

“Guess, what is God’s?” Mat 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” 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. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

This is one of these funny occasions when Jesus opponents wanted to outsmart Him and it didn't end too well for them. Let's see what exactly was going on in this little discussion and then we will see what point Jesus was making and how it relates to our lives.

The Pharisees had been plotting against Jesus for quite a while. They wanted to catch Him in His words, to find Him guilty. This time they sent their disciples to Jesus asking Him:

“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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

What a nice address! You really need to be careful with people who praise you so much. ‘We know that you are true, and teach truthfully, and you are not swayed by appearances. Is it lawful or not, to pay taxes to Caesar?’

It may seem an innocent question. But we need to hear it in its context. Jesus came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the Gospel. He spoke and acted with authority.

But He wasn't the first one to show up as a leader for Jews. 25 years earlier there was another man from Galilee, Judas. He led a revolt against the Romans. Politically motivated revolt fighting for Israel's freedom.

He taught that they don't need to pay taxes to the Romans. Now there was one more man from Galilee. Jesus from Nazareth. What was He going to do? Was He going to free Israel from Roman oppression?

Remember, many of Israelites were waiting for Messiah, for their savior, and many of them were hoping that this savior will give them freedom, will restore for them

the Kingdom of David. Remember, in John 6:15 it is described how people even wanted to make Jesus a king.

Now the Pharisees asked this question. What did it mean? As Matthew describes it – the Pharisees wanted to entangle Jesus in His words. We really need to give them credit for this question. It was well thought.

On the one hand, if Jesus said that it is not lawful to pay this tax, the Pharisees would run to the Romans and accuse Jesus in attempt of insurrection. Recent precedent of Judas from Galilee would make this accusation very serious.

On the other hand, if Jesus said that it is lawful to pay this tax, He would discredit Himself in the eyes of many followers. What kind of political savior are you, if you say that this is fine to be under Roman oppression?

As we can see the question was set in such a way that any answer would cause problems to Jesus. Either with the Romans or with His followers. What did Jesus do? I wish we had this kind of divine wisdom.

Jesus saw their malice and said: **“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.”**

It is refreshing to read that Jesus wasn’t playing word games... the disciples of the Pharisees sounded like honey. “Teacher, we know you are true and speak truthfully... and so on.”

Jesus seeing their intentions simply said: “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?” Then He asked. “Show me the coin for the tax.” Whose image and inscription is this?

It was Caesar’s money. His currency. His coins. These coins had Caesar’s image on them with an inscription which indicated His divine origin. This is very revealing moment.

Here are two kings confronted. One of them has his own money, coins with his own image, army. The most powerful man in entire Roman empire, you can say that at that time, the most powerful man on earth.

His kingdom extended from the east to the west and from the north to the south. He kept entire empire in order and obedience. Armies protected him. And there is another. He doesn’t have even a coin. He asks for it. Give me this coin!

His Kingdom is not of this world. No one protects Him. Instead, He had come to protect us. He didn’t have a lot, but everything He had, that is, His life, He gave for His subjects, for us. You see, two kings. Two very different kings.

Then Jesus said to them: “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

It is difficult to see its translation, but Jesus uses the verb which means ‘give back’. Give back to Caesar, what is Caesar’s. Sometimes we try to simplify what is said, arguing that basically Jesus affirms that it is fine for Christians to pay the taxes.

Of course, it is fine for Christians to pay taxes, for we live in this world, and state, which is today’s analogue for Caesar does so many things for us. God provides for us by means of state. We have so many reasons to be grateful.

Especially here, in Australia, we are so blessed, so blessed. If only we could get a little more rain it would be almost ideal. Thus it is obvious that we need to do our part, and to pay back what is due.

The point that Jesus is making is different. Yes, give to Caesar, what is his, and to God, things that are God’s. By saying this Jesus turns tables around. The disciples of the Pharisees wanted to catch Him talking about Caesar.

They asked this question as if paying or not paying taxes to Caesar would mean a choice between allegiance to Caesar or God. One or another. Now Jesus changes the focus of the question from Caesar to God.

Give back to Caesar what is his, for this is so obvious. But... give back to God the things that are God’s. They wanted to trap Jesus and now they were trapped themselves. Do you give back to God things that are God’s?

