

## Oct 19 Owned by God

Matthew 22:15-22

“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s.” These words of Jesus have become a sort of proverb, and those who know little of scripture may still have heard “Render unto Caesar.” Yet, it takes a bit of digging to uncover some of the deeper meanings of these words.

The combination of people approaching Jesus is intriguing. Matthew tells us that the Pharisees come together with the Herodians. The Pharisees did not want to give money to their pagan oppressors and so were opposed to paying taxes to Rome. On the other hand, King Herod’s position of power came courtesy of the Romans, so even though the taxes were widely considered to be oppressive, the Herodians had a vested interest in keeping the Roman taxes paid. Therefore, the Pharisees and the Herodians had opposing views but came together to trap Jesus.

Then came the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” This reference is obviously to Jewish law. Clearly, it was lawful to pay the tax by Rome’s standards; the question was whether it was proper for a Jew to do so. It would seem that they have presented Jesus with no way out. He can’t speak against the tax, for that would anger the Herodians and lead to a charge of treason against Rome. He could not speak in favor of the tax without alienating most of the crowds that followed him.

Jesus asks for one of the coins used in paying the tax. This is Jesus’ own trap, for it proves at least one among the questioners to be a hypocrite. For the coin used for the tax was a silver Denarius with the image of Caesar on one side, and on the reverse, the image of a woman named *pax* or peace. The coins were against Jewish law, which prohibited graven images. You will recall the incident when Jesus chased money changers from the outer courts of the Temple. These money changers had a business because one was required to exchange pagan currency for Temple coins before going to do business in the Temple. Carrying the image of Caesar into the Temple was considered sinful. But note that when Jesus asks for a Denarius, and they were within the Temple courtyard, one is quickly located and handed to Jesus.

Jesus then asks the question that everyone in Israel could have answered without a coin in hand, “Whose image and inscription is this?” When they answer Jesus’

question, saying that the image and inscription are “Caesar’s,” Jesus replies that they are to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. It could also be translated “Give back” rather than “give”. Give Caesar back those things that are Caesar’s. It is his coin anyway, who cares if you give Caesar back his coin for the tax?

Then Jesus gives the most amazing line of the short encounter when he continues by saying that we are to “give back to God the things that are God’s.” It leaves everyone calculating what exactly is God’s that we are supposed to give back. And in case you were wondering, the clue was the word “image” that Jesus used when asking the question about the coin. Jesus’ meaning to give back to God what is God’s likely comes from Genesis 1:26-27, which says, “And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” The idea is this: Just as the coin has Caesar’s image on it, so it is Caesar’s, we were made in the image and likeness of God, so we are God’s. Jesus affirmed the tax while making it all but irrelevant. Jesus implies that, though we do owe the state, there are limits to what we owe. Yet, Jesus places no limits regarding what we owe to God.

This text is often used to talk about stewardship in terms of what you give to the church. But this is no passage on the tithe. For if giving 10 percent of our income is all we do, we would fall 90 percent shy of the mark. Jesus says that everything you have and everything you are is God’s already.

While this would certainly apply to the money you make, the formula is not that you give 100 percent of your income to God, for God knows you need the money for the necessities of life. The teaching is that once you have given God some of the money you earn, don’t feel that you have bought off an obligation. God wants to share in some of your time and energy, so the 100 percent formula relates to your calendar as well as your wallet. What God wants is nothing less than to come and abide in your heart. The point is that you have been made in the image and likeness of God. God loves you. God keeps your picture in the divine wallet and on the heavenly refrigerator. Jesus did not care about the tax, for his real concern was that you live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created you.

Think about your refrigerator. I don’t know about you but ours has a collection of family pictures and Sophi artwork. I have not asked Jenny why she chooses to display

pictures and art on the refrigerator but here is the reason I am glad these things are there. The refrigerator door is a place I frequently stand before. In fact it is the one sure place I am going to be early in the morning as the dog and cat demand to be fed. As I open the door I look at the pictures and say a prayer for our kids, for Sophi and Gwen for a great-nephew and niece. They are a visible reminder of people I love. With that in mind, how does it make you feel to realize you're picture is on God's refrigerator? God loves you. You are made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus says, celebrate this but also realize that it comes with consequences.

At the core, the issue raised by this biblical passage is one of allegiance. If God owns all, then we belong to God alone. Yet we live a life in which competing powers and influences vie to own us, to sway us, to capture our hearts. The coin he held in his hand that day in the temple represents all of these competing powers. Jesus doesn't denigrate them. No he says they are real and they are owed some allegiance. You need to pay taxes if you want services from the government. But when we let all the things of the world capture our attention and our allegiance to the point of it swallowing our allegiance to God we are in trouble.

The scripture is the call of Jesus to live in whole hearted allegiance to God, while navigating in life situations that often pull at that allegiance. Such navigation is not easy, and we would do well to seek God's wisdom and discernment.

Let me give you a couple of examples. You have volunteered to help with a church function. They are counting on you. A friend calls up and invites you to go on a trip at the same time. What would you do? You are angry at someone. You know God would have you forgive the person but you are feeling so hurt. What would you do? You have made a commitment to daily prayer and Bible study. You have promised to not go to bed at night before doing this. After several weeks you have one of those days. It is late, you are exhausted. What do you do? See, giving to God what is God's is much harder than we want to admit. Giving to Caesar is relatively easy because the world demands it from us. Giving to God requires determination on our part.

Let me close with a story and see what you would have done in similar circumstances. She came to visit me. She had a problem. Her son had invited her to

come and share Christmas with him and his new wife and her two children. She was thrilled to be invited and to have some time to get to know her new daughter-in-law and step grandchildren better. But here was the dilemma. Her son informed her that his wife did not go to church and talk of religion made her really uncomfortable. They had decided to have a purely secular Christmas, no church attendance, no nativity scenes, no reading of the nativity story, no singing of carols. What should she do? Should she go as part of building new relationships, which was very important, or should she decline the offer because Christmas without faith, for her was not Christmas? Also, she knew that to say no might cause hard feelings that possibly would never be healed. I didn't feel I could give her an answer because those types of choices are ones that each individual needs to make. I just let her talk. Finally as she processed her feelings she decided that she wanted her daughter-in-law and new grandchildren to know her as a woman of faith. If they had problems with that, so be it. She called her son and politely declined the offer of coming for Christmas and said why. She could tell he was hurt. She thought that was the end of it. A week later her new daughter-in-law called her and asked her to reconsider. She said, "I really want you to be here and I realize I am being unreasonable. Your values are as important as mine. Can we find a compromise?" They decided that they would schedule events so she could go to a Christmas Eve service. She would invite her son and grandchildren to attend but would not pressure them to do so. She would go alone if all declined. Also, on Christmas they would allow her to read the nativity story before dinner and they would all sing a medley of carols, some secular and some religious. Upon returning she gushed about her wonderful time away. She really liked her daughter-in-law. Her son and one of the grandchildren attended services with her and they enjoyed singing and even invited her to pray before the meal.

Things don't always work out so well but this is the challenge to give to God what is God's.