

# Render Unto Caesar

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[ 0 : 00 ] Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Every person here this evening lives with multiple roles and responsibilities. There are fathers and children, husbands and wives, managers, employees, all sorts of different responsibilities that we live with.

And as we read the New Testament we see that those responsibilities are not irrelevant to our Christian lives but it's precisely in those roles and responsibilities that we live for the Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

And our faith is expressed in those relationships. In some ways it's the test of our faith is how we live out these roles which we have.

The Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter list in various places these different roles that Christians have and what it might mean for a Christian to live as a first century slave or to live as the wife of a non-Christian husband.

[ 1 : 18 ] One of the roles that we maybe think of less often is the role of a subject or of a citizen but just as the Bible talks about being a Christian husband it also talks in various places about being a Christian citizen, a Christian subject.

Now the passage that we've read today is one of the most famous incidents in the ministry of Jesus. It's an incident that happened in the most public place.

It would have been known very widely and it's a famous answer that Jesus gave to a question that he was asked.

The question is it right? Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar? Now many of us will know the background to this is that Jesus' homeland at that time was under occupation and the tax would have been paid not to a Jewish state but would have been paid to an occupying Roman power.

And the question is put to Jesus by people who are very far from being on his side. If you look at the questioners there's something already unusual, unbelievable, surprising, shocking about who asks the questions.

[ 2 : 47 ] It's the Pharisees and the Herodians. Now the Pharisees would be your experts in the religious law, religious, possibly even fanatics.

They would have known the Old Testament possibly by heart, they would have had a very clear interpretation of every possible passage. And these were the zealots for the law of God.

They even had a concept of building a fence around the law. So as well as obeying God's commandments there were additional rules and regulations that meant that a Pharisee would never get anywhere near breaking one of God's commandments.

So the Pharisees are asking Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to this occupying power? And they're joined by the Herodians.

Now the Herodians are completely different from the Pharisees. These are the followers, the supporters of a ruler who's not quite Jewish and his whole power base is built around a compromise with the occupying Roman power.

- [ 3 : 59 ] And we see some of the character of Herod in his actions in relation to John the Baptist and later on, and when Jesus is tried with the way in which he treats the prisoner, Jesus as he's being tried for claiming that he is the king of the Jews.
- King of the Jews was one of the slogans of the Herods. That was what they claimed to be even though they didn't have the family background to be able to claim that role.
- But this is an unholy alliance. This is people who've got nothing in common with one another. The religious fanatics on one hand and the political compromises on the other, but they have in common the fact that they want to catch Jesus out.
- And if we look in history, history has thrown up some pretty unusual unholy alliances. We can think of Hitler and Stalin at the start of the Second World War who came to an agreement and for two years between 1939 and 1941 were in some sort of alliance even though they had nothing in common.
- We can think of Chairman Mao and Richard Nixon in the 60s and 70s. What did they have in common other than a common enemy?
- [ 5 : 27 ] We can think in Scotland, in Britain, there was an alliance between Peter Tatchell and some Muslim members of parliament, very strange alliance of people.
- And in the country where we live at the minute, those nostalgic for the old days of the USSR and those zealous for the Eastern Orthodox faith, what possible thing would they have in common?
- But these are some of the unholy alliances that have been thrown up by history. And Jesus is very upfront about this question that he's asked.
- He calls the people who ask him the question hypocrites, actors, people who are asking one thing but in the back of their minds are completely different thoughts.
- It's a trick question. You can't give a right answer. If you say you should pay the tax, then you're on the side of the Roman occupying power and so you've basically given up any right to say something to the Jewish people.
- [ 6 : 29 ] If you say you shouldn't pay the tax, then you're on the side of those who rebelling against this political power. So Jesus' answer is very, very good.
- He says, well, show me the coin and he shows the coin and he said, well, who's pictures on this coin? Whose name is on this coin? And it would have been the emperor Tiberius.
- And it would have said something like Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus. That would be the sign. We don't know if Jesus spoke Latin, but his brother James certainly wrote good Greek.
- So very possibly Jesus would have had some knowledge and wouldn't have simply seen words that he didn't understand. But that's Jesus' punchline. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.
- And I want to think this evening together around these headings. First of all, what is Caesar's that we should give him?
- [ 7 : 33 ] And secondly, what is God's that we should give to him? And then later on, I want to think about how this single question, this topical issue in the first century actually relates to the central message of the gospel, of the Christian message.
- So first of all, let's think for a minute about what it means when we talk about the things of Caesar. So that's a plural in the Greek. So when it says, what is Caesar's?
- It's what things are Caesar's in the plural. So they're particular things, particular rights or claims that Jesus says that belong to Caesar, belong to the Roman Emperor, the occupying power.

