

RENDER TO CAESAR AND GOD WHAT IS DUE!
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, **"Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax."** And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, **"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"** They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, **"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."** When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

April 15. Most of us don't look forward to that day. Of course that is the day we render what is due to the IRS. We loathe taxes. We hate them. Especially taxes on our income. To tax the fruit's of a person's labor is burdensome, to say the least. It creates an anti-work ethic. But then again, the alternatives aren't much better, poverty, welfare, being destitute. And we've gotten so used to the wretched system, we barely take notice. I don't think most of us could muster up enough energy even to toss a tea bag into Boston Harbor let alone impeach some politician out of office for a system we feel is unfair.

In our text today, the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus between a political hard place and a religious rock. They teamed up with the Herodians, an odd match if ever there was one. Kind of like conservative Republicans enlisting the aid of liberal Democrats. You know something fishy was going on here. **"Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are"** (Matthew 22:16-NIV). Anyone who starts off with a sentence like that can't be trusted with the keys to the house, much less the keys of doctrine. There's enough grease in that sentence to slicken the way from Jerusalem to Rome and back again.

Here's the kicker: **"What do you think, Jesus, man of integrity and teacher of the truth? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"**

Great chess move. They've got Jesus trapped between Jerusalem and Rome. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? What do you think? If Jesus says "no," He's a traitor to Rome; He's an insurrectionist, a tax dodger, a threat to national security. If He says, "yes," He's a traitor to His own people, a Roman loyalist, a supporter of the Roman occupation; He's an enemy of Israel, therefore an enemy of God." They think they've got Him just where they want Him.

Or has Jesus got them right where He wants them? Don't think you can trap the Divine quite so easily, les you end up caught in your own trap? **"Hypocrites. So you're trying to trap me, are you? Show me the money. Bring me the coin for paying the tax."**

And so they bring Him a denarius. And He ask: ***“Whose picture is this? Whose inscription?”*** To which they respond: “Caesar’s.”

“Well then, there you have it. Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. If it’s his picture, give it to him.” Jesus dodges the political bullet. He’s no insurrectionist. He has no interest in politics as such. His kingdom is not of this world; He is the King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords. So never mind old Caesar, he thinks he’s a god anyway. Just give him his coin and don’t rile a sleeping bear.

“Oh, and by the way, “render to God what is God’s.”

Gotcha! Jesus dodges the religious bullet and turns the tables on those who would test him. Give to God what is God’s.

And what, pray tell, might that be? Jesus doesn’t say. And the Pharisees and the Herodians aren’t inclined to ask. Render to God what is God’s. Caesar gets the coin. It has his image and inscription on it. But what does God get? Well, follow it through. What bears God’s image? What has God’s inscription written on it?

You do! You are made in the image and likeness of God, albeit tarnished by sin and death. You have His inscription written on you, handwritten in your Baptism. Marked, branded. God wants you, not your coin. You! God doesn’t demand taxes, He wants you! Your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength. He wants your fear, love and trust. He wants you!

Tricky business. We’re inclined to withhold. By nature we pay the minimum tax possible. Shelter income; divert investments, anything to give less to Caesar. Tax avoidance is the name of the game. Not tax evasion. Keep that distinction clear. Avoidance - good; evasion - bad. That’ll land you in jail, and is hardly in keeping with Jesus’ words, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Give to Caesar what he asks for, but not a shiny penny more. That’s how it works with the tax game, doesn’t it?

And that’s how it works with the law. Give what’s required and not a cent more. Can you imagine someone writing out their tax form and enclosing a check for an extra thousand dollars with a note. *“Dear Uncle Sam. It’s been a good year and I thought you could use the extra cash. Don’t spend it all in one place.”* No way, it’s not going to happen.

A previous congregation we attended had a school tuition discount for members. The catch is that you have to show up to church at least twice a month in order to cash in on the discount. You wouldn’t believe the stories. Or maybe you would. People would ask, “Do both parents have to come to church?” “Do we have to bring the kids to church?” “Can we just drop the kids off at church?” Some school parents even teamed up and filled out attendance cards for each other.

That’s the way the law works. You’ll find the least you have to do to squeak by the bookkeepers. And you’ll look for ways to cheat. If the law says, “Love your neighbor as yourself, “ you’re going to ask things like “Who’s my neighbor?” and define it so narrowly that bringing a pie to the little old lady next door qualifies as a full portion of neighborly love.

