

Hope Christian Church
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Sermon Series: *Jesus Said What?*

Third Sunday of Easter



Render to Caesar the Things That Are Caesar's, and To God the Things That Are God's

(Matthew 22:15-22 ESV)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "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 left him and went away.

Introduction

Welcome to tax season. The deadline to file your taxes is Friday. Sometimes we can easily yet mistakenly think that God is only concerned with salvation and not taxation. This morning we will see that is not the case. God is concerned about every area of life, including both what we think about salvation and taxation. Jesus spoke to every area of our lives and his opinion has been recorded for us in the Bible. Jesus revealed to us God's will for us in every area of our lives.



The goal of this sermon is two-fold. The first goal is to cause you to marvel at Jesus in worship. I pray that after considering this episode in Jesus' life, you will stand and gaze at him with awe-filled wonder permeating your soul. The second goal is that if the first goal is achieved, then you will prayerfully invite Jesus into the process of filling out your taxes this week and then continue to think of Jesus as the North Star of your entire financial life and actively seek his will and then obey it, in all of your financial decisions.

Clarifying the Context

This confrontation takes place on Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week.¹ Jesus has been for most of the morning in the Temple complex teaching the people.² Jesus is under a lot of pressure. He knows this is the final few days of his earthly life.

Verse 15 says,

(Matthew 22:15 ESV)

¹⁵ *Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.*

The first word of our passage is "*then*," which alerts us to the fact that something just happened to precipitate this event. Something had happened to causes them to respond by going out and plotting how entrap Jesus.

What had happened was that Jesus had just told three parables³ which the chief priests and Pharisees understood to be directed towards them.⁴ They were enraged at the meaning of these parables, which essentially taught that they were not doing the will of the Father, they were not members of the kingdom of God, and they had not been chosen by God. Their response to these parables was to go out and begin to *plot how to entangle Jesus in his talk*.

¹ See chapter 21, the Triumphal Entry, particularly v.17.

² Mt 21:23.

³ The Parable of the Two Sons (Mt 21:28-32), the Parable of the Tenants (Mt 21:33-44), and The Parable of the Wedding Feast (Mt 22:1-14).

⁴ Mt 21:45.

The chief priests and the Pharisees were fed up with Jesus and they wanted him arrested. But the people were hanging on his every word. There were crowds of people listening to his teaching. The Pharisees had to devise a clever plan to capture Jesus without bringing down the wrath of the people upon their own heads. They feared the people⁵ but they hated Jesus. They began to plot against him. They had to hatch a plan where Jesus would indict himself in something he said. They wanted to entangle him with his own words. This led them to an unnatural partnership with the Herodians who were otherwise their enemies.

The Herodians

The Herodians were a “loosely organized group that sought to advance the political and economic influence of the family of Herod the Great (c. 37 b. c. – a. d. 93)”⁶ and his descendants. They were known for their “pro-Roman sympathies.”⁷ The Herodians were comfortable with being ruled by Rome, and they sought to maintain a good relationship with Rome by which they could profit and remain in power.

The chief priests and the Pharisees were against the rule of Rome or any foreign power for that matter. The Pharisees were seen as the religious leaders of the nation, but Jesus was now threatening their power and position. Those following Jesus were many and they were afraid of any disruption that might result in Rome stepping in and removing their authority. Jesus had to be removed. If these two unlikely bedfellows were to join forces, then perhaps they might devise a way of craftily removing Jesus without causing the people to riot and thus draw the attention of Rome. So the Herodians and the Pharisees held secret council together and came up with the plan.

Posing the Question

The plan was to ask him a controversial question that would force him into a political argument by making him publicly declare his primary loyalties.

Matthew 22:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.”

False Flattery of Malicious Disciples

The Pharisees and the Herodians come together with their intent to entrap Jesus. They sent their disciples to Jesus. The leaders of this malicious movement do not themselves go to Jesus, but instead send their disciples. Evidently they do this to increase the possibility of

⁵ Lk 20:19.

⁶ ESV Study Bible, note on v.16.

⁷ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 458.

deceiving Jesus and thus being successful in their scheme, possibly hoping that Jesus would not recognize the lesser prominent disciples of the Pharisees. They send their students to do their dirty work.

Their plotting led them to begin with praise before they plunge in the dagger. They note four complimentary observations about Jesus. They begin by calling him '*teacher*.' The word is a technical word that carries the notion of a "master of instruction."⁸ They come to him as "disciples" and they address him as "teacher," or "master," which is a term of high respect. They come to him under the guise of students seeking knowledge, but Luke tells us in his gospel, that in fact they were spies⁹ seeking opportunity to entrap Jesus in his own words in order to get him arrested by the governor.

