

WD April 15, 2024

“Render to God What is God’s”

Today is April 15, tax day. In the spirit of the day, I thought it would be fun to talk about Matthew 22 where Jesus is challenged on the subject of taxes. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesars and unto God what is God’s.” What exactly is rendered? Today I am going to read the whole passage from Matthew 22:15-22. “15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. 16 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. 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 put me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20 And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 21 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.” 22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

Now let’s keep in mind the three groups represented here, the Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Followers of Jesus. The Herodians were a non-religious party that supported the dynasty of Herod, thus their name. They were Jewish supporters of the Roman Government who also supported the tax. On the other end of the spectrum were the Pharisees, a religious party who believed in the strict observance of the Law and especially of oral traditions such as the way one washes their hands. They did not see Jesus as Messiah, even with all the signs and miracles that Jesus did. These first two groups were at opposite ends of the spectrum and yet they come together to trap Jesus with a question. The third group is represented by the disciples who were no doubt at the temple with Jesus nervously and silently watching and learning as Jesus fielded many questions meant to trap him that day.

The *kynsos* is the poll tax which was exacted on all Jewish citizens, and all conquered territories of Rome. It was considered a special badge of servitude to the Romans. This tax was especially galling to the Jews because Caesar was often portrayed as a god and the coin with him image was inscribed with “divine” implying Caesar’s divinity. And Lord knows that when Paul instructs Christians to pay their taxes in Romans 13 those monies were used for troubling things back then too. Using this tax as part of the question posed to Jesus was a trap because in the minds of this mixed crowd the answer to this question essentially pointed out where one’s loyalties were, with God or with Rome.

The trap was simple. If Jesus were to answer that it was not good to pay the tax, he could immediately be arrested for trying to usurp Rome. To answer the other way was to insight the Jewish people against Jesus because so many were so opposed to the poll tax. Instead, Jesus sets up the challengers in their own trap in way that they answer their own question. “Show me a coin,” Jesus says. The image on the coin was that of Caesar. The very image of Caesar was never allowed in the Temple. Once when Pilate tried to bring shields into the city with Caesar’s image on it the people rioted yet many of these very leaders carried that image in their pockets without a single thought. “The image on the coin was Caesars. So, give back to Caesar that which has his image on it. And give back to God what has God’s image on it.”

So, do we? “Do we what, Pastor?” Do we give God what is God’s? What do we carry in our pockets that have other images on them—those things we probably shouldn’t be carrying our hearts and minds often without a thought? We often get ourselves in a twist over the way we see the government waste our taxes. Are we any less guilty about waste? Forgiveness for example is heavily spoken about in places like Matthew 18. Jesus speaks of the unmerciful servant. He is forgiven much but ends up loving little. Can we say we are as generous as Jesus has been to us in His mercy. In Luke 12:16-21 Jesus speaks of a wealthy man who is given a great crop. Instead of thanking the Lord and honoring the Lord’s generosity with his own generosity the rich farmer decides to build bigger barns for his own personal comfort and lifestyle. Can we say we have been generous in our love, our patience, in our words, in our own self-control. Are we grateful people or stuck on sourness over things we can’t really control. How much of what the Lord gives to us, who bear His image, is given to God.

The distinction between the followers of Jesus and the other groups is well spelled out in Matthew 25. The believers and unbelievers are distinguished by what they gave to the Lord. Visiting the sick or people in

prison. Clothe those who need clothes. Both the believer and unbeliever alike ask, “When did we see you?” The goats did nothing. The sheep gave to the Lord what was the Lord’s. They gave to those in need with what the Lord had supplied them, a home to invite strangers in, clothes to clothe others, and time to visit the sick and those in prison. What these sheep do is instinctive, flowing out of a character shaped by the Lord Himself. They know the will of the Lord on loving thy neighbor; they hear his voice and follow it. These sheep do not consider the work of the Lord taxing but worthy of faith-filled response; as a form of thanksgiving for the gifts that enable sheep to love others.

As Jesus does in so many of His parables, Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the two kingdoms, the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus is a king not of this world as He told Pilate in John 18:36 and we are citizens of that kingdom who yet live in the kingdom of the world. So, for now we give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and render to Jesus what belongs to him. We are not about the temporary securities of coins or taxes. We are about honoring the Lord. Romans 13 reminds us that means remaining good citizens. Romans 13:7 says, Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” Just as we would serve Jesus by offering a visit to the sick or clothing to the poor so too we honor Jesus by honoring the Lord under the authorities that He has established.

Like Caesar our modern government reps and officials are by and large corrupt, immoral, and power hungry. They spend our money on many contemptable things. Their abuse of their authority will not go unpunished, but vengeance belongs to the Lord and not to us. They tax our patience, our conscience, our incomes, and so many other things. We on the other hand are called upon to pray for them, to vote, and to encourage one another in the Lord above all else. So, on this tax day I would offer a reminder that rendering unto Jesus is good even if that means we must continue to live in a patient endurance for our Lord’s return. Give thanks that we have something from Jesus to render back to Jesus namely His grace, His cross, and resurrection. We have reason to render and share God’s grace that overflows through us. Happy rendering.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30