



Catalog No. 1969

Luke 20:19–26

69th Message

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November 2, 2014

LET GO AND GIVE

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Let Go and Give

We are in the midst of ten rounds of heated controversy played out between Israel's leaders and Jesus, after he has come to the Temple as its rightful king. In the earlier chapters of Luke they confronted Jesus in Galilee, now Jesus takes them on in their house, the temple. With radically different views of the kingdom, everything is riding on this heavyweight fight, the outcome of which will determine the fate of Israel's history and the world.

In the first round, Jesus entered the ring with ferocious authority and cleansed the temple of all vestiges of commercialism, traffic, and noise, restoring it to its rightful place as a house of prayer for all the nations. When the dust settled, he delivered a stinging sermon right out of the book of Jeremiah, accusing Israel's leadership of turning God's house into a den of thieves. These actions were a public declaration that he was Israel's rightful king, and that the temple was doomed to destruction. One can hardly imagine actions or words more controversial. It is no surprise that they provoke a vehement response by the Sanhedrin. No question about it, they want him dead.

In round two the temple authorities take to the ring hoping to deliver a decisive blow, but instead are paralyzed for fear of the crowd, and retreat to their corner without throwing a punch. Meanwhile Jesus, having shut down all commerce in the temple precincts, transforms the Sanhedrin's shopping mall into a "teaching zone" with the crowds hanging on his every word.

In round three the authorities interrupt the teacher by throwing a question at him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things?" Jesus counters with a question of his own, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" The question knocks the wind knocked out of his opponents, forcing them to once again retreat back to their corner. As they consult with one another, they realize that whatever answer they give, they will have lost the round. So they play dumb, "We don't know." And Jesus responds in kind, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

In round four Jesus goes on the offensive and flattens his opponents with a penetrating parable that indicts them for their corruption, greed and murderous intentions. In contrast he paints the portrait of his own destiny in bold relief as the cornerstone of God's new temple (Ps 118:22) that will be built out of the ruins of the old. To drive his point home, Jesus takes his stand directly over his dazed opponents, looks them right in the eye and says, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken into pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (Luke 20:18 ESV). Those who reject the Son will suffer one of two fates: Either they will stumble on the stone and be broken into pieces; or the stone will fall on them and they will be crushed into bits so fine, they become like chaff (Isa 8:14–15; Dan 2:24). Either way, it's not a pretty sight. Hearing Jesus' pronouncement of victory the crowd leaps to their feet and fills the arena with resounding shouts of joy. Welcome to round five.

I. The Attack (Luke 20:19–22)

A. Double-agents lurking out of the shadows

The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere (lit. "righteous"), that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. (Luke 20:19–20 ESV)

Jesus has now pushed the anger of the scribes and chief priests past the boiling point, but fearing the crowd's overwhelming support for Jesus, they are unable to take Jesus into custody. Bloodied and humiliated, they are forced to regroup outside the temple precincts and opt for Plan B. Operating out of the shadows, they send double agents to do their surveillance and gather evidence against him. If Jesus is caught saying anything that is politically subversive, that will give them a basis to deliver him over to the authorities. Mark tells us that the delegation was made up of two rival parties who had a strong dislike for one another—the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisee party favored revolution against Rome, while the Herodians compromised with Rome to secure their political and economic power. Both parties have a vested interest in Jesus' claims.

B. A theological trap

So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" (vv. 21–22)

The spies play the role of being "righteous" and fawn over Jesus, lauding him as the holiest and most discerning teacher in the land. Their words have an air of calculated dignity and perfect symmetry, with "teacher of truth" at the bookends and impeccable "impartiality" sandwiched in the middle. Perfect words, so sweet they are sickening. The irony of it all is that what they say is the absolute truth, yet the formality is so overdrawn, it places their words at a great distance from their hearts. It takes precious little discernment to see right through their diplomatic airs to the demonic ploy just below the surface.

The events of the previous days have created an opportune time to force Jesus' hand. Since he has just cleansed the temple, claiming to be Israel's true king, they are eager to discover what this Galilean revolutionary will say about paying the census based poll and land tax. All Roman taxes were unpopular, but the "tribute" was a tax paid to a foreign ruler and therefore especially odious to the people. Jeffrey Gibson summarizes what the tax meant to the Jews.

