

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 22, 2023 – PENTECOST 21 / PROPER 24

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “Give to God What is God’s—Ourselves”

Isaiah 45:1-7 (There is no other God but the Lord, sovereign over all)
Psalm 96:1-9 (Our God is above all others in might, power, and glory)
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (St. Paul commends a young church’s faith)
St. Matthew 22:15-22 (Jesus teaches: Give to God what is God’s)

A mother wanted to teach her daughter a moral lesson. On their way to church, she gave the little girl a quarter and a dollar, saying: “Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself.” As they exited church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. “Well,” said the little girl, “I was going to give the dollar, but just before the offering, the preacher said we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I’d be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter!”¹

Although she didn’t know it, the little girl’s dilemma reflects on a smaller scale the same quandary in which we as adult Christians find ourselves: “Do I owe God anything, and if so, what, and how much?” Jesus addresses this question incisively in today’s Gospel lesson. Previously, in St. Matthew’s text, Christ had driven the money changers out of the temple (21:12-13), and had addressed the issue of paying the temple tax (17:24-27).

Here, we have a new situation, in which the oppositional Pharisees seek to discredit Jesus: If He declares that the Jewish Law forbids paying taxes to Rome, He can be arrested for sedition. On the other hand, if He claims that the Torah allows paying the tax, knowing it will be used to maintain pagan temples, His teaching will be denounced by the Rabbis.

The tax in question was levied by the Roman occupation on every man and woman, free or slave, and had to be paid in Roman currency. The usual amount was one denarius, which was equal to a laborer’s average daily wage. So Jesus asks for a coin that would be used to pay the tax. He knows that Jewish coins which bore no human or animal image were minted for the required offerings at the Temple. However, normal commerce and the payment of taxes required imperial coinage bearing Caesar’s likeness and the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest.”

When Jesus inquires whose image is stamped on the coin, the obvious answer is, “the emperor’s.” This enables Christ to answer, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” (v. 21). The coin is already Caesar’s, so it should be given back to him. This reply gives Jesus’ opponents no opportunity to denounce Him as a rebel. And neither can the religious zealots say He is disloyal to their faith. However, the full genius of Jesus’ answer hinges on the second part of verse 21: “Give to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus’ audience would know the biblical teaching that God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:26). That each listener was stamped with the likeness of God—a living, visual reminder that God has a claim on every aspect of their lives. To give back to God that which, by right of creation, already belongs to God, means to return to God all that we are, and all that we have.

What we are required to give to “the emperor”—that is, the government and the temporal order—is only money. Our total allegiance of heart, mind, and soul always belongs first and foremost to God (Matthew 22:37). Jesus called attention to the reality that what God asks of us—our total devotion and obedience—does not belong to the secular state, and therefore cannot be given to any earthly ruler.²

On the other hand, we can’t ignore that we also have civic obligations. In the 13th chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome, he writes that we should obey governmental authority as God-ordained: “Pay ... taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (13:7). In our democracy, part of giving “Caesar” his due is voting in elections. But how we apply our faith in the voting booth is a matter of individual conscience, and it is not the place of the Church to tell you how to exercise that right.

Carrying out our civic responsibilities such as paying taxes to the government and voting does not mean that we give up the things that are God's, when entering the political sphere. As Christians, we have both the right and the responsibility to speak out against injustice, graft, corruption, and abuse, or any policy or practice that is contrary to God's will. In fact, every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we align ourselves with God's kingdom first, above all others: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

The emperor Tiberius may have claimed to be the son of the divine Augustus, but the truth is that Jesus' followers are children of the only true King, the God of the Bible.³ We are the only image of God on earth, and therefore we belong to God. Yes, we must pay tributes to Caesar for roads and waterways, but we are not servants of that government.⁴ Our primary allegiance is to God, and God alone.

In today's Gospel, Christ makes clear the moral inquiry that must take place first: "Am I giving myself entirely to God? That is, am I in a right relationship with God?" Fr. Charles Hoffacker, an Episcopal priest and Christian author, observes that our humanity is constituted such that unless we do right by our most important relationship—with God—we cannot do right by the rest of our relationships. But if that relationship is healed and whole, repaired by God who initiated and established it, then our other relationships have the hope of being set right, as well.⁵

A major way that we can stay right with God is by immersing ourselves in the Bible and knowing it well. That's one reason we offer Adult Bible Study here at St. John's Church. One can never be too biblically literate, and you would be shocked at how ignorant of the Scriptures most Americans are.

When Jay Leno was hosting the *Tonight Show*, he did a bit where he walked out into the street to ask questions of passersby. Once, he administered a Bible Quiz to the unwitting souls who faced the camera, hoping for their five minutes of fame. Infamy is more like it. Question: "Where was Jesus born?" Answer: "Somewhere in Iraq." Question: "What was the crown made of that He wore at His crucifixion?" Answer: "Flowers." Question: "Whom did Jesus say would inherit the earth?" Answer: "The rich." Question: "What two biblical cities did God destroy on account of their evil?" Answer: "Pompeii and Atlantis." Question: "Scripture says cast your [what?] upon the waters." Answer: "Life raft."⁶

Boston University professor Peter Hawkins asked his students on their first day of Religion 101 who had ever heard of the Twenty-Third Psalm, which he describes as "surely the lowest common denominator of biblical literacy." "Perhaps five hands went up," he writes. "I then recited the text and asked my question again. This time the room was a forest of hands." The first student he called on said it was line from the rock group Pink Floyd's song, "Sheep." A second thought it was a reference to the late rapper Coolio's "Gangsta paradise." "Avid consumers of popular culture," says Professor Hawkins, "my students knew their movies and ... [song] lyrics, but not the biblical source of 'the valley of the shadow of death.'" They were shocked when he revealed it.⁷

We, too, will be unable to answer the question, "What belongs to God?" unless we know and understand the Bible. As for what we are to give to God, most of us secretly wish it were as simple and clear-cut as writing a check to the IRS. Oh, we might chafe and whine, or fudge a bit here and there when tax time comes, but there is no confusion about what Caesar wants in that envelope that must be postmarked before midnight, April 15th. It's not our soul.

Deep down, we know that what we must give to God is not so much our correct belief, our good behavior, or our selfless service—as noble and necessary as these things are. In our hearts, we know that what we should give to God is *ourselves*—which, according to Romans 12:1, is nothing less than true spiritual worship. When we can wholly surrender *ourselves*, "our souls and bodies"—as we say in the Eucharistic liturgy—we won't regret it. As Martin Luther declared: "I have tried to keep things in my hands and lost them all, but what I have given into God's hands I still possess."⁸ May God give us His grace to do the same. *Amen.*

^{*} Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 16 October 2011, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. "Bits & Pieces," (4 February 1993, p. 23). [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/giving.htm) <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/giving.htm>> 16 October 2023.

² Adapt. James R. Wheeler, "Living Under God's Rule," *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 24* (16 October 2011, p. 1).

³ Wheeler, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴ Adapt. Sue E. Armentrout, *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 24* (16 October 2011, p. 3).

⁵ Adapt. Charles Hoffacker, "Living Under God's Rule," *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 24* (16 October 2011, p. 2).

⁶ Adapt. Peter S. Hawkins, "Reflections" (Spring 2008), qtd. *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 24* (16 October 2011, p. 3).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Giving," [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/giving.htm) <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/giving.htm>> 16 October 2023.