



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Render to God the Things that are God's Luke 20:20-26

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We'll be looking at Luke 20:20-26 this morning, but I want to backup and review a bit. When it comes to reading and understanding the Bible, context is *everything*. In the last two chapters we've seen Jesus on his final approach to Jerusalem. As he started the final leg of his journey in Jericho, Blind Bartimaeus cried out to him, "Jesus, son of David!" That's was a messianic ascription of kingship. Bartimaeus believed Jesus could heal him because he believed that Jesus was God's King and that as God's King he had authority. Then we see Jesus riding on a donkey from Bethany to Jerusalem. He was acting out the prophecy spoken by Zechariah of the Lord's King coming to deliver his people, riding humbly on a donkey. The people waved palm branches and spread their cloaks on the road as they sang the words of Psalm 118—a psalm about the the Lord coming to rescue and to save his people. Jesus wasn't what the people were expecting in the Messiah, but the people—many of them at least—gave him the benefit of the doubt and gave him a royal entrance into the city.

Jesus' claim to kingly authority didn't end there. The first thing Luke tells us he did after arriving at Jerusalem was to enter the temple to rebuke the chief priests and religious leaders—and much of the Jewish nation right along with them—for turning what was supposed to be a house of prayer, a house of worship, into a den of robbers. It wasn't so much about the commerce going on in the temple. That actually had to take place so that the people could pay the temple tax

and offer their sacrifices. The real problem was that the Jewish leaders had sold out and compromised with Caesar. For others the temple had ceased to be the place where earth and heaven meet, the place where God meets graciously with sinners, the place to which Israel was to bring the nations for redemption and for renewal. Instead, the temple had become a symbol of nationalism, of exclusion, of self-righteousness, and a place where the people of God would gather to pray for judgement to come on the nations. They'd turned the purpose of the temple upside-down. And so Jesus came and disrupted the prayers and the sacrifices, effectively proclaiming that this was the beginning of the end for the temple. The chief priests and religious leaders demanded to know by what authority Jesus did this. He wasn't a Levite. He wasn't from the priestly tribe and had no right to do these things. But remember: Jesus is the son of David. Even a blind man could see it. And it was David, the king, who had planned the temple and it was David's son, Solomon, who built it. As the Son of David, Jesus *did* have the authority over the temple.

And interspersed between all of these events are Jesus' parables. Jesus declared in Jericho that he was bringing salvation, but the people were angry with him because he was declaring salvation to the wrong people—to tax collectors like Zacchaeus. Jesus responded with a story about a man who went to a far country to receive his crown and who came back as king to judge his servants. When the chief priests and elders questioned his authority to teach in the temple, Jesus responded with a story about a man who rented his vineyard to tenants who beat his representatives when they came for the produce. The man sent his son and the wicked tenants killed him. And so the owner returned himself, casting them out and giving the vineyard to others. Finally, Jesus told them a story about a building site—much like the site of the temple where he was

teaching and where workman still had thirty or forty years to go before finishing the renovations Herod had begun. He told the people about a stone rejected by the builders that eventually became the keystone of the whole project.

There was no mistaking what Jesus was saying: He was the king, returning after having received his crown; he was the son of the vineyard owner murdered by the wicked tenants; he was the stone, rejected by the builders, but eventually to become the cornerstone of a new and better temple. He was the King, come to inaugurate a new and better kingdom and to call Israel to account for her rejection of the Lord and of the mission he had given her.

Jesus claims authority: as the Son of David, as the Messiah, as the Lord's King. And the chief priests, the scribes, the elders—the Sanhedrin or ruling council of the Jews—they refuse to accept it. They become obsessed with finding a way to take Jesus down. And yet he turns their questions and accusations against them and makes them look like fools in front of the crowds. This is where we're at as we come to today's passage. Look with me at Luke 20:19-20.

**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. So they watched him and sent spies, 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 are the leaders of Israel left to whisper and murmur in secret as they conspire against Jesus. Every time they've tried to bring him down, Jesus has turned their questions against them. Now they're the ones looking foolish as the crowds watch. So they send their agents to Jesus covertly.

