

Render Unto Caesar, part 2

Luke 20:19-26

Now, it is never wise to set a trap for Jesus. Okay? Just, if that's ever an open question for you, just kind of write that down, maybe jot it in the margin of your Bible. Don't set a trap for Jesus. Bad idea. Don't ever try to entrap the Son of God in the horns of a dilemma, because the rebellious of heart will end up being impaled by those horns, and that's what we see in point number three, number three, the reversal; or if you prefer, the impalement. Luke says in verse 23, "But Jesus perceived their craftiness." The word craftiness, *panourgia*, literally, ready to do anything. This refers to men who have no principle, no integrity, no shame, and they will do anything it takes.

Matthew tells us that "Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?'" Mark writes something similar; he says, "Knowing their hypocrisy, Jesus said to them, 'Why put me to the test?'" They've even said he shows no partiality. He doesn't look at the face. He doesn't hear the

flattery. He sees straight through them, through the mask, and down into the depths of their wicked hearts. He knows exactly what's going on here, reminds us of the words of Job: "He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end."

That's what happens here. He perceives their craftiness and their cunning, and he says to them in verse 24, "'Show me a denarius. Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?' And they said, 'Caesar's.'" If you listen closely, you can hear the spring of the trap activate, the door slam shut. He has got them. As soon as they say, as soon as they produce that denarius, and they admit whose inscription and likeness is on it, boom, they're his. Obviously, the denarius they were able to produce, according to Matthew and Mark produce it quickly, so that the pacing of Jesus argument didn't stall or lag at all by waiting for them to produce the coin. Some commentators say, "Well, these, these men were pious Jews and they would not have carried around a denarius." Oh, yes, they did. They had a denarius.

This denarius is equal to a day's wage, and that's the annual tribute owed for each male from 14 years old and upward; and women as well had to pay a tribute, a denarius, for each head. It was a head tax, is what it was called. So the one-denarius tribute wasn't an exorbitant amount. But considering the politics, considering the climate, considering the cultural, social issues here, what this one denarius represented was an irritation. It was a, it was a, a rubbing in their face that this pagan authority was their overlord. It was basically, this one-denarius tribute sent every year was a sending a signal to every male and every female, reminding them Rome's in charge. And they hated it.

Even worse for pious Jews that the Roman coinage made use of pagan imagery and pagan symbology. On one side, the coin pictured the Roman emperor Tiberius in a laurel wreath on his head. That's the, the sign of victory. It's the symbol of a conquering power who's won and who's now at peace. He's won the victory, and that's crowning his head. And there's an inscription that reads, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." "Oh, there's only one divine. It's Yahweh and it's not him."

Other side of the coin pictured emperor's, the emperor's mother, Livia, an earthly incarnation of the goddess Pax, which means "peace." And they had this inscription: "Pontifex Maximus, High Priest." Oh, that's another irritation, a blasphemous assertion of pagan religious superiority over their religion, over their temple.

So some pious Jews did refuse to carry the coins on their persons, but many did. Many made pragmatic use of coins for ease of trade as they travelled along Roman roads. And the fact that these men were able to produce the coin upon request rather quickly, that's very revealing. The Roman denarius was minted from silver, and the silver mines and gold mines also were controlled by Rome. So what was extracted from gold and silver mines were controlled by Rome and it's, it's, it's disseminating, minting the coins and sending them out into circulation, that was all controlled by Rome. So all this controlled by Rome.

But the denarius, or like all coins and all money, you know, currency is a convenient for conducting commerce, for trade and, and goods and services. In fact, when you think about it, that's what coinage is, that's what a monetary system is. It's a government-backed convenience. It promotes trade of citizens and subjects. A monetary system actually facilitates accumulating wealth, building of wealth. Because you don't have to have a thousand head of cattle; you can have lots of money in the bank.

