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Matthew 22:15-21
Rendering to God What is God's

Taxes have always been controversial. This is not news. One beloved church member once confessed that after a life which spanned an entire century, she had but one regret, she was born on April 15! I still remember the day I got my first paycheck at a real job. I held it in my hands and just studied it. What a glorious moment. The first thought I had after looking at all those numbers were, "Jesus was wrong about rendering to Caesar what was Ceasar's." For us, taxes are a matter of policy where we debate percentages and types of taxes. In Jesus's day, taxes were about much more.

The scene opens by introducing four groups of **Characters** (vs. 15-16). The first is Jesus, whom we know well. The second are the Pharisees introduced in verse 15 who loathed Roman rule. To them, Israel suffered under the oppressive tyranny of Gentiles. Israel, then, was under the active judgment of God as they were under the Babylonians. The solution was religious fidelity and strict obedience to the Mosaic Law in hopes of liberty. The third is the Herodians introduced in verse 16. This group loved Rome and supported its system. Rome placed Herod in power over Palestine and their connection to him was the source of their own power and influence.

The final group, though not mentioned directly in the text, lies in the background. They were the Nationalists. Jerusalem was filled with nationalists who agreed with the Pharisees that Rome was a threat, and God would one day liberate Israel. The problem with the Pharisees, in their humbled estimation, was they were too soft. Only violence, not religion, would solve the Roman problem. Remember how Jesus's Triumphant Entry had echoes of the Maccabean revolt. Most Jews prayed for another moment of liberation even if it came by violent rebellion. The most extreme of these nationalists were the Zealots who murdered Romans and their sympathizers. Although not every Jew in Jerusalem favored how the Zealots sought liberation, no doubt animosity of Rome permeated Israel.

All of this sits in the background of this simple question. Taxes were about more than infrastructure and public schools. They were about loyalty. One could either be loyal to Rome or loyal to the Lord. They could not be both. Render your loyalty to Caesar or render it to God.

This leads to **The Question** (vs. 17). They begin by asking if it was lawful (according to Moses) to pay taxes to Caesar. The crowd had a specific tax in mind known as the Poll Tax which had to be paid by every man between ages 14-65 and woman between ages 12-65. What launched the first Zealot revolt after the resurrection of Jesus was the Poll Tax resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem.

To the Jews, paying this tax was a sort of litmus test for how one truly felt about Rome. For many, God did not recognize Roman rule over Israel. Therefore, to pay the tax was to defy God. And it is this very tax that Jesus was asked about. It was loaded with cultural, religious, and political fires.

This leads, finally, to **The Answer** (vs. 18-21). Jesus opens by calling out their hypocrisy. Despite being appalled by the tax, its presence in the Temple showed they were not too bothered by it. A denarius was a day's wage and, on the dime-size coin, was an image of Caesar Tiberius with the captions, "God and High Priest," and "Son of the divine Augustus." The coin would have repulsed the Hebrews who considered it blasphemous.

Jesus's answer is two-fold. First, render to Caesar what is his. In short, pay the tax. If his answer concluded here, these groups would, no doubt, accuse Jesus of being a Roman sympathizer and traitor. Nevertheless, Christians have developed a basic understanding of how we are to relate to government. Clearly, followers of Jesus have a responsibility toward their government.

In the early church, Justin Martyr wrote an apologetic to Caesar explaining the Christian faith and why Christianity was good for the empire. In his argument, he reminded Ceasar of Christ's command for believers to pay their taxes and to be good citizens. In general, Christians are commanded to obey all civic laws including taxes, regulations, speed limits, etc. There are two main exceptions to this rule. First, Christians are to resist when the state demands Christians do something that God has commanded not to do. Secondly, they are to resist when the state demands they defy what God has commanded.

The more significant command is the second. Not only are we to render to Caesar what is his, but we are also render to God what is his. For most my life, I thought Jesus was talking about tithing. Pay taxes to Caesar. Pay tithes to God. However, the standard by which the denarius belongs to Caesar is important. Coins belong to Caesar because they bear his image. But what bears the image of God? We do.

In a masterful stroke, Jesus turns the question on the head of each group and draws them to repentance. They think the most difficult command is rendering to Caesar, but each prove they fail in rendering to God. The Herodians gave their loyalty to a political system shaped by a dynasty with innocent blood on its hands. The Pharisees rendered their worship to a system that prioritized the appearance of righteousness without its actuality. The Nationalists may have been patriotic but forsook the Lord's clear commands regarding violence and even murder. In one sense, all of them were more like Caesar than they might want to admit.

Rendering to Caesar is significantly easier than rendering to God. Caesar demands a portion, but God demands the whole. Caesar requires a tax, God requires our hearts. It's easy to shout about the controversies of the day, especially in a divided nation wherein online rhetoric is confused with the real world. It is significantly more difficult to "crucify the flesh," (Galatians 5:24) and "pursue righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). The former requires a CPA and a quarterly report, the latter, however, required the cross.

Don't just render to Caesar. Render to God.