

October 16 - A Trick Question A Challenging Answer - Matthew 22:15-18

The Pharisees began with a little flattery

"Rabbi, we know that you are sincere. You teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and are impartial."

By addressing Jesus as "teacher" or "rabbi," their thrust is to challenge, not recognize, the authority of his title. We'll see what sort of rabbi you are.

They attempt to discredit him through a controversial question about paying taxes.

"Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

It's a trick question. If he says, "No, we're Jews. Caesar expect us to pay tax with coins with his idolatrous image stamped upon them. It would be collaboration with the oppressive Roman regime," Jesus would be in big trouble, for he would reveal himself to be a political revolutionary and the Romans would be quick to arrest him.

However, if he says, "Sure, go ahead and pay the stupid tax; what harm is there in a bit of collaboration with Rome?" then he will reveal himself to be a compromised collaborator with the Romans.

So in the question, they asked Jesus to make a choice, treason or blasphemy - a lose-lose situation

Jesus, aware of their malice, said, *"Why are you to trap me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax."* His pockets are empty. Only his critics have a coin. And they gave him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's."

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."

The verb translated "give" more literally means to "give back".

Jesus replies to his critics, "give back" to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - but "give back" to God what belongs to God. Note that Jesus does not specify just what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. He doesn't have to. He is talking to people who know psalms by heart. *"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it"* (Ps 24:1).

So what does that imply about Jesus' response-- *"Give to God the things that are God's"*? Jesus is saying that all which bears God's image belongs to God's. Genesis chapter 1 says all of us are made in the image of God. God has stamped His image upon us. We are owned, claimed. Thus, "what belongs to God" is none other than one's entire self.

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In a "Peanuts" cartoon, Charlie Brown says to Lucy: *"My Dad said that someday I might be able to run for President."*

"Really. He certainly must think highly of you!"

"I don't know. He also said that he didn't think he'd vote for me."

Don't worry, Charlie Brown. You are made in the image of God - and that is the source of your value and worth. Even if your dad wouldn't, God would vote for you.

To whom do we give our highest allegiance? In whose image are we stamped? Who owns us?

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Everything we possess comes from God, but we tend to believe that our prosperity has more to do with our work ethic and our effort than it does with an idea from the Bible. We feel a natural sense of pride when we have accomplished something, and that makes us reluctant to share the credit, perhaps even with God. But to say that all things come to us from God is to acknowledge that behind everything is God. Without his grace, blessings and mercy, we literally could not exist.

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St. Augustine, commenting on today's gospel, focuses on the real point of Jesus' words--giving to God what is God's. Augustine insists that when we truly succeed in "*giving to God what is God's*," we are, in his words, "**doing justice to God.**"

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A man was driving to work when a truck drove through a stop sign, hit his car broadside, and knocked him out. Passersby pulled him from the wreck and revived him. When he opened his eyes, he began a terrific struggle and had to be tranquilized by the medics. Later, when he was calm, they asked him why he struggled so. He said, "I remember the impact, then nothing. I woke up on a concrete slab in front of a huge, flashing SHELL sign; S-H-E-L-L. But somebody was standing in front of the S."

"Do justice to God." What a strange phrase. What could it mean?

Doing justice to God requires that we return to God, with dividends, that which God has entrusted to us. This is paying our dues to the Divine.

"Doing justice to God" means returning to the Lord the creativity and care, compassion and generosity God has lavished on us.

The first thing the Bible tells us about God is that He creates. and that we are created in God's own image. "Doing justice to God" demands that we mirror God's creativity in our own lives and continue to multiply creation. The creative genius within us is an unfolding of God's creative genius itself. We are not only to use our gifts and talents - but to develop and increase them.

The biblical witness also reveals that our God is caring --a God for whom kindness and mercy warm the breath that the Holy Spirit breathes on us. The Scriptures describe a compassionate God. "Doing justice to God" means opening our own hearts and souls to a compassionate ache that brings about committed acts on behalf of others.

God shaped you and me to be able to give to others, to show compassion, to love and comfort, to be there and let them know that I really care.

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In a cartoon, the pastor is shown giving a member a basket full of food, saying, "*Here, I'm giving food baskets to members who earn below the poverty line.*"

The member is insulted and asks, "What makes you think my salary is that small?"

The pastor responds, "*I took your annual giving to the church – your tithe - and multiplied it by 10 – and decided you must be in poverty.*"

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Kim Brei passed out pledge cards – asking you to think about your giving and make a commitment.

God is generous to all - and made in His image, we are also to have a generous spirit.

Listen to Paul's advice about filling in your pledge card:

Each of you must make up your own mind as to how much to give, not reluctantly or

under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:5,7

We are recipients of God's grace, and so, when the offering is brought forward, *with joy and thanksgiving we offer - our selves, our time our possessions* – and pray that God would *receive us*.

Reflect God's image with joyful generosity.

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Before the communist revolution, the family had ministered in China for many years. But now they were under house arrest. One day the soldiers came and said, "You can return to America."

They were relieved, But the soldiers said, "You can take two hundred pounds with you." Two hundred pounds. They got the scales and started the family arguments. Must have this new typewriter. What about my books? What about that? They weighed everything – discarding a lot of stuff - finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds.

The soldier asked, "Ready to go?"

"Yes."

"Did you weigh everything?"

"Yes."

"You weighed the kids?"

"No, we didn't."

"Weigh the kids if you want to take them."

And in a moment, all their stuff became trash.

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The Christian life is one long process of learning that we don't "own" anything of any value, and that anytime we use the word "mine" we are on shaky ground. Life, time, possessions, family, friends - all held in trust by us, all on loan from God to us. God graciously gives, but He does not let go. Learning to acknowledge God's claim upon us is the beginning of wisdom.

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Jesus said: *Give to God the things that are God's.*
So what belongs to God and bears his image?

You and I.

And what are we to render to God?

How much do you owe God?

Everything you are and have.

God has provided for us -- our talents, our time, our ability to think and feel - and even our lives themselves.

We are called to use what we have, and what we are, to communicate God's love to the world. That's our job here - *whatever we do, wherever we go* - to share His love with others.

Our actions, our character, our commitment *should reflect Christ in our everyday life* - express His compassion, love and care for others – for that is how we show our love and loyalty to the Lord God.