Now we should be careful to say that even what is Caesar's is also under God's control. It's not as if God has abdicated responsibility of a particular sphere, but he's delegated that particular sphere to the political power.

All authority is from God. And various Christian thinkers have found different ways of talking about it. And they often will use the notion of two, two kingdoms, two swords, two cities, and to talk about these two different spheres.

[ 8 : 54 ] And this is, for example, what one Christian leader, Martin Luther, wrote about his understanding about how these two different spheres related to one another. God has ordained the two governments, he writes, the spiritual, which is by the Holy Spirit under Christ, makes Christians and pious people.

And the secular, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that they are obliged to keep the peace outwardly. The laws of worldly government extend no farther than to life and property and what is external upon the earth.

For over the soul, God can and will let no one rule but himself. Therefore where temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads and destroys souls.

We desire to make this so clear that so that everyone shall grasp it and that the princes and bishops may see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing one thing or another.

So Luther's speaking here about these two kingdoms, or the left hand of God and the right hand of God. God rules in both of these, but when we're talking about the things of Caesar, we're talking about an outward and a civil power.

[ 10 : 09 ] So what is it the things of Caesar, what is it that we should give to Caesar that belonged to him? What is it that we should give to the state, we should give as Christian citizens?

Well the first thing that Jesus is talking about here is tribute or tax. And all of us in one way or another will have paid tax, whether it's income tax or value added tax, but we've paid, we've acknowledged that in God, God has set up the state, we acknowledge the state, we recognize it and every time that we pay that extra 20% on the price of our goods when we pay 22% or whatever the base rate of income tax is, when we pay that we recognize that this is an authority that God has delegated to the state in which we live and we acknowledge that.

A second way in which we acknowledge the state, we give to Caesar what is Caesar's is that we obey the law, we comply with the particular requirements to which we are subject.

And this can impinge also on the life of the church, there are particular legal requirements which as a church we recognize, we don't contest and that we're willing to fulfill these responsibilities acknowledging that this is a power that God has set up.

So as Christians we don't break the law, we want to keep the law, we want to fill all sorts of requirements whether they're health and safety requirements or accounting requirements or other requirements, acknowledging the power and the authority delegated to the state.

[ 11 : 49 ] In Russia where I serve as pastor, there can be other things which the state can require of the church. We have to report on our finances and the source of the giving that we receive, we have to give some sort of report about the activities that we're engaged in, sometimes we have to ask permission if an event is held in public and often we will be subject to government inspections, sometimes these can be quite invasive.

The most recent inspection of our church was just this January, it was a bit delayed, we'd expected it last year but in January we received a letter and the letter contained 42 questions about our church, 42 questions to which as a church we needed to give an answer and documentary proof to support the answer that we gave.

All sorts of interesting questions, so one of the questions was do you as a church engage in educational activity? To which the correct answer is no, we don't.

And the reason is because the question is actually asking are you as a church setting yourself up as an educational institution, as a school or a university which of course we're not. If we were to say that yes we're engaging in that type of educational activity we would need to prove that our Sunday school teachers have the relevant qualifications, that the material that we're using to teach those classes would comply with particular requirements and so on and so forth.

When we handed in the papers the answers to this check which we actually passed, we got through the check. The paper weighed 10 kilograms, 10 kilograms of answers to these questions.

[ 13 : 40 ] But we at this stage see that as being well this is complying, this is accepting the authority of Caesar. So we might not want to do it, it might be inconvenient for us but we accept the authority of Caesar in that respect.

There's a third way and maybe this is more challenging for people in Scotland which is that the Bible talks about us having a particular respect for those who are in position of leadership.