And we'll do the same with God. When we treat God as the government we start to wonder what's the least we have to give Him to stay on His A-list. Give to God what is God's. What does that mean? Ten percent? Oh, that would be tidy, wouldn't it? God gets ten percent. Caesar gets a lot more! Is that how it works? Give God His ten percent tax?

Ten percent of your time, your treasure, your talent? Pay your religious tax and stay on God's good side.

It may be that way in Caesar's realm, but not in God's. The kingdom of God is different, remember. Upside down, inside out, and sometimes just plain weird. It's where the last are first, the first are last, the losers are winners, and the tax agents and prostitutes slip through the pearly gates ahead of the life-long Lutherans. This is a kingdom that doesn't just want a piece of you, it wants all of you, and God is restless until He has all of you - your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength, your fear, your love, your trust, all things!

And you know what? You won't give it. You can't. You and I are so wrapped up in ourselves as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we simply won't give to God what is God's. We'll claim it as our own. It's my time, my treasure, my talent, my life. Mine, mine, mine. And you can't have it, God, it's mine! Oh, I'll give you a Sunday or two, now and then, but no more than an hour maybe two, and maybe a few more if I get a special member discount on goods and services. But the rest of the day is mine. And the rest of the week from Monday through Saturday, that's mine too, and don't you dare interfere with my plans. I'll pay my temple tax and put a few of Caesar's coins into the offering plate, but that's as far as the claim of Your kingdom goes with me.

God knows that. He knows how it is with you. He knows you're not going to render to Him what is His. Jesus knew that. That's why He said what He said. He wanted to trap them in their own words, those religious hypocrites who looked down their noses at others, who poked at the speck in their brother's eye and couldn't even fathom the piece of firewood sticking out of their own. Jesus knew what they were about, and He called them on it. And He calls us on it too, when we feel oh so smug about all our "giving." Give to God what is God's. Everything, your whole life, is God's. He wants all of it, and we don't want to part with it, we hesitate to even give 10 percent.

God knows that. That's why He sent His Son, to render to God what is God's. Jesus is the image of God restored in humanity to its original luster. No sin. Jesus gave to God what is God's, for us. His perfect obedience, His perfect life, His perfect death the image and likeness of God nailed to the cross, that's the coin of the kingdom. He paid the penalty of our sin, He offered up the perfect sacrifice, the whole burnt offering that saves the world from sin and death. Jesus rendered to God what is God's. ***"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"*** (Luke 23:46). He did it for us all.

"What shall I render to the Lord, for all His benefits to me? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call on the Name of the Lord. I will take the cup of salvation, and will call on the Name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord, in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem" (Psalm 116).

What can we render to God? Our thanksgiving, our praise, prayer, our confession. We can take up the cup of salvation, the chalice overflowing with the blood of Jesus shed for the whole world, and we can lift it to our lips and drink deeply from it. We can worship, not as duty or obligation, but as privilege as an honor and gift.

Caesar's kingdom is coming to its end. Rome crumbled under its own apathy and hedonism. Our nation will end one day too, probably under much the same. The coin of Caesar, that denarius that was held up as an object lesson, it now sits behind glass in some museum some artifact of history. The kingdom that once proudly, arrogantly and defiantly stood behind it is no more. The same will be true one day of our pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and all the paper with famous names and images. The kingdoms of this world are destined to die. They serve the purpose of the law. That's why God has them. And the end of the Law is always death.

But the kingdom of God, which has appeared among us in the flesh of Jesus, the kingdom that comes with His dying and rising. This kingdom has no coin because there are no transactions in this kingdom. No deals to cut. No taxes to pay. No tariffs or duties. It's all free, grace, gift, gratis, thanks to the king who turned His cross into a throne. And this kingdom has no end, but comes down from heaven on the world's last day to gather to itself everything that belongs to God. And it will be on that awful and awesome Day, that the kingdoms of this world will be plunged into utter darkness and fire. The day of great judgment when under the imputation of Jesus shed blood, that the world will finally render to God what is God's. ***“Every knee shall bow and tongue confess,... that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father”*** (Philippians 2:10-11).

“Trust not in princes, in mortal men who cannot save.” Trust Jesus, who rendered to God what is God's in His own flesh, all for you and in your place, that you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

For in Christ Jesus and Him alone are you saved! For in Him all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, **AMEN!**