

“Render to Caesar - Render to God”

Luke 20:19–26

Introduction

Let's begin with some historical background.

1. Judas Maccabeus (a true insurrection leader, 2nd century BC)

After Alexander the Great's empire was divided, Judea fell under Seleucid (Syrian-Greek) rule. In 167 BC, King Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the Jerusalem temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and outlawing Jewish practices like circumcision and Sabbath observance.

A priest named Mattathias (of the Hasmonean family) sparked a revolt when he refused to offer pagan sacrifice. His son, Judas Maccabeus (“the Hammer”), took over after his death. Judas organized guerilla warfare against the Seleucids and, against all odds, defeated them.

In 164 BC, he recaptured Jerusalem, purified the temple, and rededicated it. This event is celebrated today as **Hanukkah**(the Feast of Dedication, mentioned in John 10:22).

Judas Maccabeus became a national hero. His rebellion restored Jewish independence for about 100 years (the Hasmonean dynasty), until Rome took control in 63 BC.

2. Judas the Galilean (mentioned in the NT, early 1st century AD)

After Herod the Great's death (4 BC), Rome imposed direct control over Judea. When Quirinius carried out a census for taxation (around AD 6), it provoked outrage.

A man named Judas the Galilean led a revolt, insisting that paying tribute to Rome violated loyalty to God. His rebellion was quickly crushed, but his movement didn't die. It gave rise to the **Zealot party**, a group known for revolutionary fervor (and one of Jesus' disciples, Simon the Zealot, may have been influenced by them).

In Acts 5:37, Gamaliel mentions Judas the Galilean's failed revolt as a warning to the Sanhedrin not to oppose the apostles rashly.

Why this matters:

These insurrections show the political and spiritual climate in which Jesus came. Many Jews expected the Messiah to be another Judas Maccabeus—a warrior to overthrow Rome. Instead, Jesus came not with the sword, but with the cross, inaugurating a kingdom not of this world (John 18:36).

They also help us to better understand the political, religious, and social environment in which the story of our text today takes place.

Looking at the Text

After failing to trap Jesus in blasphemy, His enemies now turn to a different tactic: they attempt to trap Him into admitting to being an insurrectionist. They know they cannot execute Him themselves, for under Roman authority they have no legal right. They are also struggling to sway the crowds against Him.

So now, desperate and determined, they pivot to politics as a means to rid themselves of Jesus.

But how can we truly understand what is going on here? On one hand, we see the haters of God—men who genuinely believe they are serving Him—acting out of their own will to murder the Son of God. Yet, on the other

hand, we also see God at work, providentially orchestrating these events to bring about the sacrificial death of His own Son for the sins of the world.

Peter captures this tension perfectly in his sermon at Pentecost:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:22–23)

This morning, we are going to turn our attention to one more step that moves us closer to the crucifixion of Jesus. This is a pivotal step, because here we see the introduction of politics into the conspiracy.

Together we will examine:

1. The Conspiracy
2. The Trap
3. The Response
4. The Results

And by the grace of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we will apply this text to our hearts and lives.

(Parallel texts: Matthew 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17)

1. The Conspiracy (vv. 19–20)

19 The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people.

Two weeks ago we saw Jesus offer what we called the “last word.” It was the defining moment where God had enough and granted these men the desires of their own hearts. We call that “handing over” or “giving them up to” in accordance with Romans 1:18ff.

They are now completely and utterly blinded by hatred and determined to murder the owner of the vineyard’s beloved son. They are officially rejecting the cornerstone. But they still needed either the support of the people or the support of Roman authorities—or both.

20 So they watched him (Matthew says they “plotted”) ***and sent spies*** (Matthew and Mark tell us these spies were Herodians and Pharisee disciples)...

- **The Herodians** were a political faction loyal to Herod’s dynasty and Roman authority. They weren’t a religious sect but aligned with whoever would keep Herod in power. Though they were strange allies with the Pharisees, they united against Jesus because He endangered their political and religious influence.
- **The Pharisees** originated during the intertestamental period (2nd century BC) as a group devoted to separating from pagan influence and strictly obeying the Law with oral traditions. By Jesus’ time, they were the most influential Jewish teachers among the people, and their legacy shaped post-temple Judaism.

Luke continues:

“...who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.”