Now as we come in from outside, come in from another country, coming into Scotland we see there's a very different attitude for those in political power. People often feel quite cynical about politicians, about how they might be in it for the money or for their own fame or to remain in power.

But the Bible talks about not only giving to Caesar what is Caesar's but also showing the respect which is due to those in authority. Those at the top of an authority but also those who are much lower down, the people with whom we have dealings.

And as Christians we believe that the state has been set up by God and therefore those who in those positions of authority are due respect as those to whom God has delegated that power.

[ 14 : 58 ] When we come to this country we're surprised by for example caricatures of the Russian president shown looking ridiculous and it's a question for us.

Is that the right way to show a respect to an authority figure? And in Russia people would show much greater respect I think to those figures even if we wouldn't agree with everything that they do.

There's another way I think which we can show that we give to Caesar what is Caesar's. And that is a question of allegiance that even though we are Christians, even though we're in the church, that we also acknowledge that for example that we are Scottish, that we're citizens of Scotland, citizens of the United Kingdom and that we don't consider ourselves outside society, that society is them and this is us.

That we acknowledge that this is the society that we live in and that we are one of the people. And also that can be seen in participation.

One of the challenges I think for the church in Russia is to see that as a Christian it's right that we should be involved in the life of society. And there's all sorts of ways in which this can be expressed.

[ 16 : 15 ] Sometimes church activities and Christian charities can monopolize the time and effort and energies of Christians so that Christians are absent from society. We're not involved in the community.

And if we acknowledge what God has set up, in this sense Caesar, that to give to Caesar what is Caesar's may also include being involved in projects which are involved in the community.

There aren't distinctly Christian but they need a Christian presence in them. One of the very practical ways in Russia is about the 22nd of April is the time when all the snow has melted.

Now if you imagine that it's been snowing from November, when all that snow melts there's accumulated sweet wrappers and all sorts of other things that might fall to the ground during the course of that number of months.

And all that's got to be cleared away. And so there'll be a special Saturday which would be announced as being a voluntary work day. And various school children and other members of the community will be out clearing their yard clearing the streets so that it's all cleared of the rubbish in time for the major holidays on the 1st of May and the 9th of May.

[ 17 : 31 ] And as Christians we should be looking for that sort of opportunity to say yes we're part of this society. We acknowledge that as Christians God has placed us here and that we can contribute and participate in that way.

So these are the things, some of the things of Caesar. Now between this point and the second point I'd like to show you a photograph of a coin. Now this is a ruble coin so this isn't worth a huge amount just that the ruble coin would be worth about maybe tuppence, it's like a two pence coin now.

Now what do you notice about the ruble coin? There's a one on it and then the second place where you'd see Queen Elizabeth the 1st of Scotland or the 2nd of England you see a double headed eagle.

Now the double headed eagle many people have said well maybe it's the eagle is facing east and west so that Russia is bordering Europe and Asia. But actually this is the double headed eagle of Byzantium.

So this is the Roman coin that has been transferred to Russia. Now the point of interest of course is when we think about that coin that Jesus held up or was held up for Jesus to see the image of the emperor it's basically an earlier version of this same coin that he showed.

[ 18 : 54 ] So in his case it was the picture of the emperor but later on the symbol of Byzantium became this double headed eagle and the two heads of the eagle represent the unity of the church and the state so that there's a single united society with a single religious basis and a single political power.

So when we think about render unto Caesar well if someone was to hold up that coin in Russia they would show this double headed eagle. So we've thought a little bit about the things of Caesar.

Let's think now about the things of God. So there's ways in which as Christians part of our Christian responsibility is to recognize authority set up by God and to pay our taxes to obey the law to show respect to show allegiance and also to participate.

But what does it mean to give to God what is God's? And I think we need to say here that Jesus in answering this question is contrasting the temporary partial requirements of Caesar with the ultimate demands of God.

And Jesus isn't being narrowly spiritual. He's not saying well when it comes to giving things to God I'm not talking about money or anything practical like that. I'm talking about simply what goes on within an individual's heart.

[ 20 : 22 ] He's talking about the ultimate demands of God. God makes ultimate demands of us. He calls us to give all of ourselves to him.

