



Dr. James C. Howell
Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:15-22
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“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” I heard this quoted at least 12 times this week. Somebody trying to establish the separation of Church and State. Trying to say it’s bad manners to talk about politics and religion in one fell swoop, or saying that we should be loyal to the government and always obey laws. Jesus said, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars.” Well let’s be very clear. He’s in the last week of his life. Forces are swirling around him. His own followers are in the process of betraying him. Jesus knows that he will be dead in a couple of days. He is not stopping off to give an academic lecture on the nature of the relationship between Church and State. It is a trap. It is a trap.

I had an interesting trap situation myself the other day. Somebody had been eating cookies in the pantry and I discovered that we’d had an intruder in the home, and I stumbled upon this intruder. I opened the pantry door the other night, I opened the door and there’s a loaf of bread on the door, and there’s my little houseguest on top of the loaf of bread. And I looked at him. Why is it always a him? I look at her, and she looked at me. “Hello, welcome to our home. Are you hungry?” Obviously, yes. Then she took off. We had about three nights of an encounter. I’m in the pantry with a shoe, and this is futility. We keep losing the cookies, which are valuable items in our house, so I got a trap. And I baited it. I deluded my houseguest with peanut butter and a little chocolate chip, a trap.

The religious people of Jesus, they wanted to be rid of him, and they had a trap. And they hooked him with a coin. They handed him a coin and said, “It is awful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” It’s a trap for Jesus. There’s no right answer to this question. If Jesus says yes, then he alienates all of the Jews who loathe the Romans and they despise the tax collectors even more because the tax collectors will come around and charge you too much, and if you protest it, they break your knees. So they hated tax collectors. So Jesus can’t really say yes, but then he hates to say no, you shouldn’t pay taxes because then that would be seditious, and the Romans would kill him. They killed him anyway. Jesus is trapped. The coin. It’s a coin that we actually know a lot about. We have seen what these very coins looked like. We know where the coins that would have circulated in Jesus’ day were minted. They bore the image of the Emperor Tiberius and they had Latin language on there to talk about Tiberius. On the front side of the coin, it says that Tiberius is not only August, but he is also divine. Tiberius the Emperor, a God striding the Earth. Turn the coin over and on the back, it says that Tiberius is the Pontificus Maximus, the Great High Priest. He is the one with the greatest access to God. He is your way to God. It’s a blasphemous coin, is it not? I can’t believe for one moment that when Jesus said “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars,” that Jesus is actually saying, Oh sure, Tiberius, love the guy, he’s a megalomaniac. He violently and unjustly slaughters the Jews. On his coins, he claims to be God and on the back of his coins, he claims to be the Great High Priest that will show you the way to God. I can’t believe Jesus said, Oh yeah, give him whatever he wants. Be loyal to him. Stick with that guy. I think Jesus holds the coin, he sees the blasphemous image, and he says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” He just tosses the thing away. He doesn’t want any part of such contrary-to-God talk as what he sees on that coin.

