

Render to Caesar

Matthew 22:15-22

One thing that has stuck out in my mind as I have prepared for and taught the adult Sunday School class on church history these past six months has been the regular and ongoing struggle to address and define the proper relationship between the church and the civil governments of this world. We've seen rather wild excesses, including the Pope of Rome assuming jurisdiction over the vast majority of western Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. The papacy itself ascended high above European society, built upon the fading glory of the old Roman Empire. The church owned extensive land and exercised power over kings and emperors alike. At other times, of course, it was the great kings who exerted undue influence over the church. And with the ebb and flow of the centuries, they never quite got it right.

Even the protestant reformation of the 16th century wasn't able to settle this issue, as the role of the relationship between the church and the civil government continued to vex the church, as it has done to this day. Our national constitution made a valiant and praiseworthy effort to define that relationship between church and state, but the issue is hardly settled or understood the same way by the whole of our nation. The COVID crisis five years ago now brought many aspects of this issue to the forefront again, and suffice it to say that Christians and churches around the world are hardly unified on the whole matter. It's not hard to find the ongoing debates abounding on the internet today with reference to what is typically called Christian nationalism. What is the role of the church in society? How does that affect even our national elections and our public policy? How should it affect those areas of civil government and politics? It is a question that Jesus himself faced, and his answer in our text this afternoon gives us a very helpful and broad context to resolve all of these

issues as they continually arise.

For Jesus, it was a trick question. That is to say, a question intended to get him into trouble with one group or another. We call them "gotcha" questions today. The design of the question was to do just that—to force Jesus to say something against which his opponents could reply, "gotcha." What we read in verse 15 is that "the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk."

They plotted! It was a conspiracy. A secret plan among the self-righteous Pharisees to get Jesus into trouble. They sought to "entangle Him in His talk." And that's a good translation. They sought to entangle him. To entrap him. To trap him like you would trap a bird or an animal. Or even a noose, obviously used to destroy life. They wanted to turn his words against him, to use them against him. They wanted to trick him, to tempt him, to snare him. And no surprise, it was the Pharisees who were seeking to do this.

We know what the Pharisees are like, the Bible tells us plainly. They were the self-righteous Jews, those who thought so very highly of themselves, thought themselves to be good, to be sufficient in terms of their performance in obedience to the law. And they are known, of course, for their hypocrisy. So we read things like,

Mat. 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward."

Also, Mat. 15:7 "Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. 9 And

in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ”

Most clearly,

Mat. 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

So that is who we are dealing with! What is presented to us is simply,

I. THE FOOLISHNESS OF HYPOCRISY.

Notice the connection with the Herodians, in verse 16. Those loyal to king Herod and his dynasty. They represented the connection with the Roman government, and typically they would be bitterly opposed to the religious leaders among the Pharisees. They would have no interest in the religious rules and laws promoted by the Pharisees. But hypocrisy does make strange bed-fellows, and no doubt these two very different groups were using each other in their united opposition to Jesus. Again, all of that emphasizes the foolishness of their hypocrisy. That foolishness begins with,

A. Foolish motives.

Sometimes it’s hard to discern the motives of people we read about in the Bible, because we aren’t told exactly what those motives might be. We have certainly encountered that in our study of Genesis. But sometimes, especially with Jesus, we know exactly what those motives are. We are told.

v.15 “Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk.”

Luke’s gospel puts this account this way,

Luke 20:20 “So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor. 21 Then they asked Him, saying, “Teacher, we know that You say and teach rightly, and You do not show personal favoritism, but teach the way of God in truth: 22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” 23 But He perceived their craftiness, and said to them, “Why do you test Me?”

So...foolish motives are evident and obvious. They don’t simply want to create an argument or debate that will make Jesus look bad—they want to have cause to turn him over to the power and authority of the governor. They want him arrested! Imprisoned. Even put to death. They were all the more determined to have Jesus killed. And all of that is as plain to see as can be.

Notice their tactic of using flattery,

B. Foolish flattery.

They say things about Jesus that are, actually, true. That doesn’t mean that the Pharisees accept them to be true, again, noting their hypocrisy. But the words themselves, the flattery itself, ironically serves to condemn the Pharisees because of actual truthfulness of what they say. Though the motives are

foolish, their hypocrisy exposed, still, they acknowledge Jesus rightly.

v.16

Sadly, they don't believe their own words. But we certainly do! Jesus is true. Jesus teaches the way of God in truth. If there is anything to be said about Jesus in honor and worship, that is it. He is, in his own words, "the way the truth and the life." We read of Jesus' incarnation with these words,

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

And Jesus answered. Pilate's accusations by declaring,

John 18:37 "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

So, yes, "we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth." And even further, again with foolish flattery, we read this about Jesus,

v.16b "...nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men."

Indeed he doesn't. Jesus is no respecter of persons, he doesn't show favoritism. He doesn't "look on the face of a man," as those words literally say. Jesus looks at the heart, the real person, the inner man. He looks at the motives and the desires, not simply the outward appearance. And, again, surely, that is exactly true. And such a self-condemnation to these Pharisees, who think the very opposite of Jesus, that he looks only at their outward appearance as if their foolish flattery will actually succeed in soliciting an answer from Jesus.