Here is the conspiracy: to trap Jesus into admitting that He is leading an insurrection against Rome. If the Herodians heard a single word insinuating this, they would have rushed to Pilate—who was responsible for law and order this Passover week—and they would have arrested Jesus at that moment. An arrest would have squashed all hopes the people had about Jesus being the divine, yet political, Messiah. Just as we will see the next day.

That was the conspiracy. Now we will look at the heart of the conspiracy—their trap.

2. The Trap (vv. 21–22)

21 So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality (Mt. you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances), but truly teach the way of God.”

Every good trap needs bait. These spies used flattery as their bait. What they said was actually true, though they themselves didn't believe it.

They expected Jesus to respond to flattery the way they would have. They expected Him to feel free to say whatever He wanted without calculating the effects of His words beyond the immediate context. I call this being *drunk on flattery* and having your judgment impaired.

Application: We are often tempted in this same way. Flattery is a powerful bait. As Christians, we need to be Christlike at all times, calculating the consequences of what we say, and not be given to flattery.

- *Psalm 12:2–3 – “Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts.”*
- *Proverbs 26:28 – “A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”*
- *Proverbs 29:5 – “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.”*

So here is the trap itself:

22 “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”

Tell the people not to pay taxes to Caesar—get arrested and most likely executed. To the crowds, He would then be seen as just another failed insurrectionist, not the Messiah.

These men were no doubt proud of themselves at this point. They believed they had finally “got” Jesus. But Jesus did not fall for their bait and was not led by it into their trap.

3. The Response (vv. 23–25)

23 *But he perceived their craftiness...* (Mt. aware of their malice; Mk. But, knowing their hypocrisy)

Jesus was not fooled.

John says:

“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”
(John 2:23–25)

...and said to them, (Mt. Why put me to the test you hypocrites), “Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?”

SHOW PICTURE OF DENARIUS

A denarius was a Roman coin worth about an average day’s wage for a soldier. On one side it had Emperor Tiberius’ face; on the other, a picture of him on a throne in priestly attire. The Jews avoided the coin when possible because they saw it as a violation of Exodus 20:4. It was a symbol of pagan idolatry and blasphemy.

They said, “Caesar’s.”

Surely the crowd was ready to explode in a victorious, battle-ready roar when Jesus denounces paying taxes to Caesar, right? Not so fast

25 He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

The Greek word for *render* is *apodidomi*, which means “to give something back that is owed.” Jesus is saying that the people are obligated to give the tax to Caesar because it is owed to him. However—and more importantly—they are obligated to give back to God everything that is owed to God.

His answer is not just about whether Christians should pay taxes. It's a profound truth about the Christian's duty to submit fully in obedience to God. To give back to God everything that is owed to Him, which is everything. It can be summed up in two words: **worship and obedience**—which are synonymous.

Nothing truly belongs to Caesar, or to any government, except what has been granted to them by God. To give to Caesar what belongs to him is to recognize that God has permitted Caesar's authority and granted him the right to tax his people if he wants. That doesn't mean the tax was right. It doesn't mean that Caesar can do whatever he wants. Caesar is responsible to obey God in his sphere and we are responsible to obey God in our sphere. Obedience should be rendered unto God from everyone. Submitting to authorities is obeying God.

Paul confirms this in *Romans 13:1–4*. *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.*

You may wonder: *What about when the government is ungodly and chooses to do evil with the taxes we pay?*

First of all—show me a godly government. If you are waiting for a God-honoring government before you start paying taxes, you’ll save up a lot of money before you are eventually caught and sent to prison.

It is not our duty to determine the legitimacy of a government before obeying it. We are to obey the government for no other reason than that God has appointed it. We are responsible for obedience; the government is responsible for how they carry out their stewardship.

That’s not to say there may never be a time to disobey. If the government orders us to trespass God’s commands, then we must resist. In *Acts 5:28–29*, when the Apostles were commanded not to teach in Jesus’ name anymore, they responded:

“We must obey God rather than men.”

4. The Results (v. 26)

26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.

Jesus would indeed be arrested, falsely accused, unjustly tried, and crucified. But not because of their schemes. It would be because He willingly laid down His life for the salvation of His people.

These men walked away speechless. They thought they were clever, but they were exposed as fools.

Illustration & Connection

If you have not heard Michael Underwood's testimony on Janel Burker's podcast, *Your Story, His Glory*, I strongly encourage you to do so. Mike was an atheist coal miner in West Virginia for 10 years. He admits that in his pride, he sought to attack the faith of his Christian coworkers—and often walked away thinking he had won.