They first flatter him by stating that they know him to be *true*. This is, of course, true. Jesus is true. Everyone knows this. They are setting him up by making reference to the truthfulness of his character, which after asking the question will be an inducement for him not to be completely honest in offering his answer. Whenever you want to entrap someone in their own words, it's always wise to praise them for their ability to speak the truth. Perhaps this would lower his defenses and cause him to more freely speak his mind.

Second, they flatter him for his teaching ability. "*You teach the way of God truthfully.*" They now build their argument. Not only is Jesus true, but he also teaches truthfully. Not only is Jesus personally truthful in character, but he is also truthful in all that he teaches. It is as if they were saying, "Jesus, you are a good man and a good teacher. You teach well the way God would have us live."

Third, they move on to state that Jesus "*does not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.*" Isn't ironic they would choose to say this, as if he would be swayed by their false appearance as humble students. But of course Jesus is not swayed by their false flattery or their thin humility. Now they come to the question.

Matthew 22:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ *Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

The phrasing the question demands a simple yes or no answer. The danger of the question is that it demands an answer concerning whose laws are highest. Are God's laws highest? Or are the laws of the Roman government highest? The wording of the question has been carefully crafted in order to impale Jesus upon the horns of a dilemma.

⁸ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 148.

⁹ Lk 20:20.

This is why there are disciples of both the Pharisees and the Herodians who are present. The Pharisees' disciples were there to ask the question, while the Herodians were there to be witnesses against him when he answered, for surely they assumed Jesus would answer that it was not lawful to pay the tax.

If Jesus answers that it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, then the Pharisees will condemn him for being pro-Roman and anti-Israel. If Jesus answers that it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, then the Herodians can condemn him for being anti-Roman and pro-Israel. In the first case, he offends Jewish nationalism by supporting a foreign government and in the second case he offends Roman nationalism by failing to support the present ruling power. In the former case, he breaks the religious law of Israel by approving the paying tribute to a foreign power whose leader claimed to be divine, and in the latter case he breaks the law of Rome, by encouraging rebellion and treason. In either case, his career is over for he would be immediately arrested.

Offering an Answer

Jesus' answer is brilliant.

Matthew 22:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

Hypocrites Full of Malice

Jesus is not deceived for a moment. Jesus is completely *aware of their malice*. Malice is a powerful word. It means "the intention and desire to do evil." Jesus names them accurately. He says, "*You hypocrites. Why do you test me?*" This may be the first time he has seen these disciples but he immediately understands their motives. Their secret intentions are not hidden from him. Their flattery does not faze his ability to rightly discern their wickedness of their hearts. Jesus brings their hidden malice into the light. They ask a question, but it's not a question. It is a test.

They are hypocrites because they came to him as disciples pretending to seek instruction, but actually they were spies seeking occasion to destroy him. They came openly pretending to be friends when inwardly and truly they were his enemy. They came pretending to seek information when truly, with hearts full of malice, they were looking for a rope upon which to hang him.

Why Do You Do This?

In the middle of this confrontation, Jesus throws out a probing question. Why? He asks those who were seeking to entangle him "Why do you put me to the test?" He asks those whose hearts are filled with malice? Why do you intend to harm me? What are your motives? Have I

done something to harm you? Does your ill will come from you? Or is it from someone else? Why do you sin against me? Why are you pretending?

Do we ever stop long enough to consider why we do what we do? When you are in the middle of an argument with your spouse or coworker or friend, do you ever ponder why? What motives are at play? Are your intentions righteous? Do you prayerfully lift up your motives to the Lord for a little bit of scrutiny? We would do well to pause more often and ask, "Why am I doing this?"

Show Me the Coin

Jesus then asks for a coin used to pay the tax and someone brings to him a denarius. The denarius was "the principal silver coin of the Roman empire."¹⁰ It was the "equivalent to a day's wage of a common laborer."¹¹ Caesar had control over its minting and over the minting of all gold and silver coin.

You'll notice that Jesus does not have one of the coins. This may indicate his poverty, or it may be because strict Jews did not use the coin because of the image and the inscription on it.¹² But those who were questioning Jesus had the coin. Jesus is handed a denarius and then he asks a question of his own.

Matthew 22:20-21 (ESV)

²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's."

The denarius of the day would have had the inscription of the emperor Tiberius. On one side of the coin is the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus," and on the other side "pontifex maximus," which means "high priest."¹³ Caesar was both political leader and religious leader.



