

"GOD AND COUNTRY"
February 4, 1990

TEXT: Luke 20:25 "He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.'"

As strange as it may seem, it is sometimes possible to know too much. I once knew a man, for instance, who liked to read murder mysteries. But he often complained that they were no longer as exciting as they used to be. And he was right. They stopped being exciting when he started looking at the back of the book to see "who dun it" before he read the story. They were no longer exciting because he knew something he was not supposed to know. He knew too much.

And I have often heard it said that doctors make the worst patients. Where you and I remain blissfully unaware of what a given symptom might mean, the doctor knows. Where you and I just lie back and trust our doctor to do what is needed, the patient who is also a doctor is inclined to "kibitz." As I said, it is possible to know too much.

And this morning's scripture is one of those times. We know, for instance, that the scribes and priests were trying to trap Jesus. We know it because Luke tells us so. In Chapter 20, verse 20, he writes "So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authorities" And because we know that, we are tempted to see the whole conversation as nothing but a battle of wits.

First, the scribes ask Jesus one of those "have you stopped beating your wife yet" questions. After trying to butter him up a bit, they ask, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" If Jesus answered, "Yes," the people would turn against him. If he answered, "No," the Romans would arrest him. Either way, the scribes thought they had him.

But Jesus found a way out. Rather than answer "Yes" or "No," Jesus said, "Show me a coin. Whose likeness and inscription has it?" And, of course, they answered, "Caesar's." Then Jesus replied, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." And Luke concludes by saying, ". . . they were not able . . . to catch him by what he said; but marveling at his answer they were

silent." There you have it. By a wonderful tour de force, Jesus outfoxes the crafty scribes. Hurray for Jesus!

But, because we know so much, we may be tempted to leave it at that. To celebrate Christ's cleverness without paying much attention to what he actually said. But is it not possible that Jesus' words were intended to do more than just avoid a trap? Is it not possible that they have an importance of their own? I believe it is. I believe they have a meaning and one which you and I need to hear more clearly now than ever before. I believe they are more than just a means to avoid a trap. I believe they mean exactly what they say.

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." The language is a little archaic and falls somewhat strangely on our ears. So let me put it into something a bit more modern and, to many of us, more familiar. "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the scout law."

"Honor", "Duty", "God", "Country", not so very long ago these were words which sent shivers up and down our spines. Words which men would die for, and for which millions of them did. Unfortunately, things seem to have changed. Some of you may recall a picture which appeared in newspapers all across the country back in 1977. At the time, President Carter was trying to reinstitute, not the draft, but registration in case a draft someday became necessary. The picture I have in mind showed a young Princeton student defiantly waving a poster which said, "Nothing is worth dying for."

Apparently that attitude has spread. Charles Colson quotes a recent survey by Rolling Stone magazine in which 40 percent of those surveyed indicate there are "absolutely no circumstances under which they would be willing to fight for their country."

What in the world has happened? How could we have gone from fathers who fought and died in World War II, to sons and daughters who will fight for nothing save their own right to do exactly as they please? And all in just one generation. The answer is not that hard to find. In 1979, a sociologist named Robert Bellah conducted extensive interviews with two hundred average middle-class Americans. As he studied the assumptions which define their lives, a pattern soon began to emerge.

Bellah called that pattern "ontological individualism," the belief that the individual is the only real source of meaning in the world. Many of the people he studied had no sense of community or social obligation. They saw the world only as a jumble of choices with little meaning or purpose. They even seemed to have lost the language with which to express commitment to anything other than themselves. As Walt Kelly's Pogo so eloquently put it, "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

Of course, individualism is nothing new in America, nor is it always bad. But, to quote Colson again,

"What is new is the dominant influence it is exerting on American life as the barriers that traditionally held it in check have all but collapsed.

"During most of our nation's existence, families, neighborhoods, churches, and civic groups have served as fire walls to restrain individualism from flaming out of control. Involvement in such communities of memory ... drew people out of themselves and encouraged their concern for the common good. These communities also provided a foundation of authority and understanding. People could discuss moral obligations and understand one another because they drew from a shared perspective of transcendent right and wrong, a standard of authority outside of the individual.

"This changed dramatically in the 1960s when the fire wall crumbled. Sources of authority were tried and found wanting. The youth culture adopted "a visceral sense that all forms of established authority, all rules, all demands for obedience, were inherently illegitimate."

We were so relieved to see an end of the kind of open rebellion which characterized the sixties that we failed to notice the spread of their radical individualism to almost every corner of society. Again to quote Colson,

"God has ordained three institutions for the ordering of society: the family . . . the state . . . and the church. These are not just voluntary associations that people can join or not as they see fit; they are organic sources of authority for restraining evil and humanizing society. And the family, state, and church, as well as the closely related institutions of education, have all been assaulted and penetrated by the new barbarians."

To put it bluntly many of us today have all but lost the word, "duty" from our vocabularies. As a result, we have no standard of truth or behavior against which to measure our lives. Truth can take whatever shape we want. In his recent book, The Tempting of America, Robert Bork carefully documents the manner in which even the Constitution is being bent by self-willed judges. And Allan Bloom, in The Closing of the American Mind, describes the same kind of relativism in our colleges and universities.

Now, I value my freedom as much as anyone. But I also believe along with Yeats that "civilization is an exercise in self-restraint". Or, as someone once said, "There are two freedoms --the false, where a man is free to do what he likes; the true, where a man is free to do what he ought." (Charles Kingsley) It is precisely this sense of "ought", in a reborn sense of duty, which alone can save us from ourselves.

Let us rebuild our shattered reverence for the institutions which served us so well in the past: family, church, country. Let us submit ourselves once more to the notion that we owe them something, that they do not exist just for our convenience. It will not be easy, but we each can make a start. For my part, I have committed myself to obeying the speed limit whatever it may be. I did that last summer on our way home from vacation, and, in one hour, one hundred seventy vehicles passed us. Vehicles of every kind: trucks, cars, motorcycles, motorhomes. About the only ones we could keep up with were two back-packers on their bicycles. But institutions need rules, and rules are useless unless they are obeyed. Let us seek for the meaning of life in standards that transcend our latest petty wants and passions. Let us serve the common good, the public welfare, the truths eternal. And perhaps, by the Grace of God, we shall yet regain the greatness we have lost. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." AMEN.