

Give to God the Things That Are God's  
Matthew 22:15–22  
Sunday, November 1, 2020

Fifteen years ago, I realized that I had a problem. I was *obsessed* with watching football. That might not sound like a serious problem to some people, but I would plan my day around what football games I was going to watch. And if there was a Florida State football game on that day, *nothing else* was going to be happening for 3 ½ hours. I remember one time when I was in seminary, Jen and I were dating long distance, and she flew down to Atlanta to visit for the weekend. But she happened to come the weekend of the Florida State-Miami game (which, if you know anything about it, is a *big game*). So instead of going out and doing something in Atlanta, I said, “I have to watch this game.” She hung in there for a while, but eventually fell asleep on the couch, only to wake up and find me on my knees in front of the TV as a last second field goal sailed to the right and Florida State lost.

Or there was the time the following year when the schedule was released for the season, and I was looking it over to see *who* they were playing *when*. I saw that the Florida State-Florida game (the other *really big game* of the year) was on November 29, and I remember thinking, “November 29...*that's the day we're getting married.*” Florida State-Florida, the biggest game of the season that I *could not miss*, was on our *wedding day*. Well, fortunately, we'd had to schedule our wedding for 10 AM, and the reception would end by 5 PM. The game started at 3:30, so we would get home in time to see the end of it. Jen had to take like a million hair pins out of her hair anyway, so she said that I could watch the end as long as I promised not to get upset if they lost. So we sat on the floor and opened all our cards from the wedding, while I watched Florida State score the game winning 52-yard touchdown with 55 seconds left.

By the time we moved to Nebraska several years later, Jen could not even be in the same *room* with me during a football game. She said that she could *feel* the tension and stress coming from me while I watched. I would yell (either out of excitement or frustration). I would get *angry*. It would literally make me feel *sick*. This was a *game* that was supposed to be *fun*. But I was *not* having fun. I was taking it *way* too seriously. This one time, some friends of ours invited us out for dinner. But I said no, because there was a game on that night. That's when I started to realize that I had a problem. My obsession with football was starting to affect my relationships and keep me from the people who were important to me.

And so I came up with a plan. In 2005, I stopped watching football altogether for an entire year. Not a single game. I would take that time that I would normally spend watching football, and spend it with people. Now, it turns out that was a *great* year to do it, because Florida State went 8-5 and lost to Penn State in the Orange Bowl. So I didn't miss much. But you know what I found at the end of that year? It didn't matter. I didn't care *near* as much as I did before. I still *liked* football (I still *do*), but I didn't take it nearly as serious. When that next season started, if there was a game on but someone asked us to go do something, it didn't even bother me to miss the game. I would only watch the games if there was nothing else going on. I didn't get *upset* or *angry* or *stressed* by the games anymore. I could watch it and have *fun*, because I realized that life could go on without it. It no longer held *primacy* in my life anymore.

Today is Consecration Sunday, the day on which we consecrate our gifts to God for the coming year. The word *consecrate* comes from a Latin word that means, "to set apart for a specific purpose, to devote." As ridiculous as it sounds to say it, my life had been *consecrated* to *football*. My time and my energy were *devoted* to it. I based everything else I did around it. It held primacy in my life. You see, consecration is not just something we do in church. We

consecrate our lives to things other than God all the time. For some people (an extreme example) it's addictions like drugs or alcohol – they *devote* their lives to those things and base everything else around *that*. The need for *that* holds primacy in their lives. Some people consecrate their lives to work, to their jobs. For some people it's money; their lives are *devoted* to the pursuit of money or power. For some people it's social status. Some people devote their lives to family; every single thing they do is based around their family, sometimes even to their detriment. For some people – and I think we especially see this right now – it's politics or even a particular political narrative; their time and energy and lives are *devoted* to that and it holds primacy in their lives.

Consecration is not just about making our pledges, consecrating our *resources* or our *gifts* to God. It is about what we do with our *lives*; what we give *primacy*. And that is an often misunderstood aspect of what Jesus is talking about in this story from Matthew. Our theme for Consecration Sunday this year has been “Give to God the things that are God's.” It's been printed at the top of the letters we have sent out, and it's our focal point in this reading. But like we talked about last week, that can sound *manipulative*. “Give to God the things that are God's, and your money, your time, your gifts are *God's*.” But that's *not* what Jesus is saying here, so let's take a look at that.

