

Date: October 27, 2019

Series: *Some Final Lessons in Neighboring*

Title: *God, Caesar, and Our Neighbors*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Mark 12:13-17

I realize that what I am about to do could cause some tension, but as the old saying goes, *"If you have tension--you have ATTENTION"* so here goes. The potential tension comes from some popular news headlines I want to share. Are you ready? Good! Here goes:

- Foreign Meddling in U.S. Election!
- Keep America first!
- Fake News!
- Stop the Democratic Party!
- Our President is a dictator! He must not be re-elected!

Sound familiar? Well it should, and then again it shouldn't because you guys are too young to recognize these headlines. You see, I got these headlines from newspapers that were published seventy-nine years ago in the year 1940--proving that history does indeed repeat itself! I hope that relieved some of your tension, but not your ATTENTION!

Speaking of history, let's review that time period so you can understand those "ancient" headlines. Franklin Roosevelt was president in the fall of 1940 and he was running for a fourth term. Remember he was president for a little over 12 years when he died in 1945. It wasn't until 1951 that the twenty-second amendment to the constitution was ratified, limiting a president to two terms of office. Well, Franklin and his party, the democrats, were in favor of America joining the war against Hitler in Europe. The republican party was not. Remembering the horrors of WWI plus America's struggle to recover from the Great Depression, they wanted to stay out of the war.

Of course, the Nazi's didn't want America to enter the war either so, as some of the first foreign meddlers in U.S. elections, they got very involved in trying to get Roosevelt and his party out of power. They planted people in the U.S.; and since Facebook had not been invented, these spies, posing as Americans bought full-page ads in U.S. Papers like this one saying, *"Stop the March to war! Stop the interventionists and warmongers! Stop the democratic party!"* Berlin's strategy was basically a lightening propaganda campaign to back the isolationist movement without the benefit of an Internet! Even famed aviator Charles Lindbergh got involved as a spokesman for the America First Committee, a group that was very opposed to the war. His committee printed this flyer that said, *"Think: Hitler nominated Hitler. Mussolini nominated Mussolini. Stalin nominated Stalin. Roosevelt nominated Roosevelt. DO YOU WANT A DICTATOR?"* All this led our nation to be deeply divided--almost as divided as it is today. Of course, that changed on December 7, 1941.

I share this little history lesson to point out that fighting over politics is nothing new. Good people have been arguing about the government since; well since 1776. And that's okay, as long as it doesn't escalate to the point that it keeps us from being good neighbors. I mean, you can lose your opportunity to share Jesus' love with the person next door or in the next cubicle at work, if you get embroiled with them in a heated argument over politics.

Thankfully, God's Word gives us the guidance we need in getting this aspect of good neighboring right. There are several passages we will draw from this morning but I want us to begin by looking at a conversation Jesus had with some political leaders in Mark 12:13-17.

Take your Bibles, turn there and if able, I ask that you stand in respect to God's Word as it's read.

**13 - Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch Him in His words.**

**14 - They came to Him and said, "Teacher, we know that You are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because You pay no attention to who they are; but You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"**

**15 - Should we pay, or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" He asked. "Bring me a denarius and let Me look at it."**

**16 - They brought the coin, and He asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.**

**17 - Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at Him.**

Okay, did you catch Jesus' "neighboring lesson" here? Even though it's brief, it's profound. I mean, in one sentence our Lord gives us truth that helps us prevent divisive political squabbles. I'm referring to verse 17 where He says, **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."** Okay, let's break this down.

WHAT ARE WE TO GIVE TO CAESAR---OR---THE GOVERNMENT?

**(1) First, we are to give government our RESPECT.**

Now, I will admit that in my lifetime, this has been difficult at times. I mean, I have known a lot of political leaders who have been HARD to respect. And I'm sure it was difficult in my parents' and grandparents' lifetimes as well. Of course, if it weren't hard--if it weren't a struggle--to respect our government, God wouldn't need to command us to do so. That's what God says. We are to give our government RESPECT.

Please understand, these words were not written by people whose "side" was in power in the government of their day. In fact, much of God's written guidance when it comes to politics was written by individuals who were being persecuted by the people in authority. The apostle Paul is a prime example. Yet listen to what he says in Romans 13:

**"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. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted---and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.**

Paul and his readers lived under cruel emperors like Nero, so they were people most likely to live with a negative bias toward the government. Yet God says they were to be subject to them.

