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Render Unto God

Jeff Miller

In response to a difficult question about taxes, Jesus famously said, “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12.17; Matt 22.21; Luke 20.25). I have quoted the King James Version here because the *render unto* language is well-known. Most people would not, for example, quote the NIV’s, “Give back to Caesar...,” though it is a good translation.

A common understanding of Jesus’s teaching in this text can be simply stated: Christians have the dual responsibility of tithing to the church and paying taxes to the government. A more challenging interpretation is that Christians should pay taxes but also give generously to the church, going well beyond a tithe because everything belongs to God. While the second understanding is indeed a step in the right direction, I believe a careful look at Jesus’s words reveals an even deeper challenge. To begin excavating through the layers of Jesus’s statement, I will focus on one of the words employed by all three gospel writers. That word is *image* and is found in the previous verse in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Jesus asks whose *image* is on the coin. Each gospel author uses *eikon*, which is best translated “image” or “likeness.” The NRSV’s *head*, for example, obscures the gospel writers’ word choice. The Greek version of Deuteronomy 4.16 uses this same word to expand and emphasize the second commandment, “. . .do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an *image* of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman. . .” (NIV, emphasis added). Jesus is establishing for all those present that his questioners (Pharisees and Herodians) are plausibly holding a graven image and thereby flirting with the second commandment. Notice that Jesus apparently does not have such a coin, but he rightly trusts that they do, or that they can at least come up with one easily. In effect, though the scenario is designed to trap Jesus, before giving an answer he turns the tables and traps his interrogators.

This word, *eikon*, also appears in the Greek version of Genesis 1.26–27, “in the *image* of God he created them” (emphasis added), as well in Genesis 5.1 and 9.6 that also refer to humans as bearers of God’s image. Even more important than the image of Caesar stamped on the coin is the image of God stamped on our hearts. Give Caesar what bears his image, for ultimately it belongs to Caesar. All the more we must give God what bears his image, for we ultimately belong to God. It seems the second part of Jesus’s command is not about money after all: it is about us. Give your coins to Caesar, for these idols bear his image. Give yourself to God, for you bear God’s image.

Another feature shared by all three gospel writers is the narrator’s closing comment. Matthew says they marveled. Mark says they were amazed at him. Luke says the bystanders marveled in silence at his answer. They did not marvel merely because Jesus had explained how to give some money to God and some to the government—that is what most Jews were doing anyway. They were amazed by him because of his boldness and his ability to turn the tables so completely. They marveled at his answer because they sensed his deeper meaning. The bystanders were silenced because Jesus’s answer called for introspection and response. And it still calls for a response: Get rid of your pocketful of idols and give your whole self to God.

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