

Paying taxes to Caesar

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[0:00] For those of you who are visiting us, we're running through Matthew's Gospel, have been for a while now, and we're up to chapter 22 and verse 15 and onwards.

! So they sent their disciples along to him, along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you're sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality.

Tell us then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.

And they brought him a denarius. Then he said, Whose head's on this? And whose title? They answered, The emperors. Then he said, Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God.

When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away. You can take the slides down for a while now. I'm not going to use them all.

[1:36] So we know... Can you just take the slides down? Thank you. We know this story very well.

There's a phrase that's sometimes used in ordinary society. Render unto Caesar's that which is Caesar's. And we just... It's a sort of fairly well-known narrative in the life of Jesus.

Bit of background, though. Don't forget, this is the beginning or the time, the period of time between the triumphal entry and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

That time where Jesus entered Jerusalem with great cries of Hosanna. Hooray! Jesus is here. The Savior. The one that's going to free us from oppression and slavery.

And bring about a new regime. A new kingdom. We call it these days, regime change. And then a week later, the same crowd cried, crucify him.

[2:52] And of course, we know that he was crucified. And then rose from the dead on the third day. And that's what we've been celebrating in the communion service.

Rose from the dead and beat death. Death now has no sting for those of us who know and love Jesus. And this is the latest of a whole lot of tricky questions that the Pharisees dreamt up.

And you can imagine they're sitting around a table at the university of wherever thinking, what's the most complex question we could ask him? It's like people setting exams.

What's the hardest, most complicated, weird question we can ask him? And they came up with a few and Jesus swatted them away. And they said, right, we've got him this time.

Should we pay taxes to Caesar? The oppressor? The occupier? Should we pay the imperial tax?

[4:03] They were so desperate to get Jesus that they spent hours pondering clever questions.

Now, when I say they, the Pharisees got their lackeys to do it. They didn't go themselves.

They went with, they sent off what are described as their disciples. The disciples of the Pharisees, the followers of the Pharisees, and also a bunch called the Herodians.

Now, you only hear about the Herodians a bit in Scripture, but every time you hear them in connection with the Pharisees. And the Pharisees essentially were, the Pharisees and the Herodians rather, were essentially acting as two political parties.

The Pharisees wanted to restore the kingdom of David. The Herodians wanted to restore or bring to power a member of the Herodian dynasty, people related to, and in the line of Herod.

[5:07] And they wanted to bring that regime change and those new leaders in post. They were only united in wanting to get rid of the Romans, but also get rid of this pesky teacher who was challenging them and saying things which they didn't like and coming against them and challenging their power and status quo.

So the Herodians and the Pharisees joined forces, not because they were friends, not because they thought they agreed with each other on the fundamentals, but just because they wanted to get rid of Jesus.

They wanted to silence the person who was really causing them the most difficulty. And they would do it by force if they needed to, but they prefer to do it by law.

They prefer to have Jesus essentially condemn himself from his own mouth. Because it was just easier for them. There wasn't any need to take up arms.

There wasn't any need to come and be aggressive. It was just, we'll get rid of him because he'll say something which we can go to the rulers and say he's been saying this and they'll go and get him.

[6:31] Now they started this episode with a load of flattery. A load of insincere flattery. You're a man of integrity. You teach the ways of God in accordance with truth.

You aren't swayed by others. All of which is true. All of which is true. But it wasn't a sincere acknowledgement of who Jesus is.

They weren't saying, you're great. We think you're fabulous. We want to follow what you're saying. They were just essentially, and this was part of their trick, softening Jesus up so that they could come and trick him.

And just hold on to that because that's something that we need to be wary of too in our society today. But these folk, these Pharisees, the followers of the Pharisees and the Herodians were just trying to flatter Jesus, make him feel better.

Now if you think about it from a heavenly perspective, these guys were trying to make the Son of God feel better about himself. It's a relatively stupid thing to do because he's the Son of God.

[7:54] And as somebody once said, if you have the in your name, you've pretty well made it. So they asked him the question, should we pay imperial tax to Caesar?

And in fairness, it's an interesting question. It's an interesting question of law. It's an interesting question of theology. It's an interesting question as well of just practical politics.

