

The Things That Are God's

Isaiah 26:1-8, Mark 12:13-17 (ESV)

March 30, 2003

“Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they marveled at him.” The Pharisees and Herodians who set out to trap Jesus in his talk ended by acknowledging his brilliance, but they confirmed their own malice and hypocrisy in that they still were not converted, they still did not believe, and they still did not follow him. God, grant us the grace to learn and benefit from their mistakes and failures, that we may not be confirmed in malice and hypocrisy but instead may believe, follow, and obey!

The good news in today’s reading begins, oddly enough, with what was meant to be false flattery by those who wanted to trap Jesus: “Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.” If, of course, they had really believed this, they would not and could not have gone forward with their attempt to trap Jesus. But even though they did not believe it, and even though they meant it for evil, they spoke a great truth they did not know, without realizing what they were doing, and that truth has been preserved for us.

“Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.” Yes, Jesus Christ is true, and he does teach the truth of God. In the midst of all the lies, falsehoods, deceptions, betrayals, abandonments, degradations, and heartaches of this world and of our lives, this one man, Jesus Christ, is the truth. He lives the truth. He speaks the truth. He is the truth. If you are tired of all the lies, if you are tired of all the deceitfulness, and if you are tired of all the broken promises, here is the one who is true. If you cannot stand any more of the twisting, embellishing, exaggerating, or denying, here is the one who is true. If you are hungry for the truth, if you are thirsty for veracity, and if you long for one who is real, here is Jesus Christ, who is the truth.

As the one who is true, Jesus truly teaches the way of God. It goes to the heart of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ reveals God to us. Jesus is not merely a teacher at whom to marvel. He is not merely a preacher. He is not merely a moral instructor or an example to imitate. Jesus Christ is the very presence of God with us and among us. Jesus Christ is what God has to say to us. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, come to save his people from their sins. So, we do not have to seek the invisible God as one who is hidden; God has come to us. We do not have to imagine

the unknowable God as one who is beyond our imagining; God has spoken to us. We do not have to worship the powers, forces, and vitalities of the world; Jesus Christ shows us the one who made the world and all that is in it.

As the one who is true and who truly teaches the way of God, Jesus Christ speaks the truth to and about the powers of the world. Those who came to question him were not looking for information. They did not need an answer about taxes. They were trying to trap Jesus. If he said "Pay the taxes," the people of Israel would hate him. If he said, "Do not pay the taxes," he would put himself in trouble with the government. So he turned it back on his questioners. "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's."

By winning this answer from those who sought to trap him, Jesus was saying to them, in effect, "You yourselves carry and are willing to use money with Caesar's picture on it to buy and sell, so you have already decided to participate in his world, his empire, and his economy, including his taxes." And after his questioners implicated themselves with their own coin, Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." That is, "Are there some things which you are *not* supposed to give to the nation? Are there some things that belong to God alone? Give the nation everything it deserves: taxes, loyalty, obedience, good citizenship, and so forth. God made nations for the ordering of human life, for the well being of human communities and families. But do not give the nation your heart and soul. Those belong to God alone. There is a place in God's good creation for loyalty to the nation. But do not worship the nation. Save your worship for the God and Father of Jesus Christ alone. The nation does not have the final say about who we are and what we are to do. We stand before God Almighty. And if and when nation and God are in conflict, we are called upon to obey God alone."

This commandment implies and acknowledges that there is a legitimate, God-given place for national authority in the world. Governments exist for the ordering of human life, for mutual help, and for protection from enemies outside and within. We realize how remarkable this teaching is when we remember Jesus said this about three days before the Roman Empire nailed him to the cross! Jesus was in Jerusalem to die, himself, for you and me. It would have been easy for him to have questioned and challenged the authority and legitimacy of the state, but that is not what he did. Even under threat of false arrest and wrongful death, Jesus endorsed the legitimate authority of the state. So it is appropriate for Christians to render unto the state our taxes, our patriotism, our loyalty, and our obedience. I think we all know that. In fact, the danger here is probably not that the state might get too little of this from us, but that it might get too much. If we shift from appropriately great trust, loyalty, and

obedience to inappropriately absolute trust, loyalty, and obedience, then we would have gone too far. Then we would be giving Caesar things that do not belong to Caesar. Then we would be giving to the nation things that belong to God alone. Then we would have taken the state, which is part of God's good creation, and made it into an idol. Therein lies the problem.