And what does that mean? Well here's some points to make. The first one is that God demands our ultimate allegiance. So even if we're Scottish or English or Welsh or Russian and we feel a sense of allegiance towards the country that we're part of and to the rulers of that country ultimately we understand that that's only partial.

That's only for now for the moment and our ultimate allegiance belongs to God. And we shouldn't place our hope, our hope for the future.

Expect the kingdom of God to be built through political institutions, through political powers or leaders whom we trust. Ultimately that's the thing that we expect from God alone.

So God demands our ultimate allegiance. And often that is tested in practical matters that we see to what extent our hope is placed in God.

[ 21 : 30 ] That we're looking for our answers, that the story of our lives is written with God at the centre. He's the one who brings meaning to our lives. The second thing we can see if we're thinking about the things of God is that God is the one who gives ultimate commands.

The words of the apostles in the book of Acts chapter 5 verse 29. Book of Acts chapter 5, 29 and it says this, Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than men.

We must obey God rather than men. And for Peter the issue was, is it okay to publicly preach that Jesus is the risen Messiah?

Is that legal? And Peter's ultimately saying, well if it comes down to it, if I have to make a choice between obeying men's laws and obeying God's laws, then I'm going to obey God's laws and I'm going to feel fine about it.

That's going to be okay. I'm not going to have a bad conscience about it. I'm not going to hesitate because I know that it's God who ultimately gives commands. And whichever society we live in, whatever the presenting issue is, there will be situations where we have to make a choice and we have to recognize that in order to obey God's law, we're going to have to go against human laws.

[ 22 : 56 ] We're going to have to be willing to not do what other people around us do, possibly not to obey the laws that other people follow, not to have the same system of values.

So ultimate allegiance, ultimate commands. Another point is that we need to comply, we need to follow the law, but we do so within certain boundaries.

As Christians and as a church, we don't accept that the church is subject to an outside power. We're going to follow the law, we're not going to do anything illegal, but we haven't relinquished control of the church.

We haven't said, you tell us what we can do and we won't do anything else. During the Communist times, there were some major restrictions on the churches.

In 1961, there was a particular leader in the denomination that I worked with who was presumably pressure was exerted and he wrote an instruction that was sent to all the pastors in the denomination saying that we shouldn't be running around trying to get converts, mainly focused on the people already in the church and that children under the age of 18 shouldn't be allowed to come into the services.

[ 24 : 09 ] And in the churches, there would often be a member of the church, possibly a deacon or an elder, and he would stand at the entrance with a red band on his arm.

And as children would come into the service, his job would be to stop them coming in, to forbid them to enter the service because the Soviet state had banned it. Later those elders and deacons in the churches realized that this was going beyond simply compliance with the law.

That's going too far. It's being subjugated to the authorities. And there are all sorts of ways in which the churches in those situations were able to find ways and means of actually teaching the faith and giving the faith to children, Sunday schools in flats and all sorts of ways in which they could ensure that the faith was being passed on to the next generation.

Another way in which we can think about how we should give to God what is God's is the issue of truth and historical fact.

It's one of those realities of our world that we now can switch on the television and we can watch end to end news, news 24, switch on the television and you can see whatever is happening in the world at any time of day.

[ 25 : 25 ] Now the problem with that of course is that actually what we're watching isn't the events that are happening. What we're watching is the particular events that we need to see in order to get the message that's being got across.

Someone somewhere is selecting which of those stories are important and what's slant to put on those particular events. And it can happen that events in the past are revised, understood in a different way with a view to changing the conclusions that we should come to.

In this country when in the First World War our government found ways and means of supporting public opinion for the First World War by describing particular events, possibly embellishing particular events.

And these events motivated young men to go and enlist for the army even before it was obligatory. Ten years after the First World War finished a book was written in 1928 called Propaganda.

And that book describes many of the techniques that were used, the stories that were told that everyone believed and actually these were simply instruments used to encourage the war effort.

[ 26 : 37 ] And that thing goes on around the world all the time. George Orwell famously said, he who controls the past controls the future. And one of the ways in which we give to God what is God's is that we're desperate to find out the real truth, the facts.

We make sure that what we believe and our values are actually based on what happened and not what someone would like to have happened or what we would like to happen. Truth is God's truth.

