

Sermon: What Do We Owe?

Matthew 22:15-22

*Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church by Dr. Katelyn Brackney
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¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

This is a shorter story than many of the others we have looked at throughout our journey through Matthew, but even with it being a bit shorter it is packed with things to talk about. Our story today takes place toward the beginning of chapters 22, just after the parable of the wedding banquet that we explored last week when we talked about both the hospitality of the host, as well as the guests (or our) need to both accept the invitation and show up embodying the love and welcome of the host (or God) - putting on the "right" clothes for the party, if you will. So now we find ourselves just after the telling of this story, and we enter the scene with the Pharisees plotting to trick Jesus into saying something that will get him in trouble. Imagine this as sort of a quick aside at the start of the story.

But instead of the Pharisees showing up and doing this themselves, they decide to send both their own disciples, as well as the Herodians. The disciples of the Pharisees (and the Pharisees themselves) being the religious "authorities" of the day, and the Herodians being the ones who served Rome and Rome's agenda, kind of keeping tabs on folks and events to ensure the Roman Empire's rule was

being followed. So right off the bat we have religious and political leaders of the day showing up (this is where some of you might be squirming in your seats at the mention of religion and politics...it's okay, hang in there, take some deep breaths). These two sets of public figures are teaming up, even though they didn't usually get along or work together... and yet here they are. They show up together and immediately the story takes us into a conversation they are having with Jesus.

"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.

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

They think they're clever. If he says no, the Herodians will report him for speaking against Rome, but if he says yes, the Pharisees will be there to push back as they're essentially asking if this is permitted in the Torah. But instead, as Jesus so often does, he finds a third way. He responds saying, *"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"* I'm not going to lie, I kind of love how sassy Jesus comes across here. But why does he call them hypocrites? Well, it has to do with what he says next...

"Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's."

You see they're hypocrites because they all use the money that they show him, and what's on the coin? The image of Caesar, and what phrasing is on the coin? Well, the English translation of it would be something like "Son of the divinized Augustus" or "son of god" on the coin. And that, for Jewish folks, would be equivalent to idolatry, it's blasphemous. So when the Pharisees' minions engage in this conversation, feeling sneaky and like they're about to catch Jesus messing up, Jesus engages right back and he starts without holding back. If they're happy to do business with such a coin, why then are they asking him this question? Hypocrites.

Nevertheless he answers saying, *“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”*

We don’t get a picture of how they process what he said, the text simply says that they were amazed and went on their way. But however they heard what he said it caused them to be amazed. Amazed as “in awe” or amazed as in dumbfounded, whose to say...but I think it’s important to acknowledge that Jesus isn’t saying that Caesar and God are to be given things equally, nor do I think it is Jesus saying that they should whole-heartedly support Caesar. What I *do* think is happening is a reminder that what is given back to Caesar, is simply money, it is not moral support or giving authority to Caesar, just by paying taxes. Those things, authority and devotion, belong to God alone.

Warren Carter shares that “an imperial tax can be paid without the payment being a vote of support for Rome or its ethos. Paying taxes acknowledges Rome’s political power but not its moral authority to rule. That moral authority belongs to God. Which is why Jesus quickly adds that one must pay to God the things that are due to God.” ([Working Preacher - Raj Nadella](#))

Perhaps, a similar message to “that which is lawful is not always moral.” Or “just because it’s legal doesn’t mean it’s right.”

So if taxes are owed to Caesar, what is owed to God? You could easily just say “everything,” because it’s all God’s anyway. But I think that answer can let us off the hook a bit too easily as we carry on content with answering the question “correctly.” Kind of similar to when kids answer “Jesus” in Sunday school – never a wrong answer right?

I think the answer, though, lies in the image bearing part of this story. When thinking about the coin with Caesar’s image on it, it makes sense then that it would be given back, I suppose. But what holds God’s image?...

Well, we do.

All the way back in Genesis 1 we see that God created humans in God’s own image, and that reality is repeated multiple times for emphasis. So if coins with a

stamped image on them are owed to Caesar then what is owed to God? Our own and each other's humanity, as image bearers of God, which requires a vastly different form of payment than what is owed to the Roman Empire. "God does not trade in Caesar's currency." ([Working Preacher - Raj Nadella](#))

One commentator calls it the "coinage of the kingdom." ([Working Preacher - Raj Nadella](#)) And this coinage not only sees the image of God in each person, but is an embodiment of that call to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven that we've been discussing. And as we are likely all too aware, this kind of work is not simply a different kind of currency, but can be directly at odds with what the taxes of the Roman Empire are doing. Perhaps this hits a bit close to home.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God, is not just something ethereal that exists way off in outer space that we will experience one day, it is the active reality of God's restoring work here on earth that will one day be fulfilled in its wholeness. And until that day, we are called to partner with God in the restoring work that brings that kingdom, that way of life, that fullness of life, just a little bit closer. And it requires that we see the image bearing nature of one another, and commit our lives, our allegiance, to God and to a way of being that contributes to *that* kind of reality, that kind of kingdom. Seeing every person as an image bearer of God is not easy, but is what we are called to, whether they agree with us or not, are our physical neighbors or not, are followers of the way or not, or any other "barrier" that may tempt us skip over them. We must see the image of God in each person, and allow *that* to shape our actions.

So when we think about giving to God what is God's, this is what we give: the work of loving our neighbor (which we will talk more about next week), the work of justice, mercy, love, peace, providing for the needs of others – the orphan, the widow, the sick, the refugee – whatever work or actions contribute to wholeness, restoration, flourishing, and healing, all of which actively work

against the empires that seek to control and oppress. This is the coinage of the kingdom. It's hard work. And it gets a bit harder... I would be remiss if I didn't also mention that part of this process must include repenting of the ways we have contributed to or been complicit in the work of empire and its agenda, which values power over people. This however, paradoxically (and beautifully) pushes those in today's story, as well as us today, to yes, continue paying imposed taxes, but do so while giving to God what is God's. And that form of giving actively works to resist that which works for a kingdom other than God's. This should influence the choices we make, the way we treat others, the way we ask for forgiveness and seek reconciliation, the way we vote, the way we speak to others in person or online, the way we show up for our neighbors, the way we care for the least of these, the list could go on...

So what do we owe to God? Yes, our lives, but not just as a blanket statement, but as an active participation in seeing the image of God in one another and working for a world where all is made whole and well, until it is.

Amen