

Matthew 22:15-21

President Lincoln...President Jefferson...President Roosevelt...President Washington... what do all of these presidents have in common? Besides the fact that they're all dead, their images are stamped on the coins that we commonly use. They did this in Jesus' day also. But it wasn't done as a tribute. Past Caesars were not stamped on their coins. The denarius bore the image of Tiberius, the Caesar who was ruling at that time.

When Jesus asked to see the coin which bore Caesar's image, His enemies thought they had Him. They had come up with the perfect trap. There was no way out. "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" they had asked. If Jesus said, "No," He would be guilty of treason. If He said, "Yes," He would lose His popularity with the people, because the people resented Caesar's rule over them. Jesus' answer, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's," may go down in history as the best "comeback" ever for turning the tables on the opposition, but there is more to His reply than just a "witty" comeback. His words are wisdom of the highest level. They may have silenced His critics, but hopefully they open our hearts and minds to the truth of salvation.

"Render unto Caesar." Is Jesus telling us here, that we are to pay our taxes? Yes, because this is our duty as citizens. He did not say, "Render unto Tiberius," but "...unto Caesar." The people were not giving their money to a man, but to the man who was in authority over them. Whether they believed it or not, Caesar was God's agent for their general well-being. It mattered not that Tiberius wasn't a very noble ruler. The office of Caesar was his. He had God's authority behind him, even though he did not acknowledge the true God. Yet, God used him to maintain law and order in the land. Under Caesar the people could live and work day after day in a somewhat peaceful and safe environment. They did not fear for their lives as they traveled from place to place. Under Caesar roads were built and maintained. The people had much freedom. They could practice their own religion. They had many rights as individuals. And what were they to give to Caesar in return? Honor, respect, obedience, and they were to pay their taxes.

We, too, are under government. We have to be. Non-government would be chaos. We need the police. We need the courts. We need laws. We need the respect of our people for authority. We don't always agree with everything our government says and does. And we have the right to disagree—not to rebel, but to demonstrate...not to condemn, but to speak our mind. But we have the duty to pay taxes. We owe the government our support...our service. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." Because Caesar, whether he is good or evil, acts in the place of God to keep the peace and maintain law and order.

Now, what about this "render unto God" part? Everything belongs to God. He is the Creator of all things. So are we to give Him all that we have? Remember the image on the coin? Jesus made much of that image. It was important. "Give to Caesar what you owe him because his image is on your money." And so with God. What is it that bears the image of God? Or, rather, who is it? The answer is Jesus. Colossians 1:15 says that "He is the image of God." He, Jesus, is the exact representation of the invisible God. So when He tells us, "Render unto God what is God's," He is saying that God wants us to give Him Jesus.

Perhaps we're a little confused by this. After all, our government does much to take care of our well-being, and so we owe our government tax dollars, respect, our works of service, and so forth. If we owe all these things to our government, then don't we owe the same things, and more, to God? That's what our sinful flesh thinks. We think we owe it to God to love and respect Him. Our flesh thinks we owe it to God to be in church on Sunday mornings. We think we owe Him our loyalty and obedience; that we owe it to Him to put our money in the offering plate.

Friend, you may owe things such as these to your government, but you do not owe them to God. Because Jesus, on the cross, paid the price for everything that you owed to God. Because of your sin, you owed Him more than you could ever pay. Jesus paid it. He paid the price for your sins. He suffered all the agony of hell for you. He took the debt which you owed and wiped it clean, paying for it in full.

And so, dear baptized believer in Christ Jesus, what will you render to God? Your works of service?...Your love and obedience?...Your hard-earned money? None of these will gain you a place in heaven. None of these will earn God's favor and eternal reward. What God wants you to give Him is Jesus. He is the image of God. He is the One, the only One who lived a perfect, holy life. He is the One who satisfied God's justice with His atoning sacrifice. God wants you to give Him Jesus. Little baptized children have it right—the answer to every question is Jesus.

When God confronts you with His Law and accuses you of wrongdoing, give Him Jesus. "Jesus kept the Law for me. He kept every commandment in my place, therefore in Christ, I am innocent of all wrongdoing." When God asks, "Do you love Me with all your heart, soul, and mind?" give Him Jesus. "I don't love as I should, but Jesus does. He loves You perfectly for me—in my place." When God asks, "Do you love your neighbor as yourself?" give Him Jesus. "I fall short, but in Jesus I love my neighbor, for He loved, and loves all people for me—in my place." And when God asks, "Why should I let you into heaven?" give Him Jesus. "Because Jesus died and rose for me. He did everything in my behalf. In Holy Baptism He made me His forgiven child, and in Holy Communion He gives Himself, and all that He has, to me."

To "render unto God what is God's," is simply to approach God always and only through Jesus. Because Jesus removed from you the burden of your sin, you can freely give God, through Jesus, your thanks and praise, your love and devotion, your works of service, your offerings. You owe Him nothing—we, in Christ, are not under Law but under grace—you owe Him nothing, but through Jesus you freely give Him all that you are and have.

As long as you live, the Internal Revenue Service will demand that you pay them what you owe them. And well we should. "Render unto Caesar." But as long as you live, know this—you owe God nothing—because Jesus paid everything in your place. You are free now, in Christ, to love and serve God not because you have to, but because in love to Christ, dear Christian, you want to. Amen.