“***Render to God***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Oct. 25, 2020

**Matthew 22:15–22 NASB**

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap him in what he said. 16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for you are not partial to any. 17Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” 18But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 21They said to him, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” 22And hearing this, they were amazed, and leaving him, they went away.

This question was meant to be a trap, but Jesus artfully answers them in a way that surprises everybody, and that does not result in entrapment. And the answer he gives provides some guidance for us, as Christians. It seems to say that there is a realm of human activity that comes under the authority of government, and another realm of activity that belongs solely to God. Unless a government demands religious devotion, there should be no conflict between our practicing ordinary patriotism while reserving our spiritual loyalties for God. Our deepest spiritual loyalties belong to God, and are not to be supervised by government.

Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were also of that opinion. They wanted government out of religious affairs so that government was not tainted by sectarianism, and so that religion was not corrupted by government coercion. It’s hard to say which one suffers worse, government or religion, when there is an unholy alliance, an inappropriate mingling, between government and religion. There is way too much mingling going on now, where political leaders claim to be backed by God, and where church leaders sprinkle holy water on their political preferences. Both are claiming too much. And churches should not hitch their star to any political camp; they drive out half their church members, and they doom the church to decline when the political gang they are backing declines. The church should not show political favoritism.

Even the enemies of Jesus knew that he did not do that, saying you “defer to no one; for you are not partial to any” (22:16). In The Message, this is translated “are indifferent to popular opinion, and don’t pander to your students.” Minglers of politics and religion *are* seeking popular approval, and pandering to certain audiences. Often, they don’t know any better. They see other pastors and churches preaching politics, and they figure that’s normal. But it tends to turn churches into a religious wing of a political movement. It stifles the potentially universal appeal of the church’s message. Politics tends to devolve into attacks on one’s enemies, and often leads to hatred. The message of the church must be love-forward, not hostility-forward.

Churches should have a message that can be used by individuals in any setting or of any style. The message should be something that can be communicated to children without cringing. The teachings should be something that can be shared in a family setting. They should encourage individuals to develop their own philosophies of living. People are going to develop their own philosophies anyway. Religion tries to provide them with some eternal truth to help lay the spiritual foundation for any philosophy.

Render to God the things that are God’s. Our developing understanding of truth, beauty, goodness, and love are things that are God’s, although they are also *ours*—they are fundamental to our personal growth and identity. This is why it is important to have some favorite Bible passages, ones that speak most deeply to your heart, your developing understanding. As you grow and change, you will find that new passages have become meaningful to you.

Today’s passage is remarkable in its brevity and clarity. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. Do your duty in the material realm, and give your heart, your highest loyalty, to God. One thing I like about this saying is that it simultaneously shows the practical earthiness and the spiritual idealism of Jesus. Render to Caesar what belongs in that realm—that’s practical and matter-of-fact. But render to God the things that are God’s—*that* strongly affirms that the deepest realities are in *God’s* realm.

To a large degree it’s about striking the right balance. At least two of the Beatitudes talk about this in a way. “Blessed are the meek,” for they accept life and its limitations, they are grateful, and they will find more in life than anyone; they will “inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). And “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (5:9). They are considerate of others, they don’t force their politics on others. These sayings show that balancing is also a matter of graciousness.

Jesus was a practical guy in his awareness of human needs and life necessities. He knew about hunger, loneliness, hostility, unfairness, and dishonesty. He knew how hard it was to get a group of people to really work together for spiritual things. And he got that to happen, but not by imposing unrealistic forms of self-punishment or ritual perfection, like so many other religious leaders have sought to impose. He allowed people to live normal lives, but asked them to turn their spiritual gaze upon God and to seek first the will of God, and God’s goodness. He was a profoundly balanced human being, and he didn’t try to force others into any unbalanced kind of living. He tried to draw people to the love of God, and to persuade them to trust the spiritual watchcare and goodness of God. The secret of his persuasive power was his own kindly and friendly nature.

I am moved to argue that we should be inspired by Jesus as a person, a loving, balanced, practical yet idealistic person who really lived a life of full trust in the Father. His salty and clever way of responding to his enemies is one of his appealing features. This is a guy you can grow to like. This is a guy you can enjoy learning from.

Learn about his approachability as well as his leadership. Learn about his normality as well as his intense spirituality. He lived and worked with fishermen, he ministered to men, women, and children. He never doubted God’s goodness and care. Let us not doubt, either. Enter into conversation with Jesus; ask him to heal your doubting. Jesus is there for you.