

Sermon Preached October 19, 2014
Year A, Proper 24 (Matthew 22:15-22)
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Let the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

An IRS inspector walks into a synagogue and asks to see the rabbi. He is shown to the rabbi's office and is offered a seat. After the introductions, the inspector says, "Rabbi, I believe a member of your synagogue, Mr Klutz, states on his tax return that he has made a tax deductible \$100,000 donation to the synagogue. Tell me, Rabbi, is this true?" "Yes," the Rabbi answers, "it will be."¹

Today's gospel reading is the one that is translated in the KJV as "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's."

¹ <http://www.governmentisajoke.com/jokes/categories/tax-agents/item/1256-tax-jokes>

The passage is often used to either justify the paying of taxes, or justify the not paying of taxes, or worst of all, justifying that the physical things of this world are not valuable to God and that we should focus only on the spiritual. None of these is what Jesus is getting at in his response to the Pharisees and Herodians. Like his parables, Jesus' words are often deceptively simple on the surface, but upon closer observation, one discovers many layers of meaning.

This passage takes place during the last days of Jesus' life. Just the day before today's events, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey with the crowds waving palm branches and yelling their hosannas. First thing he does is enter the Temple and overturn the tables of the money changers. This is an outrageous act which angers the religious leaders. The next day Jesus goes back to the Temple where the chief priests and elders corner him and question his authority. In response, Jesus tells three parables, the three parables we have heard the last three weeks. Each of these parables is provocative.

Each parable suggests that the religious leaders have failed to do God's will and they will be replaced with new people who do follow the Almighty. By doing this, Jesus changes the conversation from one questioning his authority to one which questions the authority of the chief priests and Pharisees. The crowds love Jesus and hear truth in what he is saying. But the religious leaders are outraged at Jesus' words and eager to undermine him. The stage is set for today's passage. It begins, "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said."

Their plot begins by saying a few flattering things to Jesus, after which they try to trip him up and force him to indict himself. They ask what seems to be a fair question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" But bear in mind the political situation in Palestine at the time. The Romans are an occupying force. Taxes are as high as 50%, none of which are used to provide services to the local population; all of it goes to Rome. The country is sucked dry and left in poverty while the citizens of far-away Rome live it up at their expense. It is an overtly unjust system and supporting it would imply endorsing injustice.

The religious leaders know that if Jesus says, “yes,” to their question, the crowds will be angry and doubt his integrity. At the same time if Jesus says, “no, do pay taxes to the emperor,” then the authorities can arrest him. It’s a loose/lose question. Like the classic, “Do you still beat your wife?” There is no right answer. You can imagine the chief priests and Pharisees rubbing their hands together in glee, certain they have painted Jesus into a corner!

But again, consider the setting. They are all standing in the Temple. And just the day before Jesus was overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. The money changers are there because there are religious laws against idols. In the First of the Ten Commandments it says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them.” (Ex 20:4-5). You shall not worship idols. People come from all over Judea to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The purpose of the moneychangers in the Temple courtyard is to take these foreign coins with graven images, brought by all the foreigners, and exchange them into “Temple coins” which can be used to pay the Temple tax and buy sacrificial animals. In keeping with the First Commandment, these “Temple coins” did not have idolatrous images. Jesus didn’t oppose the practice of money changing per se; instead, he opposed that the money-changers used the exchanges as a means to cheat people.² So it is important to note that this elaborate system is in place in the Temple courtyard specifically to avoid graven images of foreign coins from being present in the Temple.

So now the very next day they are in the Temple, and the religious leaders question Jesus in order to trap him. And Jesus responds by asking two questions of his own. The first question is a request, “show me the coin used for the tax.” So one of them gives it to him.

²

http://books.google.com/books?id=2ObvgEck9gMC&pg=PA412&lpg=PA412&dq=temple+tax+money+changers+idols&source=bl&ots=xsiFtOTUM5&sig=lQfi-Q8C8_gT7EwTWYwh11DZBLc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=1_pCVP2CKNb_yQSn1oGYDw&ved=0CFQQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=temple%20tax%20money%20changers%20idols&f=false

This seems like an innocuous interaction, but remember, this is in the Temple! A place where a Roman coin, with its image of Caesar, is idolatrous. Carrying one is in blatant disregard of Temple policy. Note that Jesus himself does not carry money; he carries no idols. It is the religious leaders who provide the coin.

They show him a denarius, which is the daily wage of a laborer. Jesus takes the coin and then asks the second question, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” The religious leaders reply, “the emperor’s.” In fact, along with the image of the emperor on the coin, the title listed is, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.”³ In other words, not only does the coin show a graven image, it makes claims that Augustus is a God! In doing so it again flaunts the first commandment, there is no other God but God. With this simple exchange about showing the coin and asking about the image present, Jesus has publically implicated these religious leaders as idolatrous and blasphemous.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render_unto_Caesar

Recalling the passage in Exodus, the question left hanging for them is, “Who exactly do you worship and serve?”

Rather than “whose head is this,” the second question Jesus asks is more accurately translated, “Whose image is this?” This is an important distinction as we look more closely at Jesus’ response. Because his answer to the religious authorities is “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus seems to be saying that things that belong to the emperor carry the emperor’s image. But if this is so, then it follows that the things that are God’s carry God’s image. But what carries God’s image?

Every single person standing in the Temple listening to this exchange would know the answer. They would remember the passage at the beginning of the Torah, in Genesis 1:26, when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” We are made in God’s image! Therefore we belong to God! As the coin is stamped with Caesar’s image, so too we are stamped with God’s.

This passage is a wonderful stewardship passage not because it is telling us to pay the Temple tax, or give God only prayer and no money. This passage isn't about money at all. It is about us, and our lives, and how we use them.

The Apostle Paul commended the people of Thessalonica in his letter when he wrote, “For the people (said)... how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” The religious leaders by deferring to Caesar worshipped the idols of money and power and ego. They had forgotten in whose image they were made. So too, you and I, are created in the image of the living God. And we are to give ourselves in service to the Almighty to be used in Her service and in service of Her people. It is easy to fall into the worship and service of idols. We are all capable of making idols of money, power, and ego. Other idols we might fall for include our looks and beauty, our time and how busy we are, our status, our pleasure and indulging it in destructive ways. What are our idols? In what ways may we reclaim our true self as made in the image of the true God?

The question of stewardship, for those of us who bear the image of God, is the one silently posed by Jesus to the Pharisees and chief priests, “Who exactly do you worship and serve?”

I discovered a wonderful poem this week based on this passage by a local Methodist minister. It is entitled:

To God What is God’s

The coin, stamped with the emperor's image,
is the emperor's.
Give it to the emperor.

And I, made in your image, God,
are yours.
I give myself to you.

What will it mean
to give myself to you today?
How might I drop the coin of my life
into your open hand,
each moment again,
to give myself away
for you to spend
as you please?

I give myself to you.⁴
Amen.

⁴ Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, <http://unfoldinglight.net/>