

Render unto God

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Noting that Jesus' interlocutors in today's gospel reading were truly amazed at his answer, Stanley Hauerwas comments that it's too bad Christians have not been equally amazed. Rather than being amazed that Jesus has come to usher in God's reign, we are preoccupied with the politics and rulers of the world. Rarely do we think and behave as though we are full citizens of God's kingdom. We use a passage like today's to justify living in a kingdom that divides faith and citizenship, and rendering unto each whatever "due" we decide fits at the moment. This is a losing proposition.

Why? The Pharisees' question was a bad question from the start. Rooted in a plot to entrap Jesus, it was motivated by malice and posed by hypocrites. That hardly seems like a good beginning to a political ethic. Yet many Christians continue to spout "render unto Caesar"—out of context and undigested—as a complete political ethic.

We asked a couple of New Testament colleagues for input. "Do we owe anything to Caesar?" replied the first. Instead of immediately answering "of course," and quoting [Romans 13](#) on subjection to governmental authorities, we suggest letting the question sink in. "If God be God, do we owe anything to Caesar?" Or "If Jesus be raised from the dead, what's left to owe the government?"

The Old Testament lesson is also about politics, since it asks, "Is Israel really the people of God, and if so, will God go with them to the promised land?" In [Exodus 33:1-11](#), God more or less said, "I'm not going there with you." A preacher shouldn't shift focus to Moses' character, as if the whole thing turns on whether Moses is the master negotiator, whether he has the diplomacy needed to bring God around to an equitable settlement for Israel. The character that matters in this scenario, the one that truly shapes this politics, is God. It turns out that God's character is rooted in mercy and forgiveness (33:19, and 34:6-7), so that when Moses has the courage to ask God to forgive Israel (34:8-9), God delivers.

All this means two things: First, if you preach this lesson, preach both the verses that precede it and the story that follows; the lesson as given just doesn't make much sense. Second, preach that God's politics is a politics of forgiveness, compassion and mercy. If we start with that as bedrock, then at least we'll know who we, the church, are called to be as citizens of God's kingdom.

Jesus is God's politics incarnate. He lives the answer to the Herodians' pernicious question: he renders to God all that is God's, offering even his own life in obedience. That doesn't leave much for Caesar, does it? So Caesar takes by violent crucifixion what is God's by right, as if Jesus' life were a tax due for homeland security. But not even Caesar's violence can destroy Jesus' politics of the new world on the way. He welcomes us into this politics of the reign of God—whose kingdom is justice, righteousness, mercy and forgiveness. Let us pray *and live*, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.