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Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax^[a] to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

²¹ "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar's is a well-known quote that appears in Matthew 22:21 and is part of Jesus' response to a joint attempt by the Herodians and Pharisees to make Jesus stumble in front of his own people.

The Herodians were a non-religious Jewish party who supported the dynasty of Herod and the general policy of the Roman government. They perceived that Christ's pure and spiritual teaching and influence were antagonistic to their interests. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were members of an ancient Jewish sect who believed in the strict observance of oral traditions and the written Law of Moses. They didn't believe that Christ was the Messiah, despite his many miracles during His earthly ministry. Although Herodians and Pharisees were at opposite ends of the political spectrum, their common hatred of Christ was enough for them to join forces to try to destroy him.

Here is the context of Jesus' command to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's": in Matthew 22 Jesus had just returned to Jerusalem for the final time and recently finished sharing several parables with the crowd. Jesus' enemies saw an opportunity to put Jesus on the spot in front of his followers. In verse 17, they say to Jesus, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" It was a trick question, and they knew it. If Jesus answered, "No," the Herodians would charge him with treason against Rome. If he said, "Yes," the Pharisees would accuse him of disloyalty to the Jewish nation and he would lose the support of the crowds. To pay taxes or not to pay taxes? The question was designed as a biblical version of Catch-22!

Jesus' response is nothing short of brilliant;

“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius”.

The denarius was a coin used as the tax money at the time. It was made of silver and featured an image of the emperor with an inscription calling him “divine.” The Jews considered such images idolatry, forbidden by the second commandment. This was another reason why, if Jesus answered, “Yes,” he would be in trouble. His acceptance of the tax as “lawful” could have been seen as a rejection of the second commandment, thus casting doubt on his claim to be the Son of God.

With the coin displayed in front of them, Jesus said, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” The Herodians and Pharisees, stating the obvious, said, “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus brought an end to their foolish tricks: “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. When Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” he was drawing a sharp distinction between two kingdoms. There is a kingdom of this world, and Caesar holds power over it. But there is another kingdom, not of this world, and Jesus is King as John reminds us;

“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

Christians are part of both kingdoms, at least temporarily. Under Caesar, we have certain obligations that involve material things. Under Christ, we have other obligations that involve things eternal. If Caesar demands money, give it to him—it’s only mammon but make sure you also give God what He demands.

Caesar minted coins, as he had a right to do and he demanded some coins in return, as was his right. After all, his image was stamped on what he had made. God has “minted” the human soul, and He has stamped His image on every one so give Caesar his due, the temporary stuff of this world but make sure to give God his due;

“Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness”.

We have recently been reminded that we need to get rid of our old pound coins as they have been replaced by a more technologically advanced coin that will, hopefully, deter those who fraudulently copy them. This gospel passage does

not sit easily on those who are affluent, who seek to create their own worldly values and impose them on others. It can be used by them as an excuse to justify their wealth. I pay my taxes, I am not a burden on the state. I have worked hard so why should I not enjoy my wealth and if I work hard, why can't everybody else? Why should I have to pay to subsidise others?

The coin bears Caesar's image and is part of his realm, so it is appropriate to return the coin to Caesar and as citizens (or even as subjects—as most Jews were), we have an obligation to the state to obey its laws and to pay its taxes. Paul tells us that God has appointed a higher authority that we are obligated to obey. He goes on to say;

“For this reason you also pay taxes, for (those in authority) are servants of God's service.... Give therefore to everyone what you owe: taxes to whom taxes are due; customs to whom customs; respect to whom respect; honour to whom honour” (Romans 13:6-7).

My response would be to remind us all, rich or poor, that there are two Kingdoms that Jesus was talking about and we ignore either or both of them at our peril.

Amen.