

## **“NO LOVE BUDGET”**

A Sermon for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2017

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

*“Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”*

Torn between contradictory obligations to God and Caesar, the people of Israel were unsure what to do. Jesus took the bull by the horn: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” In other words, meet all your obligations. Don’t get so busy paying your earthly dues that you forget you owe everything you are and everything you have to God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Plus pay your taxes!

But didn’t Jesus himself say “No one can serve two masters”? People have only so much time and attention and money and energy and property and skill. How could anyone meet Jesus’ requirement that we meet all our other commitments and still give God his due?

This formula of Jesus “amazed” people as much as his miracles did. They were amazed because surely no one could fulfill that expectation, to whatever you need to do for everybody else, and still do everything unto the Lord. They spent their lives trying to figure out how to schedule their attention, budget their love, finesse their allegiances and loyalties, and so on. It was so hard to do that, they thought they could entrap Jesus in the problem.

I am generalizing “Caesar,” as you notice. Jesus was not authorizing authoritarian government, or taxation, in this saying. He was talking to people who couldn’t figure out how to be citizens of the world while serving God.

You and I can sympathize. We owe so many so much. We ought to do so much more than we can

ever hope to do. We do not love God as we ought to. Worship feels like a distraction! We wish life were simple, but it is not. It’s complicated. “I need to rest. But I should worship. On the other hand there are social obligations. But I need my money for necessities.” You can only do so much.

Jesus comes along and says “Meet all your obligations in full: to your family, to society, to the planet, to God.”

No one can serve ten or fifteen masters, but we all have at least fifty.

“Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Hidden behind all the demands on our life is fear of the consequences if we fail to meet them. If we don’t pay the mortgage, they will take away the house. If we don’t do our homework, our grades will drop. You have your own personal set of competing priorities. All these things sap our vitality, and our precious time gets frittered away. Where does it end?

If we listen carefully, this will end in gospel. Good news.

I will tell you one way to find it. Look for what God is doing. What we seek is evidence that “It is God who is at work” through Jesus in Marcus Felde and his friends, “enabling us both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” We need to look for a sign that Jesus was serious when he said “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

So, where is the Gospel?

Look who is saying words "Render unto Caesar . . ."! It is not just anybody enunciating a universalizable proverb you can put on a little plaque over your desk and try to live by. The speaker is not just anybody, it is Jesus—the one who famously got crucified. Jesus is the one of whom Paul wrote this:

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." (2 Cor 1:19)

Always gospel.

According to those who crucified Jesus, his crucifixion was intended to satisfy Caesar and God.

The man from Nazareth was accused of treason against Caesar, of leading a rebellion. And he was accused of treason against God, of leading a rebellion. So he had to render unto Caesar what was due to Caesar; and render unto God what was due to God. With his body, with his very life, he paid in full. "It is finished," he said.

But that is not gospel yet. We're getting there, but we need something more. Because the crucifixion of Jesus did not become gospel to us until two more things happened.

1) God raised him from the dead. That was a sign. It signified that "God's good pleasure" is not death but life. And

2) God gave the Spirit of Jesus to anybody who wants it. This gift created unity among the people who shared in it, a unity called "the church."

How does the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit make the crucifixion good news?

Through identifying with Jesus in his death (what we call "baptism"), you too have rendered unto Caesar and God everything you owe them. Your debt is paid. Cancelled. You are no longer a debtor to God and Caesar. You are free. Paul says, "You have died to sin."

Thus, when you hear that Jesus said "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," you can read this one of two ways:

1) As law--in which case you have a long way to go to meet this standard. You need to do more and try harder. Or

2) As gospel--in which case you smile when Jesus says that, knowing that—as a part of the body of Christ—you have been there, done that, got the tee shirt/baptismal robe.

This is shocking, of course. The gospel always is. It's scandalous to people who think they don't need help to be righteous. But you and I, because we want to read Jesus' saying according to the gospel, are about to go up to the altar and do a gut check. So we don't forget but remember that Jesus paid dearly to make us his own.

Is that all?

Not by any means. The fun is only beginning.

Being in Christ means being free. It means being in the world but not belonging to the world. Instead, belonging to the one who has given us his Spirit.

Instead of running around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to satisfy all the obligations people lay on us plus the ones God lays on us, striving to become holy--we simply employ our gifts in a life of praise and thanksgiving to the one who has redeemed us. How? What Paul calls (in our Second Reading) our "work of faith and labor of love and steadfast of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Faith, hope, and love. These are our meat and potatoes, now—not rules and expectations and fear of disappointing God. As Paul says, we "owe no one anything—except to love them."

Yes, we still meet obligations and pay our fines. And them some!

Do you notice how many times Jesus demonstrates and talks about extra-mile service of others? Why invite the lame and the poor to your banquet? Why turn the other cheek? Why forgive seventy times seven times? Why give your shirt as well to the one who asks for your cloak? Why visit the sick and the prisoner?

Because that is what we owe God, and we're trying to "render unto God"? On the contrary, because those are things which are not required, and because we are free to operate in that zone in ways that were not possible when our lives and our love had to be budgeted.

Extra-mile, extraneous, even accidental actions are like proofs that you don't actually owe anybody anything! Sure, our love is also active in all our self-care, and the special care our family gets, and so on. But it doesn't get to really shine before others until people see that we are not trying to meet obligations, we're trying to express the love we have for our Lord.

We don't operate with a love budget, making sure everything is reciprocal, everything is fairly divided between ourselves, others, and God. Which is why we serve in food pantries, etc.—because none of those patrons are ever going to do us a favor. We don't serve them because they reward us with thanks, although they may. We are free to serve them because we don't need thanks. We have something better than thanks. In a similar way, we have power to absorb suffering we are not due, without seeking revenge, because we have a mystery peace which is stronger than mere equilibrium.

In conclusion, let me refer you to our Reformation banners. I am so happy that Linda used the passive voice across all three banners. We are "formed, re+formed, transformed" by God's action. True reformation is not about a determined monk who supposedly changed the world. True reformation is about the determination of God, who formed us, to

re+form us according to his image so that we might, as transformed people, live according to his good and gracious will. Seeking the good of others, not revenge. Peace, not conflict. The good of others, not revenge.

Amen.

