

Render Unto Caesar

Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Perhaps second only to John 3:16, this verse captures the imagination of the secular world. Chances are even if someone is not a Christian they have heard the phrase, 'Render unto Caesar'. And like John 3:16, it is used to support so many different opinions that it has lost some of its original zeal, and quite certainly some of its bite. For what is Jesus actually saying here? Popular opinion would have us believe Jesus is encouraging us to pay our taxes. Jesus is pro-taxation, commanding us to pay tribute, willingly or unwillingly, to support the secular affairs of the State. But is that what he really means? I guess I am no longer convinced by this interpretation. Not that such a conclusion is necessarily wrong. After all, Paul makes a similar argument in Romans 13 when he admonishes the Christians in Rome to be good citizens and obey the laws of the land. There is a time and place for such a discussion, but was that in the mind of our Lord this morning? I would offer it was not. There was something more at stake with this conversation than money and taxes; something more at work than just drawing the dividing line between church and state. As with other sayings of Jesus we need to come in close so as not to miss what he is saying or better yet what he is not saying. Let's look at the story again, but this time with fresh eyes.

"Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Jesus in His talk". From the outset, we learn the whole conversation was a baited trap. A loaded line of questioning meant to cause embarrassment and suffering. This is an important detail to notice because we can anticipate Jesus' response. Jesus never plays along with such human ambition. He never responds to veiled threats. At no point in his entire ministry did Jesus ever give into the whims of sinful mankind. He is the King of Kings when it comes to misdirection. And this morning is all about misdirection. They came to entrap Him and it was a crafty plot. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? For Him to

answer that question in the affirmative would have been an admission of Roman authority, an open endorsement of God's people being forced into servitude under foreign rule. If He would have answered that question in the negative, He would have been branded a traitor and would have incurred the wrath of Rome. Absolutely brilliant! You have to hand it to these Pharisees- they might be devious, but they are at least intelligent deviants. But when human will and Divine will clash in confrontation it is the former, which is always brought to heel. Crafty though they be our Lord is craftier still. For His answer to their sinister question transcends their earthly scheming. Notice how he answers: "Whose image and inscription is on this coin?" He returns a question with a question. Now they answer it is Caesar's image. To which Christ replies: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God." Now think about that response for a moment. What did Jesus actually say? Did He answer the question or not? Yes He did! And no He didn't! Ah, this is when I love my Lord the most. He bests them with the greatest of ease. On the one hand, He answered their question in a way that would have satisfied even the Roman officials looking on. These Herodians must have smiled as Jesus admits these coins belong first and foremost to Rome. They must have walked away all smug and satisfied that the glory of Rome was defended by her citizens. But for those who have ears to hear and eyes of faith to see, we perceive that He didn't say that at all. Jesus' response was a shot across the bow: O you wicked and perverse generation. You think yourself so original, so novel, so clever? You hedge your bets so as to secure your future. Don't you know you can't serve God and manna? You can't please God and man simultaneously. For to serve one naturally forfeits the appropriate fear, love and trust for the other. So you hold up this coin as if it were my rival? As if the likes of Tiberius Caesar could ever threaten God Himself?

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar”. Curious how Jesus never says what or how much to render. After all, what belongs to Caesar? Absolutely nothing. Jesus will make this point a little later when He reminds the chief officials at His trial that they possess no power or authority except that which God grants them. For the image of Caesar is still cast in the image of God; the real flesh and blood person of Caesar was formed and shaped by God’s mighty hand. And this self-professed god is still governed by God on high, who guides and moves all things according to His decree. This very head, which is so proudly displayed in gold on a coin, will one day bow before the true Emperor and Judge of this world. This is the real answer to their question. Who is ultimately in control? If it is the rulers of this world then your life will take shape accordingly. You will be tossed to and fro by the whims of time. You will pass your years in restless anxiety keeping a weather eye on the currents of politics and financial markets. Your god will be safely deposited, mind you. Even still, it will decay and rust and wither into ash. But if your life is found in God then you transcend it all. In God you find your true wealth. For the definition of a poor person is not someone who has nothing to show for himself. A poor person is one who is never satisfied with anything God has ever made. So render unto Caesar what you will, but do so knowing it is done for the sake of good order and not by some divine right or because Jesus said so. So render under Caesar what you will, brothers and sisters in Christ, but to God belongs all glory, honor and praise now and forever. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills