

Rendering to Caesar and to God

We just finished a presidential election. We saw lots of debates, heard a lot of rhetoric, and saw candidates telling us about what they'd do as the next president. Each candidate tried to tell us what the agenda of his administration would be. And of course, one of the main subjects was taxes. Each candidate had to tell the American people how they would handle our taxes. Of course, very few people like to pay taxes. And so both of the candidates were trying to tell us that they'd lower taxes for some or all Americans.

In our passage for today, we see Jesus getting questioned on taxes. What's his position on taxes? What would his policy on taxes be if he were elected Messiah?

Now, of course I'm being a little funny here. Nobody gets elected Messiah, and Jesus was not on a campaign trail. But as we think about this last election that we just went through, there certainly is some similarity to think about as we introduce our passage for today. You see, most people don't like to pay taxes. That's true today, and the same was true back then as well. But it was especially true for the Jews back then. Remember, in our country's history, we threw about 45 tons of tea into the ocean crying out, "No taxation without representation." We didn't like some foreign government taxing us without having a say in the matter. It made us Americans feel more like slaves than citizens. Well, that feeling was even moreso among the Jews in the first century, who were being taxed by a Romans. It reminded the Jews that they were not free, even though they lived in the Promised Land. It made them long all the more for a Messiah whom they hoped would give them freedom from taxes, and freedom from their Roman oppressors.

And so in some sense Jesus is being put on the spot as one who claimed to be the Messiah. This question about taxes really was a question about his agenda as the Messiah. Much like how the recent presidential candidates had to tell us what they'd do if they were president, Jesus was being asked what he'd do as Messiah. If he was the Messiah, what would that look like? What would Jesus do as the Messiah? Would he free the people from the bondage of the Romans, including the hated Roman tax? And so as Jesus is questioned here, we learn more about his role as the Messiah and about the nature of his kingdom he promised to bring.

And so to begin today, let me give you a little bit of historical background on the Jewish people that will help you understand the situation for them. Let's begin with the Exodus. Around 1500 BC, the Jewish people found themselves as slaves in Egypt. God promised to free them from that slavery and bring them into the Promised Land. And so that is what God did. Through the 10 plagues, and through the leadership of Moses, God freed the people from Egyptian slavery and brought them into the Promised Land.

And God told the Israelites that the Promised Land was their special inheritance. It was a land of milk and honey. It was to be a blessing for God's people. But as God brought them into the land, he made a covenant with them. That covenant included the Law. God demanded that the people seek to keep the Law. If they did, he said that they would be blessed in the land. If they didn't, God threatened that he would curse them in the land, and if they persisted in breaking the commandments, he would eventually exile them from the land.

And that's of course what happened. The people broke God's commandments, and ignored the many prophets God sent to call them back to obedience. And so God sent foreign nations to conquer them and exile them away from the Promised Land. And when that happened, God promised to one day restore them. God promised them freedom and restoration from their captors.

And so eventually the political climate changed for the better for the Israelites. Their captors the Babylonians were conquered by the Medes and the Persians. And the Persians allowed them to return to the Promised Land. They were even encouraged and assisted in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, with its temple and walls. At first it sounded too good to be true. Were God's promises of restoration finally coming true?

Well, actually, not quite. You see the Jews were able to return to the Promised Land, but they quickly realized that it wasn't the promised restoration. You see, they weren't really free. They were still effectively slaves of the Persians. Yes, they had more freedom. Yes, they were able to live back in the Promised Land. But they still were under Persian occupation. In Nehemiah 9:36-37 the people who returned to the Promised Land recognized that. They declared that they were slaves in the Promised Land. And they lamented that the bountiful fruit of the Promised Land was making foreign kings rich. In other words, their situation was not that much different as it was in Egypt. They were in the Promised Land, but they were slaves to a foreign nation. And that foreign nation was now taking the best of their produce - in other words, taxes. They were being taxed on the fruit of the Promised Land. None of this seemed right to them! They were supposed to be God's people. They shouldn't be slaves to pagan nations. They shouldn't be giving the blessings of the Promised Land to the pagan kings! The blessings of the Promised Land were for God's people weren't they? And after the Persians were conquered by the Greeks, and the Greeks were conquered by the Romans, the Jewish people were still in the same situation, under foreign occupation paying taxes to a foreign government -- the Romans. They were enslaved in the Promised Land by pagans.

You see, that is what the people were longing for. They were longing for the promised restoration. They wanted freedom. This is the sort of restoration they thought the Messiah would bring. Freedom from foreign taxes, because he would bring freedom from the Romans! Was Jesus the promised Messiah? The people hoped so!

And yet though this may be what the people wanted, that isn't exactly why Jesus was being asked about taxes here in our passage. He wasn't being asked about taxes by potential followers who were considering joining his cause. He was being asked about taxes by people opposed to him. He was being asked about taxes by people hoping to trap him in his own words. He was being asked about taxes in hope that he would either offend his potential followers or get himself in trouble with the legal authorities.

Let's begin at verse 13. Two groups of people come up to Jesus: the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were some of the religious leaders of the Jewish people. They were legalists, very concerned with the outward observance of the Law. They certainly were not fans of the Roman tax, but paid it because they had to. But the Pharisees would have represented the religious interest of the people.

The Herodians however would have represented a more political interest. They were official supporters of King Herod, who was basically the Roman governor of the Jewish people. The Herodians were Jews who practiced the Jewish religion only in a superficial sense, not too concerned about keeping the Mosaic Law at all. They were much more influenced by the Greek art and culture, and lived accordingly. But

since they were supporters of Herod, they would of course have supported the Roman tax.

I hope you understand that this was a strange coalition. The Pharisees and Herodians were very different groups of people. They had different worldviews and very different convictions. They were not typically allies by any means. It might be like the NRA joining forces with PETA. But what brought these two different groups together? One common threat - Jesus. They both saw Jesus as a threat and so all the way back in Mark chapter 3 we saw them plotting together to destroy Jesus. And so what happens in this passage is one of their attempts to try to trap Jesus in his own words. Verse 13 tells us that right away. It says that their motive was to catch him in his own words.

And so then they come up to him in verse 14 and say some very nice things. They call him "Teacher," showing respect and interest. They tell Jesus that they know he is only concerned with God's truth. And lastly they acknowledge that Jesus is not a respecter of persons - he won't compromise on the truth because it offends someone or could get him in trouble. These were all very nice things they said to him, and actually all very true. But, let's face it - this was false flattery on their part. They were buttering him up and setting him up. What they said was true, but they didn't actually believe it. Jesus immediately responds in verse 15 by describing their words as hypocrisy. Remember, the passage starts out by telling us that they were trying to catch him in his words. So these flattering words were actually just trying to set Jesus up for the question they would bring him. Verse 14, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" That's their question.

In their minds, their words of flattering are calling Jesus to not answer based on what *any man* might think. They are calling Jesus to answer based on his conviction. And yet the people before him had quite a vested interest in the answer to Jesus' question. The Pharisees and Herodians obviously thought they were placing Jesus into a trap. They thought it was one of those questions where there was no good answer. If Jesus said, "Yes," we should pay the taxes, then certainly that would offend the people who were there witnessing it, and would go against the principles of the Pharisees. Both the people and the Pharisees hated the tax for the reasons I've already mentioned. If Jesus said that the taxes should be paid, it would call into question his Messianic mission. It would possibly discredit him as the Messiah. What kind of a Messiah is this? I thought the Messiah was supposed to bring us freedom from these taxes! And so if Jesus advocated paying the tax, it would call into question whether he was really the Messiah.

And yet if Jesus said, "No," we shouldn't pay the taxes, then that could get him into big legal trouble. Remember, the Herodians were right there. That's like making an illegal U-turn when a cop is sitting right at the intersection. If Jesus advocated not paying the tax right in front of the Herodians, it would mean legal trouble for him. It would give the Herodians grounds to have him arrested.

So which would be it, the Pharisees and Herodians thought. Would Jesus move forward with his claim to be Messiah by denying the tax? If so, it would mean legal trouble for him. And if Jesus approved the tax, they hoped many of his followers would become disillusioned in him, concluding that he wasn't the Messiah that they hoped he would be.

