

“Caesar and God”
Mark 12:13-17
February 8, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, teaching in and around the Temple, where Mark describes a series of conflicts that occur between Jesus and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. This morning we come to the third of those conflicts, which is also the third conflict hinging on the theme of authority.¹

These conflicts are not random, but they all work around a common theme here. And this morning the theme zeroes in on how God’s people are to relate to the authority of Caesar.

With that in mind, let’s turn now to our text: Mark 12:13-17.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{12:13} And they sent to him [that is, Jesus] some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” ¹⁵ But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” ¹⁶ And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at him.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

¹ Some have, in fact, argued that the consistent theme throughout these three successive conflicts constitutes another Markan sandwich. [Witherington, 323, 326] Remember, the first conflict had to do with the source of Jesus’s authority, a challenge which Jesus used to highlight the relationship between authority and truth. The second conflict was Jesus’s parable in which he asserted that all in authority – especially those with some authority among God’s people – are mere tenants, serving in God’s vineyard. And now, in our text this morning, the Pharisees and the Herodians come to Jesus with a question about how God’s people should relate to Caesar’s authority.

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our hiding place and our shield,
we hope in your word.
Help us to turn from all false ways,
and to keep instead the commandments you give us.
Hold us up, that we may be safe,
and have regard for your statutes continually.
For we know we will one day stand before you and give an account,
and so, with that in mind, help us now to attend to your word.
Grant this in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:114-117, 120]

Introduction

There is a lot going on in our text this morning ... and several themes that come up.² But our focus today will be on the theme at the heart of this passage, found in verse 17, where Jesus says to the people: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

This is, of course, a well-known verse. But it's also a verse that I now suspect is often misunderstood.

Sometimes this verse is treated as if it presents a clear divide in life. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And what we hear is: You have politics over here. You have spirituality over there. They're two separate realms of life. They shouldn't mix. Really, they shouldn't even touch.

Others approach this verse as if it gives a tidy and frictionless relationship between obeying Caesar and obeying God. In this view, the Pharisees and the Herodians are creating a false dilemma. There is no real conflict between serving Caesar and serving God. God put state authorities in place, and so serving state authorities is serving God. And ordinarily there will be little or no conflict between the two.

Both of these interpretations of this text are neat and tidy. Both interpretations can give you a simple and straight-forward sermon.

² For one thing, when we look at verse 13, and we read how the Pharisees and Herodians were working together, we should be shocked by this. These two groups were normally enemies. It's bizarre that now they are allies. And that brings up the theme of how Jesus can unify not only his followers, but also his enemies, as they unite to fight against him. That's an interesting theme, but we talked about it back when we looked at Mark 3. That sermon is on our website, and so we won't re-hash it this morning. [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/mark-nicoletti/the-offensive-unifier-mark-31-6>]

Then, as we read on to verses 14 and 15 we see the insincerity of the Pharisees and Herodians – that they are trying to trap Jesus, to flatter him, to use their words more to get what they want and less to actually seek the truth, and we realize that what we have here is yet another example of "malarkey" or "bull manure" on the part of the leaders in Jerusalem. But we talked about that theme just a couple weeks ago, so we won't focus there either today. [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/mark-nicoletti/truth-power-and-malarkey-mark-1127-33>]

The problem is that both of those approaches miss a lot of what's going on in this interaction. Neither of those interpretations really fits the text or its historical setting. And so, those simpler takes on this passage won't really work – as attractive as they may be to some. [Wright, *Mark*, 164]

Instead ... Jesus gives us something more nuanced here – something more complex ... and more uncomfortable. It's something that requires reflection ... and wrestling. It's something that calls for wisdom. But it's also, in the end, something that's far better than the oversimplistic interpretations of this passage that seem to abound in popular thought. [Wright, *Victory*, 503; Leithart, 163]

Instead, when we look at this text, what we see here is that in the political realm, Jesus calls his followers to submission without compromise, and resistance without rebellion, both at the same time, grounded ultimately in our belonging to God.

Let me say that again: In the political realm, Jesus calls his followers to submission without compromise, and resistance without rebellion, both at the same time, grounded ultimately in our belonging to God.

Both submission and resistance.

We're going to break that down together.

Context

But before we do, we need a bit more context.

Because we often fail to recognize just how heated this debate was.

