

***Render Unto the Lord***

Matthew 22:15-22

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A woman gave her son Billy two quarters. One was for his Sunday School offering. The other quarter was for the gumball machine on the way home from Sunday School. Off Billy went, walking down the road toward the church. As he walked, he was flipping one of the quarters in the air and catching it. He did this successfully seven or eight times, then one time Billy missed catching the quarter. The quarter landed on the street, and rolled right into the drainage grate along the curb.

Billy looked down into the drain, then upward into the sky, and prayed, “Sorry, God...”

Friends, here we are on the third Sunday of our stewardship month, just one week away from Dedication Sunday, and it occurs to me that I've been pretty easy on you so far! Not so much today, because Jesus—in just one sentence—gives a pretty complete and all-encompassing stewardship lesson: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.”<sup>1</sup> And no matter how many times I read that passage, I don't think it gives us permission to look up toward heaven and say, “Sorry, God.”

In our gospel lesson, Jesus was asked a question that for many people was deeply personal, because it was a question regarding money. Like most people, the Israelites resented paying taxes, especially to an occupying nation. And so the religious authorities sought Jesus' opinion regarding the payment of taxes to Caesar. It seems like an innocent enough question, especially if you buy into the flattery with which the Herodians and Pharisees framed the question, but the alternative that Jesus faced by the question as it was posed to him puts him between a “political rock and a theological hard place.”<sup>2</sup> It was a question meant to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble. It was a well-devised trap.

A little background is in order here. “The poll tax mentioned in this passage was levied by the Romans against the Jews when Judea became a Roman province. When imposed for the first time, it provoked the rebellion of Judas the Galilean recorded in Acts 5:37. The Herodians favored the tax, but the Zealots, Pharisees, and people resented it. The Pharisees and the Herodians, though common adversaries in New Testament times on the very issue of rendering obedience and taxes to the Roman Empire, found themselves in common alliance in this instance to trap [Jesus] in His words... Should the authority of Caesar be recognized and the poll tax be paid to him? If Christ were to have affirmed payment of the poll tax to Caesar, he would no

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:21

<sup>2</sup> A phrase borrowed from Michael Barram, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct/Nov 2008, p. 24.

doubt have pleased the Herodians but would have made himself an even greater enemy of the Pharisees and an enemy of the people who shared popular resentment to the poll tax as an unlawful imposition by a heathen government. If, by contrast, [Jesus] were to have denied that the poll tax be paid, he would have made himself out to be an enemy of the state and possibly, subject himself to the charge of sedition.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the coin used to pay the tax carried the image of Caesar on one side, and the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” In essence the coin paid homage to a god other than the God of Israel, and it bore the image of this false god. Each coin used to pay the tax was a violation of the first and second of the ten commandments. Some Pharisees even held that it was heresy to possess such a coin.

So if Jesus were to answer the question directly, he would either alienate himself from the people of Israel and be branded a heretic, or he would put himself at risk of being arrested by the Roman authorities. A simple “yes” or “no” answer to the question would put Jesus in trouble.

But Jesus saw through the false flattery of his questioners. “Show me a coin,” he said. “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” When the leaders admitted that it was Caesar’s image that appears on the coin, then Jesus replied to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. In one simple statement, Jesus has successfully escaped the trap set by his detractors, and at the same time Jesus has affirmed that there is a place for civil government in the life of the person who desires to follow God. In fact, scripture will bear out that governments are ordained by God to foster the common good and to place limits on lawlessness that would threaten that common good. And so not only is there a place for both Caesar and God in our lives, but as faithful Christians we are called to be involved in the civic life of our society.

Dale Bruner says this in his commentary on this passage:

“The first point of Jesus' answer is respect for the state. The state performs such multiple services for its citizens, symbolized by coinage – from water, sewage, highways, and defense, [education, welfare, healthcare for the elderly and poor, and the like] – that we should appreciate that the state is... God's servant for our well-being. When a state thus serves, it is ingrate to refuse payment for services... Respect for government is an important form of respect for God.”<sup>4</sup>

But in truth, Jesus was addressing more than the relationship between church and state. Indeed, Jesus lays down for us a principle that says we are accountable.

<sup>3</sup> This background information can be commonly found in many sources. The source used here is David G. Hagopian, “Render to All What Is Due Them: What Every Christian Needs to Know about Honoring Civil Authority and Paying Taxes, Part 2”. Extracted from *Ordained Servant* vol. 4, no. 4 (October 1995).

