

Matthew 22:15-22

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

Our text today from Matthew 22 includes the famous saying, **“Render unto Caesar,”** as the King James Version put it. But as we’ll find out, that is only half of the verse. The other half is about rendering unto God. And really that is the main point of these verses. So today let’s consider: **“Render to Caesar, Render to God.”**

Our text takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus’ enemies have been trying to figure out a way to trap him, to trip him up, either to get the crowds to turn against him or to get the authorities to come down on him. They would like to get their hands on him themselves, but they were afraid of the crowds. So they practice an early form of “gotcha” journalism: Figure out a question to ask so that, no matter which way he answers, he’ll get in trouble. And so our text begins: **“Then the Pharisees went out and plotted together how to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.”**

There’s an old saying, “Politics makes strange bedfellows.” Well, so does opposition to Jesus. Groups that otherwise might not like each other, when they have common cause, can become unlikely allies. So it is here with the Pharisees and a group called the Herodians. The Pharisees, like most Jews, were nationalists; they did not like the fact that the pagan Romans were ruling over them. The Herodians, on the other hand, were political collaborators who were willing to work under the Romans because at least it gave them some measure of power. The House of Herod was the local political dynasty that had made a deal with Caesar to serve as puppet kings under the mighty Roman emperor.

Catch the tension and the political-religious dynamic at work here as the Pharisees set the trap. They’re going to ask Jesus a question that, if he answers it one way, will disappoint and anger the masses. But they also bring the Herodians along to witness Jesus’ answer, so that, if he answers it the other way, they, the Herodians, will not like it, and they will report Jesus to the Roman authorities. A delicious trap, so the Pharisees think. Heads, you lose. Tails, you lose also.

To gain Jesus’ confidence and good will, and to encourage him to speak freely and loosen up his tongue, the Pharisees have their spokesman start out with some flattery: **“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are truthful and teach the way of God in accord with the truth. You are not concerned about gaining anyone’s approval because you are not swayed by appearances.”** Now the irony here, of course, is that all of this is true. Jesus himself is truthful and he does speak and teach the way of God truthfully. And yes, Jesus does not care about man’s opinion, nor is he swayed by outward appearances. He has demonstrated that over and over in his bold and controversial ministry. The irony here is that it’s the Pharisees themselves who are not being truthful or speaking truthfully. They’re being dishonest, deceitful, and devious in their attempt to butter up Jesus and get him to slip. Jesus does not fall for it, but this is how they’re leading into their trick question.

Which the Pharisees then ask: **“So tell us, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”** Well, that’s a pretty clever question, a “gotcha” question. **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”** Is it lawful, is it right, for us Jews as God’s own children, who should be slaves to no one, to pay taxes on our person to a foreign, pagan emperor who has us under his thumb? If Jesus says yes, he has just lost the crowd; they’ll turn against him. **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”** If Jesus says no, the Herodians will hear it, and they will mark him as someone disloyal to the regime, a rebel against Caesar, an insurrectionist. And they will report him to the local Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Jesus, as he is apt to do, answers their question with a question. He asks them: **“Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?”** Jesus sees right through their phony flattery and calls them on it. He **“knew their evil purpose.”** Even so, he decides to use this occasion for his purpose, and so he tells them, **“Show me the coin used for the tax.”** Somebody digs into his pocket and brings Jesus a denarius, the Roman coin that would be used.

And now Jesus asks them another question, a question about the coin they themselves have just provided. He asks them, **“Whose image and inscription is this?”** That is, whose image, whose likeness, whose portrait do you see on this coin, and whose name is inscribed on it? This sounds like a pretty straightforward, simple question, and so the Pharisees quickly reply: **“Caesar’s.”**

What the Pharisees don’t realize is that now Jesus has caught them in a trap. Because what he says next is so brilliant, it is wisdom that cannot be refuted. He will answer their original question about paying taxes, but he

will do it in a way which neither the nationalists nor the Herodians could speak against him. And he lifts their sights, and the sights of the crowd—and our sights, too—to see a question about ourselves in relation to Jesus and to God.

Here is Jesus' answer: **“Therefore give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”** That gets at it, both our relation to Caesar and our relation to God, in one fell swoop.

First, **“give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”** This is really the minor point, because their question never really was a sincere question in the first place, it was just a set-up designed to trap Jesus. But Jesus does address briefly the matter of our responsibility toward civil government. Whoever the **“Caesar”** is over you at any particular time and place in history—well, Caesars need taxes to run whatever form of government happens to be in place. The government may be doing a good job or a bad job with those taxes; they may be collecting too much or too little taxes, but the point remains: Nations need governments. And governments collect taxes. It’s what they do. Caesar needs and demands his denarii. That’s the nature of life in this world.

So it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. We do render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. But as I say, this is only the minor point that Jesus is making. He has something more to say that goes beyond taxes and Caesar. And that is, that we are to render **“to God the things that are God’s.”** This is the most important thing Jesus has to say, and it applies to everyone, including us. Render to God the things that are God’s. And that has everything to do with how we receive, or reject the man who is saying this, namely, Jesus of Nazareth.

Now here we’re getting at it, and think back to that Roman denarius, with the likeness and inscription of Caesar on it. If that coin had the image and name of the emperor on it, and it did, then that meant you recognized it as such and you received it and used it for operating in that kingdom. The coin bore the image of the current Roman emperor, and the inscription gave his name and title: **“Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.”** Did you catch that? The Roman emperor claimed to be divine, the **“son of the divine Augustus.”**

Imagine your Jesus’ enemies. Here is Jesus, standing here right in front of you, telling you these things. You have observed his person and ministry for several years now. You have heard his words and seen his deeds, words of heavenly wisdom, deeds of divine mercy. So now the question comes: Whose image and inscription does he, Jesus, bear? The answer: God’s. Jesus’ words and his works attest, most clearly, that he is indeed the Son of the living God, the only one there is. Then why, O Pharisees, do you not receive this Jesus as your Messiah, your King and Deliverer sent from heaven? That would be the right way to render to God the things that are God’s: By believing in the one whom God sent. The image and the inscription are there for you to see.

That image and that inscription are there for you to see too. Look to Jesus your Savior. See in him the image of God, the God of all compassion and mercy. So great is his love for you that he was willing to be rejected by his enemies and to be crucified for you under Pontius Pilate. There on that cross the inscription read, **“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”** But really the inscription could read, “This is Jesus, the King who was willing to suffer shame and suffering and death for your salvation.” Yes, Jesus renders to God the things that only he could render: payment for all our debt of sin, a tax we could never pay, the very punishment of hell. But Jesus, the holy Son of God, does pay it, declaring in his dying breath, **“It is finished.”** Paid in full.” That the debt is paid is shown when Jesus then rises from the dead, offering life and peace and eternal salvation as a free gift.

So today as you see the image and inscription of God resting on this Jesus, “render to God the things that are God’s”: Faith and trust in the Savior he sends you—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.