

Render unto God

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax. And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Pharisees once again are trying to trap Jesus. Nothing was more vexed for Jews in the first century than the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Jews, and especially the Jewish leaders, resented it deeply.

So the Pharisees laid an exquisite trap. Matthew tells us that they brought with them the Herodians, that is the functionaries of Herod, the Roman governor. Then, dripping with false deference – “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” – they asked Jesus whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman government. Lawful in this case meant not Roman law – that would not have been in dispute; of course Roman law required the Jews to pay taxes – but Jewish law. The Pharisees wanted to believe that any acknowledgement of Roman law was a form of idolatry.

So if Jesus responded that it was acceptable to pay taxes to Rome, he would have incurred the wrath of the Pharisees and the Jews. If, on the other hand, he said it was not appropriate to pay such taxes, he would have been arrested immediately by the Herodians as an insurrectionist.

Jesus, it turns out, is up to the challenge. He asks the Pharisees to produce a Roman coin. And even here Jesus calls their bluff. Jesus apparently did not have such a coin, but they did. Interesting. They – or at least one of them – carried what Jewish law would have deemed a graven image because the coin depicted Tiberias Caesar, the Roman emperor.

“Whose head is this,” Jesus asks, “and whose title?” After the Pharisees muttered their response, Jesus renders his verdict, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

What are we to make of this long-ago exchange? How is this at all relevant to our lives? Christians through the centuries have cited this passage as justification for paying taxes to civil authorities, even though some of our friends in the peace-church traditions – Quakers and Mennonites, for example – withhold that percentage of their taxes that goes for military spending. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once noted, “taxes are what we pay for civilized society.”

Martin Luther believed that a Christian had an obligation to the civil order because God had ordained the civil authority to restrain evil so that the gospel might flourish. Luther even went so far as to declare

that if the state needed a hangman, a believer should feel no hesitation in coming forward to serve in that capacity.

When Jesus says, render unto Caesar, or render unto the emperor, what is due the emperor, we understand the meaning pretty well in terms of our obligations to the state. But it should also serve as a reminder that we, the followers of Jesus, are aliens in this world. The values of Caesar, of the larger world, do not always comport with the values of the kingdom of God. In this world, the meek do not inherit the earth; that awaits the next world. Peacemakers, more often than not, are reviled, not honored. So Jesus' words about rendering to Caesar serve as a reminder of our alien status in this life.

But although the phrase “render unto Caesar” has received a good bit of notice over the centuries, I wonder if the latter part of Jesus' formulation has received adequate attention. Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, yes, but Jesus goes on to say that we should render to “God the things that are God's.”

And how do we determine what belongs to God? Just as Jesus used the image of Tiberius Caesar to point to Rome, so too we must look for the image of God to determine what belongs to God. And the image of God is us. The Genesis account of creation tells us that God created humanity in God's image, and that means that we owe our allegiance and our fidelity to God.

So even though our taxes go to Washington and Hartford, our work and our play and our loyalty – everything we are and do – belong to God. St. Paul exhorts us “to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” In so doing, we render to God the things that belong to God.¹

As resident aliens in this world, we owe our taxes to the civil authorities. But we must never forget the second part of Jesus' statement: Render to God that which belongs to God. In so doing, by

¹ Colossians 1:10 (ESV).

the giving of ourselves because we are made in God's image, we demonstrate where our ultimate allegiance lies.

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