

“Render Unto God... What, Exactly?”
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Apostles Anglican Church
Scriptures: Mal 3:6-12; Psalm 96; 1 Thess 1; Matthew 22:15-22

One thing that has popped up in my algorithm in recent days is a certain series of videos that feature a singular, moderately to well-known figure who likes to argue, sitting in the middle of a group of unknown but very opinionated people who also like to argue who take turns flinging their objections at this person and off goes the rage roller coaster. I don't want to give many details about these videos because while I see their appeal, I have come to the conclusion that they are bad for my soul and my well-being. They are strife-producers, filled with people who have traded good-faith dialogue for sound-bytes, and are a function of the unhealthy state of our public discourse. They are contrived to get a reaction of outrage and self-congratulation, two of the main things that advertisers have figured out keep the human eye glued to the screen of a smartphone.

I mention these videos because they are not all that dissimilar from the occasion we come upon in our Gospel reading for the day. The question that gets us one of Jesus' most memorable and repeated quotes, “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,”¹ is a complete set up and a cynical fabrication on the part of the temple authorities who feel threatened by Jesus' presence in what they feel is *their* temple.

Fr. John gave us a bit of background in his introduction of the preceding parable last week, but it bears repeating. At the beginning of Matthew 21, Jesus comes into

¹ Matthew 22:21

Jerusalem riding on a donkey, welcomed by the crowds who proclaim his coming with messianic language, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”² Jesus then proceeds to enter the Temple and clear it of the money changers. He then leaves to stay the night in nearby Bethany.³ The next day, he returns and gets his authority questioned by these scribes after he begins teaching in the Temple. Then we have the series of parables we’ve had over the last couple of weeks in our Gospel readings, parables that implicate these scribes and elders.

And so by the time we get to today’s passage, they are pretty well incensed by Jesus’ presence. Who exactly does this guy think he is? He is a problem to be taken care of. Hear again Matthew 22:15: “Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.” This is no good-faith debate. This is not an honest seeker looking for wisdom. This is the attempted killing blow to rid the Temple of this problem prophet.

And the concoction of a question they mix is a potent one: the ingredients are religion, politics, and money. If you want to get somebody in trouble this is how you do it... that’s even true today. Notice who the Pharisees send with their representatives. Verse 16: “And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians...” So you have the Pharisees’ representatives there along with the Herodians, people who are loyal and report to Herod, the civil puppet king put over the people of Israel by the Romans. The religious authorities and the civil authorities are listening in.

² Matthew 21:9b

³ Matthew 21:17

The question begins with flattery “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”⁴

Jesus doesn't take the bait. He isn't swayed by the flattery and sees the rhetorical trap for what it is. Saying no to paying taxes will give the Herodians something actionable to Herod, ‘hey this guy is telling people not to pay their taxes!’ That would have been sure to get some Roman attention. The question askers know he is trapped if he goes that way.

But the other way, capitulating to Caesar's rule and rules, that is a trap too! It would be poor form for a Jewish rabbi to just simply comply with every Roman whim. Would such a rabbi even acknowledge God as superior to Caesar?

You are familiar with the answer Jesus gives: Caesar gets what belongs to him and God gets what belongs to him. This goes a lot deeper than paying taxes. The bad-faith questioners walk away speechless and we all get to reconsider to what we give ourselves.

Because that is the upshot of what Jesus is saying. Caesar can have his taxes, but what of yours belongs to God? This God who made everything out of nothing, who provides for your every need, what that you call yours is his? The answer, of course, is everything.

⁴ Matthew 22:16-17

The life of a Christian is figuring out, with seemingly ever increasing difficulty, what parts of our lives we have yet to render completely unto God. The journey of spiritual formation is in one sense, a path of discovery of the next thing which we are called to surrender, and then the next thing, and then the next thing. Am I rendering to God what is his?

We don't naturally want to do this, of course, and so we are in a constant struggle with the pull of the world, the flesh, and the devil for our very selves. And so I want to challenge us this morning to examine several areas of our lives that we can render more fully unto God.

And the first area our scriptures point to today is to that coin in Jesus' hand, to our money. Now Fr. John gave me a hard time in the second service last week for not preaching the Sunday after my sabbatical, but I knew these texts were coming this week and so I assured him I would get what was coming to me. Nobody wants to hear the guy who just received the generous gift of a sabbatical come back and preach on Malachi's word from the Lord telling the people of Israel that they are robbing God of his tithes, but here we are!

So let me approach this as a fellow traveler, who is also looking to render what he has to God.

Some mix of my own personality and the warnings in the Scripture about the love of money and amassing riches formed in me a posture of avoidance when it came to money. Maybe if I didn't talk or think about it, it would go away. It caused me anxiety

to think about saving, spending, investing, so maybe if I just acted like it didn't matter, well, that was the holy thing to do anyway.