We are to do the same. Why? Well, as Paul says, a government's authority is a DERIVED authority. We must respect our government—we must subject ourselves to it—because, its authority is not inherent in the governmental officials or offices. Ultimately it comes from God itself. As Daniel 2:21 says, **"God changes times and seasons; He sets up kings and deposes them."**

Do you remember when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate a few hours before His crucifixion? Now—in my mind's eye, during that interview I see Pilate walking around with his chest all puffed out trying to get Jesus to answer him on command. After all, Pilate was the Roman governor—appointed by Caesar himself. But Jesus was unfazed. He just stood silent. In essence, He didn't jump when Pilate said "jump." Finally, Pilate got a little testy and said, **"You better answer me, Jesus, because I have the power to execute You or to release You and You better understand that!"** Do you remember our Lord's response? He said, **"The only authority you have is what God the Father has allowed you to have for a season. That's all Pilate."** The extension of that

would be Jesus continuing to say, ***“Pilate, you have no more INTRINSIC authority than the pauper on the street.”***

The fact is, no human being—even a governmental leader—no president, no king, no governor, no senator---no human has INTRINSIC authority that he wields or exercises over other human beings. All authority is DERIVED authority. It is authority that is given or permitted by God. God alone is sovereign—so God alone holds ULTIMATE authority. He has given it to governments and because of that, Paul says as much as possible—and we’ll go into that in a moment—but as much as possible, we need to cooperate with the government and be in subjection to it. We must obey its laws, pay our taxes, be good citizens.

In fact, Paul says that violators who DON’T respect the government will be disciplined by God. Look back at vs 2: ***“...he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”***

Listen. Wherever there are men, there are governments of some kind. And Paul makes one thing crystal clear right at the start: All governments are in power because God has allowed them to be. So, we must respect our governments. Doing so is a way of respecting God. One thing that should help MOTIVATE us to do this is the fact that in His sovereignty God uses governments of all kinds to do His will.

- He used the Egyptian government to save the Jewish people when drought came.
- He even used the cruel Pharaoh in the time of the Exodus. Romans 9:17 quotes God as saying to that evil Egyptian ruler: ***“I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display My power in you and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”***
- God used Cyrus the Persian to bring the Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylon. In fact, Isaiah 45:1 refers to this pagan king as, ***“God’s anointed.”***
- The Roman soldiers were following God’s will in crucifying His only Son.
- God also used the Roman government to bring lasting peace to the world and build roads both of which would hasten the spread of the Gospel.

So, you see, our sovereign God uses all authority to do His will. Of course, if you don’t have a big view of God, you’ll have difficulty believing this kind of thing. I mean, if the God you worship isn’t the awesome, majestic, mysterious, loving, incredible Creator of the galaxies described in the Bible, you’ll have trouble buying into this. It takes an awesome God to use even dictators to do His will—so if you’re having trouble embracing this principle, then perhaps your concept of God is too small. Now—governmental leaders are called to certain standards. After all they are GOD’S servants. As such they are to be respectable, honorable. This is what Paul is getting at later in Romans 13 when he qualifies what we are to give our leaders by saying: ***“...if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Rom. 13:7).”***

In His Word God lists the characteristics of a Godly ruler—a leader that He approves. Psalm 72 says that rulers must care for the oppressed and the poor and take care of the disadvantaged and see to the needs of everybody—not just the privileged few. Listen how serious God is about this. In Isaiah 10:1-3 He says, ***“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people---making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?”***

This week I read about Jose Mujica, the president of Uruguay. Back in 2012, President Mujica, held a unique position. The BBC called him *“the world’s poorest president.”* As you know, it’s a common complaint that many politicians around the globe live in luxury while the masses they lead live in poverty. Instead, Mujico

chose to identify with his people by living on a ramshackle farm located on a dirt road outside the capital. A reporter for the BBC News described his approach to Mujica's lowly residence: *"Laundry is strung outside the house. The water comes from a well in a yard, overgrown with weeds. Only two police officers and Manuela, a three-legged dog, keep watch outside. This austere lifestyle—and the fact that Mujica donates about 90 percent of his monthly salary, equivalent to \$12,000, to charity—has led him to be labeled the poorest president in the world. In 2010, his annual personal wealth declaration—mandatory for officials in Uruguay—was \$1,800, the value of his 1987 Volkswagen Beetle. The article also noted that Mujica doesn't have to live this way. Uruguay provides a luxurious presidential residence in the capital city of Montevideo. But Mujica has chosen to shun the privileges he has a right to enjoy so he can stand in solidarity with the people he serves."*

Isn't that cool? Don't you RESPECT this president's choice?

So, we are to respect governmental authority—but governmental leaders are to be respectable. They are called to rule in ways that please God.

