

“Give to God, the Things which Are God’s”
Matthew 22:15-22

It’s not easy to be a Christian in today’s world. It’s really never been easy, but this is especially true today. We live in a difficult world which is full of complications. It’s often hard to know what the right thing to do is in all of our various relationships and responsibilities. Husbands often struggle to know what their responsibilities are towards their wife and children. Wives struggle to know exactly what they are to do in their relationship with their husband and children. Even our children sometimes struggle to know what their duty is towards their parents. Sometimes we wonder if we’re doing everything the Lord would have us to do or not. We also have our relationship with God, with the members of His body, and with our neighbors. Are we being faithful to fulfill our obligations towards them? Are we loving God and worshiping and serving Him in an acceptable way? Are we loving one another because we are members of the same body? Are we loving our neighbors and doing what we can to reach out to them? And what about our duty towards our government? Are we doing all that we should do as citizens of the state? There are a lot of things we need to know to live in this world. But I think we would all admit that knowing what we are supposed to do is only part of the battle. It’s much more difficult to do it. But thankfully, God has given us help. He has told us everything we need to know in His Word, if we will only pick it up and put the effort into understanding what it says, and He has given us the gracious help of His Spirit to work in us, both to give us the desire and to give us the strength to do what He wants us to do.

This morning, we are reminded that it’s not enough to know what we are to do, Jesus says we must also do it. He points us to two areas in particular: our duty towards the government, and our duty towards God. Jesus says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew tells us that after the chief priests and elders had attacked Jesus and were put in their place through His parables, the Pharisees *took counsel together* as to how they might trap Him. In doing this, they were actually fulfilling the second psalm which says, “Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers *take counsel together* against the LORD and against His Anointed” (vv. 1-2). Unbelief has always looked for a reason not to believe or submit to what the Lord says. We know from our own experience that we have to fight against this sinful inclination in our own hearts all the time. This is what was going on in the hearts of these men, only they weren’t fighting against it. They didn’t really want to know the truth, they just wanted to discredit Jesus. They wanted to trap Him, to trip Him up, to catch Him saying something He shouldn’t say, so that they could arrest Him and destroy Him. Matthew Henry once wrote, “It has been the old practice of Satan’s agents and emissaries, to make a man an offender for a word, a word misplaced, or mistaken, or misunderstood; a word, though innocently designed, yet perverted by strained innuendos: in this way they lay a trap for him that *reproves in the gate* (Isa. 29:21), and represent the greatest teachers as the greatest troublers of Israel: thus *the wicked plots against the just*, (Ps. 37:12, 13).” These men were plotting against Jesus because He was reproving them with His teaching. Since they couldn’t get Him to

recognize and submit to their authority, they were looking for some reason they could use to destroy Him.

But they had a problem. They didn't have a law that would allow them to execute anyone. The Romans had taken that power away from them. There were only two ways then they could destroy Him: either by catching Him committing a sin against the state that was worthy of death or by catching Him saying something that would make the people angry enough to do it. And for this, they had the perfect plan. They decided to ask Jesus whether or not it was lawful to pay the poll-tax or tribute – the annual tax that each male in Israel had to pay the Roman Emperor. If Jesus said no, then the Romans would execute Him for inciting rebellion. But if Jesus said yes, then the Jewish people might become angry enough to stone Him. Either way, they could destroy Him.

Now notice how subtle the Pharisees were. They didn't come themselves. That would have been too obvious. Instead they sent their disciples. In this way perhaps Jesus wouldn't be able to see through their scheme. And notice whom they sent with their disciples: the Herodians. There were the Jews who favored Rome and Rome's rule over them through the Herods. If Jesus said that it wasn't lawful to pay tribute, the Herodians would be the first to go to Herod to accuse Him. But if He said it was lawful to pay it, the Pharisees would be the first to accuse Him to the people, because they also hated Roman rule and the fact that they were forced to pay tribute. It's interesting to note that the Pharisees and Herodians also hated each other. But when enemies are faced with someone they hate even more, sometimes they close ranks in order to fight against them.

Now notice what they did. First, they wanted to make their case airtight in the hearing of the people who were present. They began by saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth." Of course, if they really believed that, then why didn't they follow Him? Perhaps they wanted Jesus to think that they were so that they could trap Him more easily. They also said, "[You] defer to no one; for You are not partial to any," that is, "You are no respecter of persons. You are fair and unbiased in all You teach. Because of this, You will answer what we ask with absolute honesty." "Tell us [then], what do You think? Is it lawful to give [tribute] to Caesar, or not?" They flattered Him, like Judas did with his kiss, but their intention was only to destroy Him.

