

Give God what belongs to God

Tell us what you think, Jesus!

Matthew 22:15-22

The question about paying taxes

The Pharisees got together and planned how they could trick Jesus into saying something wrong. (Ensnare him in a word) They sent some of their followers and some of Herod's followers to say to him, "Teacher, we know you're honest. You teach the truth about what God wants people to do. And you treat everyone with the same respect, no matter who they are. **Tell us what you think!** Should we pay taxes to the Emperor or not?"

Jesus knew their evil thoughts and said, "Why are you trying to test me? You show-offs! Let me see one of the coins used for paying taxes." They brought him a silver coin, and he asked, "Whose image and name are on it?"

"The Emperor's," they answered.

Then Jesus told them, "Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God." His answer surprised them so much that they walked away.

We all know what it's like to feel we'll be damned if we do and damned if we don't. In those cases, we know no matter what we say or do it's not going to go well for us. It's not going to be pretty.

The Pharisees and Herod's people thought they had Jesus in one of those positions and they were looking forward to his answer because they thought he was as cooked as a well done steak. Did they imagine for a moment he could give them the 'I don't know' answer they'd given to him?

Despite their glowing introduction, they have no respect for Jesus - they know he's influential, people are listening to him and liking what they hear. They know he's a threat to their way of doing things, a threat to the status quo. They don't accept his authority and therefore they've concluded he has to be dealt with, he has to go. So they try to trick him into condemning himself. They try to entangle him or entrap him in his words.

Did they have any idea who they were trying to trick?

I love the way Jesus handled these people and their question. I wish I could be so calm, so controlled, so precise, and so creative - especially when I'm under the pump.

Jesus doesn't get entangled in his words, he doesn't get trapped, and he isn't tricked. I imagine he'd almost satisfy the "Doctrine of the two kingdoms", experts with his answer.

"Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God."

Two questions for us, maybe two groups of questions.

The first is about speaking to Jesus and asking him questions. I know we speak to him all the time, but if we could speak to Jesus face to face and ask anything we like, what would we ask? Think about that for a moment.

Would we preface our question with introductory praise like the Pharisees or with a long position statement to make it clear where we stand? Would we try to trick Jesus or would we simply ask the question, be genuinely interested in what he says, and accept his answer?

Second, what does it mean to "Give to God what belongs to God."

What belongs to God? Do we have a narrow view or wide view?

A wide view might be simply, "everything." As the Creator of the universe, everything belongs to God.

But how about our personal possessions? How about us? When we think about ourselves do we begin to have a narrower view? When we say "this is mine", does it no longer belong to God? Do we allow God to have the Great Barrier Reef but not our fish tank? Can God have the Nullarbor Plain, but not our backyard? Do we believe our private ownership trumps God's ownership of everything?

In order to begin to answer these questions, remember we're made in the image of God and were baptised in the name of God. Jesus asked whose image and name were on the coin presented to him. We bear both the image and name of God. Therefore, to give God what belongs to God means giving our all to God! It means all we are and all we have belongs to God. We could say, our whole lives belong to God.

Is that what Paul's referring to in **Romans 12:1-2** when he says,

*"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to **offer your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Don't conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."*

Do we feel conflicted when we think about giving our bodies or ourselves to God as a living sacrifice and still having a family, a job, and paying our taxes?

Most of us pay our taxes to the government out of obligation. We don't have a choice. Do we feel the same about giving or "paying" to God? What have we got to give to God?

What does God want? God the Father wants us to believe in Jesus. To believe Jesus is our Saviour. Jesus wants us to love others as he loves us. That means to love and forgive our enemies. This is Jesus' command, to love others as he loves us.

What if we're not very good at either of those things? We believe Jesus is our Saviour but we want to say with the man with the sick son, "I believe, help me in my unbelief." What if we're not good at loving others as Jesus loves us?

Here's some good news, God doesn't just want our best. God doesn't just want our best efforts? God wants us, the real us, all of us! He loves us and wants us. He created us and he named us his child in baptism.

I have four grown-up sons. They're good young men and I love them. But here's the truth I don't only love them when they're perfect. I don't only love them when they're doing their best to be good. I love them all the time because they are my sons. What do I want from my sons? Above all I want their love. I love them and I want them to love me.

Give to God what belongs to God. We give God the whole of our wonderful lives, the whole of our real lives, and the whole of our rotten lives.

God knows us inside out and as our loving Father he wants a relationship, Father to child. No need to pretend. No need to soften him up with praise. No need to hide our messy bits. His gracious and forgiving love welcomes us into the family and accepts us as we are.

Jesus did all that was needed to save us. As dearly loved and saved children of God we offer ourselves in loving service to God and to our neighbours.

Amen.