<sup>4</sup> F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2, The Churchbook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 399.

We are accountable to the authorities in our society – Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But even more important, and in a way that is overarching all other ways, we are accountable to God--Give to God what is God's.

Most people, though, don't really hear the second half of Jesus' response. Yet even more than giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, we need to hear Jesus tell us to give to God what is God's. Not only do we need to hear Jesus tell us to give to God what is God's, but we also have to answer a critical question: What, exactly, is God's? What belongs to the Lord?

In a society that covets private property rights and individual ownership, in a world where one of the first words a child learns to say is "mine," in a world that tells you that you have to take care of yourself first and above all else—in the face of a me-first world, the Bible offers a different message regarding what belongs to whom.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

So, what belongs to God? The psalmist declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all those who dwell therein."<sup>5</sup> The last time I checked, "everything" is a pretty all-encompassing term.

It all belongs to God. You and I belong to God. It all belongs to God.

Don't you see, this isn't a teaching on taxation. It's a teaching on stewardship, and on how you and I are accountable to God for everything, because everything belongs to God in the first place. You and I are not the owners – God is. We are the stewards. "Steward" is an olde English term for manager. A steward manages the affairs of a household or an estate for the owner.

What we have isn't ours – it belongs to God. God has given it to us, with the responsibility that we will use what we have in a way that honors the will of God and that blesses God and our neighbor. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 4, the apostle Paul says this: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."<sup>6</sup> We have been entrusted everything – life, health, time, talents, property, money, the Gospel, relationships, children – we have been entrusted everything by God; the question is, "Have we proven faithful to the Owner, to the Master?"

Likewise Peter says in his first epistle, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."<sup>7</sup> Again, what we have been entrusted – and that would be everything – is given to us so that we can administer and share God's grace and blessing. Is that how we use what we've been given – to administer and share God's grace?

I've said it before, but it bears repeating. Just as you and I are called to remember that all we have is a gift from God and belongs to God, so do we on the staff and the Session of the church recognize that everything you put into the offering plate belongs to God. We, as a church, take our stewardship seriously. Everything we do as a church is done to support the ministry of the Gospel in Georgetown and beyond – proclaiming in word and in deed the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 24:1

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:2

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 4:10

There's one other thing I want to say about giving to God what is God's. In the story from Matthew, Jesus asks whose image is on the coin. What he doesn't ask, but what I would like to ask today is, "Whose image is imprinted in your being?" The truth is we were created in the image of God. We bear God's image. And therefore, we belong to God. In life and in death we belong to God, which also means that we are to give our selves over to God.

Stewardship truly does entail our being accountable to God in all things. That's why we put more than just a financial pledge card in your stewardship packets. We also put the volunteer information forms, so you can offer more of yourself than simply dollars and cents. If we are going to take seriously Jesus' command to give to God what is God's, we have to consider every aspect of our lives.

Next Sunday is Dedication Sunday. If you don't have your stewardship materials, please take some extra copies that we have in the narthex and in the lobby by the fellowship hall. You can fill out the pledge card and the volunteer form, and then either bring it to church next Sunday or send it to the church or bring it by the office in the next week or two.

We hope you will consider prayerfully how you will give to God what is God's through your giving to the ministry of this church. Truly, we are blessed with a committed, compassionate, caring congregation. It is because of your generosity that we are able to impact so many lives with the saving love of Jesus Christ.

I want to say two things about our budget. First, I'm sure you have noticed that our financial situation has been good all year – even exceptional. It is not due to a rise in overall giving, but as a result of new giving from one or two families. The second thing is that we don't give toward the budget. We give to God, through the ministry of the church, and the church is then able to plan our ministry accordingly. In truth, we won't establish a full budget for next year until we are confident we know how much to expect in pledges and tithes. The more any of us is able to give, then that means we are able to do more – more mission and outreach, more Christian education, more fellowship, more pastoral care.

Give to God what belongs to God. Jesus' words serve as a reminder that all of life is to be lived out as a debt of gratitude that we owe to God for the life he has given us. Every day is to be a giving back. Every day, as we wake up, our prayer ought to be, "Thank you, God, that I am awake. Thank you for this new day you have given to me. Let everything I do, everything I say, even everything I think be a gift to you. I am so grateful for the life you have given me. Let me live my life so that this day is a day I give back to you."

For you see, if you're going to render unto God what is God's, you'd better not hold anything back, because everything in our lives belongs to God.

Everything. Amen.