What are these things, we may wonder, that we need to give to Him? Think about it! What image was on the coin? Caesar’s. What image, or whose image is on you? In whose image are you created?

Exactly. You are created in God’s own image and likeness. He is your Creator, you are His creature. You belong to Him. You are His. He gives you life and everything and He takes it away. He grants you value and dignity.

You see how Jesus lifts this conversation on a different level. It is not about what you do anymore. The Pharisees thought in categories of doing. Doing right and wrong. What is lawful and what is not. We often think this way.

Jesus provides a totally different perspective. It is not so much about what you do, but to whom you belong. To whom belongs your ultimate allegiance? Who is your Lord? Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, or someone else?

The Pharisees thought that actions determine what kind of person you are, and how God will judge you on the last day. This kind of thinking is as old as the world. We very often think in the same categories.

If I do the right thing, then I'm a righteous person. If I do Christian thing then I'm a good Christian. If we think this way, and there are so many who think this way, we are in no way better than the Pharisees.

Probably worse, for they tried really hard to live according to God's will, as they understood it. People in our culture, on the other hand, choose their own criteria for being good, or even for being Christians.

If they think that they are more or less able to live according to these criteria then they consider themselves good people, or even good Christians. If we are nice people, friendly, do not do big sins like killing someone, then we pretty much have completed the list. What else could someone expect?

Then people are so proud of how good they are, that they are ready to run to God and show – see, what we have done, what a wonderful people we are, what marvelous deeds we do.

We are so good. Let's celebrate our goodness! It's all about our goodness. About me. Then we live in a nice little Pharisee-Land...

There certainly are things that Jesus expects from us. Caesar was a king over his empire, but to Jesus Christ all authority is given, in heaven and on earth. Caesar could demand taxes, Jesus demands you, all of you, without a reminder.

This Jesus conversation with the Pharisees was a part of a longer discussion, where Jesus accused them and highlighted a few things that the Pharisees had not given back to God. We can meditate how this refers to us as well.

They had not repented from their sins, when John the Baptist was sent to them. (Matt. 21:28-32) Think, how much do we realize our sinfulness and God's wrath when we learn His will? How much do we repent of our sins? How much, instead, we celebrate our goodness?

They had not received Jesus Christ as who He was, the Son of God, but instead had plotted His demise. (Matt. 21:33-46) How often do we receive Jesus as who He is, our Savior, the Son of God, who had to die to give us life?

How often we can see Jesus portrayed simply as one of us, our buddy Jesus, when it is almost expected that He also must be celebrating our imaginary goodness, as if it was not our sin that made Him suffer a terrible death.

They had repeatedly turned down God's invitation and call to His eternal feast as we discussed it the last Sunday (Matt. 22:1-14) How many of good, nice people turn down God's invitation? Again, and again, and again.

If this was the end of the story, this would be very sad, for we fall short in so many ways. It is so good that Jesus, to whom all authority is given, does not treat us as we deserve it.

He is not like human kings, not like powerful of this world. Yes, we belong to Him, and we may be afraid to hear that we belong to someone. But this is the best thing that can happen with us.

Jesus Christ is our Lord. Your Lord. He comes to us first. Not because we are such a lovely people. He comes to us, because He sees our hearts. Because we need Him. He knows exactly how much we need His saving grace.

How much we need His restoring forgiveness. He is the Lord. Your Lord. Mighty ones of this world have armies to protect them and to make others to do their will.

The Son of God comes to us, to you and lies down His life to protect you, to serve you, to save you. Because you belong to Him. Because you are His. For Jesus Christ it means that you are even more important in His eyes, than His own life.

He gave it up, so that you can live. This is what kind of Lord He is. If there is something for us to celebrate, then it is this fact that we are His. Each of you.

That He is so gracious that He forgives us our obsession with ourselves, that He sends His Spirit into our hearts so that we can see the reality as it is. So that we can begin to realize that all we are and all we have belongs to Him.

That He loves us more than Himself. May the Holy Spirit help us to see this truth and rejoice in our Lord. When you go home, take this thought with you. You belong to Christ, and no one will snatch you from Him. You are His.

Amen.