who has faithfully served his country as a Marine, even to the point of serving in Afghanistan during combat there. I have to restrain myself from continually boasting about what a hero he is. We have a flag out on our house this weekend, and I love what that flag stands for. If we watch any of the Olympics later this year I can guarantee I will be proud when they raise the Stars and Stripes during a medal ceremony. I deeply love America and all that it has stood for.

Tomorrow we celebrate our nation's declaration of independence on July 4, 1776, now 240 years ago. Sadly, I fear that while it will be nice to have a holiday, I will not feel quite the same about the day as I once did. I recently saw a program on ESPN about a major league baseball game that was played on the evening of May 1, 2011. The players reported that during the game they began to sense that something very unusual was happening in the stands. There was some crowd noise that was different and seemed unrelated to the game. Soon the crowd began chanting "USA, USA!" Unbeknownst to the players President Obama had just informed the nation that a US Special Forces team had killed Osama bin Laden. For a brief moment our nation was galvanized and united. People rejoiced and were proud of America. Laurie and I saw a video of a group called Anthem Lights, 4 guys with great voices singing a medley of patriotic songs. It was beautiful and stirring. The most powerful part for me was when they sang, "I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free. And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me. And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today. Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land. God bless the USA." I wish I could feel that as I have most of my life, but it is getting hard to hang onto it, and our current presidential campaign isn't helping.

I have recently been feeling increasingly estranged, alienated from the nation I have loved and believed in all my life. It's not that I am abandoning my feelings for our country, but that it is though our country is abandoning me. Our nation has never been a truly Christian nation if you define that as a country made up mostly of true followers of Jesus. Neither are we God's chosen people. However, we are a unique nation that has experienced God's blessing in abundance. While we may not be a Christian nation, the country was most definitely built on a foundation of biblical truth. What we believe and have stood for is derived from the Bible.

In 1776 as the Continental Congress was discussing and debating what the American colonies should do about the escalating problems with Britain they called for a day of fasting and prayer throughout the colonies on May 17, during which all should pray that they might "through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, obtain (God's) pardon and his forgiveness." One of the British Crown Governors wrote in the time leading up to the Revolutionary War that up and down the length of America could be heard the cry, "No king but Jesus." The first thing George Washington did after being inaugurated as the nation's initial president was to kneel down and kiss the Bible as a symbol of his submission to God and his truth. Our second President, John Adams, said, "Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other. For democracy to work, the majority of people have to be religious and moral at their core, or it falls apart." In the chamber of the House of Representatives in the Capitol building behind the speaker's rostrum are inscribed in gold the words, "In God We Trust." President Andrew Jackson said, "The Bible is the rock upon which our republic rests."

The Declaration of Independence contains words that, at that time, were like a thunderbolt. All men are created equal. It is hard for us today to comprehend how radical that idea was back then. Before they wrote those immortal words most people did not think that was true. Kings and nobles were far above common people. They were equal in no sense. People were born into classes, and their class determined their worth. But the wise men who wrote the Declaration were applying the implications of biblical truth. If all men are created in the image of God, if Jesus Christ died for all people, then they are all equal in value. That idea, along with the idea that each life is sacred to God, is rooted firmly in the truth of the Bible. Without Christ dying for us, without the truth of being created in the image of God it is not self evident that all people are created equal. Shortly after the American Revolution the French had a revolution of their own based not on biblical truth and the brotherhood of Christ but on what they called the brotherhood of man, an idea derived from French philosophers that left Christ out of the picture.

Do you know what that produced? It resulted in violence and carnage that horrified the world. Furthermore it failed, for within a generation the French were once again ruled by a dictator.

This foundation of Christian truth was the heritage that I have always felt such a strong bond to, but recently I have become more and more aware that our nation is throwing that heritage away. It is cutting loose its moorings to our historical foundation. This is true of both our political foundation and our moral and religious foundations. You may have heard about the controversy that blew up a few years ago at a high school in Massachusetts because the school board removed the pledge of allegiance from classes and would not allow American flags to be displayed in classrooms. Laurie had a conversation with a friend recently in which the Constitution came up. When Laurie talked about how it is the anchor of our nation the woman said, "That was written a long time ago. People change." In other words, it is outdated, and we need something new and different. Maybe you heard about the publishing house that not long ago put out a book that consisted of our founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It came with a warning label that read, "this book is a product of its time and does not reflect the same values as it would if it were written today. Parents might wish to discuss with their children how views on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and interpersonal relations have changed since this book was written before allowing them to read this classic work."

