

Render to Caesar



*Matthew 22:15-22; Mark
12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26*

Year A Proper 24

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5
▲	Priest - another highly ranked priest of the Temple concerned mostly with his own power	▲		●		
■	Caiaphas - the high priest, a suave and amoral politician whose primary goal is the survival of the nation	▲		▲		
●	Nicodemus - a member of the ruling council who's a secret follower of Jesus	●				
▲	Elder - a member of the ruling council who's honestly undecided about who and what Jesus is	▲				
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		▲			
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room		▲			
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples		▲			
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples		▲			
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor				▲	
▲	Chuza - the open-minded, intellectually curious manager of Herod's household				▲	
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus					▲
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past					▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts					▲

Scene 1

Caiaphas , Elder , Nicodemus , Priest

{The priests and elders meet again.}

- Priest** This is intolerable! Every day he preaches another parable attacking our authority - declaring that we should be executed for crimes against God! - and we have to take it because we're afraid to arrest him.
- Caiaphas** *[correcting him]* Because we don't want to escalate what the Romans might see as a destabilizing conflict that they'll need to pacify.
- Nicodemus** *And* because he hasn't broken any laws!
- Priest** *[scornfully]* What are you, a secret follower of his?
- Elder** Please, please! Let's not carry the conflict into these chambers. What we need to do is think of a way to reduce his popularity with the people. Then we'll be freer to do what needs to be done.
- Priest** That's all fine and good, but how?
- Caiaphas** I happen to have an idea for that.
- Priest** Why didn't you say so in the first place?
- Caiaphas** I was just waiting for the noise to abate. *[to the Elder]* We'll need your help for this.
- Elder** Anything I can do.
- Caiaphas** I want you to contact a few of your more reliable Herodian friends.
- Nicodemus** Herodians?
- Priest** Those collaborators?
- Elder** I don't know that I have any Herodian *friends*.

Caiaphas Now, now. They're a respectable party. They simply express formally what every Israeli has accepted in his heart: that Herod is our king.

Nicodemus A king that was installed by the Romans.

Priest And not even fully Israeli!

Caiaphas Nevertheless, he is the king, and we all accept that because we'd like to stay alive. The Herodians simply have the courage to own up to the unavoidable. (But just to be on the safe side, perhaps you could recruit a few Pharisees to join them.)

Elder I think I can manage it. What do you want them to do?

Caiaphas Challenge our man on his loyalty to Rome.

{A pause while the other take this in.}

Priest What possible good will that do? It's not the Romans he's been attacking.

Nicodemus *[realizing the plan]* No, but that's what you're going to try to trick him into.

Elder I see! If we can get him to attack the Romans, they might arrest him themselves and solve our problem.

Caiaphas Exactly.

Nicodemus But what if he doesn't fall for it?

Caiaphas If he indicates his support of Roman rule, then he'll lose favor with the people, and we win again. *[to the Elder]* In fact, have your Herodians challenge him precisely this way: by asking him whether it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Nobody likes to pay taxes, so if he answers yes, they'll turn from him all the more.

Elder It's brilliant!

Nicodemus It's diabolical.

Caiaphas I must confess: it wasn't my idea. It came from a friend whom you could call a bit of a Herodian himself.

Priest The best thing about this is that on top of everything else, maybe he'll start pestering the Herodians or the Pharisees and give us some peace!

Scene 2

James , John , Matthew , Peter

{After Jesus handles the challenge, the disciple celebrate his victory over the Herodians.}

James That was awesome!

Peter I liked it better when he whipped those Temple parasites, but this was a pretty good beatdown, too.

John What are you talking about? What happened?

James A bunch of Herodians and Pharisees tried to trap the rabbi with words, and he wiped the floor with them.

Matthew I must admit: I was totally stumped by their question. I thought he was going to be damned however he answered it. But he found a way!

James Well, he *is* the Messiah.

John This is wonderful! I'm always forgetting what he's capable of. Tell me what happened.