Father John Haughey, years ago was the priest of St. Peter's Catholic Church downtown. While he was here, he wrote a book called The Holy Use of Money, and on the first page, he says, in Church we have to talk about money because the fact is, in society, money talks all the time. It talks all day long, it talks every day. Church barely gets a word in on Sunday, so we've got to say something when we have the opportunity. I thought about what he writes, money talks. And money does talk. I've been asking myself this week, what does money say? I've been reading my money. I've brought some money this morning to read to you. I only have two bills. I had more money last night. My son picked my pocket to go Scarowinds. So I'm down to just two bills. But I've been reading all my money this week, and it's fascinating what money has to say to you if you stop and read the thing. For instance, this one, it's autographed by somebody. That's good. It's autographed by Henry Paulson, that's a guy, I don't know where he is, he's got a headache this morning. He's the Secretary of the Treasury. That's got to be tough. The second one, this is something, it's autographed by Lawrence Summers. Do you remember him? He was Secretary of the Treasury then he went to become President of Harvard, but he got booted out from being President of Harvard because he seemed to think women aren't as smart as men. Well, it's his autograph on my money. Just interesting. Money, it has pictures of presidents on it. And thinking about presidents, I hope you will come on Tuesday night. Grant Wacker is coming to give a lecture on the history of religion and presidential politics in America. He's brilliant and wonderful. He's a biographer of Billy Graham you know, and I know people in the Graham family who tell me that he's told them things about their lives that they didn't know, which is cool. The president, this is interesting, the best presidents are on the lowest denominations of money, right? Not that I've seen many of the higher denominations of money, but the best presidents are on the lowest denominations of money; Washington and Lincoln. You know, why is that?...All the money says something. I never noticed this. It's in a little tiny font, I had to get a microscope to look at it. "This is one dollar. This note is legal tender for all debts". I think they should add in parenthesis, "but not many debts". It's only a dollar, right? You know, if you gamble a little over bridge, you know maybe that will pay off your debt, one dollar. This is legal tender for all debts. It seems kind of worthless, doesn't it? It's just a dollar. I had a penny the other day, it's just a penny. Who keeps up with those anymore? Maybe that's part of our problem, isn't it? We don't know how to be attentive to things that are small. When I was a little boy, a penny was like a big deal. One; I didn't have that many of them, and I was happy to get them and I always learned that if you happened to be walking around...Those of you who are young don't know what I'm talking about. But when I was a little boy, the idea was if you were walking around and you saw a penny, you were like, "Ahh!" You snapped it up and put it in your pocket. That meant that you had some good luck coming your way. Now people just step on a penny, walk on by. Annie Dillard tells that when she was a little girl growing up in Pittsburgh that she would take some pennies and she would go out and she'd hide them somewhere, you know, like in the crack of a sidewalk or in the little nook, the root of a tree, and then she'd hide and see if somebody would find the pennies. She said sometimes people, they'd miss it, so she'd get chalk and she'd put big arrows on the sidewalk and write, "Treasure this way. Surprise ahead." And then she'd watch people find the penny. And she said, what we all need in our soul is that disposition where finding a penny will blow your mind and make your day. If you don't have that anymore, you miss it because, as she puts it, thinking about the wonders of God's good creation, she says our world is fairly studded in pennies cast broadside by a generous hand. But if you don't know how to notice the little

penny that God has planted in creation any more than you don't notice anything. If you can't value what is small and precious, then you can't value anything any longer. If you can't value the person who is like a penny because they're poor or they seem to be insignificant, then you can't value yourself or anybody else that you might fawn over because they seem to be a great person. We are, all of us, stamped with the image of God. Can we see this? It seems like it's a small thing, but let us remember that Jesus came as a small thing.

Jesus did not come down big and overwhelming and all mighty to overwhelm his foes. No, Jesus came down as just a baby. And what we can see in the baby's face, in Jesus' face, I think we get a little reminder of this every time we have a baptism and I hold these children. We carry them down the aisle, you see them. What we see in each of those faces, what was flawlessly reproduced in Jesus, is the very image of God. We look into the face of the Baby Jesus and we see. We see God. We see the image of God. And that image of God in Jesus' face isn't just there for us to look at, it becomes a mirror. And as we look into the face of Jesus, we begin to notice in ourselves the image of God. We forget this, day in and day out.

On Friday of this week, I went by Carolinas Medical Center. One of our church members, a longtime friend, was very sick there. What happened is I went to see him, and within just a few minutes, he actually took his last breath. Died, at 58 years old. He was an interesting church member by the way. I've been doing what I do for a living for 28 years. He's the only person I've ever had who was a church member who would scold me for being far too conservative. ..He would scold me for being too conservative. He was an archliberal, voted straight Democratic ticket every time. What happens in the world, see, is that that kind of thing goes on, and conservatives look at liberals and they think, "Airheads, numbskulls, how could anybody be that empty in the head as to be a liberal and vote Democratic?" And then the liberals and the Democrats look at the conservatives and thing, "Fools, stupid. How could..." This goes on all the time. But I was with one the other day when he breathed his last. And when you're with somebody who dies, you notice something that's extraordinary. You don't see a kooky political opinion or a brilliant political opinion, you see a child of God. You see in their breath, and they're not having a breath any longer, but our commending them to God. You see that the only thing that matters at the end of the day is the image of God. All of us. He came into the world the way Jesus came into the world, as a small child, stamped in the image of God. He left this world the way Jesus left this world, dying probably too young. Stamped in the image of God.