Oh, yes, we must educate them before allowing them to read this insidious work. If we do not prepare them they might easily have their young, impressionable minds impacted, and like the little boy who blurted out that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes, say, "Hey, what we have today doesn't look anything like this." Free speech, guaranteed by our constitution, has been for all intents and purposes, banned on many of our college campuses.

In the moral and religious arena it is even worse. Perhaps you heard that the Miss America organization suspended Destiny Velez, Miss Puerto Rico last year, because in response to movie propagandist Michael Moore, she tweeted comments that Muslims are the ones who are behind all the terrorist attacks and the God of Islam is not the God of Jews and Christians. Oooh, you can't say that. Forget freedom of speech. But what is interesting is in an interview in *Vogue* magazine recently actress Jennifer Lawrence ranted against Christians, talking about "all those people holding crucifixes, which might as well be pitchforks." Do you know what happened to her? Nothing. It is fine to attack Christians, but don't say anything critical of anyone else, including Islamic jihadis.

Last year a woman named Yvette Cormier was at the Planet Fitness gym in Midland, Michigan when she encountered what was obviously a man in the women's locker room. This person had all the physical parts of a man. She went to the front desk and complained about this. They did nothing. So she called the corporate headquarters. The next day her membership at the gym was revoked because she was intolerant of that man who felt he was a woman. Not long ago a school board in Cape Cod ruled that one of their schools must give out free condoms to students without notifying their parents. *It was an elementary school!*

Is this what the forefathers of our nation put their lives on the line and fought for? Is this what they envisioned? Is this what so many men stormed the beaches of Normandy to protect? Is this what our son-in-law, Michael, had to go to Afghanistan to keep safe? John Adams, that brilliant forefather of our nation, said that unless a people is moral and religious at its core, the whole project of democracy will fall apart. We have been living on borrowed capital, the spiritual capital of people who did have morality and faith at their core. But that capital appears to be running out, and if so we will be left with a democracy, a nation, that is unraveling. Perhaps in his grace God will step in and turn our people back to their roots. But as of now our nation is on a trajectory that is disturbing at best. And the velocity at which it is following that trajectory is increasing exponentially. What are we to do? How are we to think about our nation? For instruction let's look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:15-22.

JESUS' OPPONENTS TRIED TO TRAP HIM

All factions of the leaders of Israel were not buying what Jesus had to say. They weren't listening to him nor were they paying attention to his works and what their own doctrine said about such works. Jesus was a threat to their power structure, so he had to go. So they made repeated efforts to discredit him in public. They bring him a woman who had undeniably committed adultery and asked if they should stone her like the Law of Moses said. Jesus would either have to take an extremely unpopular hard stand and advocate killing her, a stand that would also get him in trouble with the Romans, or advocate disobeying the Law of Moses. It was a lose-lose situation for him. At least it seemed that way until he said, "Let him who is without sin throw the first rock." Oops. What do you do with that? You walk away defeated. But you don't give up. You lost one battle, but the war goes on.

This passage is another battle in the same war. It is another trap. The Romans levied several taxes on the Jewish people, but the one in question here was the most hated. The Romans actually quit taxing their own people at home and relied

on taxes raised from territories they conquered and occupied, like Israel. The tax in question in this passage was specifically used to run their administration and maintain their occupation forces. In other words, they taxed conquered people like the Jews then used their own money to oppress them. That makes me think of the IRS. They say it takes the average taxpayer 13 hours to fill out and file his tax forms. The Bureau of Labor says that the average wage is about \$30 per hour. That means that we have to spend a day and a half which is worth an average of almost \$400 plus expenses such as tax software or an accountant just to have the privilege of paying taxes. We have to do onerous work and pay money to be allowed to pay taxes. Doesn't that seem wrong to anybody besides me? It's kind of like Disney saying, "Well, we'll let you ride on this Teacup ride that will make you sick and ruin your day, but first you have to pay us a bunch of money then you have to stand in a long line for the privilege. It's just wrong.