Sure, everyone gets worked up in a debate about taxes. But it was much more intense in first-century Judea. Remember that the Jews were under Roman occupation. And this was a direct Roman tax. And as a symbol of Rome's power over, and domination of, the Jewish people, this tax was a flashpoint of conflict – so much so that when this particular tax they're talking about here was instituted a couple decades earlier, a different Galilean – Judas the Galilean – led a violent revolt against Rome over the tax. And the revolt had to be put down by the Roman military. That's how contentious it was. Many of the Jews hated being under the Roman rule. There were plans for rebellion among some Jews, who were known as the Zealots. And as this question came to Jesus, his audience would have in mind both the revolt of Judas the Galilean a couple decades earlier, and the Maccabean revolt a couple centuries earlier.

There was such passion around this tax, that it would go on to play a role in the Jewish rebellion in Jerusalem in 66 AD, as well as in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. [France, 465; Jeremias in Myers, 314]

So this was a question that could bring some heat and some sparks ... and Jerusalem at this time was already a powder-keg. [France, 464-465; Wright, *Victory*, 502; Leithart, 157, 161]

Which meant that whichever side Jesus took would elicit a strong response. And eliciting such a response could seriously endanger Jesus's ministry. If Jesus simply tells the people to pay this tax to Caesar, then the crowds – whose favor has been protecting Jesus from the Sanhedrin – the crowds would turn against him. And if Jesus tells them not to pay this tax to Caesar, then the Sanhedrin can use that to get the Roman forces to turn against Jesus. [Edwards, 363; Horne, 156; Leithart, 161-162; Myers, 310, 314]

And the tension was all the more acute because in the crowd that was listening to Jesus, there would have been Zealots who opposed this tax and longed for revolution ... and also as we're told in verse 13, there were Herodians present, who supported this tax, and who favored the current political status quo. [Witherington, 324]

That's why Mark notes in verse 13 that the question was a trap.³

So a lot's at stake.

With that in mind: What does Jesus tell the people to do?

Submission And Resistance

Well, at root, Jesus calls God's people to both submission and resistance in the political realm.

The submission aspect is fairly easy to see.

Jesus is clearly telling the people to pay this tax to Caesar. [Horne, 156] Controversial as it was, hated as it was, Jesus tells them to submit to Caesar's decree and pay this tax. Even though the funds might be used to further Rome's oppressive empire, even though it might be used to build idolatrous pagan temples, even so, Jesus tells them to submit to Caesar, and to pay the tax. That is a striking thing.

But what's even more striking, is that that's not all Jesus does. At the same time, Jesus also calls on them, as faithful worshippers of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, to resist some of the demands, and assertions of Caesar and of Rome.

Now, how do we see this?

Well, we see this when we consider Jesus's words in light of what they would have meant while he was also directing their attention to the Roman coin in verse 16. In that verse, Jesus draws their attention to both the image and the inscription on the coin. Now, we still have examples of this coin today. So what was on it?

³ Interestingly, Jesus, as a Galilean, did not have to pay this specific tax himself, directly. It only applied to parts of Judea that were under direct Roman rule – like Jerusalem. [France, 465] In Galilee, where Jesus was from, Herod Antipas would collect taxes, and then forward a portion of it to Rome, in place of a direct poll tax. [Edwards, 363] As a result, Jesus hadn't had to decide for himself, previously, whether he would pay this tax. He is answering the question fresh, and as an "outsider" to Jerusalem.

On one side was a “semi-divine bust of Tiberius Caesar” along with an abbreviated Latin inscription which, translated, meant: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The other side of the coin had an image of Tiberius’s mother Livia, along with words in Latin meaning “High Priest.” [Edwards, 363; France, 466, 468; Leithart, 161; Myers, 311; Witherington, 325; Wright, *Victory*, 503; Wright, *Mark*, 161-162]

Everything about that was an affront to the God of the Bible. The coin presented Caesar as a semi-divine figure. The inscription declared Caesar to be the son of a god. The reverse side identified a high priest in direct rivalry to the Jewish and the later Christian concept of God’s high priest. And these claims were not just political hyperbole. There was a literal religious cult of Caesar, paid for with revenue from these kinds of taxes, in which Caesar was worshipped as a god, and most non-Jewish citizens of the Roman Empire were required to make religious sacrifices to him as a god.

