

## LESSON 227

### TRIBUTE TO CAESAR

Related Scripture: I Corinthians 1:17-31

**KEY VERSES:** "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well."—I Peter 2:13, 14.

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22;  
Acts 5:24-32

#### Introduction:

Religious controversies can be the fiercest of all controversies, and religious persecutions have been among the bloodiest persecutions in history. The question of submission to constituted authority becomes somewhat complicated when the religion of the government is different from that of the people subject to that government.

Under the Old Testament theocracy, the government of Israel was supposed to govern for the God of Israel, and our American ideas of freedom for all religions would have been completely out of place. Ideally, the Israelite prophet, priest, and king were alike mere servants of the God of Israel, committed alike to maintain true worship and to destroy idolatry.

But Israel failed and fell, as its own history and its own prophets testify. God in judgment purged His chosen people from gross material idolatry; yet as a people they have never returned spiritually to Him, but have rejected their own Messiah.

At the time of Christ's earthly ministry two thousand years ago, the Israelites (or Jews, as they came to be called) were under the government of the Roman Caesars; but they were permitted to continue the practice of their own religion under the authority of their own religious leaders. In this situation there was naturally a great deal of argument among the Jews as to how far they should submit to the superior military authority of Rome, or just where they should draw the lines between religious duties and political necessity.

Problems like these are still with us, and modern religious leaders are generally giving the wrong answers. On the one hand, "social gospellers" support the plans of atheistic communism to destroy our freedom; on the other hand, they demand for themselves and their followers the "right" to disobey and disrupt all authority that they do not like and cannot control.

Genuine believers in Christ must get back to the original teachings of Christ Himself and to the inspired words of His apostles for guidance in these troubled times, when most supposed Christian leaders, like most of the later kings and priests of Israel, are blind leaders of the blind.

For an outline of the lesson, we note:

1. Necessary Taxes, Matthew 22:15-22
  - a. Religious rebellion, 15-17
  - b. Righteous realism, 18-21
  - c. Rebuffed recalcitrants, 22
2. Necessary Testimony, Acts 5:24-32
  - a. Impious tyranny, 24-26
  - b. Impudent tirade, 27, 28
  - c. Imperative tenet, 29
  - d. Imperial testimony, 30-32

#### Notes on the Printed Text:

**Necessary Taxes, Matthew 22:15-22.**

Almost nobody likes to pay taxes, but almost everybody can understand that taxes are necessary to government. Most of us may agree that taxes are generally too high and that we could do with much less government; yet the fact remains that anarchy is worse than taxation: we must have government, even if it does cost too much. History has demonstrated again and again that even oppressive government is better than no government at all.

**Religious Rebellion, 15-17.**

When religious people are in rebellion against God, it can be expected that they will be in rebellion also against earthly authorities. Religious leaders of God's Old Testament people had been given authority of life and death over the people—far greater authority on the human level than our Lord has given to His New Testament church. But they had showed themselves unfit to govern and had lost much of their authority to Rome. (Jn. 18:31.)

So the religious leaders were discredited before God and man. They had themselves rebelled against God and were "making the word of God of none effect" through their tradition. (Mk. 7:13.) It is small wonder then that, having dared to usurp authority from God, they dared also to question the authority of Caesar. Yet, with all their confusion, hypocrisy, and contradictions, they still wanted other people to obey them.

Among the various Jewish sects, the Pharisees were the strictest religionists, while the Herodians were political compromisers. It was a nice combination to ask a tricky question. Their compliment of Jesus in verse 16 was no doubt insincere and intended to be sarcastic, but in spite of themselves for a moment they spoke the truth.

**Righteous Realism, 18-21.**

Diplomacy may have its place amid the conflicts of fallible human opinions, but Jesus was embodied Truth, and scorned the language of diplomacy. Having perfect knowledge of reality, He could call things and people by their right names without ever making a mistake. He knew that His questioners were hypocrites, and He told them so.

But the question remained to be answered, for our sake if not for the sake of the hypocrites. And the greatest Teacher in history demonstrated again the power of righteous realism in facing the problems of life. People who handle Caesar's money must recognize Caesar's title to that money.

#### **Rebuffed Recalcitrants, 22.**

"When they had heard" the answer of Jesus, His hypocritical questioners were temporarily rebuffed, "and went their way." It is not likely that any minds were changed; they had not been seeking the truth, but setting a trap. When their attempt failed, they withdrew for a time, but they were still recalcitrant.

#### **Necessary Testimony, Acts 5:24-32.**

Testimony to the truth is necessary, not because everybody will hear and believe it, but because God has commanded it. In the Old Testament, God told Ezekiel, "Thou shalt speak my words unto them, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear: for they are most rebellious." (Eze. 2:7.) So Christ has commanded us to "preach the gospel to every creature." (Mk. 16:15.) The question of whether or not people wish to hear the truth is irrelevant to our obligation to preach it.

#### **Implous Tyranny, 24-26.**

Governing authorities, religious or irreligious, are "ordained of God" (Ro. 13:1), and therefore are generally to be obeyed by God's people. But whenever any human authority (be it king, pope, priest, council, convention, pastor, or church) sets itself in open opposition to the plain commands of God, then at that point it has forfeited its claim to authority and its right to be obeyed.

Religious authorities at Jerusalem had forbidden the preaching of the gospel and had put the apostles in prison. "But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." (Verses 19, 20.) The impious tyrants "feared the people" (v. 26), and so did not wish to press their persecution too far or too fast.

#### **Impudent Tirade, 27, 28.**

With no apparent shame or embarrassment, the hypocritical high priest boasted of the council's strict command and in the same breath complained to the apostles, "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." Only a few weeks earlier, the leaders had taught the people to say, "His blood be on us, and on our children." (Mat. 27:25.) But now they impudently sought to disclaim responsibility.

#### **Imperative Tenet, 29.**

Our duty to God must come first. This is a very simple and inescapable axiom for all who know the true God. Certainly we must admit that there may be false claims of religious obligation, so that earthly rulers cannot be expected to recognize every possible claim to religious freedom. But true worshipers of the true God must be ready and willing to suffer the consequences if their obedience to Him involves disobedience to the laws or commandments of men.

#### **Imperial Testimony, 30-32.**

Children of God should show all due respect to constituted authorities, but we need offer no apology for our testimony to divine truth. We serve the God of our (spiritual) fathers; our crucified Savior is our risen Lord; and the Holy Spirit joins with us in imperial testimony to the glorious truth.

#### **Key Verses:**

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well."—I Peter 2:13, 14.

Our obedience "to every ordinance of man" is "for the Lord's sake." For His sake we must obey even those laws that we may personally dislike. Earthly rulers "are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well." If we must suffer punishment at human hands, let it not be for evildoing, but for obedience to God. For His sake, let us be sure of our ground before we disobey duly constituted human authorities.