

“Made in the Image: Return to God what is God’s”

based on Genesis 1:26-31, Ephesians 4:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

Delivered on October 18, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

So, everyone knows that today’s gospel reading is just about paying taxes, right? How often have you heard just the comment, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s’? It has been used both as a justification for why we should pay taxes, and with a creative wink and a nod, also as a reason not to pay taxes. But what if this text actually has little to do with taxes? What if this text is primarily about you?

This brief story about taxes is one of a series of debates that Jesus has with Judean leaders. Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a beast of peace, like the Great Kings of Israel David and Solomon. He is on a donkey, like the Prophet Zechariah predicted the Messiah would enter Jerusalem.

And so after that triumphant entry, Jesus has already made a scene in the temple, so the leaders have questions and concerns. They want to know if this guy is the Messiah, then what is it going to be for the balance of power – their power. Judea was already a politically tumultuous place, an ancient powder keg. It’s a place where every commoner felt conflicted, forced to pick a side. The leaders want to preserve their power, no matter what the cost. They likely hope Jesus is on their side, but if he is not, they will gladly turn the crowd against Jesus and get rid of him.

Now, I want you to imagine yourself in that crowd. Imagine yourself as a commoner in Jerusalem back then. In truth, it probably isn’t very hard for you to imagine, considering our current politics. But humor me, and imagine yourself in a divided, tense and seemingly explosive landscape. Because doing so may help you see that this isn’t about taxes or power. No, what Matthew shows us, is that Jesus is talking about you. Jesus is talking to the very powers seeking your loyalty and speaking the truth about what really matters – you.

So, imagine you are there, just days after Jesus flipped over tables in the temple. Already, the chief priests and the elders have challenged Jesus’s authority to be there. These are leaders from the Sadducees, or the temple sect in Jerusalem. Politically, their number one priority was protecting their freedom, particularly freedom to worship in the temple, making deals with Rome to preserve their identity as God’s people through temple worship. These leaders want to know if Jesus has the authority to preach in the temple. They want to trap him into a charge of blasphemy, either against the temple or Rome, but Jesus asks them about John the Baptist’s authority, and they back away.

Next, Jesus tells a parable of the vineyard owner who sends slaves to collect his produce, but the tenant farmers refuse and kill them. So, he sends his son, and they kill him too. Jesus implies that the leaders think they are serving God, but they reject God, because they only serve their own interests, power and authority. At this point, Matthew expands the audience beyond the Sadducees. Jesus is now in the center of Jerusalem, talking also with the rival of the Sadducees, the Pharisees. These are the scholars on scripture, who know not just the Torah but the wisdom

and prophets. Their number one goal preserving their identity as God's people by living rightly and keeping the law in a changing world.

So then Jesus tells another parable, one that isn't clear if it's about God, Rome or King Herod. It seems to warn of the consequences of ignoring an invitation into God's Kingdom, yet this parable also offers up a strange contrast to the analogy before it. It's confusing, but no matter how Jesus meant it, Matthew uses it to bring in another sect, and in today's reading the Herodians enter the picture. Not much is known about them apart from this text, but it can be assumed their loyalty is to Herod Antipas, the son of King Herod the Great who rebuilt the temple.

So, now, back to you, as a witness to today's confrontation, in a rather large and tense crowd. There are still Sadducees there, the ones whose power comes from deals with Rome. They are alongside Pharisees, the populists whose power base is outside of Jerusalem. And now Herodians, who likely want to restore the Kingdom of King Herod, and get rid of the Roman Governor, a man named Pontius Pilate, who you may remember from Lent. None of these groups are really friends with each other. They are enemies, and there you are in a crowd of ordinary people, following this Jesus, who offers a new way.

Now, I can't get inside your head, but assuming you are a well-informed citizen at that time, when you hear the question, you know and likely can physically feel a riot brewing. You know Rome has a very specific tool for dealing with rebellions – It's called the cross. Rome's concern isn't justice but restoring peace through law and order. As an innocent bystander, you know you could be the one hanged, if Rome thinks your death will restore the Pax Romana, peace.

Couched in flattery, they ask Jesus, 'Is it lawful to pay taxes, or 'tribute' to the Emperor?' Each of the powers around you has a different opinion of what a good and true Judean should do. The Sadducees answer has been to support paying the tax to Rome, but to pay the temple tax, then trade Roman coins for temple coins. But these are the tables that Jesus flipped a few days earlier, so they clearly know Jesus will not side with them.

The Pharisees are populists who know the crowd hates this tax, so, if Jesus says to pay it, they will turn the crowd against him. The Herodians in this case would likely want to show that they are tough enough and could handle an insurrection, so, if Jesus says not to pay it, they will detain Jesus so the Romans can crucify him.

So, you are in the crowd – stuck in the middle of all of this – with nowhere to go. I hope I'm helping you get a sense of the tension that existed in this scene. Let's be honest: The American right and left fights are peaceful compared to this. Our division may be more widespread than just one city, but believe it or not, it is far less volatile.

So, how do you think you'd feel in that moment? Before Jesus speaks, how would you lean? As a Judean believer, you have been raised to view your god as the One True God. And you remember when Pilate just a few years earlier had wanted to put up Caesar's flags in the city, the people and leaders unified to say they would die before allowing it. This forced Pilate to stand down and step back from his proposal. Yet, now you are being asked to support this

occupying force, by giving Caesar and Rome a day's wages, your tithe, when for all of your life you have been taught, to give God and the temple your first fruits.