The point here is that paying taxes to the Romans was abhorrent to the Jewish people. As we will see the Caesars kept the minting of gold and silver coins as their prerogative. Just like we have images of various people on our coins and currency, they had an image of Caesar on their coins. The Jews considered even that image to be idolatrous. They wanted no part of paying Rome's tax with Roman coins, but they had no choice because the Romans had the power. Just like you may not want to pay taxes, but are you really interested in messing with the IRS? I didn't think so. So Jesus' opponents figured paying Roman taxes made the perfect topic to use to put Jesus in an inescapable bind. You can see how desperate they were to trap Jesus. Verse 16 says the Pharisees sent some of their disciples with some Herodians to confront Jesus. Herodians were people in Herod's camp, which is to say they were thoroughly secular and utterly compromised as they completely ignored the Law of Moses. This would be like the farthest left liberal Democrat getting together with Ted Cruz to work on a project. But hey, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. They both wanted to get rid of Jesus.

Did you notice how they addressed Jesus? "We know you're a man of integrity and you teach God's truth. You don't pay attention to who people are because you only teach the truth. You don't care about what people think." Really? You think that highly of this guy? Then why are you trying to screw him over? It's pretty obvious that these guys were totally lacking in integrity, because they didn't believe a thing they said. They were just trying to set Jesus up with some smarmy flattery, thinking they could catch him off guard. More importantly, they were trying to make people who observed this interaction think they had a genuine question for the great teacher and were anxious to get his wisdom. Maybe they knew he wasn't

dense enough to fall for their act, but they hoped the audience wouldn't see what was really going on.

So they ask for his opinion. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? At that moment they think they've handed him a conundrum that had no good answer, another lose-lose situation. If Jesus said, "No, it's not right and people shouldn't pay the tax," they would have immediately run and tattled on him to the Roman authorities. They'd have had plenty of witnesses to him saying it, and that would have been considered sedition by the Romans. They would have taken care of Jesus in a hurry.

His other alternative was to say that it was right to pay the tax. That would have kept him out of trouble with the Romans but it would have seriously turned off many of his followers. They may have paid the tax because they had to, but they had to grit their teeth every time they did it. And it made them resent the Romans all the more. If Jesus advocated paying the tax then they'd have resented him too.

JESUS NEATLY AVOIDED THE TRAP

Jesus began by exposing his opponents. He did not let them paint the picture of themselves as honest, sincere inquirers asking the teacher to help them deal with a difficult problem. He baldly called them hypocrites to their faces. They were hypocrites because they were trying to present themselves as one thing when they were something else entirely.

Then he identified their real motive. They were trying to trap him. They weren't truth seekers. They were arrogant liars out only to discredit him. Their motives couldn't have been worse or more dishonest. After unmasking them he did an unexpected thing. He asked for a coin. He had to ask because he didn't have one. The coin he was given was not the equivalent of any of our coins. It was a denarius, which was generally considered a day's wage. At \$15 per hour, the new minimum wage, that works out to \$120 for an 8 hour day. That coin was worth a lot. Then he asked, "Who's picture is on it? The answer was "Caesar's."

Then Jesus lowered the boom. Give to Caesar what belongs to him and give to God what belongs to him. Hey, this is Caesar's coin, evidenced by his picture on it. By using a coin minted by Caesar with his picture on it they were tacitly acknowledging he had the right to levy taxes. Hey, it's his coin, his system, his right, so give it back to him. But at the same time you must give to God what belongs to him. God also has some rights. Whose image do you and I bear? We are created in the image of God, and that means that he has the right to require some

things of us. So give to God what he requires just like you give Caesar what he demands.

Verse 22 says when they heard Jesus' response they were amazed. That's a way of saying they were thinking, "Wow, didn't see that coming." How could you argue with that answer? Without violating Roman law Jesus had just told them to pay their taxes, but more importantly to give to God what belonged to him, which was their complete devotion. They were to love him with all their heart, soul and strength, and they could do that even when they paid the Roman tax. In other words, there was no inherent contradiction between paying the tax and serving God.

Jesus shined a light right on the real problem. They didn't really care about loving God. They cared about protecting their position, about maintaining their power structure. And the larger society cared about hating Romans and resisting their power. Jesus essentially told them they'd better start loving God.

IMPLICATIONS

This passage tells us how we should think about our nation.

GIVE TO OUR GOVERNMENT WHAT BELONGS TO IT

The Bible lays out fairly clearly what our responsibility to our government is. We need to do what the Scriptures tell us.

Pray For Our Leaders

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul wrote, "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgiving, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."

We are to pray for all those in authority. When Paul said prayers should be made on behalf of all men was he simply saying, "Pray for everybody"? Wait a minute, there's 7 billion people on the planet. Am I supposed to pray for every one of them? If I prayed for one a second it would take over 221 years to get to them all. Oh, wait, maybe this is at the opposite extreme. I can handle this in 5 seconds. "Dear Lord, please bless everybody in the world." Good, I'm done.