And so, when Jesus directed everyone’s attention to that coin, with that image and with that inscription, and then said “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” he wasn’t just telling the people to submit to Caesar and pay their taxes, and following it up with a vague spiritual exhortation. And he certainly wasn’t describing a neat, simple, conflict-free relationship between relating to Caesar and relating to God. By pointing to Caesar’s divine claims, while speaking the words he said, Jesus was also calling his disciples to a form of political resistance.

The political forces of Rome would push for, and later even demand, that God’s people give to Caesar the kind of honor, and allegiance, and obedience, and even worship that was only rightly due to God. And when that happened, the people of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, would be called on to resist – to refuse. [Witherington, 325]

And Jesus is highlighting that call to resistance here – contrasting the divine claims that Caesar makes on the coin with the command to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

What makes Jesus’s statement so profound – what leads those who questioned him to marvel at the end of verse 17 – is not that he found a clever way to dodge the trap that was laid out for him. Rather, what’s so striking here is that in a short statement, Jesus had both called the people to submit to Caesar, and to resist Caesar. He had affirmed what was right on each side of the Jewish political divide, affirming some aspect of both the Zealots’ resistance to Caesar, and the Herodians’ submission to Caesar. But at the very same time, he’d also seriously challenged both the Zealots and the Herodians [Myers, 314; Leithart, 162], by calling the Zealots to submit and the Herodians to resist.

As one commentator puts it: Jesus “is not a Zealot.” He opposes rebellion and Zealotry. “But neither does He urge political compromise. He leaves His disciples a complex politics to follow, a politics that combines submission and resistance.” [Leithart, 163-164]

Submission and resistance.

What I want to focus on for the rest of our time is how these dual callings of submission and resistance work out under the claim that God has on us as his creatures, and as his people.

Submission Without Compromise

The first aspect of this that we see is that in the political realm, Jesus calls his followers to submission without moral or spiritual compromise.

As we've already seen, Jesus calls God's people to submission to those in authority over them – he calls them to pay this hated tax to Caesar. [Frame, 804]

But the way Jesus says what he says, seems to hint at some of the reasons behind it.

The word Jesus uses there, translated “render,” means to “give back” or to “repay” – as in to give back “that which already belongs to the receiver,” like “paying a debt.” [France, 468; Myers, 311]

On one level, this may indicate that the coin belongs ultimately to Caesar because, as their king, he minted it, he put his own image on it, and so the people are just giving back to him what is, in a sense, already his. [Edwards, 363; Witherington, 325]

In many ways, this is an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of human government on Jesus's part. The fact is that Caesar reigns over the Roman Empire. His image on the coins shows that. God has put him in that place. And so the Jews should submit to Caesar in the role of authority he's been given – they should acknowledge that reality.

And it's worth asking ourselves: Do we acknowledge that reality? Do we recognize that God has put in place those who are in authority over us? That's one meaning of giving back to Caesar what is owed to him.

But a second meaning behind Jesus's call to “give back” to Caesar what was owed to him is to acknowledge that there is a debt they have towards Caesar, which they are called to pay back through their taxes. This is Jesus telling the Jews – though they may not want to hear it – that they have, in fact, benefited in certain ways from Rome's rule over them. [Horne, 156; Leithart, 162; France, 468-469] And so they owe taxes to Caesar as a matter of justice.

One author writes: “The Jews do not like the Romans, but the Roman empire makes trade across the Mediterranean safe; the Romans protect Judea from traditional enemies to the East; the Romans provide a kind of stability and safety.” “Caesar has [...] provided the order within which the Jews operate.” [Leithart, 162]

And so with us. Can we recognize that even under presidents we don't like, or governors we don't like, or legislatures we don't like – even when a party we don't like is in power – even then we receive benefits from their rule? And if we see that, do we also recognize that not just our taxes, but our respect, and our submission is owed to them in return, as a matter of justice?

In these ways, Jesus calls the people to submit – to pay the taxes they rightly owe to Caesar, as one in authority over them, and one whom they have received real benefits from.

But even as he makes that point, Jesus also makes a distinction between submission and moral or spiritual compromise.

