

Study a Bible passage

Matthew 22

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John Calvin Commentary

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The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

22

21They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

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21. Render therefore to Caesar those things which are Caesar's. Christ reminds them that, as the subjection of their nation was attested by the coin, there ought to be no debate on that subject; as if he had said, "If you think it strange to pay tribute, be not subjects of the Roman Empire. But the money (which men employ as the pledge of mutual exchanges) attests that Caesar rules over you; so that, by your own silent consent, the liberty to which you lay claim is lost and gone." Christ's reply does not leave the matter open, but contains full instruction on the question which had been proposed. It lays down a clear distinction between spiritual and civil government, in order to inform us that outward subjection does not prevent us from having within us a conscience free in the sight of God. For Christ intended to refute the error of those who did not think that they would be the people of God, unless they were free from every yoke of human authority. In like manner, Paul earnestly insists on this point, that they ought not the less to look upon themselves as serving God alone, if they obey human laws, if they pay tribute, and bend the neck to bear other burdens, (Romans 13:7.) In short, Christ declares that it is no violation of the authority of God, or any injury done to his service, if, in respect of outward government, the Jews obey the Romans.

He appears also to glance at their hypocrisy, because, while they carelessly permitted the service of God to be corrupted in many respects, and even wickedly deprived God of his authority, they displayed such ardent zeal about a matter of no importance; as if he had said, "You are exceedingly afraid, lest, if

tribute be paid to the Romans, the honor of God may be infringed; but you ought rather to take care to yield to God that service which he demands from you, and, at the same time to render to men what is their due." We might be apt to think, no doubt, that the distinction does not apply; for, strictly speaking, when we perform our duty towards men, we thereby render obedience to God. But Christ, accommodating his discourse to the common people, reckoned it enough to draw a distinction between the spiritual kingdom of God, on the one hand, and political order and the condition of the present life, on the other. We must therefore attend to this distinction, that, while the Lord wishes to be the only Lawgiver for governing souls, the rule for worshipping Him must not be sought from any other source than from His own word, and that we ought to abide by the only and pure worship which is there enjoined; but that the power of the sword, the laws, and the decisions of tribunals, do not hinder the worship of God from remaining entire amongst us.

But this doctrine extends still farther, that every man, according to his calling, ought to perform the duty which he owes to men; that children ought willingly to submit to their parents, and servants to their masters; that they ought to be courteous and obliging towards each other, according to the law of charity, provided that God always retain the highest authority, to which every thing that can be due to men is, as we say, subordinate.<sup>63</sup> The amount of it therefore is, that those who destroy political order are rebellious against God, and therefore, that obedience to princes and magistrates is always joined to the worship and fear of God; but that, on the other hand, if princes claim any part of the authority of God, we ought not to obey them any farther than can be done without offending God.

63 "Est subalterne, comme on dit; c'est à dire, en depend;" — "is subordinate, as we say; that is, depends upon it."