They think, to their own shame, that they can now pose the question to Jesus that will get him into trouble, realizing that he won't be giving a politically correct answer but one rooted in some sort of principle. Jesus won't be trying to win anyone's favor, he won't be influenced by anyone else's opinion. He's not afraid of anyone, but totally impartial. So they ask what seems to be the perfect "gotcha" question they can conceive of.

v.17

No doubt that question was one reason the Pharisees aligned with the Herodians, because the Herodians would have expected payment of all the Roman taxes. They would have expected the political influence to demand the tax, so if Jesus spoke against it they would find that to be treasonous.

We are told by Matthew, however, exactly what is in the heart of these Pharisees and Herodians. It is,

C. Foolish wickedness.

v.18 "But Jesus perceived their wickedness..."

Strong words. Their flattery didn't influence him one bit. Even the truthfulness of their descriptions of him wasn't sufficient, given their hypocrisy. Jesus simply calls them wicked. There was nothing neutral about this question. Nothing ambivalent. Just pure and simple wickedness, which Jesus recognized and perceived for what it was. It was wicked to "test" him, to entrap or snare him. It was wicked to flatter him with such obvious hypocrisy.

And thus, avoiding the trap of the trick question put to Jesus, Jesus uses the occasion to teach an incredibly complex lesson regarding a very profound and timeless matter. He answers the question in a way that serves us to this day and has provided

guidance to the church of every age. It is a declaration of what I call a new covenant reality.

II. A DECLARATION OF NEW COVENANT REALITY.

v.19-21

I use the language of the New Covenant because the matter of church and state was entirely different in the Old Covenant. In the age before the incarnation, Jesus didn't exist in the flesh. He had no human nature. And the kingdom of God was identified precisely with the nation of Israel. It was an emphasis on that which was outward, the shadow form of the truth of the gospel. The people of God were the people of Israel, and God's choice of the nation was the same as his choice of the people. Thus, the king of Israel sat upon the throne of God. The church and the state were identical, to use the language of our day.

But Jesus came as the fulfillment of all those Old Covenant shadows, and so now, in Christ, those who believe in Jesus are called "the Israel of God." Such that those outward distinctions are now removed, such that the gospel is put this way,

Rom. 10:8 "But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Gal. 3:26 "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ

Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

So now,

Col. 3:11 "... there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."

In that new covenant context, the question is actually a very good one. And Jesus gives a very good answer.

v.17 "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

So what is the answer? The short answer is actually, "yes." Pay the tax. But the fuller answer recognizes the proper role of both the civil magistrate and God's authority. It's not one or the other, it's not one against the other. So should you pay the tax to Caesar, the Roman emperor? Well, yes. And Jesus explains,

A. The proper role of civil magistrates.

v.19-21

What is his point? Simply this, that in the New Covenant, God has established the distinct authority of civil magistrates for the benefit and protection of people who live in this world. It is an authority separated from the authority given to the church for the spiritual care and membership of God's people. And we are to be subject to that authority. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

And what do we "render to Caesar? What things are his, as the civil magistrate? I don't have to guess or assume the answer

to that question, for the fullness of NT teaching is clear.

1 Peter 2:13 “Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. 17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

This is our duty to God, for the Lord’s sake, that you “submit yourselves to every ordinance of man.” It’s not optional. We aren’t exempt. In fact, we read “this is the will of God.” Not only is it our duty to “Love the brotherhood,” but Peter continues, “Fear God. Honor the king.” And Peter isn’t talking about any particularly good and beneficial king. He’s talking about Nero, a rather despicable leader among Roman kings.

Paul would express the same idea in,

Rom. 13:1 “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear,

honor to whom honor.”

Jesus, of course, cuts right to the heart of the matter in answering this question intended to ensnare him in a contentious debate. He isn’t tricked at all, nor at a loss to know how to answer. The answer is plain. It is clear. And although all the applications of his answer might have a level of complexity in the context of our own day, the principle of the matter is just as simple and straightforward as it could possibly be. “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Caesar, representing the civil magistrate, is due our honor, obedience and submission. As a matter of conscience, as the religious and spiritual duty of a Christian. If Caesar requires the payment of taxes, then you must pay your taxes. For Caesar, the civil magistrate, is “God’s minister.” God’s servant. The civil magistrate is granted the responsibility by God of being an agent of his wrath, to punish evil doers, thus obviously defining that evil to be punished. The civil magistrate is to be honored, given respect, according to the commandment of God. “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.”

That obligation is inescapable, so if the Pharisees thought they would get Jesus in trouble with the Roman government by advocating or promoting his own authority, they were deeply mistaken. It was not a difficult question for Jesus at all.

v.18 “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” 21 They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to

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

So there we have equally clearly,

B. The proper role of God's authority.

They are not pitted against each other, this authority of Caesar and of God. They are both valid, both obligatory for the people of God. In the realm of civil authority, we submit to kings and governors. In the realm of spiritual matters, within the church and within all matter of personal holiness and godliness, we submit to God.

In a very broad and personal sense, submission is a fundamental aspect of all Christian conduct and virtue. It is a characteristic trademark of the true and sincere child of God. We are not autonomous creatures, deciding for ourselves whatever seems right in our own eyes. We are not independent anarchists, ruling our own little kingdoms by ourselves. Rather, just as Jesus submitted to his father in heaven, we submit to the proper role of authority in which God has placed us.

It is worth noting just how fully the Pharisees were silenced by that declaration.

v.22 "When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way."

This characteristic of submissiveness takes on a comprehensive meaning in our lives as God's people, joined so closely the humility with which we are called to live.

1 Peter 5:5 "Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." 6 Therefore humble yourselves under the

mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

So we come back to Jesus, with these words of encouragement,

Phil. 2:1 "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. 9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."