I think Paul was saying that when we pray for those in authority we are making a prayer on behalf of all people. Most people would like to be left alone to live their lives in peace. Paul said we should pray for authorities that they would have the ability and the wisdom to rule in such a way that we can do that.

I'm supposed to pray for those guys? Those flaming Republicrats who are clearly doing everything they can to destroy our nation and are so dense even light bends around them? Paul was so insistent on this that he used 3 synonyms to emphasize that we should pray for them. But it is that fourth word he used that may really get to you. He said thanksgiving is to be made for kings and all those in authority. We are actually supposed to give thanks for them!

I could be wrong here, but I don't think he meant saying, "Lord, I thank you that this guy can't be elected for another term." To give thanks for them is to actually change how we often think of them. It requires seeing good in them because you must have something to thank God for. I realize this is not the American way, but it is the godly way. Praying, even giving thanks for leaders, is part of giving to Caesar what belongs to him.

Submit To Government

In Romans 13:1 Paul wrote, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." Does anything about that verse strike you as a little odd? To me it is a little weird that Paul said, "there is no authority except that which God has established," then said, "the authorities that exist have been established by God." He repeated almost exactly what he had said. Did he lose his train of thought? Or was he just old and repeating himself like old people seem to do, telling the same story they told last time you talked to them?

I believe he was struck by the astounding nature of what he had just written. No authority except what God has established. Do you know who the authority was when he wrote that? Caesar was a guy named Nero, a man widely known to be corrupt, compulsive and even tyrannical at times. You're saying that guy was God's choice to rule? I think Paul knew that his readers, who lived in Rome in close proximity to Nero and suffered persecution by him, would find that impossible to believe. So he said, "Yes, I said exactly what I meant. The authority in Rome, meaning Nero, has been established by God."

Why would God do such a thing? How could God put such an ungodly man in a position of such power? Paul doesn't explain why, undoubtedly because he didn't know why. But he does know that God rules in the affairs of men. Daniel 2:21 says of God, "He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others." God decides who rules. That means that we, right now in the United States of America, have a President that God has put in place. And next year, despite how

you may feel about candidates set before you, we will have the President that God has put in place.

I know that some people right now feel like the kid whose parents have taken him to a restaurant and have given him the choice between two menu options, the liver and onions or the spinach and kale casserole. The poor kid will choose to go on a hunger strike. Dying of starvation would be preferable to either of those options in his mind. But either one of these two candidates is God's choice for our nation or we cannot trust what we read in the Bible because it's not true.

We do not give blanket obedience to governing authorities. In Exodus 1:16 Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the baby boys born to Jewish mothers, and they didn't do it. In Daniel 3 Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego were ordered to bow down to an idol and they refused to do it. In Daniel 6 the prophet was ordered not to pray, and he kept on praying. In Acts 4 Peter and John were ordered by the leaders of their nation to stop talking about Jesus. In verses 19-20 they answered, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The amazing thing to me is this challenge to submit even extends to how we regard those in power. This is not to be a grudging compliance while grumbling about leaders and saying every negative thing you can think of about them. Romans 13:8 says, "Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." Give them respect and honor as well as your taxes.

What allows us to obey, respect and pray for people that we think may not be Satan but are at least his nephew or niece, is what Daniel stated. God changes times and seasons, he decides who ends up in charge. I can relax and do as God instructs because regardless of what people do, God is carrying out his plan unthreatened by them, and God's purposes and plan will be accomplished.

Laurie and I were watching a show on television that was very tense, but became frustrating. It was frustrating because the situation in the show seemed completely hopeless, lots of bad things were happening and everything the main characters tried to save the situation failed. To make matters worse they made a lot of dumb decisions that no sane person would make. It kind of reminded me of the commercial that features 4 young people in a horror movie saying, "let's go hide behind the chainsaws." It frustrated us to the point where we turned it off. What I

needed to remember is that there are writers of the show, and they are sovereign. Everything that happens is part of their plan and in the end it will be all right because the writers haven't lost control. So it is with our government, and any government. God is sovereign, and though we may see people doing idiotic things, though the situation may seem hopeless, it's all part of the plan, so we can quit being frustrated and fearful and we can relax.