And yet the wisdom of God is higher than the wisdom of men. They thought they had trapped Jesus. But his response is marvelous. Even though Jesus knew they were trying to trap him, he doesn't join in their hypocrisy. He indeed answers in truth, not respecting men, but instead uses this as an opportunity to teach. Jesus

asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. In verse 16 he asks, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They reply to him, "Caesar's." The picture on this denarius coin would have been the picture of Emperor Tiberius, and the inscription on one side read, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus". And the inscription on the other side read in Latin, Pontif Maxim, meaning, "Highest Priest." (You can find a picture of this coin fairly easily on the Internet, if you are interested.) And so this image and inscription would have instantly brought to mind all the concerns the people and the Pharisees had. Here this pagan king claims to be the Son of God and the Highest Priest! And it's this pagan king with his pagan lies who they are enslaved under!

And yet this coin bore the image and inscription of Caesar. It obviously belonged to Caesar, regardless of his false pagan beliefs. And so listen then to Jesus' assessment and answer: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The Greek word for "render" here has the idea of paying back or giving back. Jesus gives an important principle here to answer the question of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God, what belongs to God.

And so about the tax - Jesus says pay it! Pay it because you are basically giving back to Caesar what is already his. It's his coin you use to pay the tax, so give it back to him. It was his coin, and to the degree that they were all benefiting from its use, they were obligated to give back to him what he required. And so Jesus calls them to honor the emperor with the honor that is rightly due to him. The Herodians could not find fault in that statement.

But as profound of an answer that was, Jesus then turns it back to God. Render to God what is God's. The idea of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's is a profound principle, but how much more profound is this! We need to give to God what is rightly due to him!

Of course Jesus' answer makes a distinction between the kingdoms of men and the kingdom of God. Remember, the people were looking for the Messiah to usher in the kingdom. Jesus had started his ministry saying that the kingdom was at hand, and people were rightly thinking that Jesus might be the Messiah. But by answering in this way, Jesus is really telling us more about what it means for him to be the Messiah. He is sharing more about his kingdom. His kingdom is not going to be manifested at this time through doing away with the kingdoms of men. If it was, he'd tell them not to pay the tax because the Messiah had come and Rome's days were numbered. Or maybe he'd say, "Pay it now, but you won't have to soon, because I'm here!" But Jesus doesn't say that.

You see Jesus is clarifying the nature of his kingdom. Yes, the kingdom of God, broadly speaking, is above all the kingdoms of men. God is over all. That's true. And there will come a time when God will do away with all the earthly kingdoms of men. But that time is not now. And so when Jesus says that the kingdom is at hand, he's not talking about getting rid of all the earthly kingdoms of men quite yet. That means Jesus sees a way for his kingdom to coexist with the kingdom of men. You see, when Jesus came announcing the kingdom, he was talking about the kingdom more narrowly. The kingdom of God described in the gospels is not about God as king over all, though that's true. It's about God as king over the redeemed. You see the kingdom Jesus is bringing is a kingdom of redemption. It's the kingdom that brings salvation to God's people. Salvation from eternal damnation.

That's the kingdom Jesus is the Messiah over. That kingdom is now being manifested visibly through the church. But it can and does coexist right now with the

kingdoms of men. Jesus is setting out a principle called "Two Kingdoms." There are the kingdoms of men expressed in civil governments and empires, like the Roman Empire. That's one of the two kingdoms. And then there is the kingdom of God. That's the kingdom Jesus is the Messiah of. That's the kingdom Jesus has been teaching about. That's the kingdom he is ushering in. Of course, the kingdoms of men are temporary. The kingdom of God is eternal. Right now the kingdoms of men have the earthly glory, and the kingdom of God manifested in the church can seem so meager at times. But as promised long ago, God's kingdom will eventually fill the earth when King Jesus returns again to this world. At that point, all the earthly kingdoms will be judged for their rebellion. At that point, they will be replaced with the one kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. At that time, the kingdom of God will permanently displace the kingdoms of men. And only those in the kingdom of God, only those who have been saved by Jesus, will be in the final consummated kingdom. Of course I'm describing heaven. I'm describing eternal life. That is what life will look like in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

