

What Belongs to God?

Matthew 22:15-22

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Our gospel lesson this morning comes from the 22nd chapter of Matthew. Threatened by Jesus' popularity, members of the *religious* establishment conspire with the *political* establishment to see if they can trap Jesus into advocating something illegal. The Pharisees, depicted here as members of the religious establishment, and the Herodians, representing the secular or political establishment, decide they will ask Jesus about paying taxes to the emperor. If he says, "Yes, pay your taxes," he will lose credibility with the religious establishment which views the Roman occupation as oppressive and as an affront to their faith. But if he says, "No, don't pay taxes," he will run afoul of the secular authorities. Pleased with their cleverness, the Pharisees preface their question to Jesus with some insincere flattery. Hear now Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' 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.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Grant that we too may be amazed, inspired, challenged, and chastened by your word and presence this day, O God. Amen.

The line, as I first heard it, was, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." It's a great line, isn't it? It can be uttered with thunderous conviction and disdain, or with gentle, almost apologetic wisdom. It is so simple, and so wise. And yet, I think it has been much misunderstood over the centuries.

Its point is *not* that of compartmentalizing our lives into areas of civic duty and areas of religious duty such that we can safely attend to one and then the other — you

know, a kind of every-day, practical separation of church and state. I'll admit that this is a very tempting way to view Jesus' words, especially in a society where secular responsibilities and religious responsibilities are *not* seen to be in perpetual conflict. After all, we like to believe, and do believe for the most part, that we can serve God and the United States of America at the same time. We can give our due – pay our taxes – to society *and* still give to God what we believe is due to God. But is that really what Jesus was saying? Listen again: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." He does not say, "Pay your taxes." His point, I believe, is that we must each decide for ourselves what properly belongs to God, and what properly belongs to every other allegiance we feel we have, whether that allegiance is to the government, or to our employer, or to our family, or to any other organization. He says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." We assume that it is obvious what belongs to the one and what belongs to the other. But is it?

Jesus suggests that belonging to someone or something is a matter of bearing that someone's imprint. We know that the coinage of his time, and our time, for that matter, bore the imprint of some secular authority. Caesar's head and title were imprinted on the coins used for paying taxes. These same coins were used to pay laborers and buy most everything. Similarly, our coins and currency bear the imprint of the United States of America. The people whose heads appear on them vary according to denomination, but they are all Americans. Whose imprint, then, do we see – on coins, on currency, on our jobs, on our loved ones? To whom do we and they and everything else belong? Whose imprint do we bear? All our money bears the imprint of our nation, but our nation's leaders felt another attribution was important, too, and so the reminder, the assertion, the *statement of faith*, "In God We Trust," is imprinted on all of it as well.

Jesus spoke to his accusers saying, "Show me the coin used for the tax." Apparently, Jesus himself did not carry money on him. Why do you suppose that was? Is there any adult among us this morning who doesn't have some money or its equivalent on them – if not a coin or bill, then a check, or a debit card or credit card? Granted, there wasn't as much to buy in Jesus' time, but most people still carried some money, if only to give to those who were beggars. Why then did Jesus not carry any money? Could it be because he saw money as something with the potential to entice us away from God? Are we really trusting God if we have money on us? Do we even need God if we have enough money? Jesus didn't carry money on him. Either he didn't feel the need for it, or he felt it had the potential to interfere with a life devoted to God.

Notice, though, how much he spoke about money! He talked more about money than anything else if you survey the gospels. "Consider the lilies of the field . . ." or the

rich young man who followed the commandments but who couldn't give up his possessions, leading to the comment that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. (Mt. 19:24). He spoke of the Good Samaritan who used his money to care for the beaten man whom others had passed by, and the Prodigal Son who wasted his inheritance, the laborers in the vineyard who were all paid the same regardless of how long they had worked, the rich fool who needed to build bigger barns, and he made the assertion that "You cannot serve God and Mammon" – meaning, wealth. Money and wealth were metaphors for allegiance, for faith, for love. Where would we place our allegiance? How might we demonstrate our faith, our love? Money was intimately involved in the lives of people, but most of the time it got in the way of our relationship with God, rather than enhancing it. There was the money of love, as he himself experienced at the hands of the woman with the jar of costly ointment; and as he illustrated with his stories of the Good Samaritan and the widow's mite, there was the love of money, which was a form of idolatry ending usually in something sad. Putting one's faith in money was understandable, because its rewards were tangible. And where those rewards were somewhat delayed, well, there especially money had its seductive qualities. Money in hand had immediate rewards. But the promise of money further down the road had the potential to indenture people to lives of slavery and desperation. Truly it could be a false god, at whose altar people were willing to worship regularly in the hopes of future salvation and security. Sadly, many of us have put our faith in a promise of future financial security through 401Ks and other investment vehicles, and are now experiencing a crisis of faith – of trust – as the stock market – a false god – heads south for the winter.

