When Do We Render Unto Caesar? **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 5 September 2021 - 20:57



Read time: 17 minutes
“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” This phrase, from Matthew 22:21, has been used as a proof text of the separation of church and state; where the religious duty ends and the secular authority begins. It is rich in the interpreter’s eye, and has been used to advocate and justify all manner of things. For the loyalist, it means that we should go along with whatever laws the government makes, even if it restricts the work of the church. For the nationalist, this saying gives *carte blanche* to go along with military conscription and going off to fight a war in a foreign country. These laws and rules are things of the world, and Caesar rules the world: Jesus said so. But is this really how we should read and understand this passage?

Context

Immediate Biblical Context

The immediate context of this phrase is a brilliant display by Jesus of turning the tables around and putting his accusers on the back foot. His enemies were trying to lay a trap for Him.

Social Context

In the time of Jesus, the question of whether Jews should pay taxes to their foreign occupiers (the Romans) was a divisive point.

Appeasers, such as the Sadducees and tax collectors1, were treated well by the Romans, but often derided or shunned by their kinsmen. That is because the appeasers' success often came at the expense of their fellow Jews. Although the late emperor Augustus had reformed the tax system of the Roman empire to make it less corrupt and more fair2, there remained ways to exploit taxpayers.

And while the reduced corruption must certainly have been welcomed, Augustus had also instituted new taxes which needed to be paid. These new taxes became seriously contentious for some Jews.

Those opposed to paying tax to Rome resented having to give away so much of their hard earned income. Apart from paying the Roman taxes—and whatever was additionally extorted by tax collectors, as Zacchaeus had done (Luke 19:8), and John the Baptist had called out (Luke 3:12–13)—they also had to pay taxes required by the Jewish law (which was calculated on their *brutto* income, not their *netto* income). Add to this their disapproval of being ruled by Rome in the first place (the Jews had been a free people less than a century earlier), and one can understand why a rebellion was brewing (and which would erupt approximately 33 years later, in AD 66)3.

And so, by asking whether Jesus supported paying tax to Caesar4 or not, His opponents could trap Him. If He said that the Jews should pay the taxes, He would become unpopular and the target of both rebels and those who were peaceful, but legitimately burdened by the high taxation. If, instead, He said to not pay taxes to the Romans, His accusers could bring Him before the Roman authorities as a seditionist.

Wider Biblical Context

The larger context is that Jesus was in His final week before His crucifixion. He had been steadfast in traveling to Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21) and rebuffed attempts to dissuade Him from doing so (Matthew 16:22–23). He then made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:7–10); an act which drew considerable attention to Himself. Then He started to deliberately provoke the Jewish religious authorities (Luke 19:45–48, 20:39–47). His opponents (the established religious elite) were already targeting Him before this time (Matthew 12:9–14, John 7:1), but now Jesus was confronting them openly and provoking them to take action against Him. Jesus was fully expecting to die at their hands soon. But He was not acting rashly, but in a calculated manner: no matter what He believed would happen to Him soon, He was not going to compromise His message.

A Trap Failed

But Jesus saw through their trap and deftly stepped around it. His opponents believed that they were asking a question with a binary answer: either yes or no. However, Jesus gave them a higher answer: one which they had not even considered.

In the same way that Jesus’s opponents had a simplistic view when trying to trap Jesus with their question, we too may have a simplistic understanding of how to interpret His response.

Interpreting Jesus’s Statement

We often do ourselves a disservice reading or preaching pithy little excerpts from the Bible (including Jesus’s life) which are bracketed by modern translators' headings. The danger of this is that it can give us tunnel vision: we know the individual stories, but forget the context and (worse still) how the different parts fit together.

We cannot read Jesus’s words about “rendering unto Caesar” (literally fulfilling their obligation of paying high taxes) without hearing Him say “love your enemies, … and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44), “you can’t serve both God and Mammon [money]” (Matthew 6:24), and “consider the lilies of the field” (Matthew 6:27–34). The Jesus who said to “render unto Caesar” is the same One who dismissed Herod Antipas [2] as “that fox”

(Luke 13:31–22) for the reason that Antipas did not care for the Kingdom of God. The Jesus addressing the crowds in the Temple that day was the same One who said to an aspiring follower who wanted to bury his father before following Jesus “follow Me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22). He expected His followers to “be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16), that they should not “be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28), and that they should “deny [themselves]” (Matthew 16:24–27). “He who seeks His life will lose it; and he who loses his life for My sake will find it,” He said (Matthew 10:39). Jesus promised that “there is no one who has left house, or wife, or brothers, or parents, or children, for God’s Kingdom’s sake, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the world to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:29–30). He told the Parable of the Rich Fool, who died after he had accumulated much wealth: “so is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God” (Luke 12:16–21).