Economically, it represented an additional, bitter financial burden, since it was added to other civic and religious taxes. The result was that taxes totaled nearly 30 to 40 percent of a person's income. Politically, the tribute went to support the hated imperial court in Rome and the pagan cult of the Roman state. It kept the

subject nation ever mindful of its domination by a superior power and represented tacit assent to the legitimacy of these institutions. Theologically, it was an infringement of the first commandment with the blasphemous imagery and denial of God's ownership of the land.¹

When the tax was "first imposed by means of Quirinius' census when Judaea became a Roman province under direct rule in AD 6, it was the immediate cause of the revolt led by Judas of Galilee in that year."² His battle cry was, "No tribute that puts God's land and people under the hegemony of foreigners."³ At the opposite end of the spectrum was the Sanhedrin, who was responsible for collecting the tribute. Though some would have questioned their fidelity to God, they felt the compromise was a small price to pay for the security Rome provided for the temple and all that it represented in return.⁴ Garland sets forth the dilemma:

Should Jesus openly oppose the tax, it would be tantamount to inciting rebellion against Rome, which warranted execution (23:2). Should Jesus, however, answer "yes" to the question, it would negate any messianic claim he might make, since everyone expected the Messiah to deliver Israel from such subjection.⁵

Their method has become a time-honored strategy used in all political campaigns. In order to malign your opponent you lure him into taking a stand on a controversial issue that divides the populace. Once he has committed himself to a particular position that will then identify him with the entire party line. The result will be that the other half of the population will become his enemies. What will the prophet from Galilee say?

II. Jesus' Counter-attack (Luke 20:23–26)

A. Incriminating evidence

But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." (v. 23–24)

Discerning their trap, Jesus takes the offensive and subverts their question with one of his own to expose their evil motives. "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" The poll tax had to be paid in Roman coinage. On one side of the coin was an image of Tiberius with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, Son of Divine Augustus." On the reverse side a female figure was "seated on a throne, wearing a crown and holding a scepter in the right hand and a palm or olive branch in the left. The superscription reads: PONTIF[ex] MAXIM[us] (Chief Priest)... The denarius oozes idolatry."⁶ Which explains why "for everyday commerce Jews were able to avoid 'idolatry' by using copper coins, locally minted, which bore no image."⁷

Coming from Galilee, Jesus was not liable to pay the tax and therefore he doesn't possess such a coin. But his questioners are able to produce one, which incriminates them for bringing a graven image into the temple, and exposes their hypocrisy in asking the question. For they demonstrate that they have no religious scruples about handling idolatrous imperial money. As his questioners hold out the idolatrous coin, Jesus gives his famous aphorism.

B. Caesar's claim upon us

He said to them, "Then render (lit. "give back") to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (v. 25)

Jesus begins his conclusion with "well then," suggesting the answer to their question should be obvious. If Caesar's image is stamped on the coin, it must be his property. Therefore "give back" to Caesar what rightfully belongs to him. Tom Wright explains that when Jews heard the phrase, "Give back to Caesar what is his due," they immediately thought of revolution, of taking up arms and paying back the gentiles in full for their oppression. That was the "way" of Zealots and Pharisees, and one that was invoked every Hanukkah during the celebrations of the Maccabean heroes, who successfully fought against the pagan enemies, cleansed the temple and refortified Jerusalem. Their battle cry became, "Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law."⁸ But Jesus subverts that idea, and says paying your taxes to an oppressive government is inconsequential to the kingdom of God. So send those idolatrous coins back from whence they came.

C. The "Day of the Lord" changes everything

Jesus had nurtured his understanding of his role in history, not on the stories of the Maccabean heroes, but on the writings of Israel's prophets. After the Exodus, God mediated his rule as a theocracy, anointing Israel's leaders with both spiritual and political (military) power. Under the Lord's direction, Israel was to engage in holy war fighting the Lord's battles. But power corrupts, and it didn't take long before Israel's leadership became as idolatrous, greedy and corrupt as the pagan nations around them. Despite God's faithfulness and forbearance in sending his prophets to rebuke them and warn them of impending judgment, they refused to listen.