Think about this: When you get some bread for your family, you got to go out to the market, would you rather drag your goat to the market and, you know, find a guy carrying a bushel of wheat and then figure out how to trade your goat for his wheat? I mean, what if you're not willing to accept his bushel for your goat, are you going to butcher your goat and give him the leg or something like that in exchange for a bushel because the price difference or the value differences is so vast? Obviously, we don't have to think like that, do we? Because we look to our, we just kind of take for granted the long-established inherited system of valuation, once was based on the gold standard, but as

of 1971 no longer, so all of our dollars are not backed by gold sitting in Fort Knox.

Now our valuation of our moneter, of our money goes up and down and no one knows, right? Eventually, with inflation it becomes less and less valuable. It takes more and more of those little dollars to purchase the same loaf of bread or the same goat, but we just rely on these long-established inherited systems of valuation, long-established system of government-backed security of our monetary system, tables of weights and measures, all that so we can carry things like coins and bills in our pockets or credit cards or whatever you use.

These things are just tokens or symbols of value, and all they do is facilitate buying and selling in the marketplace. And as we go into the marketplace, you know, and I know, we're not going to accept our buddy's Monopoly money in exchange for our bushel of wheat or for our goat. We're not going to accept that. Why not? Because there's no authority backing Monopoly money. We look to a higher authority wielding actual power to back the monetary system we use. For example, if you take out a \$1.00 bill from your pocket, it says, should say on there, on your

dollar, if it's not counterfeit, it'll say "This note is legal tender for all debts public and private," and then emblazoned at the top of that dollar on both sides of the bill, it says the "United States of America." That's your guarantee, the government.

And if my friend brings \$1.00 to buy my goat and insists that this \$1.00 bill is actually worth \$100, and he takes my goat by force, throwing the dollar in my face, well, I can go to a duly established authority of that legal tender and make my complaint. And I can fully expect, reasonably expect, the authority is going to enforce the law in my favor and convict my friend or my former friend of theft.

I know we get all this, and it's very simple, but it's not actually as simple as we think. We need to go back and examine the principles of a monetary system and think about what we accept when we use money, and what we accept when we spend money, when we exchange money. We need to think about the conveniences that that affords us, things that we take for granted.

I'm just trying to spell out in very basic terms, something that we, and there's a lot to this, but this is just something we rarely think about, something we take for granted, I just want to make this point: that the right to mint money, the right to print money, the power to guarantee that money, the authority and the power, implies the authority and power of governance. And the authority and power of governance requires money to run that governance. And so that implies the right of levying a tax or requiring a tribute. Those who use the money minted and printed by the issuing authority, they acknowledge the legitimacy of that issuing authority, and thus they have a duty to submit to the governance of the issuing authority.

We get this, that taxation, it's a legitimate function of government. It funds benefits for citizens and subjects, and the Jews had benefited from this money. It benefited from the Pax Romana, the, the peace that Rome enforced on the roads that Rome had bought and paid for, the roads that Roman soldiers had paved with their own sweat and blood, roads that Jews used and assumed safe travel and could appeal to the soldiers for safe passage. And they, those roads facilitated trade and commerce and goods

and services exchanged. So instead of hauling goats and bushels of grain everywhere, and cattle and all the rest, they carried, you got it, money.

The Jews, and most notably the Pharisees, along with the chief priests in the temple, these guys loved money. They loved money. And they ridiculed, remember, they ridiculed Jesus' teaching on stewardship as being soft-headed and unsophisticated, his warning against loving money, against worshipping the God of Mammon. Why? Because Luke 16:14 says, "They were lovers of money," *philargyros*, literally silver lovers. They were denarius lovers.

So as users of Caesar's money and as lovers of Caesar's money, did these men really think that they could entrap Jesus about paying tribute to Caesar with a denarius? Well, evidently they did. This is the trap that they tried to set up. And it brings us to the famous saying, which is turning the tables on these spies and unmasking them: "'Show me a denarius,' he said. 'Whose likeness and inscription does it have?' And they said, 'Caesar's,' so he said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar and to God the things that are God's.'"

Now we said at the beginning, “pay your taxes” is part of Jesus answer, but there's a lot more, here. We can tell by the final verse and silencing of his opponents that they discerned a lot more, here, than just “pay your taxes.” Let me point out, before we move to the final point of our outline, the cruel irony of this. These scribes and Pharisees, these chief priests, elders, members of Sanhedrin, they all used Caesar's money. They all traveled on Caesar's roads. They all relied on Caesar's soldiers for protection. And all of that continued to build and accumulate their own personal wealth so that they could buy positions of authority and power and continue to enrich themselves and create laws that would favor themselves.

You know something else they were looking to Caesar to provide for them? A death sentence. We noted back in verse 20 that the Sanhedrin had no legal authority to condemn anyone, no right of capital punishment in the land, no power to execute a death sentence. These men intended to deliver Jesus up to the authority and the jurisdiction of the governor, a man who represented Rome, a man who sat in the seat of Caesar in the land.

And they have the audacity to try to entangle Jesus in a squabble about refusing to pay one day's wage every year to Rome in tribute. And that denarius, that they would withhold and teach their countrymen to withhold actually would contribute to the salaries of the soldiers under Pilate's authority, who in three days will usher Jesus to the cross, where he will be crucified, which is their end game all along. Luke shows us how the Jewish religious establishment, they wanted to use Caesar's authority. They wanted to use his jurisdiction to accomplish their evil, but they didn't want to pay Caesar's bill.

Aren't all sinners just like them? Don't all sinners want the benefits that God provides, but they don't want to render unto God what is God's? They want God's stuff. They want good days, not bad days. They want pleasure, not pain. They want ice cream, not broccoli, not brussels sprouts. They want everything good that God would give them. But they don't want to render tribute. They don't want to subject their lives to his authority. They don't want to render unto God what is God's, that is, their very hearts and their very souls. They don't want

to give him their lives. They want his stuff, and they want the autonomy to shirk God and do their own thing.

And that's where the greater obligation in this text actually comes is in the second half of Jesus' statement: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Whatever tribute Caesar requires, however much it might have been, it's a pittance compared to the claim that God has on every human being, is it not? We are to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might," Deuteronomy 6:5. Who can repay that? Who has kept that?

And bear in mind, whether the duty is to Caesar or to God, Jesus uses a verb that expresses obligation, moral duty. The word the spies used is, give. "Is it lawful to give," the verb *didomi*, as if paying tribute was a matter of their own personal freedom, something that they would give or withhold, an autonomous choice for them. When Jesus answered, he answered with the intensified form of the verb *didomi*, *apodidomy*, which means "to repay," "to pay back," "to give back." It assumes a prior giving of a greater benefactor.

So for these Jews, rendering tribute to Caesar was a moral duty. It was something they were not allowed to neglect. They must repay the tribute because they have benefited so greatly from the Pax Romana, from Rome's rule, from Caesar's authority. In fact, they intended to use it to crucify Christ. Who is the one with the authority and power to enforce such a duty? Who is the one with the right to bind their consciences to this moral duty, this moral obligation? Well, if Caesar's image is stamped on the coin, and his inscription notes his authority, whose image is stamped on Caesar? Who has inscribed his law on Caesar's heart and on every human heart? Therefore, Jesus says likewise to render to God what is God's.

We have a moral duty to honor God as God and to give thanks to him, a moral duty to worship him and love him, a moral duty to obey him, to love him with whole-souled devotion. We may not violate him, his image and his honor by committing the sin of idolatry, by elevating a rival in our hearts, to love anything more than God, our own pleasure, our own comfort, our own ease, our own autonomy, our own money, whatever it is. We don't have the right to do that. These duties of love and worship and

obedience to God, they're not a matter of mere freedom and preference from us, not a matter of just giving and withholding. No, these are things we owe to God. These are things we must render to Him. These are things that every single human individual will give an account for one day standing before his throne.

Well, any of the irony in all this is lost on these spies. They're, they're filled with their own self-importance, bloated with their own, their own pride, their own arrogance. What about the point Jesus' making? Did they get it? Is this what left these men dumbfounded, unable to accomplish their goal? We come to a final point, Let's consider for a moment number four: the silence. The silence. "Jesus said to them then," the word is kind of like a "therefore"; it's based on what came before. If Caesar's image is stamped on the coin, if Caesar's inscription is written on the coin; therefore, "'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar.'" Oh, and by the way, "'and render to God the things that are God's.'" And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer, they became silent."

