

The things that are God's

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's.” Or as the Old King James Version of the Bible reads: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.” I imagine most of us have heard this famous quote from Jesus. And we have interpreted it to mean there are some things we give to Caesar or the state, and there are some things we to give to God and the Church. We pride ourselves in taking this approach in our own country, where we have the constitutional tradition of the separation of Church and State. The state has its place here, and the church has its place there, and we want to keep the two things apart.

We hold citizenship in two worlds. We are citizens of the state, this country, and the world in which we live. And at the same time, by virtue of our baptism, we are also citizens of the kingdom of God, members of Christ's body, the Church.

So, how do we live in both? How do we live as members of our community and country, yet also as members of the church and followers of Christ? Do we keep it all separated? Are we supposed to? Are we to live one way in the world, where we pay taxes, vote, go to school, work at our jobs, and then live another way in the church, in our life with God? How do we give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's?

Jesus is teaching at the temple, and the Pharisees and the Herodians arrive. It is important to know that they are the very factions we have been talking about: the religious system, and the state. These two groups were usually on opposite sides. The Pharisees, devout Jews, and religious leaders, were on one side, and they opposed any form of foreign influence. The Herodians, also Jewish, on the other hand, were sympathetic with the Roman government who occupied the country. In fact, the Herodians openly collaborated with the Romans in order to maintain their power.

The two groups joined forces to plot against Jesus. They wanted to publicly entrap with their questions. They begin with some flowery words, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show

deference to no one.” A little set-up before they set their trap, which they do with a single question. “Tell us then, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Here is the dilemma: if Jesus answers the question, “Yes, it is right to pay taxes to the emperor Caesar,” then he would be in trouble with the powerful Pharisees. The ritual holiness laws of the Pharisees discouraged Jews from even handling Roman money, because Roman coins had the image of Caesar on them, and the Romans regarded Caesar as a god. If he said it was right to honor Caesar, Jesus could be accused of idolatry and blasphemy. Besides that, that position deference to the government might cost Jesus the support of his followers, most of whom were peasants, and suffered terribly under Roman taxation. Many of them were hoping Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would break the Roman system.

On the other hand, if Jesus said, “No, do not pay taxes to Caesar,” then he would be stepping into the trap set by the Herodians. To openly saying “no” to Roman law, could be considered an act of sedition. Romans did not tolerate rebellion against their empire, and it was typically punishable by death.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” Jesus sees their trap, and rather than answer directly, he asks for a coin used to pay the tax. This official Roman coin was engraved with an image of Caesar along with an inscription naming Tiberius Caesar as the Divine Son. Jesus himself doesn’t have such a coin, but his accusers, even there in the temple court, are carrying them, and they readily produce one when Jesus asks.

Jesus looks at the coin and asks a question of his own. “Whose head, or another, and better translation would be, whose image is this, and whose title?” They give the obvious answer: this is the image of Caesar, named here as divine. Jesus then delivers his simple, powerful answer: “Give therefore to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.”

For the Herodians, the people of the state, Jesus was saying, “Yes, go ahead and pay the tax to this empire,” because Jesus knew the kingdom of God is bigger than that. God’s kingdom will not threatened or weakened by Rome. Go ahead and give this small, little coin to your Caesar and to his worldly little kingdom.

For the Pharisees, Jesus is also giving an answer. He is telling them, “As observant and devout religious people, you know that God is King of the Universe, Creator of everything in heaven and earth, and the creator of each of us. If you believed this,” Jesus was saying, “you would know that everything is from God, and everything belongs to God. Our scriptures tell us – from the very beginning – that every human being bears the image of God, and our life is to be given to God.

Both the Pharisees and Herodians were amazed and frustrated. They simply left Jesus and went away. Jesus not only gave a brilliant response to those who wanted to trap him with their questions. He was also offering a profound teaching to everyone who was listening. I believe Jesus was inviting them, and us, to ask ourselves, “Whose image do we bear? What is the inscription written on our heart? What do we give to God?”

Many years ago, there was a pastor teaching a teenage confirmation class. One day, he began the class by setting down a large stack of newspapers in the middle of the table. (this is back when newspapers were common!) He told the students to look through the papers and cut out anything that had to do with their faith. They were to see how many articles they could find, collect their work in a pile, and share them with each other at the end of the exercise.

As you might imagine, many of the students turned first to the religion section. There were articles of a new pastor arriving in town, or one celebrating a new ministry project. There were ads for several churches, listing times for worship. Some more resourceful class members also thought to cut out wedding announcements and funeral notices when a specific church was mentioned. Several students began to find stories on other pages that mentioned the Christian church in particular or religion in general.

After many minutes of searching and finding and cutting and collecting, the students were quite proud of the little collection of articles. The pastor looked at the work, then announced, “That’s not a bad start. But remember: there is nothing in the world, there is not one page of the paper, not one item in our lives, that God is not concerned with. Go back to the newspapers. Look and listen again for the presence of God. Where are might we find the face of Christ. Where could we pray for the movement of the Holy Spirit?” Give to the Emperor what you need to; give to God what is God’s. And what doesn’t belong to God?

What if we practiced this as we watched the evening news, or read the news online, and observed the world around us? Jesus was not talking about giving some things to Caesar and some things to God. It was not about the separation of Church – here, and State – there. Jesus was not talking about separation at all. Jesus was reminding us it is all God's. Everything in creation was made by God and we humans in particular bear God's image. Jesus took the first commandment seriously: love God with *all* your heart, and mind and soul and strength. Not a fraction of yourself, not a percentage – but with your whole heart and mind and strength. That is what good religion does: it brings it all together. In fact, the world religion comes from the root words re and ligio – which means to bind together again, to bring back together. The spiritual is not separate from the material. Of all religions, we Christians ought to know that. We believe that God became incarnate in Jesus – the divine in human form – to show us precisely that.

Jesus wants us to see the world in a new way, as the place where the kingdom of God is breaking in. When we see our neighbors on a street corner, or on a Zoom meeting, do we remember whose image they bear? When we see ourselves in the mirror, do we remember in whose image we are created? It is not about the separate, little categories, dividing church and state, our time of prayer and our times of work. Good religion helps us see it is all connected. It is all one. God's salvation is meant to reach every part of our lives.

You and me, we are in Christ's own hands, much like that coin from the gospel story. And Jesus is asking us, whose image do you bear, what has God written on your heart? Go pray and reflect on these questions. The whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection shows us the answer. May our lives reflect the same. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 24 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Isaiah 45:1-7 • Psalm 96 • 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 • Matthew 22:15-22

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