Finally, in the mid-eighth century BC the prophet Amos announced a terrifying new development in holy war under the phrase the "Day of the Lord." Bruce Waltke explains:

The term emphasizes the experience of *I AM's* character and usually points to a future comprehensive judgment by *I AM* on his enemies. Amos (ca. 760 BC) proclaims that the Day of the Lord is coming, but it will be a day of darkness and not light. For the instruments of Israel's theocracy: corrupt magistrates, unholy priests and false prophets have positioned themselves as the *I AM's* enemies.⁹

"Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?"

"And on that day," declares the Lord GOD,

"I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation;

I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head;

I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day." (Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9–10)

Now the tables are turned as the Lord of Armies redirects all his power to fight against his people. To Israel's horror, the "sword" of kingdom is taken from them and is given over to Gentile nations (Assyria and Babylon), who become instruments of God's judgment on the nation. In 586 BC even the temple is laid to waste and only a faithful remnant remains. After the exile the political fate of his people still remains in the hands of Gentile empires—Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. From now on God's witness to the world will no longer be mediated through a carnal, political kingdom, but through his prophetic word. Out of the ashes a future king will

arise, who will have the full measure of God's Spirit and will smite the earth with the sword of his mouth (Isa 11:1-5). God's kingdom will not be established by the sword, but by the Word and Spirit, transforming human hearts by conquering the real enemy behind the world powers. Waltke concludes:

It will be a kingdom that does not rely on territorial boundaries for its breadth, on military weapons for its security, or law codes for its justice. The new kingdom...administered by a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) will be a covenant of peace and an everlasting covenant (Ezek 37:26).¹⁰

The separation between political and spiritual powers continues into the New Testament. Luke's two-volume work is cast under the vast shadow of the Roman Empire, which prepared the stage for the spread of the gospel by establishing peace for nearly two centuries and constructing a massive road system (55,000 miles) across the empire. With the eye of faith, Luke's audience is able to view Quirinius' census through a different lens than that of Judas of Galilee, who championed rebellion against Roman greed and oppression. Behind the edict was the hand of God, who used the greed of a world monarch to transport Mary and Joseph seventy miles south from Nazareth to Bethlehem, just in time to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Micah seven centuries earlier (Micah 5:2). And now at the climax of his ministry, Jesus proclaims to Israel's leaders that God will use the Roman armies as instruments of his judgment to destroy Jerusalem and its temple.

D. God's claim upon us

He said to them, "Then render (lit. "give back") to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (v. 25)

The second half of Jesus' aphorism is even more compelling. For God has stamped his image on every human being, and has a more fundamental claim upon us than any human government. We owe God our very being. Tom Wright notes that Jesus is evoking the call to worship the one true God echoed in psalm and prophecy:

Give to the Lord, you families of the peoples,
give the LORD glory and strength.

Give the Lord the glory of his name;

bring an offering and come into his courts.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, "The Lord is king!" (Ps 96:7-10; 29:1-2)

To worship in the Temple was also to celebrate the Lord's kingship over the pagans (nations and their idols). The context of the quotation is instructive. The passage follows from a standard denunciation of foreign idolatry:

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.

Splendor and majesty are before him;

strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. (Ps 96:4-6)¹¹

Give to God and God alone the honor that he deserves, not that which Caesar blasphemously claims. And at this moment in history it would clearly imply giving honor to his Son and following in the "way" that he is implementing his reign over the nations. The real

revolution would not come about by the non-paying of taxes or violent revolution, but in Jesus' dying for the whole world. How ironic that the first one in the gospels to comprehend this is not a religious Jew, but a Roman centurion (Luke 23:47; Mark 15:39). Jesus did not defeat Rome by fighting against her, but in dying for her. Suffering in order to embrace others remains the most revolutionary force on earth.

III. The Sound of Silence (Luke 20:26)

And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent. (v. 26)

Round five ends with Israel's leaders exposed for their hypocrisy and, failing to catch Jesus in a word, stand condemned by their own words, "You *truly* teach the *way of God*." The Pharisees, while renouncing pagan idolatry, have adopted the pagan *way of coercion and violence* to bring in the kingdom. In Jesus' terms, they are as guilty of idolatry as the Herodians, who compromised with Rome to secure their idols of wealth and power. Like the tenants in Jesus' previous parable, both have failed to give God what is due him. God has the last word, not to mention the silence after.