Again, why did they fall silent? Why did they recognize in Jesus' answer something that dumbfounded them and shut their mouths? Several things. First, they were silenced by the way that Jesus effortlessly escaped the trap that they had set for him. The text says "they were not able," it's referring to their ability, their lack of ability. "They were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said." So he thwarted their attempt to trap him. These spies, they thought they'd set the perfect trap. They lured him into seeking popular favor by flattering him, by using cunning; and since he didn't do as they'd hoped, that is, cater to the will of the people and shirk their duty of paying the tribute to Caesar, well, they couldn't send the Herodians to Pontius Pilate, who would return with soldiers, have Jesus arrested, tried for treason, then executed. So he escaped the trap in that way.

But also, he didn't flee to the opposite direction. He didn't do the opposite. He didn't bind the consciences of people to mirror human sovereignty, whether Caesar's, whether Rome's, or whoever. So they couldn't go to their fallback plan, either, in which the Pharisees would engage in a campaign of discrediting Jesus before the people because Jesus made the

perfect point: Caesar is a gift of God, like all human government is. As Proverbs 21:30 says, "No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord." Proverbs 1:17 says, "In vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird, but these men lie and wait for their own blood. They set an ambush for their own lives." That's what's happened here. Jesus is a divine Person. He is the Lord God himself. And as I said before, it is sheer folly to contend with Christ.

Second reason they were silenced; they were silenced, secondly, by the way Jesus schooled them in a lesson on moral duty, in the way he taught them to pay back what they owed as a matter of moral obligation. The text says very plainly they're caught up in marveling over his answer. That is why they fell silent. They owed Caesar the annual tribute he required. They had to pay him back for the use of his denarii, his roads, his soldiers, the Pax Romana that he provided for them. All the wealth that they accumulated underneath that system they had to pay back. They had a moral duty to pay him what they owed, one that would be enforced by God, who is sovereign over them and over all human governments as well.

So the greater duty is to pay what they owe, not to Caesar, but pay what they owe to God. That's the greater duty: to pay the tribute that God requires. Pay him back. Pay God back for the Pax Romana. Pay God back for the privilege of using a monetary system rather than dragging goats and bushels into the marketplace. Ever thank God for money? Ever thank God that you can carry a credit card and not a whole bunch of cash? Ever thank God for bank accounts? You should.

They should pay God back for the Pax Romana he was pleased to provide by his providence through the Roman Empire, through the rule of Caesar, by means of the govern, governance of Pontius Pilate in their midst. Pay him back for the, for the ease of trade that was provided by Greek, the *lingua franca* that Alexander the Great brought to the whole Hellenistic world. Pay God back for all that he had provided by the, his good and wise providence. Pay him back with honor and gratitude for the gift of human government, for the gift of order, for the gift of protection, for the gift of wealth and provision. Pay him back.

So they fell silent because Jesus escaped their trap, and then he schooled them on the way out. I'd like to offer a third

suggestion of what may have caused them to fall silent, and this is a bit on, on my part a bit of hopeful speculation, really, but it's one that brings this home for us today. Perhaps these men fell silent, and I'm hopeful in this, third, because they stopped and reflected on their greatest obligation and their lifelong failure to fulfill it, that is, to render to God what is God's.

Perhaps it began to hit home for some of them, a few of them, maybe? One? Maybe it began to sink in that they'd been niggling over a denarius' worth of annual tribute to Rome, all the while they've ignored their lifetime obligation to God. They've been caught up in debating picayune points of duty and obligation and taxes and taxation and obligation and church and state and governance and all that. And they'd done all that, but they had ignored their obligation to love God with all their heart, soul, and might.

Some of their own associated with them, Zealots, some of the Sicarii, had treated their fellow Jews not just with rough treatment but with murderous treatment. Did that break their hearts? Did they see that they failed to love God by loving

their neighbors themselves? Did they see the invading Roman occupiers as neighbors, because they were?