Something happens with money. I don't understand it exactly. Money's never the end. Money is always the means to the end. Money always represents something else. We miss this all the time. We think it has ultimate value. It does not. Money's a means to an end. It represents something else. I've told some of you before, when I was a little boy I would go to visit my grandfather, and when I would go to leave... I loved him so dearly, and I was always sad to leave his home. And always as I was getting ready to leave, he would hold out his hand and I would hold out mine, and he would drop into my palm a 50-cent piece. He didn't have much money and I didn't have much money either, and I needed 50 cents, but I never spent the 50-cent pieces because he wasn't giving me money to spend, he was giving me like a piece of himself that I could take home and treasure when I wasn't with him anymore. Money always represents something else. Did this happen to you? When I was a little boy, I guess I was asking

my dad about the meaning of money and he kind of gave me an Econ 101 lesson when I was six or seven. I don't know if this is accurate or not, this is the way he explained it to me. He said that money represents all this gold that the United States has that's housed in Fort Knox. There's this big stash of gold there, and then we print money to represent it. Did you learn this? Is this Econ 101? It's got to be more complicated than that. It only represents something else. The other day when it was announced that Wachovia was folding, we got on the computer here and we found everybody for whom we had an "@Wachovia.com" e-mail address and I started just one after another, sending notes to people just saying we're thinking about you, we're praying for you, what's it like, can we help you. Anyway, the first reply I got back was stunning. It was from a young woman, works for Wachovia. She said, I read in the paper this morning that this is corporate greed. She said, But I look around my office, I don't see any greedy people. I see people that are working hard and trying to do their best. They want to be able to work, to excel at what they do. See, she was saying it's not really about money at the end of the day, it's just a means to something else. Money. Money is interesting, isn't it? After the first service, somebody gave me money. This is welcome at any time, by the way. Somebody gave me money. It's one of these new dollar coins, and what he wanted me to talk about, and it was in my notes already, so I'm on to this. This is the new dollar coin and it does not say, "In God We Trust." If you read your green money, read the front, it's fascinating. But then you turn it over and you read the back of the money. Now the back of the money, it says, "In God We Trust." I'm the only living human being who feels this way. This makes me very nervous. Most Americans want the money to say, In God We Trust, and they're troubled by the new coin that doesn't say In God We Trust, but I don't know. I'm somebody that In God We Trust makes me very nervous, because I can always not turn the money over and pretend it's not there. I'll just look at the front of the money and I'll go spend it on something I want to spend it on. But if I turn the money over and it says In God We Trust, now what that implies is that when I spend it I'm putting my trust in God on exhibit. That my spending somehow illustrates my trust in God. Or maybe you don't have as much money that says In God We Trust, but the question is, Do we trust in God, or are we putting our trust in the money? See, there are messages on the money, which is so valuable to us if we think about it.

Jesus read the money. They handed him the money and he read the money and he said, Who's image is on this money? The whole notion of image. It's everything in our world, isn't it? Image, image, image. All the advertising is that you've got to think about your image and who are you hanging around with and what are you wearing. Some of you, you know, you've seen me around. I ride my bike to get exercise. And I got chided the other day by somebody who saw me on my bicycle and said, James, as a biker, you're a failure. And the reason is, is that you don't wear those brightly colored tights that other bikers wear. And I said, Are you kidding me. I'm Senior Minister of Myers Park United Methodist Church. If I'm wearing those multicolored tights, people would just hoot. It's image. See. We think about our image. Image seems to be everything.