But I have since learned that being a good steward of what God has given requires intention. Money without intention leads to chaos. This is why financial advisors exist. This is why estate planning is a thing. Or think about it in terms of a household budget. I think we've all had the experience of getting to the end of a month and being surprised at just how much we've spent in one category or another.

It is the same with giving as it is with long term planning and monthly budgeting. Without intention, we lose sight of our values. It would be foolish to take Jesus' words about taxes and only apply the teaching to taxes and tithes, because he is speaking about much more than that, but it would also be foolish to think he is not speaking to our material possessions and our money.

Malachi's admonition of the people gets to the heart of the matter, that our giving to the Lord is a way that we demonstrate our trust that he will provide. We are bombarded with the message all the time that there is never enough, there never will be enough, and therefore we can't possibly get enough. This is a lie and not from the one who we claim is Enough for us. Resist the temptation to fear otherwise. Remember Jesus' words earlier in Matthew's Gospel about flowers and sparrows, of how God cares and provides for them, and of how we, his children, are of so much more value to him. The financial rat race is a treadmill that has no end and seeks to turn us all inward into our own greed. Our Father, who is our very life, invites us to trust him.

Jesus' lifting of the coin with Caesar's face on it also invites us to render what is due to God in terms of our eschatological hope and ultimate allegiance. Rome offered a compelling vision for the future and who would rule it: Caesar would. That is why his face is on the money. As long as you knew your place and did what you were told, and of course paid those taxes, things would go as reasonably well for you as you could expect. Importantly, this was the best option available to you, because stepping out of line would result in swift retribution, as it had just a few years prior, when a man named Judas the Galilean had led a tax revolt against Rome in the years of Jesus' childhood. Judas' revolt had been met with mass crucifixion.⁵

These days our invitation to put our hope in the powers of the world comes with a lot more freedom of choice and without the threat of violence to our bodies, but I fear the danger to our souls remains just as great. I am getting the calls what seems like every day now, texts too. Polling companies conducting research or candidates inviting me to hop on their bandwagons. Every screen that is in our lives has the face of someone asking for our vote. And the promises are big. "I will fix it. Trust me. Only I can save you."

And I feel the temptation. I am arrogant enough to figure that I am a pretty smart guy and so I think people who think like I do should be in charge. And if they were, then all the messes would get cleaned up. Utopia is an intoxicating idea and figures across our political spectrum are using it as a ploy for our attention and allegiance. They have us convinced that it is those other people who are the problem and they should be shouted into submission. They have those who proclaim Christ on Sunday

⁵ See Wright, N.T. *Matthew for Everyone*, Matthew 22:15-22

compromising on their values to fit a political agenda, whatever flavor of agenda it may be.

God doesn't play for second place as the purveyor of spiritual principles that take a back seat to the practical concerns of life in the real world. Many will tell you that the future hangs on the November elections, and then it will be the next election and then the next. But learn the lesson of the coin held in Jesus' hands. Tiberius Caesar⁶ is no more. All that is left of him are some coins with his face on them. It is going to be the living Christ who sits on the throne at the end of all things and our allegiance to him comes before and supersedes all else.

I want to end with one final challenge that was one I encountered during my time of sabbatical. It is fairly low hanging fruit to sit here and say today from this passage from the Gospel that we are to render our material wealth and our allegiance to God and to God alone, but what about the quieter parts of our lives? What about our silence and our stillness? What about those empty places, that space that feels as if it should be filled.

In the pause in my day to day duties at Apostles, I was afforded much more space in my schedule, some space to do the necessary tasks of a husband and father, some space to care for the practical matters of our home life, but also not a small amount of just space. I am a person who doesn't always know what to do with space and so my first instinct is to try and fill it. Most often, this looks like me listening to the radio or to a podcast, something I can convince myself is growing me in some way. What is

⁶ It seems likely he's the one on the Denarius, see Keener, Craig, *Matthew* (Matthew 22:15-22).

harder to do is to offer those open spaces in which we find ourselves to God, to offer him our stillness. To offer him our boredom.

When two people are interested in dating one another, there is often that period of showy gestures and gifts. Flowers, chocolates, you know the drill. But as a relationship gets more serious, couples find that what they want most is the other person - their presence, their attention. Let us not get so caught up in rendering our external things and possessions to God that we forget to offer him ourselves as well.

Remember what Jesus says as he lifts the coin in the air, how he says we should evaluate to whom the coin belongs. Whose image does the coin bear? The thing belongs to the one whose image it bears. I don't know if that language was intentional on Jesus' part, but I can't help but hear Genesis chapter one, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit say together, let us make human beings *in our image*. Another way of saying render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's is to say, Caesar gets everything made with his image, God gets everything made in his. That's you. That's me. That's all of us. Our taxes, our money, that is far too small a price to pay. Our everything belongs to God, because we are made in his image.

What is the next step for you today? What is the Lord calling you to lay down at his feet? The good news is that not only is he worthy of our everything, he is worthy of our trust. For a life offered to God is a life truly worth living.