For at the same time that Jesus again implies and acknowledges that there is a legitimate, God-given place for national authority in the world, he also places that legitimate, God-given national authority within a larger, limiting context: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." This raises the question, "What are 'the things that are God's'?" What are we, in obedience to Jesus Christ, to withhold from the state in order to render to God alone? What belongs to God alone? The Old Testament emphasizes the majesty and sovereignty of God over all the world. The creatures of the world, the nations of the world, the leaders of the world, and the history of the world are all in the hands of God. As it says in the Psalms, "The earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1 ESV). It all belongs to God. The world, our life, and our breath belong to God. We are to render to God our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. John Calvin wrote in the 1500s that we ourselves belong to God:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal [John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page, 3.7.1 (1:690)].

We do not belong to disease, decay, decline, or death. We do not belong to fate, chance, coincidence, or the devil. We do not belong to the economy, the government, family, or ourselves. We belong to God, and to God alone.

So, the second half of the teaching of Jesus, "Render... to God the things that are God's," provides a larger, limiting context for the first half of the teaching, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." The antagonistic question about the

legality of taxes led to the larger question, an ultimate question, of how to live the faithful life. In the great days of the Roman Empire, it was easy to be deceived into believing that the nation was absolute. Many believed the official faith of the empire, that Rome itself was eternal. But four-hundred years after Christ, the Visigoths invaded the Empire and sacked the city of Rome. Augustine, a pastor in north Africa, had to convince even the people of the church that their hope was not in the fading city of Rome but in the eternal City of God, the kingdom of heaven. And if it was easy to be deceived then, how much easier it is now! Our empires are larger, our wealth greater, and our weapons millions of times more destructive. History teaches us that every empire has come to an end, but we would prefer to think that it will not happen to us. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, we witnessed the demise of our greatest enemy, but it only made us more confident of how good and right we are, not more careful about how precarious and tentative all human accomplishments and institutions are.

Now we find ourselves embroiled in a more difficult situation on more fronts than we can know or number. At one level we recoil from all war. At another level, we know that there are things that need to be done for the betterment of the world even if they are terrible to do. Totally apart from the current conflict, it is sad for us to realize that the United States of America cannot continue forever. The day will come, perhaps after our time, when the United States will no longer exist. God will still exist. By the grace of God in the resurrection, you and I will exist. But the United States will no longer exist. It is a part of this created world which is passing away. But we have been promised safe passage into the new creation. So still today, our hope is not in the fading nations of this world but in the eternal City of God, the kingdom of heaven.

And so it is that this teaching of Jesus, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," gives us both the freedom and the responsibility to decide what we are to render to Caesar and what we are to render to God. This is an assertion of both the freedom and the responsibility of a Christian to decide how to live his or her life in the face of competing claims for loyalty, in the larger context of the gospel, and as an expression of both faith and obedience. This saying engages us and will not let us go.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," calls on us to be good citizens. As Christians, we should be the best citizens of whatever nation we occupy. We serve the state, not for the glory of the state, but for the greater glory of God. We do our duty, not only out of obligation to the state, but in joyful response and obedience to the grace of God. We participate in the commonwealth, not only for the sake of the commonwealth, but as part of the unfolding history of God's work with humanity. At the same time, we of all people

are most ready to tell the nation when it has exceeded its legitimate bounds, and this also is good citizenship, an important service and duty. The nation that reaches too far ceases to be a good nation and begins to fall. Naming the limits may not be welcomed, but it is always good service and good citizenship.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” calls on us not only to be good citizens, but even more to be disciples of Jesus Christ. If we are to pay our taxes to Caesar, how much more are we to give ourselves to God! We owe God heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are to give to God alone our worship. The ultimate purpose of human existence is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever. As Isaiah wrote, “Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock” (Isaiah 26:4 ESV). Jesus Christ calls us to give our faith, trust, loyalty, love, gratitude, and obedience to God his father. If you have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, we urge you to do so. It comprises affirmative answers to these three questions: “Do you admit that you are a sinner, and stand in the need of the grace and mercy of God? Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you promise to follow him as a faithful member of his church?” So, “Render...to God the things that are God’s.” Do not put it off. Do not wait until it is too late. Give yourself to God. Stand up and be counted among the people of God.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” calls on us not only to be good citizens, and not only to be disciples of Jesus Christ. but also to be good stewards of all that we are and all that we have. Most of us pay our taxes. We do so in part because we are afraid not to. But we do so in part because we believe in and appreciate what we are paying for: defense, police, roads, schools, and so forth. But our tithes and alms are something different. Tithes and alms are the response that we make to God’s always prior grace, our response to God’s countless goodnesses to us, our gratitude for God’s blessings on us. As good a citizen as I am, and I try to be the best I can, I also believe in and appreciate what God has done, is doing, and will do for me infinitely more than what the United States has done, is doing, or will do for me. Are we making an appropriate response, financially, as disciples and stewards, to the amazing grace of God?

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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