The faithful use of money, and the willingness to talk about it, are decidedly counter-cultural. Many people's lives are such a mess, financially speaking, that charitable giving is unwelcome, if not impossible. The size of their world has become inversely proportional to the size of their unpaid credit card balances. As their balances increase, their world seems to shrink. It's a good thing to have outsiders come in occasionally to say these sorts of things because people don't want to be confronted with the question of whether they control their finances or their finances and indebtedness control them. Already feeling overwhelmed, they don't want to feel guilty too when they see no way to even pledge a modest sum to the church. But we can't help living in our culture or society, and let's face it, our culture promotes spending – not saving, not giving – but spending. We spend money to buy what our culture tells us we need – material possessions, entertainment, temporary pleasures, a youthful appearance, etc. Our materialistic culture tells us not only what we need, but what we

should want so that we have things to strive for – things we hope we will be able to buy someday, because we can't afford them now. And the promise inherent in all of this is that there will be tangible rewards for our spending. We will have things. And they will make us happy.

Spending – not saving, not giving – has become a form of idolatry in our culture, and its disciples are legion. Having hitched our horse to that wagon, we don't dare get left behind. Having joined that club, we don't dare risk letting our membership lapse. We keep spending, we keep worshipping at the altar of materialism and consumerism, and we wonder why we are stressed, unhappy, unfulfilled, anxious, indebted.

We should all reflect on our use of money, and there's no time like the present. You know, when it comes to money, more is not always better. Not if more money means less time with family, or less concern for others, or less awareness of our ultimate dependence on God. Money can be like an addiction. It doesn't take much to get us hooked, and no matter how much we have, we can still want more. But whether we have a little or a lot, the important questions are: Do we control it, or does it control us? Are we the masters of our financial affairs, or do they control us? Who is the master and who the servant? Who or what is our God, and what does our discipleship look like?

With the examination of a single coin, Jesus invites us to ponder our priorities and to ask ourselves, to whom does this or that belong? Can we truly separate or compartmentalize civic duties and religious ones? Can we serve different masters, or is there only one?

When he says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," is he really saying that different parts of our lives have different masters? Or is he saying that we must and do decide who our masters are by our actions? Remember, he did not say, "Pay your taxes." (Not that we shouldn't pay taxes, lest I be misunderstood.) What he did say was that we should give to the one to whom things belong.

Having entered that season of the church year when everyone is asked to consider their giving, I exhort you to put your priorities in order. Show yourself that you can master your finances and not have them master you. Put God first. Acknowledge that ultimately it all belongs to God; and honor God by your giving. Remember that Jesus said, "Give," not "Spend or buy or pay" but "give."

Many people make only a token gift to the church. Others have been so seduced by consumerism that their monthly payment to credit card companies is greater than what they give annually to charity. Mortgage interest I understand, but credit card debt is a contemporary form of what the Apostle Paul would call the "wages of sin." And still others give little because they are afraid. Somewhere in their lives they learned not

to be too trusting, and if they can't trust those they can see, how can they trust God whom they can't see? In other words, some give little because of a crisis of faith, and because they have not known the comfort or joy of recognizing that it all belongs to God.

God is the most giving reality there is. Without ongoing gifts of creation, none of us would be here. When we give, we enter – if only briefly and imperfectly – that larger reality of which all giving is a part. To give is to participate in the largest reality of all, which is why as the stewardship theme materials put it, “the world of the generous gets larger and larger.” God is the most generous reality of all, and the more generous we are, the more we resemble God, and the larger our world becomes.

But here I go getting all mystical on you. Let me therefore leave you with the words of Jesus and with one final question. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” How do you think Jesus would have answered the question of just what belongs to God? Let that guide you in your giving. Amen.