Pay Your Taxes

Romans 13:8 said if you owe taxes then pay them. Jesus said give Caesar the taxes he demands, for he has the right to levy them. This can be really galling. When I pay my taxes and see what a huge bite the government takes it blows me away. Income taxes, gasoline taxes, property taxes, sales taxes all seem nearly endless. What irks me is how the government then just wastes so much of that money. Our government paid \$500,000 to a contracting firm in Afghanistan to build a police training center. It turned out the bricks they used to build the building were mostly sand, and when it rained 4 months later the building simply dissolved!

Waste can be frustrating, but that's not really a spiritual problem for me. The bigger problem is when the government uses my tax dollars to fund things that violate my convictions. Don't I have a right to refuse to pay my taxes in that case? Remember that Jesus and Paul both insisted on paying taxes to authorities who promulgated idolatry, were personally guilty of adultery and murder, and encouraged all manner of behavior that violates Christian morality.

GIVE TO GOD WHAT BELONGS TO HIM

In John 18 Jesus was standing trial before the Roman governor, Pilate. Pilate didn't know what to do with him because he seemed harmless to him. But he heard from Jesus' accusers that he claimed to be a king, thus could be guilty of treason. Pilate seized on that idea and asked Jesus if he was king of the Jews. In verse 36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." In verse 37 thinking he was finally getting somewhere Pilate said, "You are a king, then?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." In other words, yes, I am a king. But I'm not here to rebel against anyone. I'm here to tell the truth, and my kingdom is made of people who listen to the truth.

Colossians 1:13 says God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." Believers in Jesus have been brought into the kingdom of the Son of God. We have a king and his name is Jesus. Revelation 19:16 pictures a time when Jesus will come in glory to defeat his

enemies and right all wrongs. It says, “On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.” Our king is the ruler over everything. He is the ruler over even the most powerful man on earth, the President of the United States.

To give to God what belongs to him is to give our allegiance to Jesus. It is to see him as the king of our lives. It is to see ourselves as living in his kingdom. Yes, I am an American, but my first allegiance is to the Lord Jesus Christ. A kingdom is the place where a king rules, what he says goes. That kingdom is to exist in us. In our lives, Jesus rules. What he says goes. We need to remember that our core identity is that we are members of his kingdom. This is what our heart beats for. Serving our king supersedes and overshadows any other loyalty we might have. We have a different constitution, a different set of rules that we live by than others around us. Yes, we obey the laws of our land, but we obey a much higher and much more demanding law first.

Recently Laurie had an interaction with a Christian friend who had become increasingly strident about politics. It became the main message of his life. It was so much so that his rantings about the candidate that he didn’t like were getting downright ugly, bordering on hateful. Laurie, as gently as possible, reminded this friend that Jesus is King, and that he orders us to behave in a loving way even toward someone we might see as an enemy or a bad person. What if this bad person gets in power? He may have power, but he still is under Jesus’ rule and always will be. If Jesus is king of our lives we will do as he says and we will live by his priorities, values and perspectives. Our friend initially resisted that message, but in the end admitted Laurie was right.

The unfortunate truth is that as wonderful as our nation has been it is a human institution. There are humans in it, and humans will corrupt anything they are a part of. All of its institutions will be impacted by the god of this age. While we submit to it, we never forget that we are not of this world. We belong to another kingdom. We must not be surprised when we are regarded and treated as outsiders who don't fit in our own land.

Matthew 6:33 tells us to seek first the kingdom of God. To give to God what is his is to give him our hearts, to live for his kingdom above all else. He is more than worthy of it. The movie *A Knight's Tale*, centers on a young squire named William Thatcher. When his knight dies during a jousting tournament, William takes on his armor, disguising himself as the knight and competes in his place even though commoners like him are now allowed. He wins the tournament and comes up with

the idea of trying to present himself as a noble. Geoffrey Chaucer helps him come up with the persona of Sir Ulrich von Liechtenstein from Gelderland. In one joust he spares the dignity of an opponent named Sir Thomas Coleville. Later Thatcher's true identity is discovered. A mob turns on him as an imposter, a commoner passing himself as a noble. The crowd is ugly and as it reaches its most threatening suddenly Coleville steps in on his behalf. Only he then he reveals himself to be Prince Edward, the son of the king. He declares that William has shown himself to truly be noble and says his nobility is beyond debate. He then makes him a knight, dubbing him "Sir William." We are like Thatcher. We are undeserving, imposters passing ourselves off as something we're not, worthy only of condemnation. But the Son of The King has stepped in and declared us to be noble in his sight. He has given us privilege we do not deserve. Surely he is worthy of our deepest devotion, our total obedience as his subjects.