

Render unto God

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Loyalty Sunday is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”** Here ends our text.

If you hadn’t noticed from all the campaign commercials and debates, its election season again. We’re getting ready to honor our nation by rendering our vote at the ballot box. We hope to elect the most just, the most honest, the most qualified, and the most respected candidates to serve as our government leaders. As always, however, there hasn’t been much honor and respect between perspective candidates or between our two major political parties, only mudslinging and name calling. This is the time when we’ll never see cooperation between Democrats and Republicans. Don’t expect to see any handshaking between them and not just because of COVID-19. In today’s heated environment, opposing candidates and parties are both practicing social and political distancing.

That’s why it seems so strange to see in our Gospel reading today two opposing theological and political parties – the Pharisees and the Herodians - cooperating together during the Passover season for a common agenda. The Pharisees disdained the Roman rule which they believed usurped God’s authority, so they objected to paying taxes to Caesar. Why should they pay tribute to their oppressor? The Herodians, on the other hand, recognized the benefits and protection of Roman rule. As associates of the line of the Herod family, who gained great political and financial power by cooperating with the Romans, why not pay tribute to Caesar? These two groups were far apart on the theological and political scale, and yet politics can make strange bedfellows, especially when they have a common enemy. And that enemy was Jesus.

It was Holy week, and Jesus had made the Temple holy by cleansing it of all the money changers and animal traders. However, the Temple built by Herod the Great was losing revenue for its constituents. By Jesus’ teaching and healing, his independent candidacy was gaining much popularity and drawing many voters away from the parties of the Pharisees and Herodians. By working together, though, they could squash their common enemy. And, if they were crafty about it, they could have someone else eliminate Jesus for them. So, the disciples of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians approached Jesus with a hot political question that was sure to either sink his candidacy for Messiah or send him to the gallows. Like a two-faced politician, they spoke with a forked tongue and sought to lower Jesus’ guard 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.”** They appeared to render Jesus respect, but their true motive only rendered him hypocrisy. Then, they set their trap. **“Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”**

Now if Jesus said it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, then he’d lose favor with the Jewish people. He’d lose his bid for Messiahship. He’d also become a target of assassination from one of the Zealots, the party of the radical right, who wanted to overthrow Rome. But if Jesus said it was unlawful to pay taxes to Caesar, then the Herodians could accuse him of treason. The Roman government would dispel of him. How does Jesus answer? Does he fall into their trap? Does he plead the Fifth and refuse to answer? Does he act like a politician and sidestep the questions by changing the subject? No. Aware of their evil intent, Jesus said, **“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax?”** They immediately brought him a denarius, a Roman coin they all used regularly for currency for the exchange of goods and services. **Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render unto Caesar’s the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”** When they heard his answer, they marveled and went away.

Now why was Jesus’ answer so marvelous? Jesus uses the word “render,” which means to pay back what is necessary to fulfill an obligation. What obligation did the people need to pay back to Caesar? The Romans had provided good roads, water aqueducts and sewer drainage, military and police protection, a judicial system, walled cities and public buildings, even their monetary system and currency. The people should indeed render taxes to pay for the goods and services they received from Caesar. The apostle Paul tells the Christians in Rome the same thing. **“You also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed.”** And we would agree. What are we obligated to pay back to our government for roads and public works, schools, police, fire department, military protection, the civil servants who make, administer, and judge our laws, and the care of the elderly, handicapped, or destitute? We render our taxes. We recognize our government as God’s servant, instituted by him for our good.

But what are we not to render unto Caesar? Besides the image of Caesar on the Roman denarius, there was also this inscription. “God and highest priest.” Caesar was not their god nor was he their high priest. The Jewish people were not to render unto Caesar their worship, praise, and thanksgiving. Those things were to be rendered unto God alone. And so Jesus rightly distinguishes between the estate of the government and the estate of the church, the temporal kingdom of the left and the spiritual and eternal kingdom of the right. Jesus answers this tricky question, not as either/or but as

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both/and. He satisfies the obligation for payment to both Caesar and God. And we would agree. Besides paying our taxes, we render unto God the things that are God's.

