

RENDER UNTO CAESAR: AN EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 22:15-22

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As an advocate of limited government and an advocate of government by biblical standards, I am frequently asked about Jesus' words when He tells us to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." Many Christians have difficulty reconciling this admonition of Jesus with the concept of limited taxation, supposing that Jesus is instructing Christians to always render unconditional submission to the state in both action and finance. Let's look at Matthew's account of this teaching.

Matthew 22:15-22 (ESV)

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.

Although the question in this passage does relate to our proper response to taxation, it is important to recognize that there are a number of complexities involved in this teaching. The first complexity is that we are not dealing with a straight-forward question. This text (and the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke) clearly tells us that the question was framed as a trap. This was a binary question, designed to allow for only two answers, either of which would condemn Jesus—either to the people or to the Roman authorities. The question was much like asking a politician if he still beats his wife. Any answer, whether affirmative or negative, indicts the politician either as a former or current wife-beater. In the study of logic, we call this a "begging the question" scenario.

Given the complexity and insincerity of the question, it should come as no surprise that Jesus did not go into a lot of detail with his answer. His answer, nevertheless, avoided the trap while remaining accurate.

Jesus said to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Notice the possessive form of the second "Caesar". If we assume that our English translations are accurate, we must take this passage exactly as it is. This means that we are to give to Caesar what is his. That is to say that we give him an amount based on his legitimate claim or legitimate authority.

Notice what the passage does not say. It does not say to give Caesar everything he asks.

If the passage intended for us to give our civil rulers everything they ask for, then we could be in a situation where Scripture would contradict Scripture—an impossibility.

Allow me to explain the logic here. What if a civil ruler (whether an individual or a group, whether elected or unelected) asked for 100% (or 95%) of our income and assets? Should we then abandon the tithe? Should we allow our families to starve? This interpretation of Christ's admonition to render to Caesar would put Scripture in conflict with other Scripture—specifically, passages requiring the tithe and passages admonishing us to provide for our families.

Scripture is clear that only Divine authority is absolute. God, through Scripture, gives men and institutions certain authority, but this authority is always limited. Wives are to submit to their husbands (Ephesians chapter 5), children are to submit to their parents (Ephesians chapter 6), and believers are to submit to elders, but the authority of husbands, parents, and elders is limited—and so is government authority.

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Throughout Scripture, we find the establishment and limits of family authority, of church authority, and of civil authority. Yes, even Caesar's proper authority is defined and limited in Scripture. A complete discussion of the proper authority of Caesar (or any civil government) is beyond the scope of this article, but here it is sufficient to say that there are (and there must be) limits on all human authority.

It is not reasonable, therefore, to make this passage say, "Give unto Caesar everything that he asks." So if the passage does not grant unlimited taxing authority, then it must mean exactly what it says: "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

Of course, nothing in the passage specifies exactly how much that tax can be (or should be), but Jesus' main point here is not to instruct on the proper role of government—we need to look elsewhere in Scripture for principles on this matter.

Our conclusions here are two: first, that Jesus seems to communicate that some level of taxation is right and acceptable; and second, that there are some limitations on the application and amount of this taxation.

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