

## No Other Gods<sup>1</sup>

This passage supports my growing conviction that Jesus was just plain brilliant. Beyond brilliant! You could hire a dozen theologians and advertising experts and give them a month to come up with a one sentence response to this trick question posed by the Pharisees and they would not have come up with an answer as amazing as this one. It took Jesus about a second to come up with "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Not only does Jesus avoid their trap, he also gives you and me some spiritual light to guide our own lives today.

Let me start by bringing out three ways that Jesus is brilliant in this scene. First of all, he avoids answering the question that has no right answer. If Jesus says, we should not pay taxes, then the Pharisees would have reported him immediately to the Roman authorities as an agitator and insurrectionist. The Romans likely would have executed him. If Jesus had said, "We must pay taxes, he would have been seen as a traitor to his own people because he would be siding with Rome.

Jesus doesn't fall for any of this. He says "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." He leaves his critics with nothing to report.

---

<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 26, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Jesus' brilliance goes deeper than that. Jesus asks for someone to bring a coin, a denarius. A coin appears. Now, it helps greatly to understand what these coins have stamped on them. In Jesus' time, the back of the coin had a picture of the emperor portrayed as the high priest of the Roman imperial religion. The emperor was pictured as the god of the Roman faith. The inscription read in Latin, "Son of the divine Augustus."

To the Jews, these coins were blasphemous because they proclaimed another god, a false god. It was a religious offense to Jews—a people of one and only one God—to have to use Roman coins, which were the propaganda of a false god. What's more, their use was forbidden in the Temple area. You didn't want to pay your pledge with the Roman coinage.

So, Jesus stands in the shadow of the Temple and says, "Show me the money," and six people dig into their pockets and whip out blasphemous coinage. Talk about turning the tables! Jesus has barely opened his mouth and he has revealed his critics as desecrators of the temple.

Now to the subtle part. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. What Jesus is doing, ever so elegantly is subverting the Roman Emperor propaganda. The coin declares that the Caesar is a god. Jesus can't go along with that. Instead, he draws a line between the Caesar and the

divine. Jesus is saying, in effect, "No, Caesar is only Caesar. Go ahead and pay your taxes to him. God, on the other hand, is God. To God you owe your life and your trust and your worship. And, the beauty of what Jesus is saying is that he says it in such a way that neither the Romans, nor the Jewish religion leaders have anything to use against him.

Pretty amazing, really!

What can you and I do with this in our own lives? Well, we also need to learn to render to our own false gods what they deserve and to God what God deserves.

Think of all the things that can become God-substitutes for you and me. Our careers and accumulated wealth. Our political passions. Our social standing. Our achievement. Our prestige. Drugs, sex, and internet poker. You and I can and do locate our god in all the wrong places.

By the way, how do you and I know if something has become a god-substitute? A god-substitute is whatever we look to to give us deep happiness or security in our lives. Our god-substitute is what we cherish in our thinking. We daydream about it. We count on it. We organize our lives around it. It's what we really worship, not on a Sunday morning, but all the time. It's what we reverence in our inner selves.

What Jesus helps us with is that we should never give to a god-substitute what God alone deserves.

Do you remember Chuck Colson, the attorney to President Nixon who was deeply involved in the intrigue of the Watergate scandal? Chuck Colson had a life-changing turning point in the midst of the Watergate affair. It was at the home of Tom and Gert Phillips. Tom was the president of Raytheon and talked to Chuck Colson about Christ. More specifically he talked about how we ourselves can become a God-substitute. As Tom and Chuck talked, Chuck Colson began to see how he had become his own god, how his ambition and pride over his political power had been the center and meaning of his life. After Chuck Colson's visit he began to drive home, but pulled his car off into a pine woods. Chuck sat at the wheel sobbing uncontrollably. Chuck Colson realized for the first time that his life had been entirely and uncritically devoted to self. He prayed: "God, I don't know how to fine you, but I'm going to try. I'm not much the way I am now, but somehow I want to give myself to you."

You see, only God is God. When we reverence anything less we've given ourselves to something less. And we become something less. When you and I place God on the real throne of our hearts we are set free from every false god, and in giving to God what is rightly his, we find that our lives become what our creator intended them to be.