But what exactly are we obligated to pay back to God? What goods and services do we receive that we need to render payment? Well, you do have this nice sanctuary to worship where your pew is warm in the winter and cool in the summer. You've got nice music to hear under good lighting. You've got a fellowship hall, a place to dine, and a place to park. You've got a pastor to baptize you, marry you, and bury you and say a few words of comfort every Sunday. You've got other staff who administrate and do ministry for the community. Just like for the government, you owe a Temple tax and so you put your payment in the offering plate. Is that what you owe God?

Actually, there's more than that. We're talking about the God who created you, who gives you your body and soul, eyes and ears, clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home. He gives you your daily bread, money and goods, husband or wife, faithful rulers and good government, peace and health, good friends and faithful neighbors. You owe for your whole life. You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. You owe God everything.

But what exactly have you rendered to God? Your leftovers? Your leftovers from your paycheck? Your leftovers from your time? Your leftovers from your energy? Have you not rendered to God your worst, your selfishness, your ungratefulness, your evil deeds, your hypocrisy? And what is God obligated to pay you back as consequences for all your sinful works? What should God render to you? The Psalmist says, **"Give to them according to their work and according to the evil of their deeds; give to them according to the work of their hands; render them their due reward."** (Ps. 28:4) The apostle Paul says, **"God will render to each one according to his works: for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury."** (Rom. 2:6,8) Render unto God the things that are God's, or He will render unto you what you truly deserve, punishment and death.

Mmmm. That's not good. I can't render unto God all the things that are God's. I can't render unto the Lord for all his benefits to me. I can't render up a perfect life that loves the Lord with all my heart, mind, and soul. Instead, I can only render up my sins and failures. I can't pay the tax; therefore, its off to the gallows for me.

But thanks be to God, there is one who can truly render unto God for us the things that are God's. Jesus Christ is not just the image of God. Unlike Caesar, Jesus is our God and high priest, who intercedes for us. He rendered unto God his Father a perfect life that loves God and all mankind. But his enemies did not render him respect and honor but only hypocrisy and lies. The Pharisees lied to the Roman governor. They accused Jesus, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar." Later, when Pilot asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." What hypocrisy. As the wind changed, these hypocrites worshipped Caesar over God and desired to pay Caesar tribute instead of Jesus. But on the cross, Jesus rendered unto God the payment necessary to fulfill our obligation, and God the Father rendered unto Jesus the punishment for our sin. Jesus redeemed us, not with gold or silver or any other coinage but with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death. As our high priest Jesus sacrificed himself and made intercession between us and God.

Our risen Lord Jesus Christ now renders unto us his righteousness, his forgiveness, and eternal life in heaven. What then shall we render to the Lord for all his blessings? Our own filthy rags of righteousness? Do we lift up our goodness? No. We render unto the Lord our worship. When your pastor finally finishes this message, we'll confess our faith in what God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have done for us. Then we'll call upon the name of the Lord in prayer, adoring who he is, confessing our sin, thanking him for his provision, and petitioning him for our needs. Then we'll remember our offering, rendering just a small portion unto God, a tenth of what he has already given us. We'll make our vow and pledge for the offering we plan to render in the coming year. Then we'll sing the offertory from Psalm 116. **"What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call on the name of the Lord. I will take the cup of salvation and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem."** Then we'll receive Holy Communion where we take the cup of salvation, the Lord's holy and precious blood, shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We render unto the Lord our worship by confessing his work, calling upon his name in prayer, offering our tithe, and receiving his forgiveness, life, and salvation. Then we'll depart from here in peace, still rendering our spiritual worship by offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God in a holy life.

Jesus rendered unto God the things that are God's. He rendered unto God our punishment with his own life. He bought us back and rendered unto God his people. So as God's people, we now render unto God the things that are God's. As his party, the Church, we render unto God our worship, thanksgiving, and praise. We truly fear, love, and trust in him with all our heart, mind, and soul. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.