The above examples may seem arbitrary in the context of the current topic, but we shall return to them shortly. First, let us imagine that Jesus was instructing us to obey the authorities. If this was the case, it would be problematic if Jesus gave any commandments contrary to the instruction to “render unto Caesar”. So the question is, are there any? And, if there are, what do we make of it?

Obligation: Honour God

> I tell you, my friends, don’t be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom you should fear. Fear Him who after he has killed, has power to cast into Gehenna. Yes, I tell you, fear Him. …
> I tell you, everyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man will also confess before the angels of God; but he who denies me in the presence of men will be denied in the presence of God’s angels. Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, don’t be anxious how or what you will answer, or what you will say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that same hour what you must say.
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> Luke 12:4–5, 8–12

Most Western readers today can scarcely comprehend how comforting the above passage would have been to innumerable Christians facing persecution in the first three centuries AD. Christians would sporadically face persecution for a variety of reasons: sometimes at the whim of an emperor, sometimes to appease the pagans, and sometimes to shoulder some blame. Often the state authorities would put Christians on trial and threaten them with pain, impoverishment or death, unless they submitted themselves to the Roman deities or the cult of the emperor. Many, calling to mind the above commandment from Jesus, refused to do so, and suffered for it.

There is much that can be unpacked from the beginning of Luke 12, but from this passage we are simply going to take away the fact that Jesus is commanding His followers to be faithful to Him when on trial or being pressured not to be. They were *not* to “render unto Caesar” when he requested a token display of pagan worship. Instead, they were to remain faithful to a basic message: there is only one God, and He alone should be worshipped.

Obligation: Love Thy Neighbour

In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), a “half breed Jew” who followed a corrupted worship of the God of Israel (that is, a Samaritan), shows compassion to an injured Jew, who had already been ignored by noble and pious Jews. Jesus told this parable to answer a simple question: “who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29). In His answer, Jesus demonstrated that our neighbour is not someone who is in our national or ethnic fraternity, or even someone who holds to the same worship or orthodoxy as us. Instead, our neighbour is the one whom we recognise as being created in the image of God. Again, looking at the early church, Christians took this commandment to mean that they were to care for all, not only their kin. They helped the widows and the orphans, the poor and the sick; not merely the *Christian* widows and orphans, poor and sick. This got Christians noticed, even by their enemies [3].

Imagine a government forbade people of different faiths or cultures from “doing good”, helping, or assisting each other. If a Christian saw “others” being oppressed and desired to help them, they would need to choose whether to be loyal to Jesus’s commandment, or the government’s laws. Looking at history, many Christians chose to side with Jesus. For example, during the Holocaust (despite the fear and apathy of other Christians), many Christians risked their lives to hide and help those being persecuted by the Nazis (Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and the disabled).

An Obligation with a Caveat

We have seen two examples where Jesus gave His followers commands which they should follow in defiance of earthly authorities, if necessary. There are more, and we can get bogged down in details and exceptional edge cases, but given the concrete examples of how Christians have acted in history to obey Jesus in these commands, we can accept these examples in broad strokes.

In broad strokes as well, these two commands mentioned in the previous two sections correspond to what Jesus thought was the greatest command of all:

> On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
> “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”
> He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’;
> and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”
> “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”
>
> Luke 10:25–28

The two exceptions (which we looked at) which Jesus gave where people were to obey Him instead of the government are, in fact, the greatest commandments which we have from God. We should honour God, and love our neighbours.

How Should We Think about Rending Unto Caesar?

So what do we make of this? And how do we tie this in with all that Jesus said which I mentioned earlier?

