

Scripture Reading for Sunday Oct 25 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 (NIV)

19 The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

¹⁵ “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

¹⁶ “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. “Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD.

¹⁷ “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

¹⁸ “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Matthew 22:15-22; 34-40 (NIV)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” ²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Sermon: “Give to God What is God’s”

We Canadians are watching the US election with keen interest and bated breath. That’s because the outcome of *their* election will impact upon *our* country, in one way or another, as we are one of America’s largest trading partners. We can’t help but be aware of the rapidly changing TV news cycles, and to hear the journalists’ take on events, and their questions to politicians and others. We also can’t help but be aware of the moderators of the Town Halls and Debates, and hear the *kinds* of questions that *they* ask. We are all a little nervous of the outcome. And given the polarized nature of America at the moment, the two sides are also anxious as to what the next few weeks will bring.

That sense of tension, even anxiety, is also present in our gospel reading this week.¹ The events took place in Jerusalem not long after the politically-charged spectacle of Jesus riding into the city on a donkey to the sounds of people shouting, “Hosanna,” meaning “Save us!” – “Jesus save us.”² He then created a major stir by overturning the money-changers tables in the Temple forecourt, and followed that up with some public miraculous healings.³ The Chief Priests and other religious leaders question his authority to do those kinds of things, and he responds with three critical parables of judgement against them.⁴ And remember, it’s Passover Week and that’s a religious festival which, amongst other things, celebrates the *nationhood* of Israel. No wonder Pontius Pilate brought his Roman troops into town to ensure peace was maintained. Religion and politics are an explosive mix, then and now.

Just as there is verbal sparring between journalists and politicians today, this altercation between Jesus and the Temple leaders was understood by everyone as the accepted means to establish one’s authority. Jesus was evidently winning the day and the Pharisees were very upset!⁵ You can tell they were rattled because they joined forces with people they despised, the Herodians, and together they tried to trick Jesus. Let’s pause to recall that the Pharisees were an informal, self-appointed group and had been in existence for about 200 years. Some were wise, devout, holy men; others seem to have set themselves up as the guardians of public morality of those in the public eye. They were, in effect, an influential religiously-conservative lobby group. In contrast, the Herodian’s were wealthy aristocrats who were friends and retainers of Herod Antipas.⁶ Consequently, they are thought to have been willing to overtly compromise and collaborate with the Roman authorities out of political expediency and self-

¹ Matt 22:15-22; see also Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26.

² Matt 21:1-11. “Hosanna to the Son of David” was also a *messianic* statement; the leaders were alarmed - Matt 21:15-16.

³ Matt 21:12-17.

⁴ Matt 21:28-22:14. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Parable-of-Judgement-and-Hope.pdf> and, <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Live-a-Life-Worthy-of-Gods-Grace.pdf>.

⁵ Matt 21:45-46; 22:15. The Chief Priests were also upset (21:45). Note: the Pharisees had *already* made up their minds Jesus needed to be killed; Matt 12:14. Not only was Jesus’ authority evident, he was popular too!

⁶ The Herodian’s were continually coming into contact with the Romans and, consequently, some Pharisees would have considered them “unclean.” They seem to have faded out of view following the Jewish War of 66-70 AD and hence not a feature in Matthew’s day; he retains them as he follows Mark 12:13.

interest. For the Pharisees to be collaborating with the Herodians is a sign of desperation. It's as if Jewish conservatives and the liberal wealthy elite were joining forces to entrap someone who might upset the status quo. So, what happens?

They begin with flattery, presumably to soften Jesus up, before asking him their "gotcha" question.⁷ The question was *political*, but it was wrapped in *religious* language: "Does it accord with the Torah to pay a tax to Caesar or not?"⁸ Now the Jewish people had major grievances about the question of Roman taxation; after all, those unpopular taxes supported the foreign military occupying their country. This question was therefore intended to put Jesus in an impossible position. If he says that they should *not* pay the taxes, it would make him a rebel of Rome - and therefore treasonous. And if he says that the taxes *should* be paid, it will appear that he's on the side of the Herodian's and so ruin any credibility he had of being a prophet.⁹ Jesus is not taken in by their flattery and not only recognizes them as hypocrites, but names them as such. He then says, "Show me the coin used to pay the tax."¹⁰ Jesus knows that the tax in question can *only* be paid in Roman currency and someone obliges him by taking a silver denarius from out of their own tunic! The coin had an *image* on one side of the reigning Emperor, and on the other side an inscription saying "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, pontifex maximus - that is, the High Priest of the cultic Roman religion. The Torah prohibits acknowledgment of any other gods, and (graven) images of any kind.¹¹ And yet here, in the most holy place in Jerusalem, Jesus' adversaries promptly produce a coin that violates the dictates of their religion! Their complicity and hypocrisy are obvious. They're obviously happy to do business with Caesar's coins! Jesus then says, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's," and we can imagine a pause before he added, "And to God what is God's."¹² Jesus had cleverly defused the "gotcha" question and even turned the tables on them. They left in stunned amazement.

Christians have often taken this response to define the relationship between God and political authorities.¹³ But that is *not* what this exchange is about! Even so, it does raise the question as to *how* compromised are *we* in claiming to speak on God's behalf while also living cozily with the values of our society - regardless of what political party is in power.¹⁴ Jesus is *not* saying that there is a secular realm and a separate religious realm and equal respect must be paid to each. God always trumps Caesar! In

⁷ The words they use to flatter Jesus are, in fact, *true*! But Jesus knows they are insincere and actually calls them "hypocrites," Matt 22:18. (This is unique to Matthew.)

⁸ Matt 22:17; see also Matt 12:2. The tax in question was introduced in 6 CE when Judea became a Roman province.

⁹ The Pharisees resented the tax, but they did not go as far as the Nationalists (Zealots) who publicly resisted its payment.

¹⁰ Matt 22:19.

¹¹ See Exod 20:3-4; Deut 5:7-8.

¹² Matt 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25. These are *not* equal matters because Caesar's role is so vastly inferior to God's!

¹³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/God-and-Politics.pdf> .

¹⁴ See also Rom 13:1-7, where taxes are also explicitly mentioned. In Jewish thinking, Caesar was God's appointed representative, but he was not worthy of loyalty that belonged to God alone. Consequently, and regardless of Lev 25:23, it is not against the Torah to pay taxes to the Emperor. The Pharisees acknowledge this by participating in the economic system made possible by Rome, even by having Roman coins in the Temple area.

fact, Jesus knew *no distinction* between politics and religion; the Kingdom of God embraces *all of life!* And nor is Jesus saying, as many like to think today, that the religious part of our lives is “private” and the rest, “public.” A little more on that in a moment.

“Giving back to God what *is* God’s” is the key point.¹⁵ But what does *that* mean? We have to figure that out for ourselves with the help of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, since the time of Tertullian,¹⁶ one of the late 2nd century Church Fathers, interpreters have suggested this saying implicitly refers to humans as *God’s* coin, bearing his image. We belong to God, as surely as Caesar’s coins belong to Caesar, because we are made in God’s image.¹⁷ We must therefore give back to God what is his - our very selves! The reasoning may be flawed, but the conclusion is, I think, correct. And we can’t forget what Jesus said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”¹⁸ We can’t live with divided loyalties, says Jesus. And that’s also why our faith - or “belief system” - is *not* simply private, it has implications for the way we live our lives, both individually and collectively. Even so, I don’t think Jesus is anti-the State, or against money or society, as such. Rather, he is saying *God is Lord of all* and therefore worthy of our exclusive loyalty, to which – ironically - the Pharisees would agree!

Later on, after another trick question,¹⁹ a Jewish expert on the Torah tried to test Jesus with a further question: “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”²⁰ Jesus refuses to be nailed down to *one* command and responds to the question in his own way. Jesus replies: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”²¹ Jesus is quoting the Jewish *Shema* from Deuteronomy²² and which all devout Jews say daily. The “Love your neighbor as yourself” command comes from Leviticus, as we heard in our Old Testament reading.²³ There is great depth and *interrelation* between these two commands.²⁴ We show our love for God by loving our neighbor. This also applies to wearing masks! When we actively demonstrate love to our neighbor, someone made in

¹⁵ By giving “back to God what is God’s,” Matthew’s readers may recall the earlier Parable of the Wicked Tenants who refuse to give to the land owner, God, the fruit that belong to him – Matt 21:41.

¹⁶ Born ca. 160 AD in Carthage, Tunisia.

¹⁷ Gen 1:27. Jesus deftly widens the question so that it has little to do with politics. Everyone has to decide, he says, as to what it means to bear God’s image.

¹⁸ Matt 6:24. See also Luke 12:15.

¹⁹ This time by the Sadducees and concerning the controversial (ultimate) resurrection of the dead, Matt 22:23-33.

²⁰ Matt 22:36. See also Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28. Matthew states this question is hostile (a “test”), Mark does not.

²¹ Matt 22:37-39. See also Jam 2:8; Rom 13:8.

²² See Deut 6:4–5. Matthew has slightly revised it to correspond more closely to the LXX text.

²³ See Lev 19:18. Note that both of these (authoritative) statements are from the Torah and so attributed to Moses.

²⁴ Matthew (not Mark) tells us Jesus adds, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:40). This is significant in that it suggests Jesus saw “the Law *and* the Prophets” as authoritative, whereas the Sadducees did not recognise the latter as such (see Matt 22:23-33 for context). The Sadducees also rejected the oral tradition (which Pharisees promoted) and only focused on the Torah. (See also Matt 5:17; 7:12.)

God's image, Matthew later tells us God sees that as a sign that we love God.²⁵ See how theology and ethics are interwoven!? Now, the connection between these two commands is not unique to Jesus.²⁶ Indeed, various Rabbis provided similar summary statements of the Law and they served as proof of their orthodoxy. We tend to think Jesus' reply is the hallmark of Christianity. Not at all; Jesus passed this litmus test and so silenced his critics because they could not fault his *Jewish* answer. But what *is* unique to Jesus is that for him "loving our neighbor" includes our "enemy," as he said in the Sermon on the Mount.²⁷ Jesus radicalizes what that love-command means!

"Giving back to God what *is* God's" means, in practice, to live by those two principles – loving God with *all* of who we are, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. No one is saying precisely what this means in practice, but it's *not* a soppy, sentimental love towards our neighbor – or to God. This kind of love is *not* easy, and it begins by reflecting on the extent of God's love for us. More on that topic another time!

One of the things that can be annoying about the questions of journalists to politicians is their apparent bias. They are hardly neutral news reporters, although some try harder than others to be so. In a similar way, the Pharisees and Herodians were openly partisan because they were public lobby groups with a vested interest in the outcome of their grilling of Jesus. The thing is, *we* have biases too – everyone does! But are we *aware* of our own prejudices and preferences? Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Christians are usually Herodian's but lacked the means to recognize themselves as such!"²⁸ What he means by that is we have also compromised ourselves with the power structures of this world for self-interest, and most of us don't recognize that fact. This lack of self-awareness makes it harder for us to "Give back to God what *is* God's." Let me give perhaps a trivial, but pointed example: Many people begin their prayers with "Dear *Lord* Jesus. . ." but fail to appreciate what "Lord" means. It is more than a title of respect. In the New Testament it had *both* religious and political connotations. The Greek [LXX] translation of the Hebrew Scriptures uses the word "LORD" [*kyrios*] as its translation for God's personal name, YHWH.²⁹ The same Greek word was also commonly used for the Roman Emperor. Consequently, using the word "Lord" with reference to Jesus raises the issue of patriotism for Romans and blasphemy for Jews.³⁰ So when we pray, "Dear Lord Jesus. . ." what do *we* mean? Are we meaning that the risen Jesus is worthy of our *worship* and *prime loyalty*? Or just our *respect*? If it is the latter, we are really Herodians. If it is the former, then let us authentically live by those two principles that Jesus stated, namely, to love God with *all* of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

God has given himself to us and for us in the person of Jesus. Let us give back to God what *is* God's – our very selves. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁵ See Matt 25:31-46. See also 1 John 4:7-21.

²⁶ See Luke 10:25-28, especially 27!

²⁷ See Matt 5:43-48. This needs to be seen in the context of Roman occupation too. The Zealots would be furious!

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, (2006), 190.

²⁹ See Deut 6:5 – "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

³⁰ Paul mentions "Jesus is Lord" in 1 Cor 12:3 on the context of an authentic Spirit-inspired confessional statement.