

Render Unto the Children
Matthew 22:15-22

I know this is Children's Sabbath, and we are celebrating children, and this passage says nothing about children. But it does say something important about priorities, and we need to consider carefully what priority should have in our families and in the world.

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's." As we continue to study the teachings of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, this one is very relevant to our every day lives. Jesus is giving us a principle which is very important to guiding our lives. The principle is this: God above all else, but not God alone. God must come first in our lives. But, as we serve God, we have other commitments and responsibilities. If we understand this principle, it will save us from two serious mistakes which Christian disciples often make.

The first mistake is to live as if, as Christians, we have no other responsibilities or commitments other than to God. We don't see that so much among Methodists. But some denominations and religious groups teach that Christians have no obligations outside of their commitment to God and to their church. Of course, the extreme example would be those religious groups which draw their members away from all other relationships.

Citizenship is another commitment. Some religious groups try to take away any sense of citizenship. They do not allow its members to say the Pledge of Allegiance or serve in army or observe national holidays. To a lesser extent, there are churches and denominations which don't prohibit support of the government, but they don't encourage it either.

Jesus tells us that we have a responsibility to support our government. We should pay our taxes. We should obey the laws. We should serve our country. We should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. As Christians, we have a responsibility to work together with our fellow citizens, in whatever country we live, for the good of our neighbors.

However, we should never forget that our highest commitment is to God and to all of God's children. But, we should also render unto God that which is God's.

It is absolutely essential that we not forget this. If we do, we go to the opposite extreme of the first mistake. Rather than having no commitment to our country, some people give their nation their ultimate commitment. When we do that, we make an idol, a false god, of our nation. God, and God alone, is worthy of our complete and unconditional commitment. God, and God alone, is worthy of worship and praise.

Our commitment to our nation must be conditional. When we say the Pledge of Allegiance, we mean it, but not absolutely. We are saying that we will support and serve our nation and its government—as long as our nation does not call on us to do things which are contrary to the will of God. And by the will of God I mean anything which is immoral or unethical.

We know we have rendered unto Caesar the things that are God's when we start thinking that our country can do no wrong. We must serve God above all else, including our nation. God alone is worthy of unquestioning and total obedience. Nations and governments are made up of people. People are sinners. God loves sinners and so do we. But when we are dealing with people, we always have to be careful. Sooner or later, in some form or another, people will manifest their sinful nature. If you have made an absolute commitment to any person, you will get caught up in their sin. The same is true of groups of people. The same is true of nations and governments.

When we come to the conclusion that what is good for America is good for the world, that the highest priority must be to protect our nation's position as the strongest and wealthiest nation on earth and that we must force the whole world to follow us and our way of life, and that we can use whatever means are necessary to accomplish this, we have rendered unto Caesar what is God's.

We give our whole hearts to God, and no one else. When we see our nation giving in to sin, we have to step back and say, "This is wrong, and I will not support it." Those who have made idols of their country will say you are unpatriotic. But, in reality, the opposite is true. Sin always undermines a nation. We have been a strong nation because of those who put God first, not in spite of them. For the sake of our nation, we must render unto God what is God's. We must worship and serve God alone with our whole hearts. We serve our nation by calling it to hold firm to the standards of righteousness which come from God and joyfully giving our taxes, our obedience and our service to our nation when it is confirming to those standards of righteousness.

These same principles apply to our family lives, especially our children. For our children's sakes, we should render unto our children that which is our children's and render unto God that which is God's.

This is important, because people make the same mistakes with children that we make with our nation.

Just as some people deny and reject their nation, some people deny and neglect their children. We have an obligation to give to our children and the children of the world those things which belong to them. They have a right to be protected. They have a right to healthy food and clean water. They have a right to be taught what is true and what is right. They have a right to our time and our attention. They have a right to our unconditional love and a fair opportunity to win our approval.

All of us adults have a responsibility to see that children have these things. Certainly we have a responsibility to provide all these things for our own children. But we also have a responsibility to see that all the children of the world have them.

We must render unto the children those things that God has ordained belong to the children. But we must not give children the things which belong to God. God, and God alone, is to be worshipped and praised. God, and God alone, is worthy to receive our unquestioning approval.

When our children can do no wrong in our own eyes, and we praise them uncritically, we have made idols of them. They have taken God's place in our lives.

Certainly we are to love our children unconditionally. Whatever my children, or my grandchildren, or your children, or the children of total strangers, or children who don't belong to anyone, whatever a child does, we will love them. We will want them to have a happy, healthy and fulfilling life. We will want them to have a life that is

abundant and eternal. And we will do all within our power to help them have these things.

While our love for our children is unconditional, our approval must be conditional. That does not mean we will give them our uncritical approval. We will hold them to the standards of righteousness. We will teach them the importance of responsibility. When they do well, we will tell them they have done well. When they don't, we will help them understand what they have done wrong and why it is wrong. We will help them see the consequences of their mistakes, and we will encourage them to do better. But we will also let them know that we disapprove of what they have done.

By our example, we will teach them that, as much as we love them, we love God more. They need to know that they are not the center of the universe, nor are they the center of our lives. That belongs to God, not to them.

For our children's sakes, we must be careful to render unto God the things that are God's. Any child who grows up thinking that the world ought to bow down and worship him or her because his parents did is doomed to have a difficult, frustrating life, because that child has been spoiled rotten.

But those children who see in their parents a whole-hearted commitment to God and God's holiness will be shown the way to life that is truly abundant and eternal.

Let us render unto our children those things which God has ordained belonged to our children and the children of the world. But let us reserve for God, and for God alone, those things which are God's.

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