Should we pay this money, this tax that Caesar has imposed on us? He's invaded and oppressing us. We are a country under occupation.

Should we pay the tax? And there's some debate about that. There's some legitimate debate about that. But they weren't interested at any point in a fascinating debate.

They didn't want to have that conversation. They didn't want to get really into the depth of it.

Because there's nothing wrong with getting into the depth of difficult questions.

[9:04] You know, those of you who have been doing the Alpha course, there's some hard stuff that we need to really wrestle with and allow God to show us the truth by His Holy Spirit.

And if they had come with sincere questions, Jesus would have given them sincere answers. We see that from elsewhere in Scripture. What must I do to be saved?

How can I have eternal life? The conversation that Jesus had with Zacchaeus that's not recorded in Matthew chapter 19.

But it won't have just been a very simple one-sentence conversation. They'll have had all sorts of conversations. And Jesus will have answered with sincerity. Why? Because the questions are with sincerity.

So one of the things that I want to be really clear about this morning is if you have sincere questions of Jesus, I don't understand help me understand this.

[10:05] Ask Him. Sincerely ask Him and He will sincerely answer you. And He will sincerely answer you with love and generosity and always with hope.

But they weren't interested in that. They weren't interested in the value of whether they should pay this tax.

It was just this latest device of trying to trick Him out. And we know that from verse 15. Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Him in His words.

That was the ultimate motivation. That was the beginning and end of it. They just wanted to trap Him. It wasn't honourable.

It wasn't godly. They just wanted to be rid of Jesus. And what did Jesus say? You hypocrites. You hypocrites.

[11:07] Why are you trying to trap me? Jesus, of course, saw through their plotting. Their silly, immature plotting.

You hypocrites. And that's a name that Jesus reserves for those who are deliberately trying to lead people away from the truth.

Deliberately trying to keep people away from Him and trick Him. The people who say one thing and do another. Who is the one who will be saved, says Jesus?

The man in the corner on his knees weeping, saying, oh, woe is me for I'm a sinner. Or the one who stands in the middle of the synagogue saying, thank you God, I'm not like him over there.

You hypocrites, says Jesus. The challenge there is we need to make sure that we're not hypocrites in our behaviour, in our thinking.

[12 : 23] Thank God I'm not like them. Thank God I'm better than that. Or I'm going to have and make up clever questions to trick other people out.

Just for fun. Just for sport. That's not part of our walk with God. Now we shouldn't be surprised and we shouldn't be surprised now that there are people who are trying to trick up Christians.

Trick up God. Trip up Jesus. Trip up the Holy Spirit. Psalm 2. Why do the nations conspire and the people plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed saying, let's break their chains and throw off their shackles. The one enthroned in heaven laughs.

The Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath saying, I have installed my king on Zion on my holy mountain.

[13 : 32] Psalm 2 verses 1 to 6. They're quite hard words, aren't they? God laughs at them. He scoffs at them. He mocks them. He says, don't play that game with me.

Don't try and get clever with me because I've installed the holy one, my king in Zion.

Jesus is Lord. Jesus was Lord then and is Lord now and will ever be Lord. So Jesus comes to the answer.

The answer to the question. But it wasn't the answer that they were looking for. It wasn't really an answer at all. He just replied with a question.

He turned the question back on the Pharisees and the Herodians and essentially said, so what's on the coin? Whose face is on it?

[14 : 41] If we're going to play this game, whose face is on that coin? Well, it's Herod's. Well, give it back to him then. If he's got his face on it, it must be his. So give it back.

Very simple. But then it comes with a caveat, or a rider rather than a caveat, something else that comes along.

This is the old language, but it's a sentence that I rather like. Render unto Caesar therefore the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God.

Give back what belongs to Caesar. Just give it back to him. Don't have these silly arguments. And when they heard that, they went away amazed.

They were amazed. They thought, oh, we thought we'd got him. We thought we'd got him, and he didn't just wriggle out of it. He absolutely destroyed our plotting and planning with one sentence.

