



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 20
Proper 24 (A)**

**Render Unto God What Is God's
[RCL] Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22**

“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s.” These words of Jesus have become a sort of proverb, and those who know little of scripture may still have heard “Render unto Caesar.” Yet, digging beneath the surface of this short encounter helps uncover some of the deeper currents in the exchange.

First, the combination of people approaching Jesus is intriguing. Matthew tells us that the Pharisees come together with the Herodians. The Pharisees did not want to give money to their pagan oppressors and so were opposed to paying taxes to Rome. On the other hand, King Herod’s position of power came courtesy of the Romans, so even though the taxes were widely considered to be oppressive, the Herodians had a vested interest in keeping the Roman taxes paid. Therefore, the Pharisees and the Herodians each reflected one of the horns of the dilemma.

Then came the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” This reference is obviously to Jewish Law, also called the Law of Moses. Clearly, it was lawful to pay the tax by Rome’s standards; the question was whether it was proper for a Jew to do so.

It would seem that they have presented Jesus with no way out. He can’t speak against the tax, for that would anger the Herodians and lead to a charge of treason against Rome. He could not speak in favor of the tax without alienating most of the crowds that followed him.

Jesus asks for one of the coins used in paying the tax. This is Jesus’ own trap, for it proves at least one among the questioners to be a hypocrite. For the coin used for the tax was a silver Denarius with the image of Caesar on one side, and on the reverse, the image of a woman named Pax or personified peace. The coins were against Jewish Law, which prohibited graven images.

You will recall the incident when Jesus chased moneychangers from the outer courts of the Temple. These moneychangers had a business because one was required to exchange pagan currency for Temple coins before going to do business in the Temple. Carrying the image of Caesar into the Temple was considered sinful. But note that when Jesus asks for a Denarius, one is quickly located and handed to Jesus.

Jesus then asks the question that everyone in Israel could have answered without a coin in hand. In our reading for this morning, we used the New Revised Standard Version, which said, “Whose head is this and whose title?” That translation misses the point of his argument. The word they translate as “head” is “icon,” a Greek word better translated as “image.” The word “title” is better translated as “likeness.” When they answer Jesus’ question, saying that the image and likeness are “Caesar’s,” Jesus replies that they are to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Again, the translation covers something better revealed. It could also be translated as “give back” rather than “give” or “render.” Give Caesar back those things that are Caesar’s. It is his coin anyway, who cares if you give Caesar back his coin for the tax?

Then Jesus gives the most amazing line of the short encounter when he continues by saying that we are to “give back to God the things that are God’s.” It leaves everyone calculating what exactly is God’s that we are supposed to give back. And in case you were wondering, the clue was the word “icon” or “image” and the word “likeness.”

Jesus’ answer came from Genesis 1:26-27, which says, “And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,’” and goes on to state “God created humankind in his Image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

The principle is this: Just as the coin has Caesar’s icon on it, so it is Caesar’s, we were made in the image and likeness of God, so we are God’s. Jesus affirmed the tax while making it all but irrelevant. Jesus implies that, though we do owe the state, there are limits to what we owe. Yet, Jesus places no limits regarding what we owe to God.

This text is often used to talk about stewardship in terms of what you give to the church. But this is no passage on the tithe. For if giving 10 percent of our income is all we do, we would fall well more than 90 percent shy of the mark. Jesus says that everything you have and everything you are is God’s already.

While this would certainly apply to the money you make, the formula is not that you give 100 percent of your income to God, for God knows you need the money for the necessities of life. The teaching is that once you have given God some of the money you earn, don’t feel that you have bought off an obligation. God wants to share in some of your time and energy, so the 100 percent formula relates to your calendar as well as your wallet.

What God wants is nothing less than to come and abide in your heart. The point is that you have been made in the image and likeness of God. God loves you. God keeps your picture in the divine wallet and on the heavenly refrigerator. Jesus did not care about the tax, for his real concern was that you live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created you.

You begin to live into the image and likeness of God by conforming your life to be more like Jesus’ life. Giving back to God through the church does matter, but merely giving money to the government, to this church or anywhere else is only part of the picture.

To live more fully into that image and likeness of God that is in you, give back your heart to God – for it is God’s anyway. When the time comes for communion in just a little while, I would encourage everyone, no matter what your denominational background, to come forward to receive the bread and wine of communion. And if you have not yet been baptized, then come forward for a blessing. For at this altar, we can meet Jesus anew every time we worship. For in answer to the question, “What are the things that are God’s which we are to give back to God?” the answer is, “You.”

This sermon, written by the Rt. Rev. Frank Logue, originally ran for Proper 24A in 2014.