So perhaps these young men, caught up in the exhilaration of confronting the greatest teacher in the land, perhaps they stopped for a moment to be humbled, stopped for a moment to see that they'd been straining out a gnat but swallowing an entire camel: humps, hooves, and all.

We're so similar to this, aren't we? Quibbling over temporal issues of church and state, debating whether to pay taxes or not, fretting over what government is doing right and wrong, who's getting elected, who is not. We get so caught up in the things of this passing world, we forget about our daily obligation, the blessed moral duty of worship, to love God and to obey his Word. We strain the gnat and swallow the camel all the time, and I think that's why I feel impatient with so many debates, people who take up the same tired arguments, straining out gnats and swallowing camels, humps and all.

It's, it's not that I consider the questions unimportant, but in light of eternal implications, in light of Gospel business, and in light of the, the duty and the commission of the church to make disciples, in light of the, the duty for us to be righteous before God and holy before him, in light of a husband's duty to his wife and a wife's duty to her husband and the parents' duty to their children, and all that spilling out into the workplace of slaves and masters and their relationships, and how we're to be salt and light in our, in our places of employment and in our neighborhoods and among our family and friends.

In light of all these weightier issues, I think so many, like the people of this day, so many people have lost perspective, lost sight of what really matters and what's truly important. We need to let these debates of history instruct us and teach us what it is to render our moral duty to pay the obligations that we owe without quarreling or controversy, with no spirit of rebellion, but a spirit of submission to God and to his order in the world.

Paul instructs Timothy to command the men of his congregation, men who are prone to this kind of cut-and-thrust debate, that they should “pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or quarreling, but offering instead supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, that they be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Why is it godly and dignified? Because we go to God and we pray prayers of dignified Christians.

We read earlier from Romans 13:7-8. We're commanded to “render to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. And we are to owe no one anything except,” what, “love one another,” right? To love one another. “For the one who loves one another has [filled] fulfilled the law.”

So finally, if you're like these spies, maybe you've come to a moment of silence and a moment of self-reflection. And if you feel like I do, painfully, fully aware of your lifelong failure to render to God the honor and gratitude and worship and

obedience that you owe to him, to love him with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, take heart, friend, because just as God provided Caesar to establish and enforce the Pax Romana, by his good and wise providence, this same God sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for sinners like you, to die for sinners like me, to forgive you of your sins and to give you the gift of eternal life to cover you with a righteousness that is not your own, but the righteousness, the very righteousness of Christ himself. Full pardon, complete redemption, reconciliation to God, brand new life in Christ, all of that and more is on offer for you, for anyone who would repent of their sins and believe in him and trust in him for their salvation. Let's pray.

Father, I pray for all who would hear my voice in this message that through the explanation of this text, and so, there's so much more that can be talked about, but we've just really only scratched the surface of what's there, but hopefully it is a faithful rendering of what is there, what Jesus taught, what Jesus meant by what he said. But Father, we're all humbled before the duty, not just to render to our government what's

owed to our government, but to render to you all the things that are owed to you.

And that is a comprehensive category, because everything that we have comes from your hand. Our very life, the breath that we breathe, the vision that we enjoy, the sensations that we feel, the experiences that we have, the things that we learn and know and understand, so much more, all these things are provided by your good hand. And so what do we owe to you but to do as you said, to honor you, to give you thanks every single day, to live our lives in wholehearted, whole-souled devotion to you, to love you with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We must confess, along with every other sinner who has ever lived on this planet, we must confess that we have failed you. We've broken not only those two great commandments, and as they summarize the entire law and the prophets, we've broken all the commandments in some way, thought, word, or deed. And so we ask for, once again, your pardon, pleading the blood of Jesus Christ for our sins, but resolving to walk forward in his righteousness, that we may please you and render to you what

PILLAR OF
—TRUTH— 

you're owed: a life of wholehearted devotion to you. We pray that you would make it so by your Spirit, by your Word, by the leadership and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.