[15 : 48] Give it back to him. Simple. They were astonished, and they went away. And they'll have gone back to headquarters and said, well, it didn't kind of work really.

He got us. He got us back. And as I was thinking about this this week, it came, an image came to me of a chess game, of someone like me, who's not very good at playing chess, playing a grandmaster.

And I think, ha ha, I've got you now. I've got you now. And the grandmaster very kindly, but very clearly, says, no, you haven't, and knocks the king over because he's checkmated me in two and a half moves, or whatever it is, that the language of chess is.

They thought they'd got him. They thought they'd trapped him. And he says, no. You can't do that to me. You can't try and trick me into submission.

They went away. And as with all these times, there's a little bit of sadness in my heart. One of the saddest verses in scripture for me is the rich young man went away sad.

[17 : 09] He had a face-to-face encounter with Jesus. He asked a question. He got an answer. Didn't lie at the answer and went away sad. And these folk went away.

We don't know whether they were sad or cross, but they won't be feeling happy. So that's the narrative. That's the narrative of this passage of scripture.

Give back to Caesar what Caesar. Stop trying to trick Jesus. Jesus. But you know, there's a little phrase at the end which is really the core of this passage.

Because whether we should pay taxes to Caesar or not is irrelevant. What Jesus said that is most significant is, and give to God that which is God's.

And the challenge for us this morning, the challenge for every Christian today and every day, is give back to God what is God's.

[18:18] Avoid foolishly ignorant disputes, says Timothy, because we know that they generate strife, arguments. Just avoid them. Don't have anything to do with them.

Swap them away. but give back to God that which is God's. So what does that mean?

What does belong to God? What is it that we have, that we are surrounded by, that we are, that belongs to God?

Psalms 24 verse 1 and 2, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The world and all who live in it. For he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

Give back to God that which is God's. What? Give back everything to God. All this stuff around taxes, all this stuff around my rights, my belongings, my power, my position, my jumpers, if you're so-minded.

[19:32] They all belong to God. God created everything. God created everything. The Lord, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

So the power of that little phrase, at the end of the well-known render unto Caesar what that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God, to God that which is God, is a really important message for us.

It's a really important message as we think about our life and our lifestyle in Jesus. Titus chapter 2 verses 11 to 14, for the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled upright and godly lives in this present age.

While we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify us for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is God.

[20:55] Now isn't there a sermon or two in that passage? Which I'll preach now. Not really. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled upright and godly lives.

That's what the Spirit helps us do. That's what the grace of God has appeared for us. And there's a lifetime of learning and a lifetime of changing and a lifetime of living under the authority of Jesus so that we can do that.

Ungodliness and worldly passions. passions. We say no to that sort of stuff. It's really important here to say that we can be enthusiastic about things.

There's a danger that we read that sentence, say no to ungodliness, okay, I'll say no to ungodliness, and worldly passions. Well, what are worldly passions? Christians? Well, there are all sorts of things.

But it doesn't say that Christians have to be miserable, that Christians have to be dour, that Christians have to not enjoy themselves, that Christians can't have fun.

[22:25] There's a small matter of a football match, I believe, this afternoon that one or two of you have got some hopes for. If you don't know, look it up. It's something about Middlesbrough doing some football things.

That's great, and you can be enthusiastic about that, you can be passionate about what you enjoy. If you like football, great. If you like rugby, great. If you like knitting, fantastic. But whatever.

I'm being flippant. But please don't think that being a Christian, we're being instructed to be miserable, unenthusiastic people. But what this does mean is, nothing in our lives can be more important than Jesus.

Our passion for football, our passion for whatever, our passion for the hobbies that we have, things we enjoy, must never ever take over our passion, our love, our commitment, our following of Jesus. Of course it means inappropriate sexual behaviour, it means don't get involved in tricking people and hurting people and all that sort of stuff. But it means as well everything.

[23:45] If we're going to give to God that which is God's, it means we give our life. We give our life. I wonder whether the technical team at the back could put the final slide up.

if you can't, don't worry about it. Give to God that which is God's. Give to God all of us, every part of us.