When Jesus said to “render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar”, He was not actually giving a command; at least, not in the way in which we think about it. There is *more* going on with the world than the neat little categories into which we try to classify our lives. Our biases, our limited understanding, and our shortcomings (all of which are necessarily because of our limitations as human beings) all impede us from seeing the world in the way in which God sees it. While humans have anxieties about whether their governments can, say, navigate the reality of potential nuclear war, God cares for beggar in the street who has only known cruelty and mistreatment his entire life. That is not to say that God is aloof; He is very much in control. What God demands, is to instead of passing by this beggar to go sit paralysed in front of the evening news as you watch global events unfold which are far beyond your influence, that you give your time and attention to that beggar. The reality beyond reality is that while you cannot prevent a nuclear war or global recession, you play an intricate part in the Kingdom of God, for which He has predestined you. While we are trying to decipher where the dividing line between our civic and religious duties run, God intends for us to *do*: to honour Him at every opportunity and to care for others. We must do this not in the confines of some early system or framework, but by listening to what Jesus said and to follow after the heart of God. And if we are anxious that by “rendering unto Caesar” we may not have enough money, we are to “remember the lilies of the field”. Where the issue of paying taxes was a big concern for first century Jews, what Jesus is saying that it is a small matter to God. Making wealth your primary concerns does not end well, according to Jesus.

So why *did* Jesus say to His audience that they should “render unto Caesar”? The people who were questioning Jesus were very much capable of paying taxes. As I have mentioned, there were political undertones in their question to Him. But instead of allowing Himself to get caught up in their (relatively) petty arguments about money, Jesus is saying that if meeting an earthly obligation (in this case, paying taxes) which would allow you to continue doing Kingdom work unhindered, then you should do that. The goal is *always* to do Kingdom work. Matters of state are incidental to the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

I often think of the story of Elisha when the Syrians surrounded the city where he was (2 Kings 6:8–23). Elisha’s servant was fearful when he saw their enemies. But Elisha was not. He knew there was more going on than what he saw in the material world. So he prayed that his servant’s eyes may be opened. Then the servant saw that “the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around”. Suddenly the servant became aware of the reality of the spiritual warfare going on around; a reality which makes warring human kingdoms appear like children bickering on a school playground.

Knowing that there is a reality beyond the physical, we should exercise judgement by keeping a wholistic view of reality (including spiritual, not only physical) when acting in the world, making decisions and planning for the future. We should not allow ourselves to be distracted by what, in the grand scheme of things, are temporary and petty. Instead, we should be focussed on fulfilling the purpose [4] which God has laid out for us.

If only we could glimpse what Elisha’s servant had seen! Were not Isaiah, Elijah, and John paralysed by their visions of the spiritual realms! They would never look at the physical world in the same way again. That is not to say that the world is unimportant. If that were the case, God would not have had a grand plan of salvation for His creation, and the Word would not have become flesh. The physical world around us is of immense importance; that is what the Kingdom of God is about. But the world is not important in the ways which we tend to think are important. Our categories and classifications serve only as distractions. If only we would be so eager to embrace the work of the Kingdom of God as we are by every passing fashion and fad. By God’s grace, may we be so eager!

- 1. It should be noted that the role of “tax collector” (or, at least, chief tax collector; _publican_ in Latin and in the KJV) was not necessarily a narrowly focussed role. A publican could oversee building projects, or have other administrative roles.
- 2. Some commentaries incorrectly claim that the Jews in Jesus’s day were unhappy about the practice of “tax farming”. This was the corrupt practice which Augustus outlawed with his reforms decades earlier.
- 3. When Jesus was a boy, the issue of taxation led a man named Judas of Gamla to begin an insurrection against the Romans. His insurrection was crushed by the Romans, but Judas’s sons carried on the fight, and by AD 66, a full blown rebellion would erupt. That is all to say, during Jesus’s lifetime, tension about taxation was high.
- 4. A word on the name/title “Caesar”. Roman names could become complicated with birth names, adopted names, and regal titles. “Caesar” was the name of Gaius Julius Caesar. While history does not remember him as technically being an emperor, he was one in all but name. Because of his legacy, everybody wanted to be his successor (literal or figurative). After he was assassinated, his grand nephew (whom he had adopted)—Gaius Octavian—became what history remembers as Rome’s first emperor (after a civil war). As emperor he also received the title Augustus, by which he is known in modern history. He _also_ took his adoptive father’s name, Caesar. He, in turn, adopted Tiberius, who, in turn, took the names “Caesar Augustus” when he became emperor. And so we see that, over time, “Caesar” became an honorific name, and eventually an honorific title (and is, incidentally, from where the title “tsar” derives). So when Jesus says “render unto Caesar”, he is referring to Tiberius Augustus Caesar, but effectively using the name as a title for the emperor.
- . Photo credit: DrusMAX [5]. Retouched.

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