## **(2) A second thing the Bible says we are to give our government is PRAYER.**

This is a recurrent theme in the Scriptures. In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2 Paul says, ***"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness"*** (1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 2:2–3). This applies even when—especially when—somebody in power seems to be our enemy. And if you live long enough there will come a time when somebody in power acts like an enemy of what we know to be good. Yet Jesus commands us, ***"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in Heaven"*** (Matt. 5:44). In other words, you're defined as children of your Father in Heaven by praying for people with whom you disagree. And please understand. Jesus is not commanding us to begrudgingly pray for our leaders through clenched teeth. He's telling us to have compassion for those in government, compassion that drives our intercessions. Our hearts should reflect the heart of Jesus, Who prayed for those in power when hanging on the Cross, upon which He was nailed by His government, religious and civil, ***"Father, forgive them. They know not what they're doing."*** If you feel the leaders of our country don't know what they're doing, you must pray for them sincerely and from the heart.

Let me see if I can help generate some compassion. How many of you have heard someone say, *"America would be better if we had people like the founding fathers back. They did such a great job running the U.S. of A.!"* Well, not only is that idolizing people of the past; flesh and blood humans who were just as fallen as we are, most of whom embraced the evil of slavery, it's also forgetting how much simpler it was to govern the U.S. when it began. Remember, back then in "the good old days" our country was smaller. There was basically one faith. People didn't face the challenges we do. They were much less dependent on government than we are today.

Today our leaders face a dramatically more complicated nation—than did the founding fathers. They face circumstances beyond our shores in ways that would have been incomprehensible to George and John and Tom and Ben---Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Franklin.

Here's something else to note. The squeaky wheel gets the grease; so the politicians we usually hear most from, the men and women most in the headlines and most often before the cameras and microphones, tend to be the squeaky self-promoting minority. And I will agree that many in that minority are not people of integrity, they aren't governing in a respectful God-honoring way. But I'm convinced that many of the others who serve us in government--the ones who are behind the scenes--are doing their best, working hard to wrestle with very difficult issues. They are working long hours, fighting an uphill battle to do what they think is right. Their health and their families are under unbelievable stress. Well, as followers of God—the One Who

took amazing pains to identify with our needs, to put Himself in our shoes, to incarnate Himself in our reality, we should put ourselves in the shoes of those who govern and to pray for God's grace and wisdom to be poured out upon them.

Of course, we must also pray for those in the "squeaky wheel minority" -- those leaders we disagree with-- the ones who get the headlines and seem to cause the most problems, the leaders we think of as the "enemy." They REALLY need our prayers.

And lest you think prayer is a waste of time; remember, prayer is the main way of accessing the power of our omnipotent God. I remember years ago reading about a popular mega-church that had planned a debate between a world-famous atheist and a world-famous Christian--I think the Christian was Ravi Zacharias. National News networks were sending their cameras, this debate got a LOT of publicity. And seeing all this, the pastor of the host church went to the staff member who had set up the debate and said, somewhat nervously, "We're going to win this debate, aren't we?" The staff members said, "Don't worry pastor! There is a room under the stage where the debate will take place. And we will have dozens of people in that room the entire time---on their knees praying." God answered those prayers. Zacharias spoke with grace and power, it was obvious who "won." My point is we can win more for the kingdom by praying than by arguing.

We must give our governmental leaders respect; we must give them our prayers and then,

### **(3) We must give our form of government CREDIT.**

I say this because it has become popular not just to berate individual politicians, but to bash the entire institution of government. And I know down through the decade we have seen public leaders mess up royally--being impeached or forced out of office for moral failures. We have seen wanton governmental waste and gridlock that makes us lose hope for the future. But for all its ills, the form and exercise of government in the United States still does more to support life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness than any other on earth. We still enjoy a rule of law. We still enjoy a level of education and mobility and opportunity that is the envy of the world. We are one of the only civilizations in the history of planet earth whose government has never yielded to military control and has always observed an orderly succession of power. That is miraculously unusual. I mean, it's obvious God was involved in creating this democracy of ours.

Here's something else to note. Our government provides a system of checks and balances which allow for remarkable self-correction over time. In a sense, it's like the weather. If you don't like it, wait a few days. It will change. If you don't like what's going on in government, wait a few years. It can change. And that's not true of other nations. I mean, democracy is a good thing---a respectable form of government. We need to acknowledge that more.

