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### To Coin a Phrase

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*Psalm 99; Matthew 22:15-22*

Over in the West End, just off Noblestown Road, there is a street on which you may have driven. It has a funny kind of a name. The name is Obey Street. Obey Street may or may not make you wonder: obey whom? Obey our parents, our teachers, our boss? Is that what comes to mind? We obey the government, especially when it requires us to do things like obey traffic laws — or to obey tax laws.

When I hear the word *obey*, I think of that phrase that Jesus coined in this portion of the Gospels: *Render unto Caesar*. Of course, this passage is familiar to us as it appears in the King James Version, where it says, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." "Give to the emperor ..." is the updated translation, which may convey more clearly the message, but the phrase "Render unto Caesar ..." has come down to us from this passage until today. It is used by people who may not even know from where it came, but they do know what it means. It means that we have to give a certain amount of our wherewithal to the government — like it or not.

But there is more to the story than that. Because the reality is that Jesus does not answer the question they ask Him. Instead, He takes the conversation to another level. He puts before them the whole matter of deciding what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. He does not state what those things are. He wants them to understand it through the eyes of faith and in their hearts and their daily living. Well, really, He wants us to understand it. He is pretty well aware that neither of these two groups are really going to get it, anyway.

And so when He says, "*Render unto Caesar*," He both deflects the question and calls upon each of us to search our hearts and minds and spirits for an answer — probably one that will take us further than ever it would have taken the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Before we leave the Pharisees and the Herodians behind — which everyone is glad to do — just a reminder, first of all, that the denarius was Roman currency. Biblical scholars tell us that faithful Jews did not permit Roman currency into the temple precincts to be used as offerings. Yet isn't it interesting, when Jesus asks the Pharisees and Herodians to produce a coin there in the temple precincts, what do they have and hand Him quickly but a denarius? So they, who thought themselves superior to our Lord and Savior in all religious matters, were carrying that image of Caesar right into God's temple. Do keep in mind, as well, that these two groups had nothing in common except the fact that they were not at all happy with Jesus — and the effect that He was having on the people, and the fact that He was exposing their own hypocrisy. Otherwise they had nothing in common and hated each other's guts.

The question brings forth the occasion for everyone to ponder the question and Jesus' reply — to say, "All right, what really does belong to and should be rendered unto Caesar? And what really does belong to God and should be rendered unto God?" When we answer these questions, our faith is shaped. We make decisions about how we use our resources, our time, our money, our energies, and so much more. What will we buy? What will we save? What shall we give, and to whom?

If we are going to be paying our taxes to the government as we should, a modern-day version of *Rendering unto Caesar*, we also are called upon to give to God what is God's. We give to God what is God's whenever we love our neighbor. We give to God what is God's when we value one another. We give to God what is God's when we respect one another. And we give to God even as we forgive others, and ask for their forgiveness.

Another way of saying it is, we are going to give Caesar whatever is rightfully Caesar's, but we are not going to give Caesar anything more than that. At the same time, we are going to give God what is rightfully God's. And no matter which way we approach that philosophy, we end up with the same viewpoint: We are going to give God everything — all that we have, all that we are, all that we hope for, all that is dear to us.

A good question for every believer is, “How am I using what God has given me?” When we understand that God has given us everything, then we will ask that question about everything. For instance, we love our families dearly. How are we entrusting them to God, praying for them, guiding them in the paths that lead to righteousness, and honoring who they are? The same is true of everyone else we meet. The same is true of everyone with whom we work. The same is true of every gift and talent that we have. Are we putting it to use for the very best and highest purposes, along the lines of Jesus Christ? Or for something less? Are we rendering it to God? Let us pray that we are.

What belongs to God? Our deepest self belongs to God. Just take a moment to let that settle in. Our deepest self belongs to God; so, of course, we will give our deepest self to God. We will render unto God the things about which we are most worried; the things about which we pray; the things that would otherwise keep us awake all night. There is the opportunity of relinquishing these things and saying: “I give myself to You, God. I give my worries and troubles to You, God. I give my highest praise to You.” What a wonderful sign of faith it is when, in the worst of times, we give God our best — and, in the most challenging of times, we give to God in hopefulness and trust.

Do you not know that God entrusted you with money — and all that it provides — so that you can: buy necessities for your families; feed the hungry; clothe the naked; help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, as far as it will go, relieve the wants of all humankind? We can and we dare honor the Lord by applying what we have to God’s good and great purposes. It is not so much whose face is impressed upon that coin, as it is whose love is impressed upon your heart.

We cannot say, “This part belongs to God, so I will give it to God.” Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Everything we are and everything we have, we are to give (back) to God. We are but mere managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us.

Just off Noblestown Road there is that street named Obey — when I hear the word *obey*, I think of that old hymn, “Trust and Obey.” That is what our Scripture passage is reminding us to do.

*Trust and obey,  
For there’s no other way  
To be happy in Jesus,  
But to trust and obey. Amen.*