But that time is not yet. Now we are governed by this principle given here by Jesus. This principle that there are two kingdoms - the kingdoms of men, and the kingdom of God. Both are under God's ultimate control, even though God for a time is tolerating sinful men like Caesar to rule. But the principle Jesus gives us is that we can belong to both kingdoms. We are all born into some nation or empire which demands our honor and allegiance. And we can also enter into the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

So Jesus here gives us a clue of what belongs to Caesar by looking at the coin. What about God? What belongs to God? If we must give to God what is God's, then what does that include? I heard a sermon on this passage that said *everything* belongs to God. Well sure, that is true in an ultimate sense. But Jesus makes a distinction here between what belongs to Caesar versus what belongs to God. Well, the coin had the image and the inscription of Caesar. That claimed the coin for Caesar. What about God? Has he placed his image anywhere? Yes, we know that he has. The book of Genesis tells us that man was created in God's image. We, humans, bear God's image. We, ourselves, belong wholly to God. This is a huge demand on us! What belongs to God, what is due to God, is our entire selves. We must give of our whole lives to God! That is what we must render to God.

But again, Jesus is saying that both of these are true demands on us. Jesus commands us to render what is due to God and what is due to Caesar. But he sets it beautifully in a proper limit here. This limit is very important. Caesar's coin claimed divinity, but here Jesus distinguishes Caesar from God. Jesus says that Caesar is not God. You see, we as Christians, must be in but not of this world. We are in the kingdoms of men ruled by people like Caesar. We must submit to them, but only in so far as they are not in conflict with God. This is a principle we see throughout Scripture. We are called to submit to earthly authorities, but only to the degree that they don't call us to disobey God. Jesus says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but realize that he is not God - no matter what he claims. You don't ultimately belong to Caesar, but to God. The Pharisees and the people could not find fault in that statement.

And so the attempted trap by the Pharisees and the Herodians had failed. At the end of the passage, verse 17, even they were utterly amazed. They couldn't help but be impressed by his answer. But in their failed trap, we see their real problem exposed. Jesus called it hypocrisy in verse 15, saying that they were trying to "test" him; the word for test can also be translated "tempt". You see, their actions showed that they weren't living out the image of God in their life. The Pharisees and the Herodians hadn't given to God what is God's. Sin had marred the image of God in them. Their hypocrisy showed that. Their hypocrisy was not a

reflection of God's image in them! No, Scripture tells us that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18). There is no hypocrisy in God. Their hypocrisy was not a reflection of God's image in them. And Scripture tells us that God does not tempt people. In fact the Bible says that it is Satan that tempts people (James 1:13).

You see, the Pharisees and Herodians were living consistent with who they were. Sin had marred the image of God in them. And they now lived in allegiance to Satan. They did not live as belonging to God, but as belonging to Satan. And so they lived in hypocrisy and in accusation against the Messiah. They tried to trap Jesus. And yet at the end of this passage it is they who are left condemned and trapped by their own actions. And Jesus is left exalted!

The Jews at the time wanted freedom and restoration. They hoped the Messiah would bring that to them. Jesus indeed would bring that freedom and restoration. But it was something different than many expected. You see, the problem wasn't really about the Roman empire. The problem was actually the same problem the Pharisees and the Herodians had. It's the same problem that Caesar had. It's the same problem we all have. Mankind has fallen in sin. Our sin has marred the image of God in all of us. Yes, we all belong to God because his image is upon mankind. And yet Scripture shows how that image has been marred because of our fall into sin. Man is totally depraved now and in need of restoration. We are enslaved to our sin, and need freedom.

So how can we render to God what is God's? Only by the blood of Christ. Only by the work of the Messiah in our life. If we are to render to God what is God's, we need his image restored and renewed in us. We need the image of God renewed in us! That's what Jesus does for us. Think about this with a few verses from Colossians. Colossians chapter 1 says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. And it goes on to say that Christ is the head of the church. And so those who are in the church now bear Christ's image as our head - which is the very image of God! Colossians chapter 3 goes on to confirm this. It says that as Christians we "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (3:10). Renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. You see, it says that if Christ is our Lord and Savior, then God's image is being renewed in us! That makes sense doesn't it? If Jesus is the perfect image of God, and we are united to Jesus, then God's image is again at work in our life! The Westminster Shorter Catechism actually uses this language to talk about the process of Christian sanctification. It says that Christians are being "renewed in the whole man after the image of God" (WSC 35)!

In other words, we can only really begin to render to God what is God's as Christ works in us. As Christ renews God's image in us, we again see that we belong to God. We begin to desire to give back to God that which is God's: ourselves! We realize that we don't belong to ourselves. Or to Satan. But to God. God becomes our Lord as we are brought into his kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. Apart from this, man looks only to exalt himself, much like Caesar. But when Christ is in us, we are enabled more and more to render to God what is God's. That's true restoration and freedom. It wasn't what many Jews were looking for. But as Jesus proclaimed here what it meant for him to be Messiah, surely some believed. As Jesus proclaimed here the true nature of his kingdom, surely some came in faith. Surely some began to realize that their view of the promised kingdom restoration was too small. They didn't need freedom from taxes but freedom from sin. They didn't need long life in an earthly kingdom but eternal life in a heavenly kingdom. God had a greater restoration in mind than they did. Something not limited to the political realm, but that touched peoples' hearts and souls and minds. Something

that restored in us the very image of God that we lost at that fall. That's what the Messiah came to do.

Saints of God, Jesus commands us here today. Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's. This is not one command, but two commands. We must do both. We are in this world. There is honor to be given to those who are in authority over us. Scripture calls us to be good citizens of the kingdoms of men. And that's not just a political thing. It means fulfilling whatever obligations you have in this world. Politically, it might mean voting, or doing jury duty, or just keeping the laws of the land. Financially, it might mean faithfully paying off your debts. Culturally, it might mean honoring those in positions of honor. Socially, it might mean doing your part to make your town a better place. When Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, he said he would plant a tree. You see, the ordinary, everyday things we do in our world, are part of the ways we render to Caesar. They are participating in civic life and duties. They involve loving our neighbors. They are not holy tasks, per se. But in these everyday duties, we are obeying God. Jesus has called us to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. We too must fulfill our obligations as citizens and members in society. And we do that from a Christian perspective that calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But we are also called to render to God what is God's. That means we recognize that we wholly belong to God. And so a good starting place in rendering to God what is God's is called "faith and repentance." Acknowledge you need his salvation that comes only through Jesus. And then strive to see his renewed image in you. And as you realize that you completely belong to God, you'll begin to see that there is nothing he cannot ask of you. He demands your complete allegiance. But don't be scared by that. Rejoice in that. Rejoice that you are part of his kingdom. To belong to God as one of his own means you have "eternal security." It means that though the kingdoms of this world will pass away, there is nothing that can separate you from Jesus. He will carry you through to the day of his return. On that day, he will finish the work in your life; he will complete the restoration work in your soul. On that day, the image of God will be fully restored in each of us who belong to Christ.

Jesus' words here have application too for the relationship of the church and state. Jesus gives us two commands here, not one. We must not blur the distinction. Caesar is not God, no matter what anyone tells you. Likewise, we don't want the state telling the church what to do. But in the same way, the church is not Caesar. The church is bringing the kingdom of God to this world. It's doing that in different nations throughout the world. But its mission is not political, but spiritual. At this point in redemptive history, the church has not been tasked with the job of taking over earthly kingdoms. Yes, Christians might providentially rise to power, and they will necessarily govern from a Christian worldview, but that's a lot different than trying to make the church itself take over political institutions. The church is to coexist with the state at this time. The church's mandate from Jesus was to make disciples of all the nations. It's a gospel-oriented mission. It's a kingdom-oriented mission. But a kingdom that's *not* of this world. A kingdom that at this point is not trying to overturn earthly kingdoms. Yes, in the end, Christ will return and judge the world. But for now, the church is tasked with making disciples of Christ's kingdom. Of course, that includes the church teaching people to see that they are to render both to Caesar and to God.

That's why our church as a *church* doesn't get involved in politics. But this is also why our church calls you *individually* to get involved in politics. As a church, we are giving you Jesus' command to render to both Caesar and God as