On those Roman coins, there was a faint image by somebody claiming to be God who was not God. The true image of God is stamped in Jesus' face. We think about our image as a Church. We think about how the Web site is going to look and how's the bulletin going to look. We need to pay attention to that, but at the end of the day, the image of the Church isn't any artistic thing. The image of the Church is you, it's us. What kind of people are we? What kind

of people are we? Do we reflect in some way the image of God? Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." I think he throws the coin away, doesn't want any part of it. But then he says "Render unto God the things that are God's." Well what are the things that are God's? Sometimes we think the things that are God's are, Oh, you know, an hour on Sunday morning when we're in town and a little quick prayer before we have a meal, and, Oh, maybe I read an old devotional book now and then. But we're missing it because Jesus doesn't say, Render unto God, oh those few little religious exercises that seem pleasant. No, Jesus says, "Render unto God the things that are God's." And what are the things that are God's? Well, that would be everything, it would be your whole life. It would be every breath that you take, every talent that you have, every passion in your heart, whatever you happened to own, it all belongs to God. Do we render it to God? And what does that look like?

I'm on the verge of preaching too long, but I want to close by singing. I know you got up this morning and you hoped Dr. Howell would sing to us this morning. That kind of reminds me of the old story about the preacher who had a gravelly voice, and he would say, When I'm sad, I sing, then others are sad with me. A song that I want to sing to you is a country song. This is not heard often in these quarters. It's a country song, and I was never a country music fan. You know, I grew up on classical music, and still, that's mostly what I listen to. Chopin is a particular favorite. I also love rock. You know, Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, that really works for me. For years, I knew there was such a thing as country music, but I kind of held that in derision, I thought, country music? What is that about? But now I get it, and I dig it, and you should too. You know, who can beat for instance Rhett Akins singing, "*That's My Girl, But That Ain't My Truck*". You don't get that thought in Chopin anywhere. Now the way I came to fall in love with country music is I went to Nashville one time and I had a meeting about how to get preachers to preach better. And usually we get preachers to tell preachers how to preach better, and this seemed like a dumb approach to things. So we decided to find some other people who were good at what they do and get them to teach preachers how to preach better. So we said, Let's get a songwriter. So, somebody introduced me to this country songwriter named Don Schlitz. And I had never heard of Don Schlitz, but a few of you are going to nod because Don Schlitz has won, I don't know, 20 Grammy Awards. He is a gold standard country songwriter. I met him. I was embarrassed. I said, I've never heard of you. You've never heard of me either. We'll just have this going on. He tells me all this. He's just a humble guy. He's great. And I said, How do you write your songs? And he said, Oh, you know, my kid will make a comment at the breakfast table or I'll be walking through the mall and I'll see somebody. He just gets his ideas out there in the world. He sees somebody sitting in a truck, you know. And so I said, What's your best song? He said, Well, there's one that won a Grammy Award. And he said, I didn't sing it. He didn't have a very good voice himself. He said it was sung by Tanya Tucker and Paul Overstreet and Paul Davis. And I want to sing it for you. I got in the shower this morning, I practiced my country voice. And here it goes. The song goes like this, "How much do I owe you said the husband to his wife, for standing beside me through the hard years of my life? Shall I bring you diamonds, shall I buy you pearls? Say the word and it's yours. But the wife said, I won't take less than your love, sweet love. No, I won't take less than your love. All the riches of the world could never be enough 'cuz I won't take less than your love." Now the second stanza...

I know you're... (Applause.) No, no, no, no. I know you're fearful now that I'll leave the ministry gig and go into singing, but I'm going to stay. I'm going to stay. The second stanza is, "How much do I owe you to the mother says the son for all the things you taught me when I was young? Shall I cast fancy pillows upon your bed or a soft pillow for to rest your weary head? And the mother says, "No, I won't take less than your love."

The reason I'm bringing this song up to you is the third stanza. Having thought about those two relationships, the third stanza goes, "How much do I owe you said the man to his Lord for giving me each day and every day that's gone before? Shall I build a temple? Shall I make a sacrifice? Just say the word and I will pay the price. But the Lord said I won't take less than your love." Did you get it? The image of God. It is stamped on everything. The question is, Do we trust in God? Is He our great high priest, the one who ushers us into the presence of God? I don't believe there are any greedy people here. I think we just have hardworking people who want to find meaning and purpose in their life, and their clue is on the money, oddly enough, reminders to trust God, to trust God, to love God. God came small, like a penny. Do we notice? Do we notice that God won't take less than our love?