

Introduction:

One of Jesus' most famous retorts to His accusers is found in **Matthew 22:21**. Having been asked if the Jews were allowed to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus asked the questioners to produce a coin. Finding on it the image of Caesar, Jesus uttered one of His most profound rebukes saying, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (ESV). But what exactly does it mean to render to God and what are we supposed to render to God? Let's take a step back, look at this story in **Matthew 22:15-22**, find out what is going on, what Jesus' main point was and what we can learn about our relationship with God from this text.

Discussion:

I. Jesus' enemies.

A. The Pharisees.

1. The word "Pharisee" meant "separatist", from the Hebrew word "parash" which meant "to separate". Pharisees were "those who carefully kept themselves from any legal contamination, distinguishing themselves by their care in such matters from the common people" (**ISBE**, v 4, p 2361, 1976.). We see this attitude demonstrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (**Luke 18:9-14**).
2. Because of their desire to be separate they created numerous traditions. Through these traditions they often nullified the Law (**Matthew 15:3**) and/or placed an even heavier burden on the people (**Matthew 23:4**). Despite this, their greatest problem was neglecting the Law. They focused on being outwardly distinct from what they viewed as the rabble, but they did not follow the Law of God regarding true distinction from the world (**Matthew 23:23-28**).
3. While Phariseeism was first and foremost a religious ideology, the Pharisees' beliefs led them to political ideology as well. Their belief and hope for the Messiah to come and overthrow the governments that oppressed them heightened their views of separatism. They were intensely nationalistic and despised the Roman rule of their land, even to the point that they would try to deny it existed (**John 8:33**). That being the case, the tribute to Caesar was a sore point for them. It was something they did not want to obey because it represented enslavement and subjection to Gentile dogs. Because of this nationalism and separatism they were opponents of the Herodian party.

B. The Herodians.

1. We know very little about the Herodians. However, their name says it all. Unlike the Pharisees, they were a political sect, supporting the Herodian dynasty that came to power through strong alliance to Rome. The Herodian family came to power by playing both sides of the fence, that is, trying to be Jewish and Roman at the same time. Thus, Herod the Great was in league with Rome but tried to pacify his subjects by beautifying and rebuilding the temple of Jehovah. His descendents tried to play this game as well.
2. The Herodians were antithetical to the Pharisees. Instead of nationalism and separatism, they wanted the leadership of Rome and Roman government. They were not looking forward to a future Messiah who would overthrow the Romans. There is some historical indication that perhaps these Herodians believed Herod was the Messiah (**Pulpit Commentary**, v 16, p 154, 1962).
3. For the Herodians, the tribute was a matter of course. It was part of their devotion to the government they loved. Refusal to pay and teaching others not to pay the tax was treason.

II. The trap.

- ##### A. These two natural enemies, the Pharisees and the Herodians, teamed up as early as **Mark 3:6** to trap and destroy Jesus. They were cunning, but not cunning enough to tackle the Master.

- B. These conspirators had seemingly developed a foolproof plan, asking a simple, yes-or-no question. Whichever answer Jesus gave, they thought they would be able to condemn and destroy Him. Interestingly, they hotly debated this very question with each other, but were willing to put aside their own debates if they could get rid of their common enemy. Whichever answer Jesus gave, He would be siding with one or the other of these conspirators. However, neither side cared whose side Jesus would come down on. Neither intended to defend Him, but was willing to let the other side trample Him.
- C. If Jesus sided with the Pharisees, saying, "No, it is unlawful to pay the poll-tax to Caesar." The Pharisees would have been more than glad to hand Jesus over to the Herodians as a traitor. Jesus could then be tried, convicted and executed. On the other hand, if Jesus sided with the Herodians and said, "Yes, it is lawful to pay the poll-tax to Caesar." Then the Pharisees would have grounds to discredit Jesus before the people. **Luke 20:19** says the high ranking Jews had not seized Jesus because they were afraid of the people. If they could discredit Him before the people, they could arrest Him without fear.
- D. The trap has been set. But they should have known better than to think they could trap Jesus.