Silence is a gift. It is God reaching out to his enemies one last time. Silence slams the door on all our reasoning. There are no words left. Without words we are defenseless and are forced to confront ourselves in the nakedness of who we are. Silence is a crucible to address our longings and loneliness, our desires and emptiness, our addictions and cravings. Silence surfaces all that is false, every lie that has been the foundation of our lives. That's the dark side of silence. But if we are able to resist the urge to rationalize, run and escape, silence has the potential to lead us to a new place where we learn to listen with our hearts (Ps 4:4). In the midst of that deafening silence we hear the "still small voice" of God (1 Kgs 19:12).

If you are presently attentive to that voice, what might God be asking you to "give back" to him? Who plays the role of Caesar in your life? What does he or she demand of you? Have you been like the Sanhedrin, making compromises with the world system to protect the things you worship? What or who do you find the most difficult to give over to God? What is your fear in letting go?

IV. Faith's Secret

As I was pondering these questions, I wondered what was the secret that transformed the apostles so completely that they were able to follow Jesus with their whole hearts and joyous spirits, knowing it would cost them everything, including their lives? How is that Peter can stand before the Sanhedrin, that just weeks earlier had orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion, and boldly refuse to be intimidated by their demands to stop preaching in the name of Jesus? Where does he find the courage to say, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20)? Or how are Paul and Silas able to rejoice with the singing of hymns at midnight after they have been unjustly beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25)?

The only answer I can come up with is—they witnessed the cross. The trauma began in Gethsemane. Though the disciples fell asleep, Jesus strengthened his soul in prayer. But consider the beating the disciples' faith takes, when Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss and hands Jesus over to the Roman authorities. What does that do to your theology of prayer? Peter is so incensed, he immediately seizes his

sword and strikes the servant of the high priest and cuts off his ear. Jesus severely rebukes him and takes time out from being arrested and heals the slave's ear. Then Jesus is subjected to a kangaroo court, where evil is allowed to play every card in its hand. The charge against him would make your blood boil, as he is accused of “misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king” (Luke 23:2). The injustice escalates when the crowds shout for Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus. Barabbas was guilty of murder for the zealot cause of the revolution. He was the epitome of what Israel had become, and Jesus dies in his place! Then Jesus is subjected to unspeakable torture, being mocked, spit upon and flogged. Few victims survived flogging, and when the Romans were done, Jesus did not even resemble a human being. Finally there is the journey to Golgotha, climaxed with three hours of excruciating agony. Do you think the disciples had any faith left when the religious and governmental authorities carried out every whim of the devil, until evil exhausted itself on that tree? The disciples were so terrified, they didn't even stay and watch.

And then came Sunday when everything became clear. With the resurrection Peter acquired a new lens to see that “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isa 40:15). In his first sermon he boldly testifies, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2: 23–24).

The question for you is —Do you have a new lens?

1. Jeffrey B. Gibson, *The Temptations of Jesus in Early Christianity* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) quoted by David E. Garland, *Luke* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 502–3.

2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 464–65.

3. Garland, *Luke*, 801.

4. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 712.

5. Garland, *Luke*, 801.

6. Garland, *Luke*, 801.

7. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 466.

8. Tom Wright fills in the background: “As the old revolutionary Mattathias was preparing to die, he made a speech to his sons, exhorting them to zeal for the law, and invoking the zealous heroes of old. The speech ends as follows: ‘Judas Maccabaeus has been a mighty warrior from his youth; he shall command the army for you and fight the battle against the peoples. You shall rally around you all who observe the law, and avenge the wrong done to your people. Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law.’ With that, Mattathias died...Judas took command, led the revolt, fought the battle, defeated the pagan army, cleansed and restored the Temple, re fortified Jerusalem – and established a royal dynasty that lasted for a hundred years. Through Herod's marriage to Mariamne, it was still in existence in Jesus' own day.” N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 504

9. Adapted from Bruce K Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology; An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 400–1.

10. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 402–3.

11. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 505.