But years later, when the Lord opened his eyes and saved him, he looked back and saw the grace those men had shown him. What he once thought were victories in debate, he now sees as foolishness.

A Word to the Skeptic

Friend, you cannot outsmart God. You cannot trap Him in a theological conundrum. You may challenge the faith of some of His children, and cause them distress—but you have not won anything.

I pray that the Spirit of God will open your eyes to see the foolishness of denying your Maker. I pray you will see the beauty of the gospel: that God sent His Son to die on your behalf, to bear the full wrath you deserve.

A Word to the Christian

Christian, you have the truth. You are commanded to take the gospel everywhere you go. But notice this—you are not commanded to be an expert or to have all the answers.

You are not responsible for the salvation of every hearer. You are responsible to tell what you know, and to do it with sincerity and compassion.

So don't be afraid to lose an argument. The enemies of God may seem to win the battle on Friday, but they will ultimately lose the war.

CG Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus' enemies first tried to trap Him in blasphemy and then shifted to a political trap? What does this tell us about their hearts?
2. How does understanding the historical insurrections of Judas Maccabeus and Judas the Galilean help us grasp the expectations of the Jewish people regarding the Messiah?
3. What does Acts 2:22–23 teach us about God's sovereignty in the midst of human sin and plots?
4. How did Jesus perceive the "craftiness" of the Pharisees and Herodians? How can we develop discernment like His?
5. What is the significance of Jesus' question about the denarius? Why was this such a clever way to reveal the truth?
6. When Jesus says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," what does this teach us about the balance between civic duty and spiritual obedience?
7. How does this passage demonstrate the difference between a kingdom "of this world" and God's kingdom?
8. What does Romans 13:1–4 add to our understanding of the believer's responsibility toward governing authorities?
9. When, if ever, should Christians choose to disobey human authority, and how does Acts 5:28–29 guide that decision?
10. How are we tempted by "flattery" today, and how can we protect ourselves from being led into a trap like the one set for Jesus?
11. In what ways does Michael Underwood's testimony challenge you personally in your conversations with skeptics or non-believers?
12. How can we faithfully "render to God" in our daily lives, work, and relationships, even when political or social pressures seem to pull us in another direction?

Daily Devotions

Day 1: Text: Luke 20:19–20

Reflection: Jesus’ enemies plotted against Him out of fear and hatred, yet they believed they were serving God. Their desire to control, manipulate, and ultimately kill the Son of God shows how sin can blind even those who think they are righteous. God, however, is sovereign—He works His plan even through the schemes of lawless men.

Challenge:

Examine your heart for areas where pride or fear leads you to control situations or people instead of trusting God’s plan. How can you surrender these areas to God today?

Day 2: Text: Luke 20:21

Reflection: The Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus with flattery. Flattery can cloud judgment and make us vulnerable to sin. Jesus saw through their deceit and responded with wisdom and clarity. Flattery is dangerous because it appeals to the ego and can make us forget our higher calling to obedience and truth.

Challenge:

Identify one area in your life where flattery or approval from others influences your decisions. How can you respond more like Jesus, with discernment and truth?

Day 3: Text: Luke 20:22–25

Reflection: Jesus’ response transcends a political question; it reveals the proper ordering of obedience. Our ultimate allegiance is to God, but we live under earthly authorities by His design. What we give to God is not optional—it encompasses all of life, including obedience, worship, and devotion.

Challenge:

Reflect on the “things that are God’s” in your life. Are there areas you have withheld from Him—time, resources, talents, or attitudes? Commit to “rendering” them fully to Him.

Day 4: Text: Luke 20:23

Reflection: Jesus perceived the craftiness of His enemies. Knowing the hearts of men allowed Him to navigate traps without compromise. As believers, we live in a world where deceit,

manipulation, and temptation are common. Spiritual discernment is not optional; it is necessary for obedience and survival in the faith.

Challenge:

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal one subtle “trap” in your life today—whether in relationships, work, or personal habits. How should you respond wisely?

Day 5: Text: Luke 20:26

Reflection: Jesus’ enemies walked away speechless, outwitted by the wisdom of God. Their plans were powerless against God’s providence. This reminds us that no human conspiracy or scheme can thwart God’s eternal plan. Even when it seems that evil is prevailing, God is orchestrating His purposes.

Challenge:

Identify a situation in your life where fear, doubt, or opposition has made you anxious. Rest in God’s sovereignty and ask Him to show how His plan is at work even now.