They want something to justify handing Jesus over to the Romans. And Luke paints a picture of these undercover agents going to Jesus and trying to flatter him and set him at ease so that they can trap him.

**So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?”** (Luke 20:21-22)

They address him respectfully as “Teacher”. They try to flatter him and to show that they think highly of him: he speaks and teaches what is right, he truly teaches the way of God. They appeal to him to answer their difficult question on the grounds that he’s honest and upright and also that he’s known for not showing partiality. Jesus isn’t afraid to rebuke the high and mighty if that’s what needs to happen and he’s not afraid of the consequences: We know you’re not afraid of Caesar Jesus, so tell us what you think of him. And so they ask him a question with lots of potential to get him into lots of trouble: “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar?”

Again, context is everything. We need to understand the background of this question. The tribute they refer to was the poll- or head-tax assessed by the Romans on all the adult males in the territories and provinces they conquered. As a tax it didn’t amount to very much: just a single denarius each year—about a day’s wages. But it was the principle of the tax that was a problem for the Jews. The Jews believed that the Lord was their king. Their identity as a people was forged in the Exodus, when the Lord rescued them from slavery in Egypt and set them free in a land of their own. Their more recent national hero was Judas the Hammer, who had revolted against their pagan Greek overlords, driven them out, cleansed the temple, and established a new monarchy. But year

in and year out as they paid tribute to the Romans, they were reminded that all of that was in the past. Even in their own land, they were subjugated and ruled by pagan Caesar. Many people felt that to pay the tax was tantamount to denying that the Lord was their king.

It didn’t help that to pay the Roman tax, they had to use Roman coins. These coins ordinarily bore an image of Caesar—at this time it would have been Tiberius—and an inscription describing him as “son of God”. The coins themselves were blasphemous. They were a violation of the Second Commandment against graven images and they were doubly blasphemous in ascribing divinity to Caesar. There were some among the Pharisees who taught that it was a sin even to look at the coins. The Jews were so outraged by the usual imperial coinage that the Romans removed the image of Caesar from the coins struck in Judaea, but they still bore that inscription: “Tiberius, son of God”. Just to use the coins was for a Jew to deny the kingship of God and to break the commandments.

While most people simply paid the tax because they didn’t know else to do, it didn’t stop them from being troubled by it. Many of the religious leaders: the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the Sadducees knew that to refuse to pay the tax was to declare open revolt against the Romans. They’d had seen the Romans do to people and nations that revolted and it wasn’t pretty. It was also true that the Romans had a unique relationship with Judaea. They had had enough trouble with the Jews that they were willing to make some compromises. They took the image of Caesar off the local coins and they let the Jewish authorities govern the temple and local worship. But the Romans would only compromise so much. The Jewish leaders knew that if they stopped paying the tax the Romans would remove them from power and would

very likely stop their worship and desecrate the temple. And so the Jewish leaders encouraged people to pay the tax. It was the price of being able to continue to serve and worship the Lord. (It was also the price of being able to stay in power.) They argued it was a justified compromise: Yes we know that God is King, but we have to pretend that Caesar is or they’ll kill us all.

But there were others who objected. They said it was unlawful to pay tribute to the Romans. It was a denial that the Lord was Israel’s King. It was blasphemous to handle the Roman coins used to pay the tax. Most of them seemed to have paid it anyway. It’s one thing to talk about not paying your taxes, it’s another thing to actually stop paying them. But not too many years before, in A.D. 6, a man known as Judas the Galilean had started a revolt. He reminded the people that the Jews had no master but the Lord and that to pay the tax was to deny this and that it was to comprise with pagans. The Romans brutally put down his revolt.

And yet both these sides, both these arguments were still out there. Everyone agreed that the tribute was bad, but ordinary people were caught in the middle: Was it okay to pay because paying the tribute kept the Romans from interfering with their worship and their temple (and from coming down on them like a ton of bricks) or was it wrong to pay tribute no matter what? This is the question they’re asking Jesus because they think it will sink him. If he says that it is indeed unlawful to pay the tribute, they can go straight to Pilate and expose him as a revolutionary. (This is, in fact, what they end up doing.) But, on the other hand, if he tells the people that it’s okay to pay the tax because what God is interested in is a “spiritual” kingdom rather than a worldly one, the people will reject Jesus. They’re looking to him as Messiah to set everything to rights in

the *real* world, not to give them spiritual cop-outs and pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. The sad irony is that this is precisely what many Christians have done with Jesus' answer: They've copped-out by spiritualising the kingdom of God and the lordship of Jesus and giving Caesar lordship over the world: Caesar is lord of *this* world and Jesus is Lord of the *next*. Of course, the Good News says just the opposite!

