

Pastor Jon's October Sermon based on Matthew 22:15-22. "Give to God what is Gods!"

Today we heard the oft quoted saying of Jesus "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and Render to God what is God's."

Are those equal things... giving to Caesar and Giving to God? No.

In our Gospel, we have two opposing Jewish Religious/Political Parties question Jesus in the Temple about the legality of paying these taxes to the emperor.

The Herodians were a secular religious party that supported Herod the Great, who was a Roman Puppet. They were pro-Roman empire and liked the benefits of Rome... roads, aqueducts, coliseums, etc. The Pharisees on the other hand were religious quietists who resented the Roman occupation but accepted it as a necessary evil. They advocated for submission to Rome as long as they didn't interfere with their practice of religion. Here you have these two opposite political parties who were united in their opposition to Jesus.

They wanted to trap Jesus to choose one side or another.

Remember Jesus just turned over the tables in their temple. He ticked them off big time. They wanted him gone. They asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If Jesus argues against paying taxes to Rome he could be accused of anti-Roman activity and arrested by Pontius Pilate. Which they accused Jesus of anyway in order to crucify him. If he supports the tax, he would lose support from his followers who felt the taxes were an economic burden on them and were a symbol of the lost freedom.

Instead Jesus answers in Jesus fashion by not answering the question directly. He first calls them hypocrites or literally someone who wears a mask... or a stage actor, and asks them to produce a Roman coin. And sure enough one of these two groups of people in this holiest of places presented a denarius, the Roman coin you paid taxes with. Keep in mind the Torah in Exodus 20 prohibits people to carry anything with a graven image on it. Jesus embarrassed them as they possessed the unholy Roman coin that

had the head of the reigning emperor and the tail would say,
“Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus.”

Jesus then answers in a rhetorical device called an epigram. Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to give to God what is God’s. They were amazed at Jesus answer. An epigram is a short poem or saying that expresses an idea in a clever or amusing way. It usually has a witty ending that annuls the first part of the poem or saying.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s... then imagine a pregnant pause... and give to God what is God’s. The second half of the epigram cancels out the first. After all, everything belongs to God. God owns everything... including Caesar. Paying taxes to Caesar was necessary to keep the peace and local services, but Jesus is saying know where your true trust should lie... with God.

One scholar, Debi Thomas wrote this week,
“If *everything* belongs to God, then our spiritual lives and our political lives must cohere. They must not contradict each another. Our "rendering unto Caesar" must always take second place to what we render unto God.”

Sometimes governments need to be called out for abuses or injustices. Sometimes unjust laws need to be overturned. We shouldn’t blindly pay our taxes. In the Roman Empire there was taxation without representation. Now we elect representatives and senators to help spend our tax dollars wisely. We also have access to public meetings and can speak up when we see injustices in how our tax dollars are being spent. It is our job to speak up. One way to do that is vote.

The bottom line for me is that we have dual citizenship... in heaven and on earth. Philippians 3:20 says “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 2:19 says “so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

Our ultimate citizenship is with God and God's kingdom. Our ultimate allegiance should be there. So teachings like in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount should inform how we live as citizens on earth and how we vote or pay our taxes. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And "No one can serve two masters" "You cannot serve God and wealth." These teachings of Christ inform how we are to live as citizens on earth. And yet we often get confused as to where our loyalties lie. The law in this text for me is in the idols we worship. What things other than God do we worship? Where have we placed our trust that hasn't been life giving for us and those around us?

The good news is know that you are made in the image and likeness of God. We are stamped with the sign of the cross and marked with the Holy Spirit in our Baptism. We belong to God. Christ went to the cross for our sins and our idolatry. We are forgiven. As a result, we are called to give thanks and praise to God with the gifts we have been given. So your assignment this week is to answer the question, "If everything belongs to God, What tributes do I owe to God?"