Peter He was at the Temple again, like usual, just ready for whoever was going to come at him this time.

James We were expecting the priests to have another go, but this time, it was Herodians and Pharisees.

Matthew I'll bet the priests have given up. They know if they show their face one more time, he'll have the crowd crucifying them!

Peter So these Herodians walk up to him and start in on the sweet talk. *[in a mocking voice]* "Oh, you're such a good teacher!" "You have so much integrity!" "You teach the truth of God!" And I thought, "Look out!"

James Then they asked their poison question: Is it lawful to pay the imperial tax?

{There's a pause.}

John That was it?

Matthew Think about it. How would you answer? And more importantly, what would consequences of your answer be?

John Well, if he said no, then they'd have cause to arrest him on the spot, so that's clearly out.

James Yup.

John So he said yes. But that's what they wanted him to say, wasn't it? So the crowd would turn against him.

Peter It was *how* he said it. It was the smartest thing I ever heard anybody say!

John *[getting caught up in the excitement]* So come on! Tell me!

James He asked for a coin and someone came up with one, and then he asked who's picture was on the coin, and they said, "Caesar's." And then he said, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

{A pause while John mulls it over.}

John Wow.

James Right?

Matthew "Yes, we should pay the tax - and it's totally unimportant, the least of things."

Peter If Caesar wants to mint coins and pass them around and then ask for them back again, fine! Let him have his little toys!

John How did the crowd react?

James They cheered him!

Matthew And afterward, gathered around him asking him to teach them more about "the things that are God's."

John Wonderful! And the Herodians?

Peter They slunk away. *After* the rabbi called them hypocrites!

John I suppose we should expect challenges from other groups now.

James Bring'em on!

Matthew But who may abide the Day of His coming?
And who shall stand when He appears?
For He is like a refiner's fire,
And He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.
He will purify the sons of Levi,
And purge them as gold and silver,
That they may offer to the Lord
An offering in righteousness.

Scene 3

Caiaphas , Priest

{Caiaphas discusses the outcome with the Priest.}

Caiaphas [*happily*] "Render to Caesar" - I love it!

Priest But he escaped our trap!

Caiaphas Yes, he did - he's really got quite a head on those shoulders! - but still, the outcome was not all bad.

Priest How so?

Caiaphas Even though it didn't compromise his standing with the people, he *did* express support for Rome, and that can only help.

Priest How? All it means is that he'll be freer to attack us!

Caiaphas [*sarcastically but elegantly*] Ah, I see the disconnect here. You're primarily concerned with your own prestige and position. And in those terms, it does look bad. But I had thought as a priest of Israel you'd be more concerned with the health of the nation. And the nation's prospects, I'd say, were improved ever so slightly by

today's events. Not as much as they could be, mind you. I'd still love to be able to eliminate this wildcard of a rabbi if I could, but we may still have our chances, if we wait patiently and resist the urge to do something stupid.

Priest *[sputtering with indignation]* I assure you, my first thought is always for the nation! I serve the nation! And God!

Caiaphas Yes, yes, you're a fine priest. I have no problem with your ambitions. Not even your ambition to some day usurp me.

Priest *[shocked]* Your eminence!

Caiaphas In every respect, you're a fine example of a priest. I have no problem with any of you. I would simply ask that you adopt some patience - toward him and toward me. There's a lot you can still learn from us both before you have us put down.

Scene 4

Chuza , Judas

{Judas and Chuza discuss the day's events.}

Judas *[bleakly]* "Render unto Caesar."

Chuza I heard.

Judas That's it! That's the end! There's no hope now of his ever leading us to freedom from Rome.

Chuza I must admit, I wasn't expecting him to answer that way.

Judas You knew about the challenge ahead of time?

Chuza Actually, I formulated the plan and passed it on to Caiaphas. I'm sorry, but I felt I just had to do something. I thought I could prod him back onto the right track.

Judas That's all right. It might be best this way. Now we know.

Chuza How is the group taking it?

Judas That's the really depressing thing. They're celebrating like they just took another step toward the kingdom!

