

Matthew 22:15-22 (ESV)

¹⁵ ^g Then the Pharisees went and plotted how ^h to entangle him in his talk. ¹⁶ And they sent ⁱ their disciples to him, along with ^j the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, ^k we know that you are true and teach ^l the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for ^m you are not swayed by appearances.⁵ ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay ⁿ taxes to ^o Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why ^p put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.⁶ ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, ^q “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they ^r left him and went away.¹

^g For ver. 15-32, see Mark 12:13-27; Luke 20:20-38

^h [Luke 11:54]

ⁱ Mark 2:18

^j Mark 3:6; [Mark 8:15]

^k [John 3:2]

^l Acts 18:26; [Acts 13:10]

^m See Acts 10:34

⁵ Greek *for you do not look at people’s faces*

ⁿ ch. 17:25

^o Luke 2:1; 3:1

^p See John 8:6

⁶ *A denarius* was a day’s wage for a laborer

^q Rom. 13:7

^r Mark 12:12

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

It's All About the Imprinted Image

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Text: Matthew 22:15-22

“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This famous line that Jesus dumbfounds the Pharisees with is meant first of all to do just that—dumbfound them. The Pharisees and other authorities are trying to trap Jesus in riddles and with questions to which every answer is a wrong answer. Have you quit robbing banks yet? Either yes or no implies guilt. Jesus was asked whether it was lawful to pay the poll tax to Rome. His opponents were looking for a way to diminish Jesus’ rising popularity. Taxes are never popular, and never more unpopular than when they are to a government of occupation. If Jesus says, No, you should not pay taxes to Caesar, he makes himself a criminal subject to arrest by Rome. If he says, Yes you should pay taxes to Caesar, he risks alienating the very many who see Rome’s occupation as an abomination. Jesus avoids the catch-22. “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

In doing so, though, Jesus begs his listeners, and us, to look deeper at the question of how God and government ought relate to one another. What are the proper roles for each? What are the spheres of authority and influence that belong to each? Are there any areas of overlap, and if there are, how are the details worked out?

Throughout history there have been a number of answers and approaches to these questions. Jesus gives his enigmatic answer. The Roman Papacy has run the gamut from at times controlling or de facto being the government to at others, as in our time, being a powerful commentator on what governments do. Martin Luther developed what he called a “two kingdoms” approach, but even Luther’s followers interpreted it so variously as to render it uninformative. John Calvin, whom we claim as our church ancestor by way of the Puritans, championed a theocracy, a church run state. That’s what we had in New England. It gave us some good things, but it also gave us the church-sanctioned treatment of Anne Hutchinson and of the so-called witches of Salem.

All of these moments in history are intensely interesting and often informative to our present situation. But it is that present situation to which we must speak of this morning. What is the right relationship between and God and Government here and today? If we were to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, who would get what? One has but to read the paper or watch the news to know the level of confusion there is about these questions. Faith based initiatives, teaching intelligent design in schools. For one Supreme Court nominee his personal or religious beliefs are off-limits, weeks later the next nominee’s religious beliefs are trumpeted as qualifications. The President invokes the blessing of God on America and the curse of God upon her enemies. Religious values are openly espoused to support prayer in the public schools, to shape the definition of marriage and to justify violence against abortion clinic doctors and gays and lesbians. Some argue that religion has no place except inside the walls of the church and in the afterlife. Others think religion ought concern itself with the things central

to human life. Lord have mercy. Can we gain any clarity? Maybe. Maybe.

In 1791 the congress in its wisdom passed the First Amendment to the Constitution. The language is decidedly and even frustratingly brief and terse. The clauses relevant to religion are: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;” In the 200-plus years since the passage of the First Amendment, the courts have rendered countless decisions related to it, many of them contradictory of one another. In addition, the demographics of the nation have changed considerably since 1791. Then the country could easily and uncontroversially be described as Christian. What Madison and others sought to prevent was favoritism of one denomination over another. They probably never imagined our pluralistic religious landscape or the idea that atheists would seek protection under the First Amendment.

Despite all the confusion in the courts and the differences between our times and 1791, the founders seem to have been onto something in the First Amendment. Today we often hear of what the First Amendment prevents in the cause of religion. The government cannot institute a state religion. Tax dollars cannot be used to fund religious activities. The government cannot force religion in public schools or other public places or events. The current debate about whether the phrase “under God” belongs in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag hinges on the interpretation of the prohibitions.

The prohibitions are important. History gives us plentiful examples of the danger of conflating the church and the state. Think of the Crusades, the witch trials both here and in Europe, the inquisition, and the Reich Church in Nazi Germany, all cases in which the state and the church were one, and where there were no protections from the government’s claim that it was acting on the will of God. Just as worrisome today is the desire of many in this country to smuggle religion into the government. As religious people we ought to be scandalized when government leaders claim the will of God for their actions or claim the right to interpret God’s will on our behalf. I think we may get confused when we think of disallowing prayer from schools as anti-religious. In many ways, the most anti-religious thing we can do is to allow the government to decide what or even if we pray. In a very real sense the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment was meant to protect religion from the state’s establishment of a government-sanctioned version of religion. Some of us feel the need for this protection more than ever in a time when our President uses the name of God to go to a war that seems decidedly ungodly.