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The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus, it says, and so some of them go to him (along with some Herodians) and ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. The Pharisees are asking from a *religious* perspective. They are the keepers of the Jewish law. So if Jesus says, “Yes, you should *definitely* pay taxes to Caesar,” the Pharisees could say, “You're putting loyalty to Caesar above loyalty to God!” That could get him in trouble with the religious leaders and with the Jewish people who oppose Roman rule. They would say, “Jesus is on the side of

the Romans!” The Herodians, meanwhile, are coming from a more *political* perspective. Herodians were Jews who *were* loyal to King Herod and the Roman Empire. So if Jesus says, “No, you should *not* pay taxes to Caesar,” the Herodians could say, “You are rebelling against the Roman Empire,” and that could land Jesus in *big* trouble. They are trying to catch Jesus in a debate between church and state, thinking that either way he goes, they’ve got him.

But Jesus never works within this dualistic mindset of “either-or.” There is *always* another way. So he says to them, “Show me the coin used for the tax.” Our coins today are engraved with images of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, but coins back then were engraved with pictures of the current Caesar. And so they show him a coin, and he says, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” The word that gets translated as “head” is the Greek word *eikon* (it’s where we get the word *icon*), and it means, “image or likeness.” *Whose image or likeness is this?* And the word that gets translated as “title” is the Greek word *epigraphe* (it’s where we get the word *epigraph*), and it means, “inscription,” or, “words imprinted on something,” but what it’s getting at is *name*. *Whose name is this?*

So Jesus asks them, “Whose image or likeness is this and whose name?” They say, “The Emperor’s. Caesar’s.” And Jesus says, “Give to Caesar the things that are of Caesar, and give to God the things that are of God.” The idea that he’s getting at here is that this coin bears the image and likeness and name of Caesar, but *we* bear the image and likeness and name of *God*. So while *this* belongs to *Caesar*, *we* belong to *God*. The word for *give* there – “Give to Caesar the things that are of Caesar...” (sometimes we hear it translated as *render*, “Render unto Caesar...” ) – is the Greek word *apodote*, and it doesn’t just mean “to give,” it more literally means, “to give *back*, to pay a debt.” The idea is that this belongs to *someone else*, and you are *returning* it. This coin belongs to Caesar – it has his image and name on it – so give it back to

him. But *you* belong to God – you are made in God’s image and God’s word is inscribed on you – so give yourself back to God.

Over the centuries, some people have read this as Jesus providing a justification or even a *mandate* for paying taxes or obedience to the state or for civic duty. But that is not Jesus’ primary concern here. The first half of his statement – “Give to Caesar the things that are of Caesar,” – is almost a throwaway line. His emphasis is on the second half of his statement – “Give to God the things that are of God.” Jesus’ concern here – his primary focus – is not on what we do with our money. That’s just an example that he’s using. It’s on what we do with our *hearts*, our *minds*, our *lives*. It’s about recognizing that we belong to God – we bear the image of God and the word of God is inscribed upon us – so we should give ourselves back to God; consecrate and devote our lives to God, to the love of God and love of our neighbor. It’s about the idea that *God* holds primacy in our lives, and no other person or thing should take that place of prime devotion.

“Give to God the things that are of God.” That doesn’t just mean give your time and money and gifts to the church. That might be one *way* in which you consecrate and devote your life to God, one *expression* of that devotion, but Jesus is talking about something much bigger. He’s talking about your whole life. What are you here for? What is your purpose? What is God calling you to do? You are made in the image of God. What *difference* does that make in your life? What *difference* does it make in how you spend your time and your energy (and your money)? What difference does it make in the words you speak or the way you treat people?

Consecration is not just about money or pledges. It’s about our *lives*. It’s about saying, in the words of the hymn we are about to sing:

Take my life and let it be  
Consecrated Lord to thee  
Take my moments and my days  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise  
Take my will and make it thine  
It shall be no longer mine  
Take my heart it is thine own  
It shall be thy royal throne  
Take my love my Lord I pour  
At thy feet its treasure store  
Take myself and I will be  
Ever only all for thee.

Am I showing my devotion to God in how I spend my time? In how I use my gifts and abilities?  
In how I do my job? In how I spend my money? Am I showing my devotion to God in the  
words that I speak and the way that I speak them? Am I showing my devotion to God in my  
relationships, in how I love others? In how I *forgive* or *seek* forgiveness?

Who or what is your life *devoted* to? And what *difference* will that devotion make?