

Rendering unto Caesar

This Gospel has been used by opponents of what is known as the Social Gospel—that is, the belief that Jesus wants us, his followers to seek justice in their society, to oppose oppression and to care for the vulnerable. These opponents argue that God’s business and politics and government are a totally different sphere. I say, that the Gospels are entirely political, and Jesus would have us work for bettering His Kingdom right where we live. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in our day.

The question of the Roman poll tax was not one of mere political opinion or inconvenience, but central to contemporary Jewish ideas about the kingdom of God, their liberation, and attitudes to the Roman occupation. The tax was imposed as a result of direct Roman rule of Judea in AD 6—but of course not in Galilee which continued to be ruled by Herod Antipas. It was fiercely resented by patriotic Jews, Thus we see a theological concern for moral and spiritual purity working hand in hand with a political concern for national autonomy. The two issues of ‘rendering unto God’ and ‘rendering unto Caesar’ are considered to be both overlapping and in conflict, so that you cannot do the one without refusing to do the other, and vice versa.

So Jesus' opponents, with this background assumption, lead him into an impossible choice. If he supports the paying of the tax, then he will be seen to compromise in his devotion to God, and lose the support of those who long for political freedom, which we can see expressed in both spiritual and theological terms as the hope of the coming messiah i...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days... But if he supports the withholding of the tax, here at the center of power in Jerusalem, he will look like a seditious rebel, and appear to make his claim as a rival leader to the power of Rome—the kind of claim on which he is in fact unjustly convicted.

Jesus' response to the question both exposes the cunning and hypocrisy of his opponents, and undermines the basic theological premise of the dilemma that they have presented him with.

Jesus is fully aware of their 'malice'; on such an important issue, they are more interested in scoring political and theological points than really resolving the question. He accuses them of 'testing' or 'tempting' him, referring to the activity of Satan in the wilderness at the start of Jesus' ministry. The testing has never really stopped, even if the players have changed.

He then highlights their 'hypocrisy'. The denarius was a comparatively large-value coin, being worth a day's wages for a worker (as we saw in the previous parables),

but the actual coin need not have been used for payment. A denarius in the time of the emperor Tiberius would have the image of the emperor, in itself a serious offense to observant Jews, but also the inscription 'Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilius] Augustus' and on the reverse the title 'Pontif[ex] Maxim[us]', meaning High Priest.

He is thus proclaimed to be not only the son of the divine Augustus, but also a high priest; the two titles together could hardly be more calculated to offend Jewish piety .And yet Jesus' opponents have one in their pocket and are carrying it around! Those who appear to be most concerned about ritual purity and political independence are carrying with them the very signs of spiritual compromise and political collusion!

Much is often made in preaching that the coin has the image (eikon) of the emperor on it, and that all humans are made in the image (eikon) of God, so that there is an analogy between the handing over of the coin in payment of the tax, and the handing over of ourselves in obedience to the call of God. More important is Jesus' emphasis, obscured in the traditional translation of 'render unto Caesar,' on paying back. If the coin has the emperor's head on it, then there is a sense in which paying the tax is indeed giving back what belongs to the emperor, and there is a pointer here to the basic principle of (fair) taxation, that tax covers the costs of what governments spend for the benefit of the population at large.

More fundamentally, Jesus is redrawing the theological relationship between political power and the actions of God's kingdom. The Pharisees, along with other Jewish groups, see the spiritual and the political inseparably intertwined, so that God's kingdom cannot be realized without the accompanying political 'regime change'. The spheres of God's action and political reality mostly overlap, and are rival regimes making competing claims for loyalty. Yet this is something that Jesus has rejected from the very beginning of his ministry. Despite the political implications of his proclamation of the kingdom of God, he has refused to pursue a political path to its realization, and has specifically rejected the political ambitions of those who would make him king (for example, in response to the feeding of the 5,000, John

6.15). The kingdom of God has political implications, but these can never be achieved by merely political means.

This is not just a conviction of Jesus; the history of the OT testifies to its reality. It is a change of heart, not merely a change of regime, that the people need.

But much interpretation of Jesus' saying has separated the two spheres of the authority of God and the authority of the emperor—or success political powers that have taken his place. We render unto Caesar what is his due (for example in paying taxes), and quite separately we render unto God what is his due (for example in pious devotion and church attendance). In this reading, what God requires of us and what Caesar requires of us are quite separate, so that our political, economic and social

lives are separate from our religious lives. This has been a distinctive approach of post-Enlightenment modernity, where the religious becomes an interest or a hobby, or even a set of important and motivating personal convictions—but it can never make claims over the political realm. It is private rather than public truth.

Yet Jesus clearly believes that ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’ (Ps 24.1). Whatever power the emperor or any other ruler has, they have it only because it has been delegated to them by God, as Jesus says explicitly to Pilate during the trial narrative in the Fourth Gospel (John 19.11).

Thus the sphere of influence and power of Caesar doesn’t sit so much as a complete system as a rival to the power

of God, nor does it sit as an alternative sphere of activity an authority separate from the concerns of the kingdom. Instead it rightly sits within the concerns of God and his authority. This means that there is no one political system or ideology which has a monopoly on kingdom realities (as in the first approach)—but neither is any regime free from scrutiny.

We should treat political and economic systems with due respect (Romans 13), acknowledging the source of all true authority, and recognizing the purposes of good government under the authority of God. But we also need to be alert to the moments, in all political systems, where Caesar claims more power than is his due, and seeks to displace the kingdom and take the role of God in the offer

he makes or the loyalty he demands. Whilst we render to Caesar what is his legitimate due, that must also sit in accountability to our higher duty to render to God what is his due.

It is this theological understanding of political power which will allow the followers of Jesus to seek first the kingdom of God, without needing to see that expressed in a specific political state in a geographical territory, and mean that they are able to bring the dynamic of the kingdom to every tribe, language, people and nation.