In his book, *I'd Like You More if You Were Like Me*, John Ortberg shares what he learned about civic duty and enthusiasm about our democracy from being called to jury duty:

*"It was 9:00 on a Monday morning and I was one of 150 unhappy campers sitting on plastic chairs crammed into a sterile basement room in the San Mateo County Courthouse, reporting for jury duty. We all had one thing in common: We wanted to be somewhere else. Until Larry happened. Larry works for the government, and however much we pay him, it's not enough. In a few short minutes, he won over the crowd of prospective jurors and infused us with a sense of honor and purpose. 'I know you're all busy people,' he said. 'but I want to say thank you. I want to tell you, on behalf of the judges and our legal system and the county of San Mateo---and, really, our nation, we're grateful for your service.' Although almost no one is happy about getting a summons to jury duty, Larry said, it's actually incredibly meaningful---and it's the foundation of a justice system in which people have a right to trial by a jury of their peers. He told us a story about a ninety-five-year-old woman who was no longer able to drive, but who took three buses to get to the courthouse so she could*

*serve. When she arrived, Larry asked her, 'Did you call ahead like you're supposed to, to find out if you're even needed for jury duty?'*

*She said, 'I couldn't. I don't have one of those push-button phones.' Turns out, she still had a rotary dial phone. Larry reminded us of the nobility of justice, and the long centuries of struggle for it, and how, even now, people around the world were fighting---and in some cases dying, for the right to exercise this privilege. As he spoke, people stopped texting; they sat up straight; they nudged each other and seemed inspired. By the time my number was called, I was so excited to serve that when the judge asked me whether I could pronounce someone guilty, I told him I was a pastor and that, according to the Bible, everybody was guilty. I said, 'I could even pronounce you guilty!' I wasn't selected to serve on a jury that time, but the point is that a room full of sullen, silent, phone-checking, self-important draftees---had been transformed into a community of joyful patriots in a matter of minutes. When people left the courthouse that day, they were talking and laughing like old friends."*

Does that make you respect our democracy a little bit more?

Okay, we've talked about what we must give CAESAR. What must we give GOD?

### **(1) We must give Him our PARTICIPATION.**

Scripture teaches that as Christians we are to be a part of the legislative process. We are to mix our faith with our politics—we are to apply our religious convictions to our involvement—and we do this in several ways:

- We vote.
- We attend town meetings and give our input in a respectful way.
- We write our congressmen encouraging them to pass just laws.
- When the Spirit leads, we sign petitions, join in legal demonstrations and marches.
- And, last but not least, some Christians follow God's call to actually serve in government—where they can help enact laws that please our Heavenly Father.

I believe more Christians are needed in government because without the influence of people who have made Jesus Lord, governmental leaders will yield to their bent toward sin. One current example is a presidential candidate who says one of his first goals if elected is to take away the tax-exempt status of churches that teach that same sex relationships are sinful. That is counter to the way our government was set up. It is not to be involved in our religious beliefs.

As someone put it when arguing against today's governmental involvement in religion, *"The threat is not that the government will establish a state religion---the threat is that the state will attack people for conscientiously practicing their own. The problem is not that religion is being forced on others; the problem is that irreligion is being forced; secular values are being forced on people of faith."*

We need to participate in our government for as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, *"The church is the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool."*

So, get informed and pray and then vote—become involved in government because this is one way we are SALT—one way we have a preserving effect on our decaying culture.

### **(2) We must also give God our WITNESS.**

We are not doing that when we hurt our friendships with neighbors and co-workers over political fighting. Remember, the REAL solution to the social and moral problems in our society is not better legislation or new supreme court justices or a president from the correct political party. No—the solution is people being

reconciled to God through their response to the good news of Jesus Christ. Laws don't change people---only Jesus does that. So nothing must get in the way of our sharing the gospel---especially not politics. Last year a nationally-known Christian magazine--supposedly devoted to evangelism had cover story that said, *"Stop the Blue Wave in California!"* I was SOOOO disappointed when I saw that cover. I wrote the editor and asked, *"How are lost Democrats in California going to respond to that? Will they be more open to the gospel when they are painted as the blue enemy?"* I never got a response.

We have to remember that the church's strategy has never been to change the world through the political process, the church's strategy is to change the world by introducing them to the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. We are called to win souls not elections. We follow the cross---not the flag. As Jack Hayford put it, *"I don't perceive my call as one to protest the culture but to proclaim the Savior."* That IS our call. Remember, this world with its governments is passing away. Our job is to prepare people for the next world---for eternity.

Listen, alienation from God is the root problem of our world. For example, economic crises happen because of the sin of greed—and only the good news of Jesus can address this root problem. We must be very careful to not confuse the cross with the flag. Russell Moore the head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC says, *"For too long we have assumed that the church is a means to an end to save America. America is important. But the end goal of the Gospel is not a Christian America. The end goal of the Gospel is redeemed people from every tribe and tongue and nation and language. As Christians we belong [not to America] but to another Kingdom."*

LET'S PRAY