

“Render Unto Caesar...”

Matthew 22:15-22

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So what things, *really*, are the emperor’s; and what things, *really*, are God’s?

The gospel story takes place late in Jesus’ ministry; he is in Jerusalem; Palm Sunday has come and gone. The stakes are high; his religious and political opponents are plotting against him. On the one hand, there are the Pharisees, a Jewish religious group that strictly followed the Law of Moses; on the other hand, there are the Herodians, a Jewish political group that was steadfastly devoted to the dynasty of Herod the Great. Jesus belonged to neither group. He felt that the Pharisees were legalistic hypocrites who neglected “the weightier matters of the law,” namely *justice* and *mercy* and *faith* (Matthew 23:23), and he was critical of the power-hungry members of Herod’s family, who had tried to kill him as a baby and had succeeded in killing John the Baptist. So Jesus comes under fire from *both* the religious *and* the political leaders of his day. They are looking for a way to trap him in his own words.

They approach him under the guise of a genuine question. People have asked Jesus genuine questions before – like the man who had asked him, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16) – but there is nothing genuine about this one. They approach him with platitudes, calling him a “Teacher,” praising him for his sincerity, for his teaching “the way of God in accordance with truth,” for his showing “deference to no one,” for his not regarding people “with partiality.” They are right on all counts – he *is* a great teacher; he *is* steadfastly sincere; he *does* teach the way of God according to the truth, he does *not* submit to the will of any man, he does *not* treat anybody differently than anyone else. They seem to recognize that all these things are true about him, or at least are things that people *say* about him, but inwardly they mock him; secretly they are looking for a way to take him down. There is nothing *genuine* about their question to him at all.

The question they ask him is this: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Now, let’s think about this. The *emperor* was Tiberius Caesar. He was the second Roman Emperor; by this point he has been Emperor for about sixteen years. Most Jews were not fans of the Romans. The Romans had annexed Judea less than a century before, desecrating the holy temple in the process. Tiberius had conscripted 4000 Jews living in Rome into military service, and expelled the rest of the Jews from the city. The Jews in Jerusalem would have known about that. The Romans imposed taxes, which went to support the Roman military, the Roman roads, and the Roman bureaucracy. Generally speaking, individual people in the Roman Empire were assessed somewhere between 2 and 5% of their income, but the Romans employed tax collectors who were often unscrupulous and greedy, assessing a far higher tax rate than what was appropriate, and pocketing the difference. So, to most Jews living in Jerusalem, the Empire was hated, and the taxes were both oppressive and unfair.

The question that is put to Jesus is: is it *lawful* to pay taxes to the emperor?

Now, if Jesus says “Yes,” he legitimizes the Roman annexation of Judea, and their system of taxation. A “yes” answer says that the Roman overlords have the *right* to take a portion of the Jews’ hard-earned income, and use it for their own purposes – purposes which really do not benefit the Jews in any meaningful way. A “yes” answer would anger many Jews, and potentially cause many of Jesus’ followers to turn against him. But if he says “No,” then the Romans could charge him with treason. It is a clever trap. There is *no answer* that Jesus could give to the question that would not get him in trouble.

Or so the Pharisees and Herodians think. They have failed to realize that Jesus is more clever than they are. They may be clever – but they are not clever enough. Not when we are talking about *God*. For, as Paul says, even “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.” (1 Corinthians 1:25)

Jesus, fully aware of their wickedness, calls them hypocrites. They had just praised him for his teachings, but they have no intention of actually *following* those teachings. He asks them to show him a coin – “the coin used for the tax,” or more traditionally, “the tribute money.” They bring him a denarius, a Roman coin, equivalent to a day’s wage for a laborer. Tiberius’s head would have been depicted on the front of the denarius, much like Lincoln’s head is on our penny and Washington’s head is on our quarter. Photographs and video technology did not exist, so putting a depiction of the current ruler on currency was an effective way of showing every citizen and subject in the Empire *who was in charge*.

Jesus asks them: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” There would have been an inscription on the coin, written in Latin abbreviations: “Tiberius Augustus Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” So the Pharisees and Herodians respond: “The emperor’s.” More traditional translations say, “Caesar’s.”

Jesus gives his answer. He says: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Or, more traditionally: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things which are God’s.” This is not the “Yes” or “No” answer they wanted to hear; it is not the “Yes” or “No” answer that they could have used against Jesus, trapping him in his own words. It is, rather, a piece of very sage advice. The Pharisees and the Herodians are amazed; they marvel at Jesus’ reply. They leave him and go their way ... for a time.