History is not up for grabs. And then there's another way in which we can give to God what is God's. And that is as Christians that we are, our DNA is that we are an international community.

Now we may be the free church of Scotland or the Russian Baptists. But ultimately we understand that we're part of an international community. And we can't at any point say, well, the most important thing for me is my nationality.

And I'm willing to turn against those who also named Jesus a savior because they're not Russian, Ukrainian or Scottish.

[ 27 : 41 ] So the church is international. And just as we're committed to God, we're also committed to all of his people. And sometimes in all sorts of situations where in a particular country there's pressure in a particular direction that we can be encouraged to dissociate ourselves from a particular group of other Christians because their values don't line up with the values in our country.

One of the points of contention at the minute is the Christians in the southern states of the United States. And the particular heritage that's there and often in the media, Christians from the southern states are portrayed as being backward and illiterate and they're not part of the modern world which is being built.

But as Christians, these are our brothers and sisters. And the same way the many strong churches in Africa are not very popular with a political elite.

They don't seem to be saying the things that we'd like to hear and we're encouraged to dissociate ourselves from Christians in Nigeria. And there are all sorts of other situations where the church is encouraged to be more national than international.

But Jesus says, what is God's give to God? So we've looked at this saying of Jesus where he answers that the Pharisees and the Herodians give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

[ 29 : 18 ] Well it almost says that. Actually if you've got an older version of the Bible, if you've got an authorized version or possibly another translation, it doesn't say give, it says another word.

In the old King James it says render unto Caesar. And there's a big difference between giving and rendering. There's a big difference between giving and rendering.

If I give something, it's mine and I give it to you. If I render something, it's yours and I give it back to you. And what Jesus is saying is that the allegiance that we owe to God is not something that's ours.

It's actually something that belongs to God. It's his. And as we yield our lives to God, as we believe in him, as we follow his commandments, we're not giving, we're rendering.

And as Jesus explains to the people of his time, what the gospel message was, what his kingdom was all about, one of the things, one of the themes that we see in Jesus' presentation of the gospel is the theme of ownership, the theme of ownership, that the world belongs to God and that the world has become alienated from him, has turned away from him.

[ 30 : 35 ] And God wants his world back. He wants his people back. He wants you and me to render, to give back what is his. There was a story that Jesus told, the parable of the tenants.

And it starts off with the landowner who plants a vineyard and the workers in the vineyard do not acknowledge his authority. You'll know the story and how they attack all the different servants.

And eventually, when the landowner sends his own son to claim what is his, he's killed. And yet the story doesn't end there.

Jesus says, powerfully, looking forward to his own resurrection, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And after his resurrection, Jesus said these words, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. So Jesus' command for us to be disciples and to make disciples is based on this theme of ownership, all authority in heaven on earth has been given to me.

[ 31 : 47 ] Or as Paul says in the letter to the Corinthians, you are not your own. You were bought at a price. And so this question, which is just a question in the first century that Jesus answered very cleverly, very wisely, actually points us to a central theme of the Gospel.

And the theme is that this world belongs to God. And what the story of the Bible is about is about God reclaiming, taking back that which belongs to him.

And his command to you and to me is render. Give back your lives. I reclaim them. I am your God.

And I want you to serve me and recognize my ultimate kingship. Amen. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we give you thanks for the fact that you are the king of the universe. I want to give you thanks for the fact that you are the one who owns everything. Everything comes from you.

[ 32 : 59 ] We want to thank you for the way in which you have delegated some of that authority to human powers, and we thank you for the state. We thank you for the civil power and how we can, as Christians, live and acknowledge your power by submitting to that legitimate authority.

But also we acknowledge that that is not an ultimate power, that you remain the king of the universe, that you haven't abdicated power. And we thank you that you give us the opportunity as reasonable beings, as those who can think and feel and have freedom that you call us to render, to return back to you that which is yours.

And we pray that as we live our lives, that we can live as those who voluntarily return to you that which belongs to you.

We pray each of us for the ways in which that will manifest itself and play itself out in each of our lives, but help us Lord to fulfil these words of Jesus spoken 2000 years ago that we could give to you what is yours.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.