

Matthew 22:15-22 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax ^[a] to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

To Whom Do You Belong? October 12, 2017

Well, it’s only October but I guess it’s never too early to begin thinking about your taxes. As the old saying goes the two things we can count on are death and taxes. The Eiffel Tower, someone has said, is the Empire State Building after taxes. Someone else has said, "You may not agree with every department of the government, but you really have to hand it to the IRS." Arthur Godfrey once said, "I feel honored to pay taxes in America. The thing is, I could probably feel just as honored for about half the price."

There seems to be no end to the debate about taxes in our country and everyone has an opinion about it. But that is the price we pay for living in a country with great road systems, electrical connections for every home and business, communications, health care, retirement, fire and police protection, just to name a few of the benefits that we enjoy due to the taxes we pay. It isn’t always fair and there may be a better way to do it but as it stands, we enjoy benefits that those in Jesus’ day would only have dreamed of.

They too were accustomed to taxation. Taxation without representation I might add. According to Bible scholar William Barclay, “A tax was payable for using the main roads, the harbors, and the markets. A tax was payable on a cart, on each wheel of the cart, and on the animal which drew it. A tax-collector could bid a man stop on the road and unpack his bundles and charge him well-nigh whatever he liked. If a man could not pay, sometimes the tax collector would offer to lend him money at an exorbitant rate of interest and so get him further into his clutches.” No wonder tax collectors were despised. And these are just the taxes for the Romans. There were also taxes paid to the temple by the Jewish people to maintain that vast network and structure as well. We complain about the IRS, but they are sweethearts compared to the tax collectors of Jesus’ time. Still, taxes were a fact of life then, just as now. All of this is the background for our lesson for today.

Jesus has had many encounters with the Pharisees and Priests and Scribes over the last few weeks where he has turned them upside down and inside out making them look a bit foolish. They have decided to regroup and come up with a better plan to bring Jesus down which leads us to our encounter today. Today they are sending in their disciples to do their dirty work for them. Oh, they are well prepared with a question, or so they think. They are also accompanied by the Herodians who are political associates of King Herod. I like to think of them sort of as lobbyists who are looking out for the king’s best interest.

They gather around Jesus, and with tongues dipped in honey, begin to address him with all kinds of flattery. “Oh, Jesus you are so smart! Oh, you are the wisest and best teacher ever. You see everyone without pretense and oh, we think you are just terrific! And since you are so wonderful, would you please answer a question for us? Pretty please?” “Tell us what you think oh wise one. Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not? What do you think?”

Now you have to believe that Jesus is just shaking his head, and must have a look on his face that you would just want to pay to see. Really? Is that your question? Do you guys think I was born yesterday? If I say yes then the people will hate me and call me a hypocrite. If I say no, then you will run back to your bosses and the emperor and I’ll be in chains before the hour is up. Really? Didn’t I teach you this trick when we were talking about John the Baptist?

It’s a trap and they all know it. A really odd little chess game. Its politics, and we know something about that don’t we? We see this kind of exchange happening daily in the news ranging from health care to the national anthem. We are not strangers to this conflict of allegiances.

Jesus has been set up and he knows it. But as we’ve mentioned before, you should be very careful when asking Jesus questions because the outcome will rarely be what you think it will be. Jesus looks them straight in the eyes and says, “Give me one of the coins you are talking about.” Of course, they have the offending coin right in their purses, and even though they too find it offensive to deal in Rome’s currency, they have plenty of it in their pockets. Jesus asks, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

They answered, “Caesar’s.” And Jesus who is always turning things upside down tells them, “Then give to Caesar the things that belong to him.” And then he goes on to say, “and give to God the things that are God’s” which is precisely what he has been telling them from the beginning of this exchange that began back with the parable of the two sons! Give to God the things that belong to God! Well, that just takes the fight right out of them and they quickly make their exit. And it may make us want to make a quick exit as well.