We sometimes sing the hymn, don't we, I Surrender All. And it's a challenging hymn to sing, it's a really nice hymn, and it's got some good words and the tune's nice, nice.

But there's a danger sometimes that we sing it and we don't really realise what we're singing. We don't really think about what we're saying.

I surrender all. I give up all. I give back to God all. All of me.

[24 : 51] All of my being. body, soul, spirit, belongings. I hand it over to God for his use. All of my hopes and plans and ambitions.

There's another quote from another hymn, song. Do I give up all my hopes, plans and ambitions? It's a good thing to ask yourself, good thing to ask me anyway, what are you hoping for?

What's your plans? What's your ambition? What do you hope for the rest of 2023? And we'll all have lots of different hopes.

We'll all have all sorts of things that we think about and we've got some plans. And planning is good, by the way. Plans are, in the old days, people would say in church, we'll meet next Sunday at Peter 45 as usual, the good Lord willing, or deo volente, God willing.

We could only plan as long as we're according to the plan of God. My ambitions. Ambition's not wrong, but it has to be surrendered to the will of Almighty God.

[26 : 20] My worship. Not just my singing worship, but my being worship. My soul and body is a living sacrifice.

Is that what it is? Have I done that? Am I doing that? Will I do it? My prayer.

And there's a whole other sermon on prayer, which I won't preach either. But how do we pray?

What do we pray for? What is our motivation in prayer?

Now, I've done very well, haven't I? I've preached for nearly 30 minutes and not mentioned my granddaughter yet. But it's going to happen, isn't it? My ambitions for that little girl are huge.

But I have no right to say to God anything other than, your will be done. By the way, please, can she be an international piano player while playing football, rugby and cricket?

[27 : 37] All at the same time. Thank you. We're allowed to have ambitions. We're allowed to have our prayers.

But our prayers have to be according to Almighty God will. My time and resources. Such a tough one these days.

When so many of us here are quite time poor. we're busy people. How do we give up and give to God?

My time, my day, my week, my month, my year. That's where we have to get into real interesting conversation with God.

God. Rather than trying to ask tricky questions about should I pay tax? By the way, the answer is yes. Don't ask should I pay tax.

[28 : 40] Say to God, help me understand what giving to you all of me. Help me understand what surrendering to God, that which is God's.

What does that mean for me? And if you dare, then what haven't I given to you that I need to? What am I holding back?

What am I saying? Yeah, nice try, but you're not having that bit. That bit's mine. And if you ask with all sincerity, if you get on your knees or lie on your bed or stand up or sit in a comfy chair or go for a walk, but if you say to God, in all sincerity, help me understand what I haven't given back to you, he'll tell you.

He'll tell you. But only do it if you dare. It's one of those questions you only ask God if you want to be, if you really mean that you want to hear the answer. Because he'll speak to you.

He'll show you the part of your life which is not surrendered to almighty God. So what's this passage about?

[29 : 56] Well, part of the passage is about don't try and get clever with God. Don't try and trick him. Don't try and get into silly conversations and don't engage with silly conversations on the internet with other people who just want to poke and prod and get into an argument for fun.

Just ignore it. Just ignore it. It's one of the real challenges of modernity as a Christian. is the number of people who really almost seem to say right, it's eight o'clock, I'm going to go online for an hour and prod some Christians.

Just ignore them. Don't get involved in silly and foolish arguments that only lead to strife. So that's part of the point of this passage.

But the key is this six words. Give to God that which is God's. seven words. Give back to God yourself, your life.

Be surrendered to him. Our lives are everything. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word which is so instructive.

[31 : 15] We thank you for your word which is so challenging. Holy Spirit, now come and help us understand how it is that we can give back to you that which belongs to you.

How we can give our lives, our everything, back to you. and where there are struggles in that and where there are things that we will really find hard.

Please comfort us and help us. Help us understand what it is that you want us to do. Holy Spirit, speak clearly to us now.

and may we know the next step in this path of surrender to almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, who promises that all those who believe in him won't die, but will have eternal life in heaven. That wonderful truth that death is, physical death is just passing from our life here to our eternity in heaven, forever worshipping the risen Lord Jesus.

[32 : 41] Amen.