And we are left with a very astute saying uttered by Jesus. But what, exactly, does it *mean*?

Well, for one thing, it means there are two authorities in our lives. There is the *civil* authority, our political leadership. The *government*, broadly speaking. For the Jews in Jesus’ day, that was the Roman Empire. Civil governments can range from the democratic to the totalitarian, and from the morally upright to the morally repugnant. In these various governments people have rights and responsibilities, to greater or lesser degrees, depending on the nature of the government and the whims of the people in power at any given time. For the Jews in Jesus’ day – well, they didn’t have many rights.

But there is also another authority in our lives, separate and distinct from the civil authority. An *ultimate* authority, a *divine* authority. *GOD*. This authority does not change; it cannot be overthrown; it is not elected; it does not die. It is here *eternally*. It predates any civil government on earth, and will outlast every government on earth. It outshines *every* civil government in its goodness and its execution of justice. It is *greater* than the civil government; it holds – or ought to hold – our *supreme* allegiance.

We belong to both realms simultaneously. We are citizens of the United States; we also have,

as the apostle Paul tells us, a citizenship in heaven. (Philippians 3:20) We are citizens of *both* at the same time. One does not exclude the other. We do not cease being citizens of the United States when we come to church, nor do we cease being citizens of heaven when we go to the polls to vote. A citizen of the United States remains a citizen of the United States even if he or she takes religious vows; a Christian remains a Christian even if she or he assumes political office. These are not mutually exclusive.

The framers of our republic did not create an explicitly *Christian* nation. The words “God,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” and “Christian” never appear in the Constitution or any of the Amendments. The First Amendment establishes freedom of religion, and the Constitution itself forbids religious tests for any who would serve in public office. But we can still hold deeply Christian beliefs and values even if we serve in government, as is evidenced by the confirmation hearings of judge Amy Coney Barrett. Likewise, our faith does not require subscription to any political party or movement, but it *does* require that we uphold certain values and principles, like *justice* and *mercy*, like *love* and *goodness*, like *honesty* and *generosity*. There is a long list of virtues that are lifted up again and again throughout the Bible.

The apostle Paul tells us to “be subject to the governing authorities.” (Romans 13:1) He tells us that the governing authorities that do exist “have been instituted by God.” That does not mean they are perfect, nor that they are necessarily executing the divine will, but it does mean that God has allowed them to serve in that role. At various times and in various places, however, those governing authorities sometimes stand *in opposition* to the divine will. In those times, people of faith have a responsibility to obey *God*, not *Caesar*. When the Hebrew midwives were ordered by the Egyptian Pharaoh to kill the baby Hebrew boys in the book of Exodus, they chose to obey *God*, not Pharaoh. When the King of Babylon issued a decree that no prayers should be issued to any god but only to the King himself, Daniel defied that order. When the apostles were ordered not to preach about Jesus and his resurrection, Peter said, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” (Acts 5:29) When early Christians were pressured to bow down to the Roman Emperor, they refused to do so – and many of them were killed. In country after country, when Christians have been forbidden to worship, they have found ways to keep on worshipping. There are times when a steadfast loyalty to God can put one in direct conflict with the dictates of a civil government. Thankfully, in this country, that rarely happens. We can obey the civil laws *and* serve God simultaneously. We should be immensely thankful for that freedom!

What about taxes? Well, we should pay them. We shouldn’t try to evade them; we shouldn’t look for ways to cheat on our 1040. If we’re going to be faithful Christians, then we need to be faithful and honest, even when we’re reporting our income to the government. If we don’t like the tax code, if we feel like we are being unfairly taxed, well, there are processes by which the tax code can be changed.

The bottom line is, there *are* some things that we must “render unto Caesar.” There *are* some things we owe or must do, as citizens of this beloved country. We do have some *civic* responsibilities.

But we also have a duty, an even *greater* duty, to serve Jesus Christ. He is the Lord over *all* of our life. In all that we do, we should be seeking to serve *him*, without reservation, without holding back.

The bottom line: Jesus said, “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things which are God’s.” He was looking at a coin bearing the image of the Emperor. But whose image do *we* bear? *God’s* image. Remember what it says in Genesis? “God created humankind *in his image*.” (Genesis 1:27) That coin might belong to the Emperor. But *our whole lives* belong to *God*.

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