

“Give Back to God”

**Matthew 22:15-22**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

*Holy One, true and living God, through the message of the gospel and the power of your Spirit make us imitators of our Lord: Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*

Our reading this morning falls in the narrative “space” of Holy Week. No rest for the weary: the gospel record of holy week chronicles Jesus’ authority being questioned, and on at least two occasions (in Matthew) Jesus was confronted by the Jewish leadership who were trying to discredit him. Today’s reading is one example.

In today’s gospel account it is helpful to know that the Pharisees and Herodians would have made strange bed-fellows; The Herodians were supporters of Rome’s puppet king, Herod; their true loyalty was to Rome. The Pharisees, on the other hand, detested Roman rule; paying taxes to Rome was like paying to finance their own occupation. These two groups were normally at odds with one another, yet in Jesus, they had a common adversary; both groups wanted to get rid of Jesus.

In this case, a trap was being laid for Jesus; it seemed perfect. The question they posed appeared to have only two possible answers; it looked like a no-win situation for Jesus.

*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* If Jesus answered that it *was* lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he would set himself against his own Jewish people. If he said it was *not* lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he would pit himself against Rome, which would probably not go down well.

What the Pharisees and Herodians hadn’t counted upon was that Jesus had a third answer which straight-way exposed their hypocrisy. When these leaders of the people produced the Roman coin in question as Jesus requested – within the temple precincts of all places – they unwittingly broke two of the ten commandments; one against possessing a graven image, and another, against having other gods (the coin declared Caesar to be a god).

So Jesus replied, *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.* Jesus was suggesting that if the coin bears the image of the emperor, then it should be given to the emperor. So by the same token, what are the things that bear **God’s image**, belong to God, and thus should be given to God?

Can you tell where I’m going with this? ☺ Yes! Genesis 1:27 – *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them...* God created us bearing God’s image; we are the coin of God’s realm. So...on the one hand, we have a Roman coin with the image of the emperor on it, and on the other we have **us** bearing the image of God. Jesus said, *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.* Now... I can see how those Roman coins could be given to the emperor, but how are **we** given to God.

What does it mean for us to give ourselves to God? If we are the coin of God’s realm, how do we spend ourselves for God? And where do we go to do this spending? ***Where are we to find God so that we can give ourselves to God?***

Because we all bear the image of God, are we then not vessels of our God? As Jesus bore the image and power of God, I believe we all have the capacity to do the same. We all bear the image of God, and I believe we all have the capacity to bear the power of God, which is the power of love. If this is true, how come we don’t see God in each other more readily?

Is it because we believe God is perfect and we know we are not? And aren’t we more likely to judge each other for our faults, rather than

see the essence of God in each? How often have I proclaimed that we are vessels of God's presence, or conduits of God's love? I never said we were perfect, or that we had to be perfect in order to convey the presence and love of God!

God is not limited by human flesh. God doesn't need us to be perfect in order to use us for the sake of the kingdom. Indeed, it is in our weakness that God's strength, wisdom, and power are most amazingly revealed. The apostle Paul wrote of this in relation to Christ who spoke to him saying, *'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'* So... Paul wrote, *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me* (2 Corinthians 12.9). Paul was saying that the power of God is most completely revealed in fallible, weak, and broken human beings!

So why is it so much easier to judge our neighbors, than it is to see the face of God in them? Why do we see the speck in our sister or brother's eye but somehow miss the log in our own eye? When the evidence of creation points to outrageous diversity, why are we suspicious, or fearful of people who are different from us?

God is revealed in everything! What if we looked for the gift of God in every human being, isn't it possible they would respond differently, that is, more positively. Whereas isn't our judgment of others more likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy? I believe if we worked at seeing the image of God in each other we could change the world.

*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.* We are the coin of God's realm. How have we spent ourselves lately for the sake of the kingdom?

And if we could see God in the face of the other, wouldn't loving them be a way to give ourselves to God. Where have you seen this?

*(move down to congregation to invite conversation)*