Yet, at the same time, Pontius Pilate did not end up putting flags with the Emperor's image in the city. Pilate listened to the Sadducees and you were not forced to worship Caesar. If you pay the taxes, the Sadducees keep their power and that protects your religious freedom. But also, there wouldn't be a temple were it not for Herod the Great. And if Herod Antipas has been put in power after Herod's death, Pilate wouldn't be here and he would not have tried to put up those flags. Sure, Herod was an unethical tyrant, but he said he converted, and his son says he's converted to believe in the One True God. He built the temple. Maybe his son deserves to rule.

The Pharisees have a very specific interpretation of justice, with their rules and regulations, and they promise that following this will bring some benevolent response from God, but they offer no real help for you. Perhaps you're tempted by a group outside this story, like the Essenes or Zealots. They're not in this text, but the Essenes are even more strict with their rules, and the Zealots want to blow everything up.

You know these groups. You're being pulled in every direction. These groups want you. As you ponder where you would side in all this, you might be really anxious. I would be. And so, Jesus asks for the coin, and his Judean critics give him the Roman coin. The denarius was a silver coin with the head of the emperor on it. Inscribed on it was, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of Divine Augustus." Here was a graven image of the emperor with a profession of faith, on a coin that represented a substantial portion of your life, for one denarius was the standard day's wage.

Jesus knows this – he knows the real value. While the leaders are talking taxes, trying to keep or even gain power, Jesus knows what it costs you. This is at the heart of Jesus's response here – 'Whose image is this? Whose inscription?'

In the Greek, the word is 'eikon' is an image, or physical representation, usually of a god. Speaking Aramaic, Jesus likely would have then said, 'tselem.' It's the same word. These are the words used in the Hebrew Torah and the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Jesus's day. It is the word used in our text from the book of Genesis, saying humans are made in the 'image' of God.

Among the ancient cultures, Israel was unique in that it had no idols to represent its God. Israel and Judah were unique also for not considering their kings to have divinity either. In every other culture, the gods were represented by statues and images. The rulers were either declared to be gods, or the image of a god. Here the Roman coin had on it, 'Tiberius, son of a god, Augustus.' And Tiberius was later said to have been a god after his death.

But YHWH, the Lord, the god of Israel was different – is different. The Lord desired that no image be made and did not consider kings to be divine. So, when Jesus asks, "whose image is this?" He is touching on the faith of the people in the crowd. Jesus is reminding you, that this is a graven image, and the inscription is blasphemy. This image, along with the coin, and the inscription on it is worthless to God. The thing of value is not the coin that represents your day's wage, it's you who worked for that wage, made in the image of God. When he says, 'Give to God what is God's,' Jesus is talking about you, the only thing of true value being discussed.

This is not about taxes or worldly powers. These are absolutely meaningless to Jesus: What matters to God is you and every other human being made in the image of God.

In all the power struggles among God's people between Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, plus those Essenes and Zealots, with each ancient party claiming God's endorsement, what really matters to God is you, and every person made in the image of God. The powers of Empire may claim to rule the world, to create peace, they may claim to be exceptional among all the powers that are in the world, but ultimately, the rulers and their empires are worthless, compared to the value that God places on you, a child of God, made in the image of God.

You are what matters. You are the reason God did not leave us alone in creation to climb up to God, but instead came down, binding God's self to our humanity to join heaven and earth. For it is in Jesus that we see God, and in Jesus we see our true humanity. Ultimately, in this, Jesus is the image of God and you bear His image. God shared in our humanity to live as we live, die on the cross for us, and rose again to begin a new creation of all things restored. This is not by a human desire to rule and govern good and evil, but by God's desire for us to reflect God's image, and see God's image in one another, through love and mercy, service and humility.

In Jesus, God did not appoint a mere human to be like a god who rules as the Romans did, but instead, God became a human to be our King so we might rule as God desires. How is that? Paul in Ephesians (Chapter 4:1-10) says our calling is to live with humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with each other in love, making every effort to guard the unity of God with humans in the Holy Spirit, by binding our lives together in the peace that God gives us.

There is one God, who is the Lord we see in Jesus. There is one God, who is the Lord we see in the Father. There is one God, who is the Lord in the Spirit. There is one God who is through all, over all, and in all, and in whose image, we are made.

Friends, remember that in this time of political division and strife, there is nothing new under the sun, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says. Just like in that first century, we must be wary of Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Essenes and Zealots, and all the parties who say they are the ones who represent true faith in God. Instead, remember what Jesus said about the images of this world: Return the things made in the image of this world, to the world, but remember that God wants you – You are loved and valued. You are made in God's image to reflect God in the world. May we live up to this calling to which we are called. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

(Matthew 22:15-22 Pastor's Translation) Then having gone through, the ***Pharisees plotted*** about how they might ***entrap*** him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him with the Herodians, saying "Teacher, we know that you are truthful, and you ***teach*** the way of God in ***truth***, and you are not ***concerned*** about the opinions of anyone, for you do not ***discern based*** on ***human appearance***. Therefore, tell us your ***opinion***. Is it ***lawful*** to ***give*** tribute to ***Caesar***, or not?" But ***Jesus***, having known their ***evil***, said, "Why do you hypocrites ***test*** me? ***Produce*** for me the ***coin*** of the ***tribute***." And they ***presented*** to him a ***denarius***. And he said to them, "Whose is this ***image***? And whose ***inscription*** is this? They ***answered***, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Then ***return*** the things of Caesar to Caesar, and the things of ***God*** to God." And having ***heard*** this, they ***marveled*** and having ***left*** him, they went away.