Now Jesus realized what they were doing. He saw right through their deception. The Spirit of God had opened their hearts to Him. This is why He said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?" And notice the tact Jesus took. He was not one to win friends and influence people. When someone attacked God's truth, Jesus was ready to retaliate by speaking the truth. Paul did the same thing, and so did Stephen. Sometimes a rebuke is what is needed to show people what they are really like, to open their eyes. Sometimes it may be necessary for us to do the same thing, when we are dealing with people who are hostile to God's truth. For the most part we are to be gentle and patient with all men. But when it becomes clear that they are enemies to the cause of Christ, we are to rebuke them with the truth.

Jesus then asked them to show Him the coin used for paying the tribute. He had to ask them for one, because He didn't have one of His own. Remember, Christ emptied Himself and became poor that we through His poverty might become rich. This emptying refers not only to His taking to Himself a human nature, but also in being born in poor circumstances. He did this to make us rich in the things of God. We should think

about this next time we're tempted to run after the world in the hope of becoming rich. The one who is filled with the Spirit and with good works is the one who is really rich in God's kingdom. Jesus asked them for a coin, and they brought Him a denarius, which was a small silver coin a common worker would earn for an average day's work. When they brought it, He asked them, "Whose picture and writing is this" (v. 20)? And they said to Him, "Caesar's" (v. 21). The sign of a monarch's sovereignty over his subjects was shown by the fact that his face was on their coins. This meant that they were obligated to pay him tribute. The Jews had always resented being ruled by anyone who wasn't Jewish. Jeremiah couldn't convince them in his day to submit to the king of Babylon, and the Jews of Christ's day equally resented being ruled by Rome. But the fact that Caesar's image was on their money meant that they were in bondage to him. And so Jesus tells them that they must submit to him and pay him tribute. He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). They are to give to Caesar as the ruling authority the things that belong to him, the things that are within his right to require, such as honor, obedience, and tribute or taxes. This is the same thing the apostle Paul will later teach the Christians in Rome (Rom. 13:1-7). After all, rulers are the servants of God. They devote themselves to this work. Therefore, they are worthy of their hire. Now how could the Herodians become angry at this? Jesus, at least at this point, was a friend to the Roman government. He was teaching the people to pay their taxes as they should. Herod might have even thanked Jesus for this. But now what about the Pharisees? It seems as though Jesus had fallen right into their hands. But no, Jesus also said, "[Render] to God the things that are God's." God is the One who requires that we support those who rule over us. In the Old Covenant, He required the people to support the Jewish government through taxes (1 Sam. 8:10; 1 Kings 4:7; 9:15). Now that there was a foreign government ruling over them, they still had to pay. They owed obedience to God; therefore they had to render to Him that obedience by paying their taxes to Caesar. When the disciples of the Pharisees heard this, they also had nothing to say. Both groups went away marveling that He had escaped their plot again Him.

In closing, I would like to apply this passage in two ways. First, it is God's will that we give to our government what is rightfully theirs. It's true that the United States government used to be more righteous than it is now, but that doesn't matter as far as our obedience to them is concerned. Jesus tells us this morning we must render to Caesar (or to the government) the things that are Caesar's. What do we owe them? From what Jesus says here, we owe them taxes. Our government provides a very valuable service to its citizens. It provides us with protection, within and without. Our police and courts protect our lives, property and rights, while our military protects us from foreign invasion and takeover. These things cost money, and we are the ones our Lord says must pay it. We reap the benefits, and so we must pay the price. Now it's true that the government also provides things it shouldn't, or perhaps things which should be voluntary and not mandatory, such as public schools and social retirement programs. And it's also true that they have enacted laws which are against God's commandments, such as making it legal to kill unborn children, or illegal to speak against homosexuality. But that doesn't absolve us of our responsibility to pay them what we owe them. We must obey where we can. Where we can't, we must disobey and leave the results to God. We must pay our taxes, even though the government may use that money for evil, as well as good. We

must pay, but they are responsible before God as to how they use it. We need to be reminded this morning that government is good. It is instituted by God to prevent total and complete anarchy, where our life and property would be in danger every moment. And because it is a servant of God for our good, we need to support it.

But second, we must also remember to give to God what is God's. He not only commands us to support the government, He also tells us there are many other things He would have us to do, such as be faithful to obey all His commandments; to attend His worship – to honor Him by praying to Him, praising Him, and by listening carefully to His Word as it is preached, since this is one of the primary ways He speaks to us today – to give Him our tithes and offerings; to forgive, love and encourage one another; to nurture our families in the ways of the Lord, to use our time and talents to build His kingdom by reaching out to others; and to pay our vows we made to Him: to put our sins to death and live for His glory, to love our spouses and be faithful to them, and to raise our children in the ways of the Lord. We owe God a tremendous debt. He made us and takes care of us, and when we fell into sin, He sent His Son to die on the cross for us. What should we give Him in return? Everything He wants of us. Let us therefore read His Word daily to know what He wants, and by His gracious Spirit, be ready to do what He wants. Let's not be like the hypocrites who are always looking for ways to get around what God wants us to do. Jesus is truthful and teaches the way of God in truth. Let's be faithful then and do what He wants diligently, for this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Amen.