

There is something disturbing about this Bible narrative. Beyond even the sinister trap the Pharisees plot and then carry out. It's after this. They marvel at Jesus and then they leave. This is very disturbing. That someone can have an encounter with Jesus and walk away completely unchanged. That happens at a place like the Grand Canyon. You encounter it. You marvel at it. And you leave. But it does not change your heart for the rest of your life.

What especially disturbs me is that I see myself too much in these Pharisees. I encounter Jesus too. I marvel here in His house and when reading or hearing His words to me. And far too often I leave and go back to how I was before. Does this ever happen to you? You come here on a Sunday, encounter Jesus, marvel at Him even, and then on your way home pick up where you left off in the argument with your spouse; or something else in going right back to the same sinful behavior as before which causes you to wonder, "Did my encounter with Jesus do anything to change me?"

It's hard to blame those church members who lose interest in these Sunday morning encounters with Jesus. They may be looking for real, substantive changes in their life, but not seeing them. And so they will find something else more productive to do in place of these Sunday encounters.

They are not enemies of Jesus, nor are we. His enemies approach Him in our text. It's easy to understand why Jesus did not change them. They hated Him. They were against Him. But that's not us. And so one would expect Jesus to make a difference in us. We should see changes. Positive changes. Even drastic changes every time we encounter Him.

I see changes when I encounter Caesar. Four times a year at tax time I see these changes. He takes from me what I do not want to give him. He changes the balance in my checkbook.

But it's an odd thing. And some of you know this. Caesar forces you to give to him, and you do. God does not force you to give to Him. And yet when the year is done, you have given more to God than to Caesar.

Caesar takes care of our National Parks like the Grand Canyon. God takes care of us; everything about us. Not just our body, but also our soul. We don't force Him to. He does this freely out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy. We do not pay Him to protect us. We do not give to Him so that He will love us and provide all that we need. God provides for everyone, even for those who give Him nothing. So why not give Him nothing? He will still give to us. But you can't do that, can you? It's because you love Him who first loved you. And you know that everything you have is from Him. Just try and give less to God than you have been giving. It won't change Him, not in the least. But it will change you, and it will not be a positive change within you.

*"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars,"* says Jesus, *"and to God the things that are God's."* Caesar wants your obedience. He wants you to pay your taxes. If you do not render the things of Caesar to Caesar, it will not go well with you. Caesar operates by means of the law.

It is natural to assume that God does the same. He wants your obedience, your adoration; He wants your time, treasures, and talents. If we do not give these things to God, will He not act as Caesar would and deal with us to the full extent of the Law?

This may explain why some who encounter Jesus discover no real, lasting change within them. They come here to give Him their adoration and offerings, their time and talents. They treat Him like another Caesar. But He is no such thing. He is our gracious God. He is love itself. He is mercy. He is the one who invites, “*Come to Me...and I will give you rest.*” “*Cast all your cares upon Me.*”

We see them doing this in the Gospels. People came from everywhere to render to God the things that are God’s. What did they render? Their sick and diseased bodies. Their unseeing eyes and unhearing ears. They brought to Him their hearts burdened with guilt. They gave Jesus things that Caesar would never accept. But Jesus did. Every one of them. All the pain, illness, and misery He accepted. Every wretched sin He took. He turned no one away. Those who came to Jesus seemed to grasp what it means, “*Render to God the things that are God’s*” God did not want their best, but their worst.

Friends, this is what He wants from you. Oh, He loves your adoration and praise. He uses your time, treasures, and talents. But this is not why He comes here to meet you. He comes here to receive the worst that you have. The worst things you did last week. The heaviest burden you are carrying. The ugly shame that will not leave you alone. These are the things of God because it’s why God came to our world in the flesh. Not to reign like a Caesar among us. To lower Himself beneath us. To be raised up on a cross and suffer everything that we deserve for our sins.

As He was on the cross, that thief next to Him understood Jesus’ words, “*Render to God...*” He gave Jesus a life full of sin. He was a miserable, dying thief, and Caesar wanted no part of him. But Jesus loved him and forgave him. He took everything wretched about him. And Jesus rendered to him a place in Paradise. And that thief was changed, wasn’t he? Not his predicament. He was still a dying thief. But he was a dying thief who was awaiting Paradise forever.

This is how Jesus changes us. You and I come here with our load of sin and guilt, and He takes it all. He forgives you. He removes your burden. In exchange He gives you His own precious body and blood. You render to God what He does not deserve – your sin and its punishment. He renders to you what you do not deserve – forgiveness of your sin, life, and salvation.

This is lifechanging stuff. You don’t just come here and marvel at Jesus. You are united with Him here in your baptism. You are forgiven by Him here in words of absolution; unburdened and released of all your sins. You leave here and life begins anew. And now you are free to render to Him your adoration, your offerings, your works of service, all for the sake of Jesus. Amen.