

Matthew 22:15-22

From what they're promising, no matter which candidate wins the presidency, we're all going to get a tax break. Politicians know that money talks; that voters vote with their wallets. Whoever offers voters the bigger break in taxes may find himself leading in the polls. And yet no candidate would be foolish enough to promise that he would cut out taxes altogether. No one would believe him if he said, "I will erase all your taxes completely." As Americans we know that we have to pay taxes for our country to work. Without money our government could not defend our shores against attackers, build and maintain roads, educate our children, and so on. We wouldn't walk into a restaurant and expect to be served a meal unless we were willing to pay for it. In the same way, if we expect our government to serve our needs as Americans, then we must be willing to pay for it.

When Jesus told the Pharisees, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," He wasn't telling them something they didn't already know. Even though they despised Caesar, they were aware of the fact that he kept the peace for them; with their taxes, providing for them a stable environment in which they could live. The Pharisees paid their taxes, although they did so grudgingly. They paid Caesar the money they owed him, but hating it with a passion when the tax collector held out his hand to them.

I imagine we are much the same way. We pay the sales tax when we purchase goods and services, but we'd rather not. We pay our property tax and income tax, but we never do it with a smile on our face. When we deposit our salary checks, we're always disgusted at how much our government has taken out. We are aware of the fact that we do have to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," but we'd rather render to him as little as possible, and yet have him continue to provide for all our wants and needs as American citizens.

As Christians we live in two spheres. We are citizens of this country, and we are citizens of God's family. And it's interesting how we carry our thoughts and attitudes from one sphere to another. "Render to Caesar," says Jesus, "the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's;" and our attitude in rendering to Caesar also becomes our attitude in rendering to God. We'd rather get by with giving Caesar as little as possible. The same becomes our attitude toward God. We'd like for Him to keep blessing us with everything that we need for this life and the life to come—but as for that "rendering" part, we'd rather give God, also, as little as possible. If you don't believe me, then take a minute to check how much our members give to the church. It's never as much as possible; it's always as little as possible.

And not just with our pocketbooks, but with our time as well. We had many members show up last week to work because they had to. But just watch how many of them will take a break from coming to church altogether now that they've put in their time. It seems to be an attitude for us not of "How often can I worship? How can I help out?" but rather of "How much time do I have to put in? How often do I have to worship to remain on the membership rolls?" Looking at the time and money that our members give, you'd think our church was nothing more than a fast-food restaurant and not the House of the Lord where He gives the greatest treasures ever given—the food of salvation: forgiveness and eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Now what would happen if we stopped paying our taxes altogether...if we told Caesar, "I'm done rendering to you!" We'd soon find ourselves in jail, wouldn't we? Caesar doesn't know the meaning of the word forgiveness. If you fail to pay the Internal Revenue Service what you owe them, they will come down on you hard. They will not show any mercy, but they will show you where you are in error, and the door into your prison cell if you disagree.

Friend, God is no Caesar. Not only does He know the meaning of the word mercy; He is that word. God is merciful. "Render to God," says Jesus, "the things that are God's;" and we don't...not one of us. We all begrudge giving Him our money. We all begrudge giving Him our time. We may do it only out of a sense of duty. We may show up here to worship or to work only because we think we have to. But despite our attitude toward Him, our God is never offended at us.

He's not keeping track of the number of hours you work in His church. He doesn't keep a worship attendance chart. He does not render His blessings to you because of what and how you render to Him. He is no Caesar. He is the One who loved you to the point of rendering His own Son for you. Our country works because we pay taxes, but that's not how God's church works. It works because God forgives. He forgives when we do not render to Him. He forgives when we render to Him as little as possible. He forgives when we render much and want everyone to know it. God's church is not run by taxes. It's run by this truth: that God gives even though we are undeserving.

If today is the first time you've been here in years, God renders to you the same forgiveness, life, and salvation that He gives to those who come here every week. If you put one nickel into the offering plate, God gives you the very same Jesus that He gives to those who put in \$200. God renders His eternal treasures to you not because of what you do and how you live, but because Jesus rendered Himself to a cross for you. And He did not do this out of a sense of duty. He did it out of love. Jesus suffered and died for you for no other reason than that He loved you. He rose from the dead so that He, your living Savior, can and will be here for you in Word and Sacrament to render to you every week the blessings of His cross. He does not give you a nasty audit notice if you fail to render to God what you could. He only forgives you. Every one of us could render to God more than we're rendering—both our time and money. And every one of you Jesus forgives. He keeps rendering His grace to you not because of what you give to Him, but because of His mercy to you.

"Now pastor," you may be thinking, "This sermon will not help our cause here at Christ Lutheran Church. Our members are not being motivated to come more and give more. Rather, you're telling them that God forgives them no matter how much they come, or work." Friends, the Law does not motivate. That comes through the Gospel alone. We've all heard the accusing Law this morning. We all know that we are doing a poor job of rendering to God what is God's. But God loves a cheerful giver. If you and I are going to freely come to worship often...If you and I are going to freely work hard for the church... this will happen only by Christ Jesus living in you and me by the power of His Word of Grace. It is the good news of Jesus alone that will grow this church. It is the good news of Jesus alone that will motivate our members to serve the Lord. It is the good news of Jesus alone that will fill our pews.

You see, when Jesus says, “Render to God, what is God’s,” He wants you to give Him the one thing you can give Him—your sins. Render to God your sins. Give Him your failings, your weaknesses, your fears, your doubts, your anger, your selfishness, your lust. Jesus takes these to His cross and He dies there for all of them. And He renders you forgiven. He renders to you eternal life in heaven. He renders to you His Holy Spirit. He renders to you a joyful heart. He renders to you a heart at peace with God for Jesus’ sake. And He renders to you the desire to come here to His House not out of a sense of duty, but out of thankfulness, to receive what He renders to you in Christ Jesus.

And so, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” because you have to. It’s the Law. But render to God because God, out of love for you, renders you forgiven in Jesus Christ. Amen.