How does Jesus answer them? Look at 23-25:

**But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."**

Jesus wasn't born yesterday; he knows exactly what game they're playing with him and once again he turns their question back on them and puts them in the hot seat. Instead of answering their question he asks them to show him one of the coins used to pay the tax. One of them pulls a denarius from his coin purse and shows it to Jesus before he realises that he's just hanged himself with his own rope. If this coin is so blasphemous, what's it doing in his purse? Jesus drives this home by asking him the obvious: "Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" And, of course, they answer: "Caesar's". Jesus reveals that they've already made up their minds. Clearly they don't have a problem carrying around Caesar's coins, which means they've come up with some comprising rationalisation for paying his tax too. Presumably it was as obvious to the crowds as it was to Jesus that these were spies of the religious leaders trying to trap or to discredit Jesus. It backfired. He stole their thunder. He deflated their balloon. He could have left it at that, but he does give them an answer and

his answer points beyond both the compromise of the priests and elders and the revolutionary zealotry of men like Judas the Galilean and the kind of messianic revolution the people were longing for—Jesus points them to the true reality of the kingdom of God. He tells them: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Jesus echoes words that everyone would have known. Two centuries before, the priest Mattathias lay on his deathbed and inspired his son, Judas, to lead a revolt against the pagan Greeks. It was that revolt that the people commemorated every year when they celebrated Hanukkah and they all knew the story very well. As he was dying Mattathias said to his sons:

**Pay back the Gentiles in full and heed what the law commands.** (1 Maccabees 2:68)

These were the words that followed a career of zealously calling the Jewish people away from compromise with pagans and back to the law. Mattathias tore down altars circumsised all the Jewish boys he found whose parents had neglected to do so. These were words that inspired Matthias' sons to revolt openly against the Greeks. He charged them to keep the Lord's law and as far as the Maccabees were concerned, to keep the law meant revolting against the Greek, driving them out, and cleansing the temple so that the Lord could once again be King in Israel. And that's exactly what they did. Jesus echoes those words and in them the people would have heard him saying that to render to God what is Gods—to be faithful to the Lord's law—meant paying back the Romans in full. The people would have heard Jesus talking about revolt.

At the same time, though, there's a second layer of meaning. Jesus'

words sounded like revolt when you heard them echoing Mattathias, but at the same time, there was Jesus saying "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's" while he holding up Caesar's coin for everyone to see. With the coin *right there*, Jesus' response is also undeniably a statement that you'd better pay your taxes! So which is it? Do you suck it up, compromise the law, and pay your taxes or do you revolt against Caesar? *The answer is both and neither.* And Luke says:

**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.**

They marvelled. Jesus changed the paradigm and they couldn't quite wrap their heads around it. And I think it's hard for us understand too, because we're too often trapped in the same mode of thinking as the people who were trying to trap Jesus. They looked at the pagans around them, the pagans who were oppressing them, the pagans who were insisting that they compromise their worship and their faith and their service to the Lord and they only saw two options: Either you go along with the blasphemous compromise in order to keep your skin intact, or you rose up in open revolt, drew your sword, and charged into battle for the Lord the way Judas the Hammer had done. Not many Jews were interested in doing that anymore. It worked for Judas the Hammer against the Greeks, but when Judas the Galilean tried it against the Romans everyone ended up dead. In a generation the Jews would try open revolt again and it would result in their destruction. But this is what so many people were hoping for in the Messiah. They couldn't revolt on their own, but the Messiah would come with the Lord's blessing and with supernatural help. With the Messiah they could pull it off. These were the two choices: compromise or war.

