

Windows on the Word: Giving Back to Caesar

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 22:15-22

The window we are considering today is on the east side—the third transept from the back, it's part of the group of three that depicts the transfiguration. In that group of three—the upper left hand corner—is the scene of the Herodians and the Pharisees asking Jesus, “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” Maybe you can make out the coin being shown to Jesus. It's noteworthy that the booklet has the wrong description attached to this picture. The booklet that describes the window says this represents Jesus preaching foreboding events. But the booklet is wrong in this case. Consider the details of the window.

But when you look at the details, you'll see that the three men are showing Jesus a coin. Further, you notice they are gesturing toward the bottom of the picture to an ax bound in the midst of a bundle of rods. That is a symbol from the Roman empire of civic and military power. It is called a *fasces*, and it represents an actual weapon that was carried around and used by Roman magistrates. The rods on the outside were wooden—made from birch or ash. They were used to administer corporeal punishment. The apostle Paul was beaten with these rods in Philippi (Acts 16:22) and reports in 2 Corinthians 11:25 that three times he was beaten with rods. It was the practice of magistrates to use these rods of the fasces to administer corporeal punishment within the city limits. The ax was typically carried only outside of the city limit and was used in cases of capital punishment. The fasces were the tool for punishment used by city magistrates. Over time this came to symbolize the power of Rome. It was carried as a symbolic object and then began appearing in the artwork of Roman architecture for government buildings. It is used in our window in that way—a symbol of Roman political and military power. So taken together—Jesus, the three questioners, the coin, and the fasces, the window depicts the story found in Matthew 22:15-22 where the Herodians and Pharisees ask Jesus about paying the imperial tax to Caesar.

The Pharisees were serious religiosity. They exercised their religious power by dead lifting layer upon layer of rules and ordinances. As only one example, with regard to the fourth commandment (Sabbath observance), the Pharisees had determined on the basis of Exodus 31 and 35 that there were 39 categories of prohibited work. Here's an example of some of those categories: Planting, shearing trapping, building. Plowing and reaping. Grinding, weaving, and writing. Sewing and kneading. Each of these 39 categories then had sub-categories of work that were prohibited.

The Pharisees spent their days sparring with each other over whether you could pour out a bucket of water (for if you did it might water a plant and help it grow). Or...could you spit on the Sabbath? (since the spittle might water a plant and make it grow).

When Jesus begins his ministry, the Pharisees are quick to pick fights with Jesus and his disciples. They would say to the disciples: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus performed miracles, they would appeal to the crowd, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” Sometimes they would take Jesus on directly, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!” But the Pharisees are on a long losing streak against Jesus. The most recent was when Jesus cleanses the temple and pushes them

onto the ropes. Jesus then delivers a series of parables where the religious insiders are the enemy of God's mission and the outsiders are beneficiaries of God's mission to redeem and restore.

The Pharisees are losing in their realm of religion so they change tactics. Instead attacking Jesus to burden him with the dead weight of all their religious rules and regulations, they attack Jesus from the realm of politics. So they recruit some help from their enemies the Herodians. Now, in contrast to all the sparring between Jesus and the Pharisees, the gospels don't tell us much about the Herodians. In Mark 3 after Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, the Herodians plot with the Pharisees how to kill Jesus. The second story in our passage is Matthew 22 and the parallel in Mark 12. Scholars agree that their name is a clue to who they were. They were supporters of the kingship/dynasty of Herod. Herod was appointed by the Romans. The Jews held a lot of enmity toward Herod because of this. The Herodians were likely a political group who cultivated power through their association with Rome. Their association with Rome means that the Herodians were not light weights. When they entered into a fight they had the Roman legion standing in their corner. The Herodians come out swinging with the most controversial political debate being talked about in the Jerusalem marketplace: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" This political question is a trap. If he says yes—the Pharisees can call him a collaborator with Rome—and he becomes an enemy of the crowd. If he says no—the Herodians can call him a revolutionary against Rome—and he becomes an enemy of the state. Jesus is trapped, he's cornered.

I think it's worth noting that Jesus recognizes the danger he is in. He is being cornered by evil. Jesus knows that the devil is behind the attack. Jesus hears an echo from the wilderness when Satan tempts him with the promise of the political power of worldly kingdoms. With his back against the ropes Jesus pivots— "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?" The word "hypocrite" in Greek refers to 'an actor who performs under a mask.' Jesus pulls off the mask of his opponents to reveal his opponents are clinging to their power. The Herodians are clinging to political power. The Pharisees are clinging to religious power. But now their hypocrisy is exposed and Jesus answers their question. First the jab— "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's." What Jesus means is that disciples pay their taxes. This has been the understanding of Jesus' followers from early on. Pastor Bob reminded us of Paul's admonition to pay our taxes in Romans 13. Paul is echoing Jesus. Disciples of Jesus must respect the government because this is an important form of respect for God.