III. Jesus' answer.

- A. At first glance it may seem that Jesus overcame this trap by figuring out a middle of the line answer that gave both groups what they wanted to hear and left no room for criticism. It appears Jesus sided with the Herodians about the poll-tax in the first half of His statement, saying to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Yet, He appears to side with the Pharisees when He says what is most important is to render to God what is His due. However, that is not at all what Jesus did. In fact, His answer was actually inflammatory to both groups, yet left His enemies unable to arrest Him as they had intended. The Herodians could not charge Him with treason; the Pharisees could not discredit Him before the people.
 - 1. First, Jesus demonstrated that He knew their question was disingenuous. In **Matthew 22:18** Jesus boldly calls them hypocrites and proclaims He knows He is being tested. However, He proceeds with an answer demonstrating He is not afraid of their traps.
 - 2. Secondly, He immediately shattered the fragile claim the Pharisees would make that they were in subjection to no one but God by directing everyone's attention to the money used to pay taxes. Caesar's inscription was on the coin (**Matthew 22:20-22**), clearly indicating the Jews were tributaries of Caesar, for without him, they had no money at all. The Pharisees couldn't have it both ways. They were willing to submit to Caesar enough to use his money, but didn't want to admit the rights that gave Caesar over them. If they were going to refuse to pay taxes, then they would have to refuse to use the money.
 - 3. Thirdly, Jesus cut through the surface issues of paying taxes which these nominal followers of God liked to debate and slammed home the heart of the matter (**Matthew 22:21**). The real issue was not paying taxes, the real issue was neither one of these groups were serving God. Jesus is not here saying that the people should give to Caesar the money that is due him in taxes and then render to God the money that is due Him in tithes and free will offerings. Notice, Jesus knows what belongs to Caesar because Caesar's image is inscribed on it. What then determines what belongs to God? God's image is inscribed on it. What is God's image inscribed upon? **Genesis 1:26**, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ...'" What were these men to give to God? *Themselves*. Jesus turned this question back on the askers and demonstrated their hypocrisy, saying if these men were real servants, the answer to their question would be obvious.
- B. How infuriated these men must have been as they could only stand there and marvel at Jesus' wisdom and ability to silence them. Jesus indeed is wise. Let us pray we too can have a small amount of this wisdom when we respond to those who would trap us.

IV. Lessons from Jesus' answer.

- A. Rendering to God what is God's resolves many issues of behavior.
 - 1. This was a debate between the Pharisees and the Herodians because they had not given themselves to God. Both groups' spirituality was based on selfishness not service to God. Had they been servants, they would have understood government is only in place because

God has established it (**Daniel 2**). Therefore, paying a tax to the government did not deny one's submission to God as the Pharisees suggested. They would also have understood submitting to that government did not allow selling out to the immoralities of that government, as the Herodians had done in throwing their support behind the Herodian family.

2. Today this is also the case. Many of the struggles we have in behavior are not struggles regarding what is really the right thing to do. The majority of the cases are struggles with wanting to do the right thing. If we haven't given our lives completely to God, we will struggle hoping to find some justification for our desires, but deep inside knowing what we should do. Wasn't this also Paul's point in **II Corinthians 8:5**?
- B. Submitting to the government does not deny submission to God.
 1. Some in our country balk at pledging allegiance to the flag because they claim their allegiance is only to God. However, Jesus' statement to the Pharisees and the Herodians demonstrates submission to the government does not deny our submission to God.
 2. We are to be in submission to the governing authorities because the governing authorities have been put in place by God. Submitting to them is an indication of submitting to God. Rebelling against them and disobeying them is a rebellion against God (**Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17**). The only exception is when submission to the government mandates disobeying God (**Acts 5:29**). Then and only then do we refuse submission to the government.
- C. Rendering to God does not mean separatism or going out of the world.
 1. The Pharisees' claim against paying taxes was based on their views of separatism. They were not a part of the commoners and they were definitely not a part of the Gentile world. They were their own little group, separate from all others. Throughout history, many separatist groups have existed, trying to live in some type of communal brotherhood and claiming they are not part of this world so they do not have to live by the laws of this world.
 2. Jesus demonstrates serving God does not relieve us of our place in this world. As Paul said, we are to be different from the world (**Romans 12:2**), but we do not go out of the world (**I Corinthians 5:10**). By rendering ourselves to God, we live in the world, but demonstrate we are not of the world. Everything we do is still in the world, but everything we do is governed by God's will because we have given ourselves to Him. We, as Christians, are not to be separatists. Rather, through our distinction but continued contact with the world, we will draw others to Christ.
- D. Rendering to God is not just about outward acts of obeisance.
 1. The Pharisees made a big show of their outward acts of obeisance to God (**Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 23:14, 23, 29; Luke 18:11-12**). That's why this issue of taxation was so important to them. Arguing against it made them appear righteous to their fellow Jews. However, Jesus pointed out these outward acts were empty because they were not really God's servants. They had not given themselves to God. In **Matthew 23:25-28**, Jesus claimed they appeared righteous outwardly but they had no true righteousness, because on the inside they were full of corruption and hypocrisy.
 2. In **Matthew 23:23-24**, Jesus claimed they were hypocrites because they made a big deal out of their easy outward acts but neglected the weighty parts of the law that dealt with attitude, motivation and outlook. Focusing on those weighty matters would have governed their outer actions and done so thoroughly, neither adding traditions or overlooking requirements.
 3. Can we fall prey to this same struggle? How many Christians make a big deal out of "going to church" but their heart is not in it? Yes, we must have the outward actions of obeisance, but first the heart must be right with God (**Matthew 15:8, 15-20**).

Conclusion:

The Pharisees thought they were righteous because they wanted to separate themselves from the rabble of the world. The Herodians thought they were better because they had sold out to the world. Jesus demonstrated the balanced response. As we live in this world, we must render to God what is God's. That is, we must render ourselves to God. When we give ourselves to God, then our behavior in the world will be appropriate and will even draw others to God. What have you rendered to God?