But the story doesn’t end there because Jesus leaves us with this powerful statement and he ties it to the moving idea of this coin which bears an image that belongs to someone, and infers I think, that the image of God also rests upon those who belong to Him. That if this coin which bears the image of the emperor belongs to the emperor, what image do you bear that identifies you as belonging to God?

When Jesus asks, “Whose image is this?” it gets me thinking about those words from Genesis where in the creation story the writer reminds us that we are made in the image of God. I’m not always sure what that means, but I think at the very least it means, we reflect the image of God’s love in the world. That if Jesus were to pick us up like a coin and ask, “whose image is this?” what would he see? Is there a family resemblance?

I have this habit of keeping old Christmas cards. I don’t know why I do it, but this week I was doing some cleaning and came across my stash of cards and found three years’ worth of Christmas cards. There were some that caught my attention as I considered this idea of image and they were three cards with pictures of my granddaughters. You can see each year a few changes but overall what struck me was the incredible likeness they had to their mother and their aunt when they were the same age. You have to look twice sometimes to be sure who you are remembering. The family resemblance is strong and my children often get comments about how much they favor one another.

My mother often tells me that I remind her of her father. I walk like him and have some of his features. I have his temperament and caring nature. I have to tell you that it's quite a responsibility when someone thinks you remind them of their father, especially if it's your own mother. But that's what Jesus is seeing and saying here I think. That as we heard in Genesis, that he created us in His image, in his likeness, in his nature. And that all we are and ever will be, belongs to him. That we reflect the image of God in our lives and living.

When we consider that we may remind Jesus of His Father, that brings a level of responsibility that may make us a bit uncomfortable. And apart from physical appearance, how do we bear the image of the One we belong to? How do we give to God the things that are God's? What does Jesus mean by that? There is no question in Jesus' mind that everything belongs to God. But in light of the parables that have preceded this, perhaps what Jesus reminds those who are trying to snare him is that, while we live in governed societies with rulers and laws, our ultimate allegiance is not to Caesar but to God. He doesn't deny that we live in both worlds but the image we bear in the world is one that reflects God's goodness and not necessarily the powers of the day.

And it highlights for me anyway, that we are often more willing to give to the emperors in our lives, than to God, aren't we? Let's be honest about it. We only have to give a portion to the emperor, to the IRS, to the State. But God, who created all of it, has a funny idea that it all belongs to Him, especially us.

I like to think that when God gets asked about his children he pulls out his wallet or iPhone and starts to show his friends all his pictures, not only the creation but of us! "We are the spittin' image of God" His friends will say. Especially when we act like God; with love and compassion. When we think about others first. When we pray for those in need. When we act on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves. When we serve others. When we work for justice and equality. When we go to the quiet places to hear the voice of God and be renewed and guided.

So even as Jesus was giving these disciples of the Pharisees permission to give the coin back to Caesar, he was also calling them to give themselves to God—to give all that they were and all that they had to God. He was saying, "Give this little thing—this unimportant thing—this coin—to Caesar, but give this big thing—your life—to God." He was challenging them to a level of understanding and devotion they had not yet considered. And Jesus does the same for us.

So, to whom do we really belong? Take a look at any person. Look to your right and to your left. Whose inscription is on her or him? Is it only the images that the world leaves on each of us that you see? What we wear, what company we keep, what we do? Or can you see deeper and see the gentle mark of God's presence, the light of love in the eyes, the faded mark of the cross that was made at baptism, the part of each person that is also the part of you? Each is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

And it is God who claims us. We do not belong to anything or to anyone else. We don't even belong to ourselves. We belong to God in all our being, with all our talents, our interests, our quirks and mannerisms, our laughter and tears. And we were made to love the Lord with all our hearts, minds, spirits, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. So live in this world as one who has given yourself to God. Live in this world as a point of light. Live in this world in such a way as to bring it a bit of holiness. Live in this world in such a way that you "let God's image shine in you, and through you, and around you-- and maybe, you, like the disciples of the Pharisees, will be 'Amazed.' In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen