

Coin of the Realm
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Matthew 22.15-22 (NRSV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Introduction

Jesus' opponents were trying to find something to get him in trouble and their plan was to impale him on the horns of a dilemma. The dilemma resulted from the Jews' hatred of their Roman oppressors. Certain groups within Judaism believed that no taxes should be paid at all to Rome because that was the same as giving aid to the enemy. Others believed that paying the annual tax was blasphemy. The tax had to be paid with money bearing Caesar's image. Since officially the emperor was considered to be divine, some Jews believed using the money of Caesar was to blaspheme against the one, true God. Even those who thought the tax should be paid knew it was very unpopular with the people.

So if Jesus came out in favor of paying the tax, he would lose a great deal of support. The people would no longer follow him because he would seem like a traitor. If he opposed paying the tax he would be in trouble with the Roman authorities. They would brand him a terrorist trying to overthrow Rome and Rome dealt swiftly and violently with potential revolutionaries. So Jesus' opponents were sure they had him this time. One way or another his answer about taxes was going to get him in trouble.

But the Pharisees and Herodians didn't really care about what Jesus said. They raised a very important question without really wanting an answer. So Jesus first exposed their true motives. The encounter took place in the temple in Jerusalem where there was an area called the Court of the Gentiles. This was where the moneychangers were, stationed at the primary entrances to the temple to allow Jewish pilgrims and others to exchange their pagan, foreign money (usually with images of the emperor on the coins) for Jewish money with no pagan images. Only Jewish coins were allowed in the temple area itself because other coins were regarded as unclean. Yet those who confronted Jesus with the question about taxes, even though they were standing in the temple, were able to produce a pagan coin. That's because they weren't in the temple for holy purposes but to trap Jesus. That's why he said to them, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"¹ Then, having

¹ Charles Page, "Lesson from the Land," *Lectionary Homiletics* 4.11 (1993): 24-25

shown their real intentions, he answered their question.

I still remember as a kid seeing the movie *A Man Called Peter* which told the story of Peter Marshall.² The movie starred Richard Todd as Dr. Marshall who pastored the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. and who was Chaplain of the United States Senate from 1947 until his untimely death in early 1949. This text from Matthew was one of Marshall's favorites and the movie version of Peter Marshall quoting Jesus' answer still echoes in my mind, spoken, of course, in the language of the old King James Version: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." In whatever version we prefer, this text needs to keep echoing in all our minds because the question of taxes is one of Jesus' most famous teachings and it takes us right to the heart of what it means to be Christians today.

ONE: What belongs to God?

As I worked on this sermon, my thoughts became organized around two questions implicit in what Jesus said. If we are going to give to God what belongs to God and give to the emperor or the state or the world what belongs to them, we need to know what belongs to whom. So let's ask first, what belongs to God?

In a couple of weeks we will mark the 488th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation which is said to have begun on October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. The reformers like Luther and John Calvin were most concerned to show that we are directly related to and accountable to God. So what does belong to God?

The answer the text gives is this, an answer with which the reformers would heartily concur: we do. We belong to God. Our lives belong to God. That's the point of Jesus asking for a coin. He inquired, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The coin, of course, had the image of Caesar's head. But the actual word Jesus used was not the word for head. It's the Greek word *εικων*. We get the word *icon* from it. The coins had the icon, the image, of the emperor. Caesar has a right to claim what bears his image.

But whose image do we bear? Whose image do humans bear? Human life is created in the image of God. We bear the icon of God upon us.³ God has a right to claim what bears God's image. We are claimed by God. Caesar, the empire, the state, the government, the world have no right to claim us. For we belong to God and God's claim upon us is superior to all other claims. That's the point of my sermon's title. Money may be the coin of the realm of the state. But we — human beings — are in themselves the coin of the realm of God. We bear God's image. We belong to God.

So Jesus said, "Give to God the things that are God's." Our lives bear God's image and so our lives belong to God. Everything we have and are belongs to God: our ability to think and work and play and love. Our families belong to God and our homes. Our checkbooks belong to God and our investments. We don't like that; we deny it in all kinds of ways. But the truth is, nothing belongs to you or to me that does not come from God. We owe God everything and Jesus said give to God what belongs to God. We are the coin of God's realm. We belong to God and this means, simply,

² The movie starred Richard Todd as Marshall and Jean Peters as Catherine Marshall. It was made in 1955 and directed by Henry Koster. Most critics label Todd's performance as "moving" and "sensitive."

³ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 532.

we give God our lives.

TWO: What belongs to the world?

Then there is a second question. What belongs to the world? If we belong to God, what belongs to the earthly sphere of life, represented in the text by the emperor, by Caesar?

At first glance it may appear that Jesus was dividing the world into two equal realms that are never to mix, God's realm which is spiritual and Caesar's realm which is material, as if God and Caesar were equal but differing authorities.

But that is not what Jesus meant. To render to God that which is God's means to also render the material — Caesar's coin, if you will — because God also lays claim to it. God claims the material world too, not just the spiritual. I suppose if God wanted, there could be a kingdom of God existing in only spiritual terms. But for some reason to be a follower of Jesus Christ in this world also requires a material response. I think that is why Jesus talked so much about money. Almost half (16 of 38) of his parables are about money. One of every ten verses in the gospels (288 in all) is directly about money. The Bible has about 500 verses on prayer and less than 500 on faith but it devotes over 2,000 verses to money and possessions. The Bible deals with money matters because money matters.⁴

The point is that if we as a church are going to be about the work of God's kingdom, it will take Caesar's coin to do it. While worship is spiritual, our church cannot do it without Caesar's coin. We can't have a ministry staff using its full time without Caesar's coin. We cannot have ministries of music and education and service without Caesar's coin. The mission causes we help support cannot minister in Christ's name without Caesar's coin. The bulletin in your hand, the lessons being taught in Sunday school, the coffee in the kitchen, and the heat in this room all cost Caesar's coin. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. But if we do not render some of Caesar's coin unto God, then the work of this church as an institution will stop. God's kingdom will not stop. As Martin Luther's great hymn proclaims, "God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever." But without material means, this church cannot be doing the work of God's kingdom.

We like the notion that we belong to God. That's a spiritual comfort. We are less happy, however, about the truth that God's claim upon us also claims the material part of our lives. Let's quit kidding ourselves about tithing. The Bible says 90% of our material belongs to us; it bears our image. But 10% belongs to God and by our giving, it should bear God's image. That's the goal. Most of us fall short of tithing. But we need to be progressing towards the goal.

One day, a little boy was trying to make sense out of something he learned in Sunday school. So he asked his mother, "Is God everywhere?"

His mother replied, "Yes, dear."

So the boy asked, "Is he in this room?"

"Why, yes, he is," the mother responded.

"Is he in my glass of milk?" inquired the four-year-old.

Mother was growing uneasy now but she said, "Uh, yes."

⁴ Michael Hodgin, ed., *The Pastor's Story File*, 7.7 (1991): 2.

So the little one clapped his hand over his glass and said, “Got him!”⁵

Sometimes we are like that. We want to keep God in our glass of milk where we know he is under control. But God isn’t like that and he’s going to keep popping out of the glass and claiming us both spiritually and materially.

Conclusion

The challenge of this text is the challenge of whether our lives are moving more towards God or more away from God. The text isn’t an absolute. It’s more like a compass. Are we headed more and more in a godly direction. That is also the challenge of stewardship. Are we moving towards or away from God’s claim on our whole lives?

We might be helped here by thinking about the official symbol of Harvard University, one of the world’s great educational institutions and just a few miles from our door. The symbol of Harvard is a shield bearing the single word *Veritas* which means Truth. It was not always so. The original symbol had *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*—“Truth for Christ and Church.” That original symbol of Harvard was followed by two verses from John 8 (31b-32): “And Jesus said, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’” On the shield of the original symbol were also three books, two opened and one closed, suggesting limitations of human reason and ability.

But today Harvard’s symbol makes no reference to Christ or the Church or to John 8. In addition, all three books on the symbol are now open, suggesting that humans can or soon will know it all.⁶ Today, Harvard’s symbol proclaims just *Veritas* —Truth. But *Veritas* for what? What is the truth for?

That may be the way much of our world moves: away from Christ, away for church, away from the truth that acknowledges the centrality of both. The question of the text and of stewardship is this: are our lives like Harvard’s symbol, moving away from Christ, or do our lives witness that more and more we belong to God? That’s the question we must answer in many ways and particularly as we prepare to make our financial commitments in a couple of weeks. May the Lord help us more and more to render the coin of our lives, both spiritually and materially, unto God.

⁵ Stan Purdum, ed., “You Just Don’t Get It,” *Homiletics* 5.4 (1993): 12.

⁶ Richard John Neuhaus, *First Things*, February 1993, 76.