But do not think that either I or the constitution is saying that there is no place for religion in the affairs of the world. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is a church very far from the church of Jesus that sees itself concerned simply with readying us for the afterlife. That is, it is a church very far from the church of Jesus that concerns itself only with heaven rather than the central spaces of human existence. It seems quite clear that the founders understood this possibility, for the First Amendment as a whole endorses the notion that the citizenry can bring its voice, even its religious voice, to bear against the state. The whole of the First Amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” It is no accident that these particular freedoms are gathered together in one Amendment. They are integrally related to one another.

The First Amendment, then, seems quite in tune with Jesus' pronouncement to the Pharisees and the Herodians: "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The two realms are not identical. There are great dangers, especially to the free exercise of religion, if they were to become identical. But religion has a role, a very central role. Let us turn our attention to just what is the role of religion, what ought the role of the church to be? What does it mean to render to God what is God's?

Jesus held a coin up to his opponents. Whose image is imprinted on it? Caesar's. He looks at them and says, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." His opponents run away. They were beaten at their own game. And maybe more than that they know there is then another question implied in this discussion. What is the coin of God's realm? And whose image is imprinted on that coin. That question resounds for us today.

I can think of two ways of answering the question, both of which get us to roughly the same place. In Genesis it says that we were created in the image of God. If we think of ourselves, as religious people, as the coin of God's realm, we are imprinted by the very image of God. We are called to take our cues from God. Whenever God spoke to the people in the Old Testament to tell them what they should do, God said because I treated you thus and so, so should you treat others the same way. Because you were strangers and sojourners and I treated you with hospitality, therefore thus you must treat the stranger and sojourner in your midst. Because I heard your cry when you were in bondage in Egypt, therefore you must hear those who cry out. In Paul we hear something very similar: Forgive one another as I have forgiven you. Stamped with image of God.

Another image by which we are stamped as Christians is the image of Jesus himself. God incarnate. God's son, if you will. When we read the Gospels it cannot be clearer that Jesus is teaching his disciples about himself, about God, and about who they as his disciples are to be. They are his followers. He teaches them by story and example how they are to be and act. The Prodigal Son. The Good Samaritan. The sermon on the Mount. Love your enemies. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Whoever tries to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of me will save it. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You cannot serve both God and mammon. Where your treasure is, there also is your heart. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher. Be merciful even as your Father is merciful. Stamped with the image of God, the image of Jesus.

In light of God's image stamped upon us, it is clear that to give to God what is God's requires that we think and act as best we can with the mind of Jesus. To do so takes humility and prayer; it takes listening for what God is saying, not for what we want to hear. And yet it takes commitment to the things we believe and come to believe. When we think of the relationship with the state, what does it mean to act with God's stamp upon us?

In 1933 as Hitler's Nazi party was ascending to power in Germany, the young theologian and minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked the same question of himself and his church. At that time the German church was more and more an instrument of the state. Hitler claimed God's blessing on his policies, and the German church largely applauded him. On April 7, 1933 Germany instituted what has become known as the Aryan Clause. The law prohibited Jews from holding any civil or church office in Germany. It was but the beginning of the horrible atrocities we have all come to know. In response the young Bonhoeffer addressed himself to the

relationship between the church and the state, to what it meant to have the imprint of God on one's whole being. He spoke to an assembly of his fellow clergymen. During the address many of the ministers walked out because they could not bring themselves bear the imprint of God, they could not bring themselves to swallow the ramifications of giving to God what was God's.

In that address Bonhoeffer preached these courageous words: "The church has three possible ways it can [relate to] the state. First, it can ask the state if its actions are legitimate. Second, it can aid the victims of the state action. The church has the unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering society even if they do not belong to the Christian society. The third possibility is not just [to] bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

Bonhoeffer's words give us the direction that both our Constitution's First Amendment and the imprint that God has on us allow and require. As religious people we are always to be the loving critic of the state. We are to ask over and over again if the state is acting legitimately and justly, and to object when it is not. We are to be a moral compass and mirror. Our aim is to nudge the state in ethical directions. Just as important, we are to aid all those in need, including the victims of an unjust state. Bonhoeffer stepped on thin ice here, because he dared to call the actions of the state toward the Jews unjust and illegitimate. Interestingly, here Bonhoeffer was well on his way to a theology of religious pluralism that he would later develop more fully. Finally, Bonhoeffer recognized the right and requirement of the church to, in his words, "jam a spoke in the wheel" of the state's illegitimate policies and actions. Bonhoeffer understood that sometimes there is need for disobedience to the state. Here he finds himself in the company of people like Martin Luther King, Jr and Mahatma Ghandi, and even Jesus himself, all of whom said in their own way that their moral sensibility must sometimes trump government authority.

So what does it mean to render to God what is God's? Just this: We are to pray and to look with brutal honesty and humility to know what is God's imprint upon us, not what we wish God's imprint were, or what we think God's imprint is, but as carefully and humbly as possible to determine what it is. Then, we are to use the imprint God has made upon us to critique and nudge our governments, we are to use the imprint God has made upon us to look after the victims, and when necessary, we are to use the imprint God has made upon us to stick a spoke in the wheel of unjust society. It may be as simple and as daring as that. "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Amen.