

Baptist DNA: Separation of Church and State (Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22)

Rev. Todd Pridemore

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/baptist-dna-separation-of-church-and-state

Today we're going to wrestle with a topic that can be polarizing. It's not a simple topic at all – in part because it's not only a Baptist principle that has evolved since the early 1600s, but it's also linked to the First Amendment of our American Constitution and differing interpretations by our federal Supreme Court over the decades. I'm talking about the separation of church and state, or what we refer to as religious liberty.

As a reminder, this is what the First Amendment to the Constitution states:

- *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

So the intention is two-fold in our country: no establishment of religion, and free exercise of religion.

This is one of the most hotly debated topics in religious and political life in our nation today. And with that being said, part of my goal this morning is this (looks at screen)... Do you recognize what this is?



If you've ever watched the game show "Press Your Luck," you're familiar with this guy: the Whammy. In the game show, whenever you landed on a Whammy, you lost everything. So my hope and prayer today, in all seriousness, is to avoid saying something that is a Whammy... something that is taken the wrong way, or something that becomes the only thing you hear this morning and that takes away the heart of what God wants us to hear. So let's get started, as I Press My Luck with you today!

I'm going to begin by telling you a few personal experiences I've had that relate to religious liberty.

- When I was in elementary school- which was a public school, I vaguely remember lining up every day in my classroom before lunch, and someone would say a prayer. I never thought a thing about it. I grew up in a town where everyone looked alike, and as far as I could tell, everyone had the same religious beliefs and political stance. That's just how it was. That's how I was raised. I now think about how that would have been different in my teacher had a different faith perspective than I did.
- Fast forward several years to when I was in college, and I saw that not everyone in the world – not even everyone in Missouri – looked like me, thought like I did, or even worshipped God the way I did. Those years opened my eyes to the diversity of thought and expression that exists within our country and world, and I had to start wrestling with the idea that even if I strongly believed in something – like my faith in Jesus first and foremost – did that make it OK for me to push that belief onto other people? For a young kid that was raised as a conservative Baptist and taught how important evangelism is... that was a tough thing to get my mind around.
- Then, I went to a Baptist seminary and I learned about church history. In particular, I learned that up until about 312AD/CE, the church lived in persecution from the government, namely the Roman Empire – and yet the church grew and spread, even while it was at odds with the government. But things changed in the 4th century when Constantine the Great was Roman Emperor. Constantine became a Christian. And the thing I remember most about that was for all of the benefits that the church in general received because the ruler of the world was now “on their side,” there were also problems. I remember learning of times when Constantine's army would conquer an enemy and take prisoners. And Constantine gave the prisoners an option, as swords were held to their throats: They could be baptized into the Christian faith – forced into the Christian church - and continue to live as citizens of the Roman Empire, or they could reject Christian baptism and be killed then and there. And from that moment on I've been a supporter of religious liberty. When the church and the government get into bed with each other, bad things usually happen.
- To me, it all comes back to the freedom God has granted us. God does not force any of us to believe. If we look back to the creation story at the beginning of Genesis, Adam and Eve were given freedom. You and I have that same freedom today. And it's because that is at the core of my personal theology about who God is and how God relates to us, that I don't go along with anything that pushes or forces religion onto anyone else. You might look at that very differently than I do.

As was the case last week when we dealt with the Baptist principle of Church Autonomy, today we can't go to a specific passage in the Bible that explicitly states that church and government should be separated. But we are going to look at two passages that at least discuss the topic.

*NOTE: This passage in Roman 13 has been used and abused by both sides of all types of debates over the years – Revolutionary Wary; Abolitionists vs Slave Owners; etc

Romans 13:1-7

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, 4 for it is God's agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority[a] does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's agents, busy with this

very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

- Paul is writing in a time when the government – the Roman Empire – was relatively peaceful toward Christianity (56 to 58 AD). In other words, the Roman Government wasn't giving the church reason to push back or rebel. It was a time to be content and keep their heads down, so to speak.
- Paul's basic point here is that the Christians in Rome were to "be subject to" the government. He's continuing his focused from chapter 12 that is focused on how Christians are to live out their faith at that time and in that situation. In a nutshell he's saying, "At this time of relative peace, when we have some degree of religious freedom, don't rock the boat with those ruling over us. Live in submission."
- It's significant to note that this message – remember it's written for a specific group of people at a specific time in history – seems to contradict what is written in Acts 5:29...
 - Acts 5:27-29:

27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

If you're like me, that Romans 13 passage doesn't help me very much as I try to follow Jesus today in relating to our government. Thankfully, Jesus had something to say that I do think is helpful...

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" 21 They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

- Jesus' point seemed to be this: there is a separation between things of the government/authorities, and things of God/faith. Even though we all live in a world where we can't ignore the government (as much as we might want to!) and we are called to live for God, we have to figure out how to navigate the tension when those two authorities in our lives collide.
- There are things that belong to the government – namely taxes – and there are things that belong to God.

I challenge us to take Jesus' words and apply them to our divided nation today. And let's focus on what is God's, because that is what unites us together in this church. So what is "God's?" What belongs to God? What should we be giving God?

- **Micah 6:8** - He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?
- **Matthew 22: 36-40**: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

So for you and I today, what does God want? What is God’s? I struggled to find one word that sums it all up, but I’ll say it this way: God wants our heart. What’s in our heart is what we care about and it leads to what we say and what we do.

I’m going to “Press My Luck” a little further with you by sharing some examples of how easy it is for me, and maybe for you, to not give God our hearts...

- When I am more loyal to a political party, or an elected official, or a flag than I am to God; then God doesn’t have my heart. My allegiance should be to Jesus first and foremost.
- When hate toward someone else or another group of people rises up within me, then I’m not allowing God to have my heart.

OK. I’ve probably said more than enough today. But I will conclude by focusing on the positive side of all of this. Don’t be paralyzed by all of the controversy swirling around this topic. While it can be extremely difficult to balance state and church dynamics, remember the freedoms that we’re granted by God and through our nation. The separation of church and state does NOT mean that we, as we follow Jesus, have to keep our faith boxed up and that we can’t make a difference in our places of work or schools we attend.

Today alone, our congregation is making an impact in local public schools...

- Donating supplies for South School students
- Youth gathering to pray at various schools in the community this evening
- Every one of you who steps into a school building in a few weeks takes your faith, and your words, and your actions with you.

If this is a topic you want to investigate further, I encourage you to check out these resources...

- <https://bjconline.org/religiousliberty/>
- <https://www.FreedomForumInstitute.org/about/>
- <https://OxfordRE.com/americanhistory>
- The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (book)