

Luke Chapters 20-21: Render Unto God What is God's From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Luke

After Jesus is welcomed as king in Jerusalem, there is a passage in Luke that has often been used wrongly to separate the world of work from the kingdom of God: Jesus' saying about taxes. The teachers of the law and the chief priests try to "trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). They ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. In response, he asks them to show him a coin, and immediately they produce a denarius. He asks whose portrait is on it and they reply, "Caesar's." Jesus says, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25).

This reply has sometimes been interpreted as separating the material from the spiritual, the political from the religious, and the earthly and from the heavenly realms. In church (God's realm), we must be honest and generous, and look after the good of our brothers and sisters. At work (Caesar's realm), we must shade the truth, be driven by worry about money, and look out for ourselves above all. But this misunderstands the sharp irony in Jesus' reply. When he says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he is not sanctioning a separation of the material from the spiritual. The premise that Caesar's world and God's world do not overlap makes no sense in light of what Jesus has been saying throughout the Gospel of Luke. What is God's? Everything! Jesus' coming into the world as king is God's claim that the entire world is God's. Whatever may belong to Caesar also belongs to God. The world of taxes, government, production, distribution, and every other kind of work is the world that God's kingdom is breaking into. Christians are called to engage that world, not to drop out of it. This passage is the opposite of a justification of separating the work world from the Christian world. It calls us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's (taxes) and to God what is God's (everything).