

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Giving to the Emperor - October 18, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22

In a little over two weeks, our nation goes to the polls. At long last, decision time. At long last, this endless election season will, hopefully, be over. No more political ads. No more questionable claims. No more talking heads telling us how to think. As you know, our church has been praying about this election for many weeks. Moreover, I certainly have not been shy about working current events into the sermon.

Some might say that the church should have nothing to do with whatever is going on in the world and talk only about so-called “spiritual things”. In that view, religion and politics shouldn’t mix. God is God. Government is Government and even Jesus supposedly made the distinction in today’s scripture when he said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s but give to God what is God’s.”

These words are among the most frequently quoted sayings of Jesus. They are also among the most misunderstood. On the surface, it would seem Jesus is saying government and religion should have nothing to do with each other. There is a secular realm as represented by “Caesar,” who was Emperor of Rome and was in charge of much of modern Europe and the Middle East, and a spiritual realm represented by God, whatever that means. All human beings therefore have two identities: the one reserved for “in here” using Zoom or in-person worship. In “here,” we talk “holy talk”: God and prayer and fancy words and this book called the Bible which is read by few and understood by even fewer. In the secular view, religion is an airy-fairy fantasy land which has nothing to do with what goes on in the real world out there.

Out there, that’s what really matters: money and power and doing better than your neighbor and lying and cheating a bit in order to get by. That’s reality, my friend. This church stuff is merely a brief artificial respite from the grueling realities of life.

But was Jesus really detached from the so-called secular world? Did he intend for his spiritual ministry to be separated from the day-to-day lives of the people whom he healed, preached to, and cared for? Consider the circumstances of Jesus’ life: He was a Jew, living in a land that was occupied by the Roman government and subject to the whims of the Roman governor and Roman soldiers who had the power to do whatever they wanted with him. Furthermore, he was constantly at odds with the Jewish King, a man called Herod, and the Jewish religious authorities: the priests and scribes. There is, in short, no way that Jesus could avoid interacting with and being affected by the many layers of authority and the rules and regulations of Rome, the Jewish Kingdom, and the Jewish religion. He knew first hand about the oppression of Rome, the tax collectors who robbed the people, the rules which allowed a soldier to demand any Jew to give him his coat or carry a heavy load for him.

No, Jesus knew all about Caesar's world and what Caesar's world represented. It would be a mistake to think Jesus wanted his followers to ignore Caesar. The reality was simply too obvious to ignore. However, Jesus was not asking his followers to ignore Caesar, they couldn't even if they wanted to. Rather, he was asking his followers to envision a different way of life and living: A way founded not on the power of money or might, but on the power of love.

For too many people back then and even today, Jesus' ideas about the world seem ridiculous and unobtainable. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God or says things like, "My kingdom is not of this world," it's easy to conclude that Jesus cannot possibly expect us to live our day-to-day lives in accordance with his teaching. Caesar's world, Caesar's rules, Caesar wins.

And if the world were really divided into two spheres, the secular and the religious, that might be the correct interpretation.

However, is the world divided into a secular sphere and a religious sphere? Are our lives really split in two with one part having nothing to do with the other? Are Jesus and his teachings so detached from daily living that they are a hopeless ideal which can never be attained in this world?

Well, I don't know about you, but I believe that if what we do here during this hour has nothing to do with what is going on the other 167 hours of the week, then I would agree that we've all been wasting our time. If God is only present in the sanctuary — whether on this on-line sanctuary or the in-person one in Collingswood, then it is very easy to claim God does indeed have no place in the so called "real world."

However, such an interpretation cannot be true. Faith and religion are not separate from our day-to-day living. What happens in worship is not divorced from what goes on the rest of the week. We cannot split our existence into two parts. Caesar is not separate from God. Quite the contrary, the unshakable truth is that Caesar is surrounded, dominated, and absolutely controlled by God.

The fundamental assertion of our Judaeo/Christian faith is that, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." As soon as you accept that truth, as soon as you admit that everything and everyone you see around you could not possibly have come into existence on its own, then you acknowledge there is a first cause, a creator, a God behind the vastness of the universe. From the largest star to the smallest particle and everything in between, our creator God is responsible for bring creation into being and that means you and that means me and that means Caesar.

Can we understand, therefore, how ridiculous it is to argue that Jesus' saying, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's," somehow separates reality into two parts? Reality cannot be separated into religious and secular. Reality is one, one in God.

Do you appreciate what Jesus is saying here? When he tells us to give to God what is God's and we remember that in fact, the universe belongs to God, what is he saying? The point is giving to Caesar, far from being an equal choice, as opposed to giving to God, is in fact a meaningless choice. Who is Caesar, a man, a mortal man, a human being just like you and me who was born, lived on earth for a while, and physically died, just like all of us. Caesar was the product of two people who arrived on earth the same way that he did, grew up and were sustained by the food produced from the earth, breathing the air we all breathe and drinking the water we all drink. And friends, that air we breathe and that water we drink and that food from the earth we eat was all created by God.

How then can we possibly put Caesar at or near the same level as God? How can we possibly divide life and living into a choice between earthly considerations and heavenly considerations? Why would we think for even a second that a choice exists at all! There is God and then there is everything else God created.

If we embrace this way of thinking, really accept it, really make it part of how we view the world, everything changes. Everything turns upside down. We human beings are trained from the start of our lives to look at reality in terms of how the world of our senses works. What is real are the things we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Our realities are defined by people we interact with: our families, our co-workers, our neighbors and friends, and the people in positions of authority.

We are taught to think of the senses and the people first and then see how they fit into our understanding of God. For most people, God is a mere afterthought, if even that. We're born, we live, we die. If God is part of the picture, it's only because we recall something random in the Bible or remember the example of an exceptional person, or maybe have an unusual experience that we cannot explain rationally or logically. That, for most, is God — God exists merely to cover the gaps in life that our experiences cannot explain.

But what if, what if, what if we understood the universe not in terms of what our senses tell us and/or the relationships we have with other people but instead understood the universe first in terms of God and God's vision for humanity — and then compared God's vision with our reality?

Confessing that God created the universe and really applying that in our lives turns everything upside down. If God is our priority, everything else is secondary. God comes before everything. God is more important than the government. God is more important than our jobs and careers. God is more important than our community. Yes, God is even more important than our parents, spouses, and children. And yes, God is more important than us.

Here then is the core of what Jesus is saying: giving to Caesar, or recognizing the existence of human government, is akin to noticing that a fly is crawling on our forehead. It is there. It is annoying.

We probably should swat it and make it go away, but in the big picture of life and living, these human inventions are absolutely nothing. Totally meaningless.

This is why, friends, having a relationship with God in Jesus Christ is so critical to living well during our time on earth. Having a prayer life in which you feel comfortable talking to God at any time, and listening for God at any time and understanding what God is saying to you makes it much easier to place God first in your life. Studying the scriptures and talking about them helps you understand what God is saying to you and guiding your choices.

Equipped with a strong relationship with God, strengthened our hearts by our prayers and strengthened in our minds by our knowledge of scripture, we have real power. We have real power on this earth to decide when to follow Caesar and when to reject Caesar. We have real power to decide when to do what our jobs ask of us and when to refuse. We have real power to go along with our friends and neighbors or turn and walk away from them. We have real power to decide how best to deal with and support our families. We understand how to best manage our own lives not to benefit ourselves, but to bring glory to God.

The religious authorities presented Jesus with a false choice, Caesar or God. They wanted him to come down on one side or the other and they set him up knowing that whatever he chose, he would be in trouble.

But the choice between God and Caesar is not an either/or. It is not even a both/and because Caesar and God are not equal. The only choice for us is God because in God's view of the world, Caesar, government, jobs, neighbors, family, and us are just one small part of the magnificence of God's infinite creation. We make a huge mistake by allowing ourselves to be consumed by the worries of the politics and relationships and cares and concerns of the day. In God's world all these things are like a summer breeze blowing in and fading away.

Jesus is telling us to give everything to God, whether it is loyalty, or obedience, or how we focus our lives but never to any person, or government, or job. Seeking life through God's eyes first will transform us in ways we cannot possibly imagine, but transform us it will.

Give to God what is God's — in short give everything to God. Because in giving, you will receive far more than you can ever imagine. Your life will be infinitely changed and infinitely better, and the concerns about Caesar will utterly, totally disappear.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.