The profile side of the coin alluded to the divinity of the emperor, as "son of a god," whom they understood Caesar to be, while the other side, featuring Caesar seated on his throne, referred to him as the high priest of the whole empire. Use of the coin gave tacit agreement with the claims of the coin. This is tantamount to idolatry. This is why conscientious Jews did

¹⁰ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995).

¹¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 61.

¹² R.T France, *Matthew*, in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 1, ed. Leon Morris, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 318.

¹³ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 459.

not use the coin. Rome accommodated these sensitivities by allowing the Roman senate to mint special copper coins without offensive image and inscription.¹⁴ The fact that at least one of these disciples of the Pharisees could pull the coin out of his pouch indicated that they had no problem enjoying what the coin could buy.

Matthew 22:21 (ESV)

²¹ Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus uses a different verb in his answer than they did when they asked the question. When they Pharisees' disciples asked the question they used a verb, *didōmī*, which essentially means "to pay, or to give."¹⁵ Jesus uses a slightly different verb, *apōdōte* (ἀπόδοτε), which means "to give back what one owes," such as a debt or an obligation.¹⁶ "It is the verb for paying a bill or settling a debt; they owe it to him."¹⁷

Jesus' point is, "If you're going to use Caesar's money, then you ought to pay Caesar's tax. If you're going to take his money, then you need to return his money when he asks for it." Jesus' conclusion is that it is right and proper to pay tax to those who govern in authority over you, even if they do not themselves submit to the God whom you worship. This principle is maintained throughout the New Testament.

(Romans 13:1-2 ESV)

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

(Romans 13:6-7 ESV)

⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

(1 Peter 2:13-14 ESV)

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

¹⁴ France, *Matthew*, 318.

¹⁵ Louw & Nida, 574.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ France, 318.

If Jesus had stopped with this statement, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,*" then the Pharisees would have had him and the people would have surely rejected him for being pro-Roman supporter of a foreign over-lord. However, Jesus didn't stop there. He kept going.

Matthew 22:21 (ESV)

²¹ *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
and to God the things that are God's."*

Render to God the Things That Are God's

Jesus makes it clear that he does not believe Caesar is divine. He understands Caesar and God to be two different persons. Caesar is not God. There are things that belong to Caesar, like the denarius poll tax, and so he ought to be given those things that belong to him.

But there are also things that belong to God, and he ought to be given those things that belong to him. What are those things? What things belong to God? *Everything* belongs to God. Every created thing, including all persons, belong to God. He owns the universe.

Psalms 24:1 (ESV)

¹ *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein...*

God owns all things, including you and me. To God belong all humans. God is the giver of life and he, like Caesar, has placed his image upon that which he owns. Just as Caesar imprinted his image upon the coins he created, so God has imprinted his image upon every human being that he created.

(Genesis 1:26-27 ESV)

²⁶ *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."*

²⁷ *So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

Caesar minted coins. God minted humanity. Caesar's coins had an inscription that indicated that he was to be understood as the 'son of divinity,' and was to be worshiped as the "highest priest" in the land. Jesus said, "Tax should be given to Caesar, but worship should be given only to God." In fact, everything one does should be done while acknowledging that all things come from God. Paul said it this way,

1 Cor 10:31 (ESV)

³¹ *"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

So when you pay your taxes this Friday, do it out of obedience to God with the desire of pleasing him. That means filling it out with complete honesty and integrity. That means reporting all income that you are legally required to report, including cash income. That means doing nothing dishonest or deceptive or “under the table.” God sees what goes on “under the table” and “behind closed doors” and in the secret recesses of your heart.

Matthew 22:22 (ESV)

²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Conclusion

Jesus’ enemies marveled at him. They were amazed at his answer. Jesus honored Caesar and he honored God. His enemies could not find any fault with him even though they had thought they had him trapped. They had come up with a question that impossible to answer. Jesus had answered them well. And they marveled at him. They could say nothing more and so they went away.

Where did Jesus get this wisdom? He’s a simple, uneducated carpenter and yet he silenced the wisest and most wicked in the land. The flattery didn’t work. The false humility didn’t confuse him. The trap failed.

If Jesus had the wisdom to answer such hard questions during his earthly ministry, how much greater is his wisdom today given the present reality of his heavenly ministry? Isn’t he worth marveling at? Isn’t he amazing? Marvel at him now for we will marvel at him in the future when he comes again.

(2 Thessalonians 1:10 ESV)

¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Marvel at Jesus in the adoration of your heart, but also magnify his name with your money. Jesus is concerned with what you do with your money. Honor him as you consider what you do with your coins. Don’t think that he is unconcerned with how you handle your finances. Remember Jesus as you pay your taxes. Obey taxation laws this week out of reverence for Jesus. Plan your spending this month while marveling at the messiah.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”