We hear those words, "respect for the government is an important form of respect for God" in the context of our democracy and we can readily agree. But it's worth noting that Jesus commands respect for the state, even though he is about to be beaten with those birch rods of the fasces and suffer the capital punishment of the state. Not only Jesus, Paul when he writes the letter of Romans has already been beaten by those fasces birch rods in the city of Philippi. And yet Jesus says, "give back to Caesar" as a command that his disciples respect the government because this is a form of respect for God. And so with that Jesus answers the question from his opponents.

But then Jesus continues beyond the question about obedience to the state and commands his followers to obey God when he says: "And give back to God what is Gods." With this answer Jesus is clearly drawing a parallel in his answer. In the same way that the coin that bears the image of Caesar is to be given to Caesar...disciples are to give back to God that which belongs to him, what bears the image of God. We are the image bearers.

In the context of Matthew—especially here in chapter 22—there is no greater gift than love. A few short verses later Jesus says, “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Consider this. The problem of Jesus’ opponents is that they cling too tightly to their religious and political power. Jesus’ command is for us to emulate God who, out of his love for the world, “gave his only Son” (John 3:16). Rather than clinging to power, God’s has called his church to join him in his mission to give. The question is, what does it look like for us to be people who give by loving God and neighbor? I suggest that it doesn’t look like the sparring matches of the Pharisees against Jesus. Instead, Scripture often pictures God’s mission as an invitation to join one another around a table. In this meal, each of us are invited to share our gifts.

That reminded me of the work of Father Gregory Boyle, who is a Jesuit Priest and founder of Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries provides hope, training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated people, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of their community. In his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, he tells a story from his time serving on a prison island in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Mexico. He spent 3 months there as a time of spiritual renewal. He slept on a mattress in the small chapel. In the morning he made mud bricks side by side with the inmates. In the afternoon there was mass and in the evening dominoes. Life was hard on the island, but of all the difficulties—the labor, isolation, cruelty—the food was abominable. Father Greg lost 40 pounds in those 3 months.

One day Beto, a prisoner who regularly made bricks with Father Greg, told him to meet at a particular time and place. When Father Greg arrived, Beto was carrying a cloth sack, which seemed to be writhing of its own accord. But Father Greg didn’t have any time to wonder about the sack because Beto was leading them on a complex route away from the dormitories. He clearly was trying to avoid being seen by the guards. After walking through the dense section of forest they emerge into a clearing where there is a cooking pot, firewood, and a stash of vegetables – carrots, tomatoes, peppers. Beto starts a fire to get the water to boil as he cuts up the vegetables. Then he opens the sack to pull out an iguana that he had captured. He cleans the iguana and throws it in the soup pot. (Father Greg reports that iguana tastes like chicken). About the time that the aroma of the soup exceeds the clearing, drawn by the smell, a prisoner steps into the clearing—Beto invites him to be seated—but the prisoner dashes back to the dorm and returns with a wadded up ball of newspaper. He unwraps his gift—salt—and adds it to the soup. Soon another arrives with a dented tin of tomato paste. Beto added some more veggies and the paste. One after another prisoners bring their gifts—jalepenos, beans, and a couple of tortillas. Father Gregg writes: “Maybe there are eight of us or so when the meal finally gets served. Plenty to go around, and just as tasty as it could be. Everyone brought his flavor to this...pot of iguana stew, and keeping anyone away and excluded was unthinkable to this band of prisoners. Alone, they didn’t have much, but together, they had a potful of plenty.” God’s mission for his church in this world is to bear witness to God’s grace and invite others to the feast.

Friends, Jesus words, “give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what is God’s” have been a word of command and a word of caution to the church throughout history. It is not easy or automatic for God’s people to maintain balance between respecting the state and participating in God’s mission. It takes a lot of thought, prayer, humility, and courage to nurture a balance between these two parts of our calling.

A while ago I received a copy of a book, *Serving the Claims of Justice*. It contains essays from our beloved, local representative Paul Henry as well as some of his colleagues at Calvin

University. His essays are a timely and thoughtful contribution to discussion about how to integrate deep religious faith and the difficulties of political life. In an essay written in 1979 he is proud of his evangelical faith. He clearly warns about the attempts of secularism to marginalize Judeo-Christian values. Toward the end of the essay he raises a concern he carried about evangelicals, a group that he considered himself a member of (p. 107). He noted that a lot of the governing power in the United States was held among “white, middle-class, suburban, mid-western, male(s).” He also observed that evangelicals shared many of the same values of those “white, middle-class, suburban, mid-western, males” and so, by association, evangelicals were experiencing political power in the late 1970s. The correlation between these two groups was not his concern. His concern was that evangelicalism, like their secular counterparts, was too culturally isolated. It was “deaf to the questions being asked” by, for example, our sisters and brothers in the black church, or the ethnic groups within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, by the poor and ethnic minorities in cities. His call to the evangelical church is to build connections with others by sharing our gifts and receiving the gifts of others. His warning is for the evangelical church to, “put its own house in order. Otherwise the cause of evangelical Christianity, while achieving political effectiveness, may foster a movement which it will live to regret.”

Giving to God what belongs to God is a call to avoid clinging to political power at all costs—because that offers limited solutions. Instead, by respecting the state and participating in God’s mission of love, together with the whole people of God, we grow up into mature disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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