EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE XX. 20–26.

20 And they watched *him,* and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of his words, that so they might deliver him unto the power and authority of the go­vernor.

21 And they asked him, saying, Master, we know that thou sayest and teachest rightly, neither acceptest thou the person of *any,* but teachest the way of God truly:

22 Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Cæsar, or no?

23 But he perceived their crafti­ness, and said unto them, Why tempt ye me?

24 Shew me a penny. Whose image and superscription hath it? They answered and said, Cæsar’s.

25 And he said unto them, Ren­der therefore unto Cæsar the things which be Cæsar’s and unto God the things which be God’s.

26 And they could not take hold of his words before the people: and they marvelled at his answer, and held their peace.

LET us mark, for one thing, in this passage, the *cloak of goodness under which some of our Lord’s enemies approached Him.* We read that they “sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men.” We read further that they attempted to impose on Him by flattering words: “We know that thou sayest and teachest rightly, neither acceptest thou the person of any, but teachest the way of God truly.” Those words sounded well. An ignorant bystander would have said, “These are sincere inquirers after truth!” But all was hollow and unreal. It was the wolf putting on the sheep’s clothing, under the vain idea of deceiving the shepherd. Their words were “smoother than butter,” yet there was “war in their hearts.” (Psalm lv. 21.)

The true servant of Christ must expect to meet persons of this description, as long as the world stands. There never will be wanting those, who from interested or sinister motives will profess with their lips to love Christ, while in heart they deny Him. There will always be some, who “by good words and fair speeches,” will attempt to deceive the heart of the simple. The union of “burning lips and a wicked heart,” is far from uncommon. There are probably few congregations which do not contain some of those whom Solomon likens to “potsherds, covered with silver dross.” (Rom. xvi. 18. Prov. xxvi. 23.)

He that would not be often deceived in this wicked world, must carefully remember these things. We must exercise a wise caution as we travel through life, and not play the part of the “simple who believeth every word.” (Prov. xiv. 15.) We must not lightly put confidence in every new religious volunteer, nor hastily take it for granted that all people are good who talk like good men. Such caution at first sight may appear narrow-minded and uncharitable; but the longer we live the more shall we find that it is needful: we shall discover by experi­ence that all is not gold that glitters, and all are not true Christians who make a loud profession of Christianity. The *language* of Christianity is precisely that part of religion which a false Christian finds it most easy to attain. The walk of a man’s daily life, and not the talk of his lips, is the only safe test of his character.

Let us mark, for another thing, in these verses, *the consummate wisdom of our Lord’s answer to His enemies.* We read that a most difficult and subtle question was proposed to Him for solution. “Is it lawful to give tribute to Cæsar or no?” It was a question eminently calculated to entangle anyone who attempted to answer it. If our Lord had replied that it was not lawful to pay tribute to Cæsar, He would have been accused to Pilate as a rebel against the Roman power. If our Lord had replied that it was lawful to pay tribute to Cæsar, He would have been denounced to the people as regardless of the rights and privileges of the Jewish nation. An answer which would not involve our Lord in difficulties, seemed at first sight impossible to be found. But He who is truly called “the wisdom of God,” found an answer which silenced His adversaries. He bade them show Him a penny. He asked them whose image and superscription was on that penny? “They answered and said, Cæsar’s.” At once our Lord made that penny the groundwork of a reply, at which even His enemies were obliged to marvel. “Render,” He said, “unto Cesar the things which be Cæsar’s, and unto God the things which be God’s.”

They were to “render to Cæsar the things which were Cæsar’s.” Their own lips had just confessed that Cæsar had a certain temporal authority over them: they used the money which Cæsar had coined; it was a lawful tender between man and man. They probably had no objection to receive gifts and payments in Roman coin; they must not therefore pretend to say that all payments to Cæsar were unlawful. By their own admission he exercised some dominion over them: let them obey that dominion in all temporal things. If they did not refuse to use Cæsar’s coin, let them not refuse to pay Cæsar’s temporal dues.

They were to “render to God the things which were God’s.” There were many dues which God required at their hands which they might easily pay, if they were inclined. Honour, love, obedience, faith, fear, prayer, spiritual worship, were payments to God which they might daily make, and payments with which the Roman government did not interfere. They could not say that Cæsar made such payments impossible. Let them see to it that they gave to God His dues in spiritual things, as well as to Cæsar his dues in temporal things: there was no necessity for collision between the demands of their temporal and their heavenly sovereign. In temporal things, let them obey the powers, under whose authority they allowed themselves to be; in spiritual things let them do as their forefathers had done, and obey God.

The principles laid down by our Lord in this well-known sentence are deeply instructive. Well would it have been for the peace of the world if they had been more carefully weighed and more wisely applied!