- Chuza** They didn't realize the significance of what he said?
- Judas** No. They only see that he won the rhetorical battle with the Herodians.
- Chuza** What will you do now?
- Judas** I'll stay in the group and do what I can to keep him from doing harm to the nation. Or to the others.
- Chuza** To the others? You think they're at risk?
- Judas** The priests - or even the Romans, despite today's capitulation - could always decide to move against him, and the others would just be collateral damage to them. We were all prepared to die for the Messiah, but I have no wish to die, or to see any of the others die, due to the ravings of a madman. *[a sudden thought]* Is Joanna here?
- Chuza** She's been spending her days with the group but coming home in the evenings. I'll speak to her tonight about not going back.
- Judas** Good. *[after a pause]* You know? She had always been one of the most thoughtful critics of the rabbi. I wish I'd paid her more heed.
- Chuza** She's an amazing woman. I'm glad to have her home again.

Scene 5

Joanna , Mary , Thomas

{Later that night at the house, Joanna speaks with Thomas and Mary on her way out.}

- Joanna** Well, goodnight, you two. I'll see you tomorrow morning.
- Mary** *[urgently]* My lady!
- Joanna** *[good humoredly]* You know, some time before this is all over, I'm going to get you to call me Joanna.
- Thomas** Can you stay a minute? Can we talk?
- Joanna** Sure. What is it?

Mary You shouldn't come back. In the morning. Or ever. You should go home and not come back.

Joanna Why? What's wrong? Have I offended you in some way?

Mary *[shocked]* No!

Thomas We've been talking, and we think...we think it might not be safe to stay in the group.

Joanna *[soberly]* I see. Well, we've always known the risks. We've all been prepared to die for the sake of the nation.

Thomas But it's not about the nation any more. Is it?

Joanna Ah. You've noticed that, too, have you?

Thomas *[with gentle humor]* Of course. I'm Doubting Thomas.

Joanna I'll admit the rabbi has not turned out to be what I hoped or expected, and that I've considered leaving the group for various reasons. But if anything, I would have thought the risk to life and limb has decreased.

Mary No! He's seeking it! He wants to be killed!

Joanna Mary!

Thomas We've been talking about it a long time, not just tonight. I'm not as certain about it as Mary is, but the fact is, he *has* talked about coming here to die.

Joanna Yeah, but they were just misunderstandings.

Thomas Were they? Think about it. Think hard and precisely. What exactly did he say, and how exactly - exactly! - did it turn out to be a "misunderstanding"?

{A long pause while Joanna thinks it over.}

Joanna *[in a subdued voice]* Wow.

Thomas People are good at not hearing things that don't fit into their belief systems.

Joanna *[fondly]* And you're Doubting Thomas.

Thomas So. Will you consider leaving the group?

Joanna Maybe. I'll speak with Chuza about it tonight. I assume you two will be leaving, too?

Mary *[shocked]* No!

Joanna Why not? If you're so sure that disaster awaits us?

Mary But it won't be disaster! If the rabbi has...has turned toward death, then that must be where the Kingdom is. And I'll follow him there.

Joanna *[with a combination of wonder, sadness, and affection]* Oh, Mary. *[to Thomas]* And you?

Thomas I'm staying, too.

Joanna *[doubtfully]* Because you believe in the Kingdom?

Thomas *[laughing]* No, no! It's because - where else would I go? I was happy to join these people even when I didn't believe what they did, and I'll be happy to die with them. They're my friends.

Joanna *[in amazement]* You two...But why are you urging me to leave, then?

Mary You don't believe.

Joanna I suppose that's true. But then neither does Thomas.

Thomas You have somewhere else to go. A place where *you* belong.

Joanna Maybe. And yet...I think I'll stay.

Mary *[in shock]* My lady!

Joanna I don't have your faith, or your love, but it seems you need a third to complete your circle. Say hello to Hope.

Thomas *[laughing]* Welcome to the Doomsday Club!

Mary Welcome to the *Kingdom*...Joanna.

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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