

The Things That Are God's

It is likely these Pharisees and Herodians who came tempting Jesus had little in common with each other beyond a desire to ensnare the Saviour in His words, and cause damage to His reputation. Luke calls them 'spies' and Matthew and Mark tell us the Lord was not deceived by their overly-reverent greetings but denounced their 'wickedness' and 'hypocrisy'. The Lord's enemies did not hesitate to make alliances with their rivals to oppose Him, and still today the gospel of grace is attacked by all shades of religion of the freewill and works kind.

Paying taxes

The plan was simple. These two groups were on opposite sides of a thorny political question about paying taxes to Caesar. If Jesus could be tempted to speak against paying taxes to the Roman state the Herodians would accuse Him of rebellion against the government. If, on the other hand, He encouraged paying taxes to Caesar the Pharisees would seize on his words to shame Him. The whole Jewish nation longed for a Messiah to rise up and rid them of their Roman overlords. Either way, the Lord's opponents thought to snare Him in their sneaky strategy.

A wise answer

The Lord of course knew all this. Christ knows our hearts and discerns our motives. There is nothing hid from the Lord. Yet the ease with which the Saviour side-stepped the trap caused even His opponents to marvel. Jesus called for the coin used to pay tax and asked whose image appeared on its face. The answer was obvious. It was Caesar's image because it was Caesar's coinage. Then, said the Lord, give or 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'.

A relevant answer

The sheer beauty and simplicity of this answer at once disarmed Christ's opponents and left them speechless. But when we pause over the Lord's words and consider them we, too, are compelled to admire just how wise and helpful they are. They provide advice to distinguish between opposing priorities that challenge the church in every age. The Lord's answer then, is right up to date now, it is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago.

'God over all'

We live in countries with laws, rules and structures of government to be honoured and respected even when we personally disagree with the policies and practices involved. The Roman state was the antithesis of Christ's kingdom, yet God had placed Caesar in power and it was not the role or responsibility of Christ's people's to undermine or overthrow that rule by their disobedience; civil or otherwise. Caesar had rights, too!

Appealing to Caesar

Strange as it may seem the Lord Jesus was at that very moment living under the protection of Rome's rule of law. In time the Apostle Paul would also take advantage of this fact and appeal to Caesar. The Jews wished to kill Jesus, and later Paul, but they could not because capital punishment was out of their control and resided in the hands of Caesar. The cross was a Roman form of execution and Christ must be crucified. The chief priests would exploit this in our Lord's case due to Pilate's weakness, but the fact remains.

What God's sovereignty means

Nor was any of this outside the control of God who orders the affairs of kings and kingdoms, and the rise and fall of nations, to accomplish His own purpose and honour His own glory. God put Caesar on the throne in Rome, and Roman governors on the seats of power in Jerusalem. 'The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will', says Daniel. It therefore becomes the church of Jesus Christ to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to be subject to such principalities and powers as God has placed over us. Believers who promote or justify disobedience are disobeying God.

Obedience is believing

The other side of this issue is equally important. Believers must render to God the things that are God's. We desire to serve, honour, and obey the Lord according to His Word and with purity of heart. However, do not imagine we shall

ever establish a righteous kingdom here on earth. Nor should this be our aim. Christ's kingdom is spiritual and our service is spiritual. We serve, honour, and obey God by trusting Him, believing what He has said, and keeping faith with the Lord despite all the violations we face from the kings of the earth and wickedness in high places.

Christ's spiritual kingdom

In a few days the Lord Jesus would be standing before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate would ask about the Lord's kingly role and Jesus would reply, 'My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews'. Instead, the Lord's servants, His apostles and followers, would render to God the things that are God's and by faith take His message to the ends of the earth; preaching His gospel for the salvation of sinners, and gathering in the Lord's elect.

Doing the work of God

There is no great conundrum or moral dilemma here. We render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and Caesar will be answerable before God for the things he does and the things done in his name. In addition, the Lord's people, render to God the things that are God's. This we do by faith. We serve, honour, and obey the Lord by faith. If any should ask, 'What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?' We shall hear the Lord's own answer to this question. 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.'

Amen

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