The attempts of the civil power in some countries to control men’s conscience by intolerant interference, and the attempts of the Church in other countries to interfere with the action of the civil power, have repeatedly led to strifes, wars, rebellions, and social disorder. The injuries which the cause of true religion has received from morbid scrupulosity on one side, and servile obsequiousness to State demands on the other, have been neither few nor small. Happy is he who has attained to a sound mind on the whole subject! To distinguish rightly between the things of Cæsar, and the things of God,—and to pay to each their real dues regularly, habitually, and cheerfully, is a great help towards a quiet and peaceable life.

Let us often pray that we may have wisdom from above in order to answer rightly when perplexing ques­tions are put to us. The servant of Christ must expect a portion like his Master. He must count it no strange thing if the wicked and worldly-minded endeavour to “entangle him in his talk,” and to provoke him to speak unadvisedly with his lips. In order to be prepared for such occasions let him often ask the Lord Jesus for the gift of sound wisdom and a discreet tongue. In the presence of those who watch for our halting, it is a great thing to know what to say and how to say it, when to be silent, and when to speak. Blessed be God, He who silenced the chief priest and scribes by His wise answers, still lives to help His people, and has all power to help them. But He loves to be entreated.

NOTES. LUKE XX. 20–26.

20.*—*[*Spies.*]The Greek word so rendered is only found here. Parkhurst defines it as meaning “liers in wait.” [as in those who are “lying in wait to ambush.”]

22*.—*[*Lawful to give tribute to Cæsar, &c.*]Let it be remembered that a large party among the Jews bore the yoke of the Roman government most uneasily, and were disposed to regard with the greatest enmity any Jew who conceded that the Jewish nation was altogether in a tributary position under the Roman Emperor, or “Cæsar.” The question of our Lord’s enemies was so artfully framed, that it seemed to place Him in a dilemma. Whatever answer He gave, it seemed that He must offend one of two parties: He must either give offence to the friends of the Romish supremacy or to the zealots among the Jews.

23*.—*[*Craftiness.*]The Greek word so translated is only found five times in the New Testament. It is the same word that is used in describing Satan’s “subtilty” in tempting Eve. (2 Cor. xi. 3.)

24*.—*[*Whose image and superscription.*]Lightfoot tells us that the Jews have a tradition among them, that to admit the title of any prince on their current coin was an acknowledgment of subjection to him.

25*.—*[*Things which be Cæsar’s...things which be God’s.*]Few principles contain more deep wisdom than the famous one in this verse. Few however have been found to admit of such difference as to practical application.

The grand difficulty in applying the principle arises from this: that men do not agree what are the “things of Cæsar,” and what are the “things of God:” where the claims of “Cæsar” end, and where the claims of God begin. A meeting place there must be; a boundary to the respective claims of each party must be laid down: the definition of this boundary has been in every age a fertile cause of strifes, divisions, and contro­versies.

On the one hand the English government under the Stewarts used to push the claims of “Cæsar” to a fearful extreme. Men were persecuted, and punished, and fined, and imprisoned, like felons, because they would not worship God in a particular way. In this case “Cæsar,” beyond all doubt, was stepping out of his province.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church, in modern times, is continually interfering with the civil power of every nation where Roman Catholics live, and claiming for her mem­bers immunities and privileges which threaten to interfere with the existence of civil government altogether. In this case we have an extravagant and unreasonable assertion of the claim on behalf of the “things that are God’s.”

There are few subjects on which Christians have such need to pray for a sound mind and a clear judgment, and to ask for deliverance from a morbidly scrupulous conscience, and espe­cially on the question of the dues of “Cæsar.”

A conscience which is very tender and sensitive about a money payment which the State demands, but very careless in all matters of faith, and hope, and charity, and humility, and private holiness, is a conscience which, to say the least, is very suspicious.

So long as we have liberty to worship God in Christ, according to our conscience, and to serve Him in the way of His commandments, we may safely submit to many require­ments of the State, which in our own private opinion we do not thoroughly approve.

It is evident to every reflecting person, that all government must be the result of compromise, and that every member of the commonwealth must be willing to give up something of his private opinions for the sake of the general good. If every subject is to be excused paying the tax to which he feels an ob­jection, common sense tells us that all government must soon come to a stand-still. One will object to one tax, and another to another, until the whole State is thrown into confusion.

Gualtier has a very useful note on this passage, in which he maintains the principle just laid down by the example of the Jews under the rule of their Babylonian conquerors, and also bears his protest against the excesses committed by anabaptists in Germany, in the days of the Reformation, under the colour of conscientious scruples.

Our Lord had probably in view two parties among His hearers. One party was that of the Jewish zealots. To them He said, “Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s.” The other was that of the worldly Herodians. To them He said, “Render to God the things that are God’s.”