It's interesting that Mark includes the detail that Jesus didn't have a denarius, but those who questioned him did. There were other forms of Jewish coins they could have used in ordinary commerce, besides the Roman denarius. [Wright, *Mark*, 162] And so the fact that one of Jesus's questioners his carrying a Roman denarius with him, with its deified image of Caesar, and its inscribed claims of his divinity – the fact that they were carrying such a coin with them may reveal that at least some of those questioning Jesus were more comfortable with Caesar's claims than their question might indicate. [France, 465-466; Witherington, 325; Wright, *Victory*, 503]

And that shifts our attention to the Herodians, mentioned in verse 13. Unlike the Zealots who opposed this tax, the Herodians supported it. [Witherington, 324] The Herodians, as their name suggests, supported the dynasty of Herod. Herod the Great was given his title “King of the Jews,” not by the Jews but by the Roman senate, and his position was then confirmed by Caesar Augustus, who, over the years, increased Herod's territory. In response, Herod built several pagan temples for the Caesar cult – temples intended for the worship of Caesar Augustus as a god. Herod build such temples in Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea Philippi, and Sebaste in Samaria. [NBD, 467; ISBE, 2.691-692; Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 232 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=GaYKGrqXCwEC&lpg=PA232&pg=PA232#v=onepage&q&f=false>); Biblical Archeology Society Library: <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/sidebar/sebaste-tribute-to-an-emperor/>]

Let that sink in. Herod the Great didn't just submit to Caesar Augustus according to Caesar's God-given authority. Herod honored Caesar Augustus as divine. He built temples to worship Caesar Augustus within his territory. He embraced the idolatrous claims of Caesar. And the Herodians, posing this question to Jesus, support the dynasty of Herod, which was then continued in his sons, one of whom honored Tiberius Caesar with a building project [NBD, 472] and the other of whom put Tiberius Caesar's image on his own local Jewish coins – something no Jewish leader had ever done before. [NBD, 917]

All of this is to say the Herodian dynasty had compromised so deeply with Caesar's claims to divinity, that when Jesus said “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,” those very same words that called the Zealots to submit and pay their taxes to Caesar also, at the same time, rebuked the Herodians for their idolatrous compromises with Caesar.

And we need to hear that too.

Because the truth is that when we – when human beings – find a leader in civil authority we like ... when we find a political leader we think can improve our lives, or improve the lives of our people, or even just give us stuff that we want ... then we too can be prone to serious compromise. When that leader says things we know are contrary to the gospel, at first we ignore it, and then we excuse it ... and eventually we embrace it. As time goes on we adjust our faith to conform it to our favored political leader, or the political party we put our hope in. We may still loudly proclaim our Christian faith, just as Herod very publicly rebuilt the Jewish Temple. But then we also, like Herod, build a few temples to Caesar as well. We worship both God and Caesar. We try to give our chief allegiance to both God and Caesar. And in response, Jesus rebukes us, just as he does the Herodians: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

When it comes to the political realm, Jesus calls us to submission ... but to submission without moral or spiritual compromise.

Resistance Without Rebellion

But then, at the very same time, we also see that Jesus calls his followers to resistance without rebellion.

Now, I've already mentioned several ways Jesus is calling his hearers to resist the demands of Caesar: By pointing to Caesar's claims of divinity on the coin, by drawing attention to the Herodians' moral compromise with Caesar, by the very words that he speaks, Jesus is calling on faithful believers to resist when Caesar claims, or demands, the kind of honor, loyalty, worship, authority, and obedience that is due only to God.

But the wording Jesus used may have made that aspect of his teaching even more provocative than we realize. When Jesus said to "render" or "give back" or "pay back" to Caesar what is Caesar's, one biblical scholar argues that Jesus was intentionally echoing a slogan of the Maccabean revolt, to "pay back the Gentiles what they deserve" – a slogan that was probably familiar to many Jews from their annual Hanukkah celebrations.⁴ [Wright, *Victory*, 504-507; Wright, *Mark*, 162-163]

If that's so, then that would stress even more that Jesus wanted his hearers to hear his teaching on this matter as subversive. He was calling the people to an act of resistance against the occupying forces.

And yet, still, he wasn't calling them to rebellion – since in the immediate context of the dialogue he's also telling them to pay their taxes to Caesar. [Wright, *Mark*, 163; Wright, *Victory*, 505]

There's a lot going on there, and it's not simplistic. The message of this saying is both more subtle and more subversive than is usually recognized. [Wright, *Victory*, 505 n.104] But taken together, we see that Jesus was calling the people to resistance, without rebellion. [Wright, *Victory*, 505]

Because after all, in a sense, the rebellion of the Zealots was just another kind of compromise with the world – a moral compromise that adopts Rome's brutal methods as the means of bringing about the kingdom of God.

⁴ In this passage from the intertestamental book of Maccabees that was "probably familiar to Jesus and his audience, [...] through the regular celebrations of the Maccabean heroes at the annual festival of Hanukkah," the final exhortation that the revolutionary Mattathias gives to his sons is: "Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law." In response, Mattathias's son led a revolution against the occupying forces. [Wright, *Victory*, 504; Wright, *Mark*, 162-163]

The first half of the clause is instruction to "give back to the pagans an equal repayment: [to] do to them as they have done to us. The saying is unambiguously revolutionary." The second clause was meant to keep the revolutionary fervor from breaking the law of God – from going beyond what the Scriptures permitted. "The Maccabean saying [...] had a double thrust: your duty toward the pagans is to fight them, and your duty to our god is to keep his commandments." [Wright, *Victory*, 504]

What this scholar proposes is "that Jesus's cryptic saying [here] should be understood as a coded and subversive echo of Mattathias' last words" meaning "Pay Caesar back what he is owed! Render to Caesar what he deserves! The words Jesus said would, [on its face] have been heard as revolutionary." [Wright, *Victory*, 504]

Instead, Jesus calls God's people to reject Caesar's methods as a means for establishing God's kingdom, because that would leave them spiritually compromised, just like the Herodians. [Wright, *Victory*, 506-507] Instead, as one author puts it: Jesus's teaching "transcended the popular view of the kingdom, subverting the blasphemous claims of Caesar, *and* the compromises of the present Temple hierarchy, *and* the dreams of the revolutionaries." [Wright, *Victory*, 507]

And we need to consider this, because when we reject compromise – when we reject the path of the Herodians ... we far too easily can swing in the other direction, to revolution – to the path of the Zealots. If we're going to resist, then often we also want to rebel.

But what we see here is that Jesus calls us, as his followers, to submission without moral compromise, and resistance without rebellion.

Both at the Same Time

And it's noteworthy that we're called to do both at the same time. In every situation, as we engage in the political realm, in a fallen world – in an unbelieving world – we will be called to some degree of both submission and resistance towards worldly powers.

And it's this combination – this calling to both at the same time – that's especially difficult.⁵

And so, it's worth asking yourself which approach you tend towards. Do you tend more towards rebellion ... or moral compromise?

⁵ It reminds me of Herman Bavinck's categories of political engagement – something we talked about a few years ago. [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/biblical-justice-nicoletti/biblical-justice-part-5-when-micah-31-45>]

Bavinck talked about a few false directions people could be tempted to go politically.

One that he focused on was the path of revolution. This was the path of resistance that led to rebellion. It was the conviction that the right response was to spurn all forms of submission, to tear down the power structures in place and to build something new, from scratch, by force. [Bavinck, 1.81] This is the path that embraces both resistance and rebellion – a path Jesus clearly stands against in our text.

But another false political path Bavinck identified is what he called "false conservatism." And this is the path that may start with submission, but then leads to compromise and complacency with things that are not as they should be.

Bavinck writes: "There is, however, also a false conservatism that takes pleasure in leaving the existing situation untouched simply because it exists and – in accordance with Calvin's familiar saying – not to attempt to change a well-positioned evil." [Bavinck, 1.81]

In the work that Bavinck quotes from Calvin [Swan], Calvin goes on to explain that often those who embrace this false conservatism will explain that they're simply being realists. But, Calvin notes, they fail to appreciate – and fail to believe – that it is God's strength that is the real basis of any change for good in the world – not human strength. And so we, as God's people, are called to resist evil even when it is well-positioned, because God is able to work through even our weak and feeble efforts. [Calvin, 110]

This pushed Bavinck to the third option he outlines, what he called a "Reformed" or "Reformation" approach to cultural and political engagement. In this view we neither rebel nor do we become compromised or complacent with the evils of our times or of our leaders. Instead, we both submit and resist – we seek to preserve what is good, and transform what is evil. We work with patience. We seek to honor those human authorities over us – even those we disagree with. And we try to honor God by working to make our society more and more one that would please him, even if it means opposing our allies at times.

In this framework too, we see submission without compromise and also resistance without rebellion.

And you should be aware that it's probably a bit of both, depending on the circumstances. Many of us can be rebellious Zealots in one area of life, and then compromising Herodians in other areas of life, depending on what suits us.

Maybe you're a Zealot, ready for rebellion, when you look at our state government ... but you're more like a Herodian, ready to morally compromise, when you relate to our federal government. Or maybe for you, it's the other way around.

Maybe when one party is in power, you're like a Herodian, but when the other is in power you suddenly turn into a rebellious Zealot.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying you can't prefer one political party over another, or that all political leaders or organizations are equal. They're not.

What I'm talking about is the temptation to compromise your Christian convictions, or morality, or loyalty to God, out of devotion to a political leader or organization ... along with the opposite temptation to refuse to submit to other political leaders, in a way that defies the commands of God and the teaching of Jesus.

What I'm asking is: Where do you look too much like the Zealots or like the Herodians?

And what would it look like instead to embrace the more complex relationship to the political realm that Jesus calls us to here? What would it look like for you to both submit to those in political authority over you as you're called to, and to resist them as you are called to? What would it look like for you to truly "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"?

Jesus calls his followers to submission without compromise, and resistance without rebellion, both at the same time.

Grounded, Ultimately, in Our Belonging to God

But finally, and key to all of this, is that Jesus calls for every aspect of this political stance to be grounded, ultimately, in our belonging to God.

We can miss this but it's an important implication of the last half of verse 17.

Just a verse earlier, as he pointed to the coin, Jesus introduced a principle: The image imprinted on something tells you who it belongs to.

The coin bears Caesar's image. So, in a real sense, it truly belongs to Caesar – because he made it, and he put his image on it.

But that same principle also applies to the second half of verse 17.

There Jesus tells us to render to God the things that are God's. But what belongs to God?

In one sense, everything.

But in another sense, what especially belongs to God is whatever bears his image. And the Bible tells us that we – that you and me – that every human being bears the image of God. And so, if Jesus calls us to render to God the things are to God, then he is calling on us to give our very selves to God – because we belong to him.

[Edwards, 364; Horne, 156; Leithart, 162; Witherington, 325]

In a politically fractured world like ours ... in a politically fractured world like first-century Jerusalem – with its Zealots, its Pharisees, and its Herodians – we can get so caught up in which team we're on, which party we're a member of, which cause we are serving ... that we can forget who we belong to.

And the only way we can reset our loyalties – the only way we can truly clear our heads from all the noise in our fractured world is to start with who we belong to.

That's what Jesus is calling his hearers – Zealots, Pharisees, and Herodians all alike – that's what he's calling them to hear. Because they bear God's image, they belong to God. And the very first thing they need to do is to offer – to render – themselves to him.

And if that is our first movement – if that is our starting point – if that is our foundation: that as image-bearers, and as believers, we are not our own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to God our Father and to Jesus Christ our Lord – if that is our ultimate truth and our ultimate loyalty ... then we will be able to see that our political allegiance or our political status, while it may be an important thing, it is not an ultimate thing. It is never more important than the fact that we belong to God.

And when our belonging to God is our foundation, we can step off the treadmill of anxiety and franticness that characterizes the political realm for so many, and we can find our peace with God – because he is our hope, not Caesar, nor the next attempt at revolution.

When we ground our hearts and lives in the truth that we belong to God, then even as we engage thoughtfully and passionately in the political realm, we will, at the very same time, say with the psalmist:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They collapse and fall,
but we rise and stand upright.

[Psalm 20:7]

And so, brothers and sisters, let us put our trust in the Lord.

Let us render to worldly authorities their due, submitting to the office that God has given them, giving thanks for the gifts they give us. But let us resist any time where they claim the kind of honor, or loyalty, or obedience, or worship that only God can claim.

Let us occupy that difficult space, not at home with the Zealots or with the Herodians . . . but instead finding our home with Jesus.

And placing our hope in him to watch over us, and to put this world to rights, let us render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume One: Prolegomena*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Calvin, John. *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Translated by Henry Beville (1844). Dallas Texas, Protestant Heritage Press: 1995.
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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.