

## RENDER UNTO CAESAR

For those of you who may understand the Bible to be an old and almost useless group of stories that can't possibly deal with 21st century politics, look again! We are seeing some intense struggles for leadership of this nation especially at the top of the ladder of power.

Seldom have I seen more obvious examples of how the Bible speaks to 21st century issues than when Jesus addressed the question about whether to pay taxes or not ([Matthew 22:15-22](#)). When some of the religious leaders of his time asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the (Roman) government, he asked for a coin of that government. After inquiring as to whose image and whose title was on the coin, the religious leaders had to admit that it was that of the emperor—Caesar. His reply was simple, direct and obvious once he had answered the question: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” ([Matthew 22:21](#))<sup>1</sup>

This question of taxes is of concern to generations of people. However, the answer given by Jesus raises both religious and moral concerns that go beyond simply paying one’s taxes. Then as now we face troubling concerns about the inappropriate uses of political and personal power. It is, as has become all-too-apparent recently, an issue that transcends our hesitancy to mix politics and religion. It provides reason to wonder how far our government is prepared to go in securing information about individuals. Do we really believe, for example, that it is OK for the government to monitor some worship services?

Some of our politicians have ignored, challenged or otherwise swept aside basic standards behavior that are not to be ignored in the quest for power. Too often we have come to expect what a writer of a paper on ethical healthcare delivery to prisoners described as “a decent minimum standard of healthcare.” I believe that most of us already do or would if we had been exposed to basic moral training, support a “decent minimum standard of moral behavior” from everyone.

Sadly, political campaigns seem to bring out the worst in some of us. Some supporters of politicians have either condoned or ignored lying and worse in an effort to discredit their favorite politician’s opponent. When political leaders or candidates for political office seek the support of religious leaders as part of their campaign strategy, this understandably becomes a concern to faith group leaders and the general public. In this situation the imagined line between politics and religion is crossed. When religious leaders (Full Disclosure: I am a retired hospital chaplain as well as retired ordained minister in The United Methodist Church) feel compelled to speak out in support of or in condemnations of specific politicians, that same line is crossed.

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So, what are we to do both now and during what will become the future for some of us as well as future generations of our families? Do we stand by and do nothing? Obviously, I don't agree with doing nothing.

Those of us who believe that our faith and/or our personal philosophy provide us with standards of appropriate behavior to expect from each other need to live out our moral convictions. We need to make understanding and critiquing the political process more important than the hours we invest in television, electronic games, texting each other dozens and even hundreds of times each day or other experiences that do not equip us to be informed citizens.

In what may be a simplistic approach to explaining the seriousness of the challenge to a "decent minimum standard of moral behavior for everyone" let me share a very brief story. When I was a young person growing up, we were taught to approach every railroad crossing with care. Yes, there were the usual warning lights, bells and cross arms to warn us of an approaching train. There were even long blasts from the train horn. What I remember most, however, was the sign at every railroad crossing that said simply, "Look, Listen and Live."

Like many of you I don't always pay attention to such a simple concept. Perhaps we assume that we all know and accept this advice. The truth is that not everyone has learned or accepted the importance, even in politics, to "Look, Listen and Live." While some of us ignore danger others of us act as if whatever was about to happen will not happen to us. The third possibility, of course, is that we may believe, perhaps unconsciously, that there is no hope of saving the situation, whether personal, professional or political.

That will only be true if we allow others to usurp our rights as people in our country. It is and has been happening to too many of us for too long. It's important that each of us, whether we respond on the basis of our faith in God, a Higher Power, a "First Cause" or our commitment to a shared understanding of basic morality, take a stand. Nothing less than rousing our population to active awareness of the issues and then acting in the best interests of our nation and everyone who lives here will be enough. Those who want to take power away from God's people need to stop. It appears that the only answer is to be informed, to speak up and to Vote! If we have faith in God, we need to pray for one another, including all those serving or wanting to serve in positions of power.

Feel free to [talk to me about it](#).

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