

Matthew 22: 15-22 NIV

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax^l to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So, they left him and went away.

Whose Image Do We Wear?

The political season is upon us, and we’ve got some pretty hotly contested races going. Which means the television is rife with political commercials. I don’t know about you all, but I really get turned off by political commercials. Why can’t the candidates be nice to one another? Oftentimes, I’ll find myself, after watching a political commercial, rooting for the other guy...simply because the one who sponsored the advertisement seemed so vicious and unfair in his and her attacks on the other person they are running against. It seems it’s more about why you shouldn’t vote for a person instead of why you should vote for them.

You know the taglines with the candidates saying: “I’m so and so and I approve this ad.”

Do you ever think to yourself, when you see that, “Well, if you approve that kind of mean-mudslinging and stretching of the truth...I don’t know why anyone would want to put their trust in you!”

“I’d be ashamed to put my endorsement on that kind of meanness!”

Our Gospel Lesson for this morning is well known and often used as an excuse for political theocracies, a need to blindly follow governments (oppressive or not), and so forth.

Once again, Christ’s Words have been seriously misunderstood and misused...kind of like some of those political t-v ads we see...the truth gets twisted.

Jesus does not clearly resolve the question of authority of Church versus State in this morning’s encounter. Requirements, such as taxation, imposed by the State are not the main issues of our passage. Rather, the main issue is that, as believers, our total allegiance belongs to God, and all other obligations are to be subordinate to this supreme loyalty.

Let’s take a closer look at what’s going on here in Matthew Chapter 22. The story starts with the Jewish Church leaders looking for some way to get rid of Jesus. They know that they don’t have any power to do anything to Him themselves, except flog Him, and that might just have made Jesus even more popular. So, they tried to find ways to get Him to say something against the Romans so they can take over and do something to keep Jesus quiet.

But there is a problem. A lot of the ordinary folks regarded Jesus as a prophet and just giving Him to the Romans could make things very difficult for themselves. So, they come up with a plan that, if it works, and they saw no reason why it wouldn't, whatever Jesus does will upset one side or the other. This is their plan. There are two main groups arguing against each other.

One was the Herodians. These were not a Church group, but a group of Jewish people who supported Herod Antipas and wanted closer and better ties with Rome. They supported Roman taxation and believed it was right for everyone to pay taxes to Rome. This tax wasn't based on income, but was a poll tax, something everyone had to pay...and there was a lot of unscrupulousness that went along with it.

The other group was the Pharisees. This group was a religious group, and they objected strongly against paying anything to Rome, claiming it was a heresy to do so. They based this claim on the fact that the tax had to be paid in Roman coins, which had an image of Caesar on them. They refused to pay anything but the Temple Tax, which was paid in Jewish shekels.

It's hard to see how two such opposing forces could work together, but they did. They had a common cause—get rid of this Jesus!!! So, they thought they had a question worked up, that no matter what Jesus answered, He would condemn Himself.

The question was: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The conspirators thought there were only two possible answers. Either answer would condemn Jesus. **explain**

They start out by flattering Jesus, and Jesus, quite justifiably, calls them hypocrites. He knows what is in their hearts. Matthew tells us that it was “evil”. So instead of answering their yes-or-no question, Jesus throws a question back at them by asking for one of the coins.

Apparently, Jesus did not make it a habit to carry Roman coins around with Him. His treasure was elsewhere.

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” Jesus says. He points to the picture and inscription on the coin. “Whose head is this?” Jesus asks, “And whose title?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.

“Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’” Ingenious! So ingenious that the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians “were amazed. So, they left him and went away.”

How many folks know the saying: “Render unto Caesar?” **or how the scripture says it.** A lot of people today may not even know that this comes from the mouth of Jesus; it's so well known. I think that our familiarity with this saying can keep us from seeing the deeper meaning of this passage...we also often leave out the other part.

Jesus does say, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but he also says, in the same breath: “and to God what is God's.” In Jesus' response, He used the Greek word “apodote,” which is translated as render or give back.

The coin bore Caesar's image: give it back to him. But whose image do we bear? If we bear God's image, does this not also mean: “Give yourself back to God?”

In Genesis 1:27 we are told: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Quite literally, we have all been created in the image of God, and we are to give back to God what is rightfully God's!

Have we done this? Are we doing this? When humankind rebelled against the Creator, what was one of the main reasons? We see in Genesis 3 that we wanted to be like God, but of course, in doing this we did not become more like God...instead, we blurred our image

But by His grace, because of His great love for us, God has come back in human form to reclaim that which is rightfully His...humankind. God has come to us in Jesus Christ, and in God's mercy, all of us who receive Jesus Christ, all of us who believe in His name, God grants the right to, once again, and for all of us who have been born of God—through the Cross of Christ, God stamps God's inscription on us.

Whose portrait, whose inscription do we have stamped on us? It is to be the likeness and image of God, for He made us...and as Christians, Christ has purchased us with His blood!!! Are we willing to allow God to have what is already rightfully His?... Our lives...our allegiance?

This does not mean that we do not pay taxes to Caesar, or to whoever the governing authority is. Jesus tells us to be good citizens. We are to be good witnesses for Christ. Because our ultimate and everlasting citizenship is not of this world. Dust is not the final word for our lives; our citizenship is in heaven! And this is what we, the Church of Jesus Christ, are even while we still live in this dying world.

We are citizens of another, of a much greater kingdom. Should we give to Caesar what is Caesar's...or should I say give to Uncle Sam? Sure thing. But that's just a coin. What we are to render unto God is our whole selves!

Are we doing this? Or do we still live as Almost Christians, who have half an interest set in the kingdom of man, and another half in the kingdom of heaven?

We are to bear the image of God. There is to be no competition between God and Uncle Sam! Our allegiance must be to Christ and Christ alone!!! Sure, we are to pay a tax to Uncle Sam, but God's due is our complete devotion!

Is He getting it? Let this be our true and complete aim while we await our eternal home! Friends. Brothers and sisters in Christ. God has chosen us out of this world. God has stamped God's image and inscription on our hearts.

We are to let that image and inscription shine before all peoples so that they too may come to know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to join us in waiting for His joyful return from heaven—Jesus, the one who died for our sins so that we may have salvation.

Thanks be to God. Amen!