Today we face something similar. I'll say first that we here in North America face nothing like the persecution of either the Jews of Jesus' day or the Early Church, but we do face hostility from the pagan world around us. Our culture is moving increasingly away from a biblical morality and worldview. And what responses do we see? We see many Churches and many Christians compromising with the world. We're afraid people won't like us, so we hide our principles in the closet and hope no one will look in there. Many often go so far as to deny fundamental tenets of our faith and practise and twist or throw out portions of the Bible to justify it. On the other hand, many Christians are ready to put up a fight. "Don't tread on me!" If we can't have our way and if the world is against us, we'll push legislation that will make everyone see things our way—or at least live our way, whether they want to or not. In our democracy, legislation and the ballot boxes are our means of taking up the sword against our enemies. If we can only capture Caesar's power for ourselves and for our agenda, we can manifest the kingdom of God and drive out God's enemies. Or, a third option, we spiritualise the kingdom of God and compartmentalise our lives: Caesar here, Jesus there. Obey Caesar in the things of this world and Jesus in the things of the next, as if the kingdom of God is pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, not a present reality here and now.

Again, Jesus changes the whole paradigm. The Jews—and many Christians today—are looking for the right answer to the wrong question. Do we compromise with Caesar or take up the sword against Caesar? Those are the only two options we see. But Jesus offers another and we see it manifest at the core of his ministry: at the Cross. Jesus brought a revolution and he brought it because he refused to compromise, but it was a revolution unlike anything the world had ever seen. He called the people to the true

and uncompromised worship of God. He called the people to repent: to turn away from *everything* that was not of God's kingdom. He reminded them and he reminds us that he is Lord, that God is King, and that Caesar, whatever form he takes, is a cheap imitator and failing rival. By his very life, Jesus undermined the false lordship of Caesar. He exposed Israel's idolatry as she tried to save her skin and keep her place in the world through compromise with Caesar. He called for an end to all these things. And for it he went to his death. For a brief moment, Peter tried to stop it. He drew his sword and attacked one of the soldiers arresting Jesus. For just a moment it looked like the revolution everyone was hoping for might begin. But Jesus told him to put it away and he healed the soldier. Instead, Jesus took on himself the punishment the Romans meted out to revolutionaries. He took Israel's punishment on himself. He bore the pain of rebellion and provided a means of escape, of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of restoration not just for Israel, but for the whole world—for all those who would repent, turn away from the old ways of compromise and violence, and follow him in trusting faith.

The martyrs of the century that followed and the martyrs of our own day continue to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's". A century and a quarter after Jesus began his revolution in humility on the Cross, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyra, like so many other of our brothers and sisters, was arrested by Roman soldiers. He didn't draw his sword. Instead he invited them to come into his house and to share his dinner. He wanted to tell them about Jesus. They bound him to a stake and demanded he renounce Jesus and acknowledge Caesar, but he refused so they burned him alive. Polycarp rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's and rendered to God what is God's. The

history of the Church is full of stories like this and it was through the blood of the martyrs, who followed Jesus in faith even to death, that the Roman empire was transformed and that even the emperor eventually acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus as he saw their witness.

Brothers and sisters, *this* is the story we tell. This is the Good News we preach with no compromise. Jesus dealt with sin and rebellion and violence, not by meting out violence and death, but by taking sin and rebellion and violence on himself. He took Israel's punishment in his own flesh. He died the death that sinners deserve. He rose three days later, victorious over sin and death. And now he calls us to trust him and to follow in his footsteps in faith, uncompromisingly rendering to God the things that are God's, even if that means rendering to Caesar our privilege, our security, our freedom, or even our lives as witnesses to the humble and servant way of the Cross: the only means of bring life and restoration into the darkness of this world.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you have shown us a new way of life in the way of the Cross. In the Cross you have given us the only way to true life and you call us to proclaim it to the world. Israel compromised her witness and her mission, but that life and witness were redeemed by Jesus. As he now calls us to himself and to witness the life he offers to the world, keep us faithful. Give us the grace we need not to compromise that witness for the sake of our privilege or freedom or even for our lives. Give us faithful courage to follow Jesus, sacrificing whatever is necessary that we might clearly declare to the world that he is Lord and that in him is life. We ask this in his name. Amen.