

## **Matthew 22:15-22**

22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

22:16 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.

22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

22:19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

22:20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?"

22:21 They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

## **Sermon: Pocket Change:**

Every morning, when I wake up, I gladly accept the breath that God has given me. I roll over, and see a partner who, God, again, in all Their infinite wisdom, has seen fit to add into my life. I walk down a hallway to look in on three little girls, who God made, and who have transformed my life in too many ways to count. I walk downstairs, often unmindful of the shelter above my head, built from natural resources like wood, clay, and stone. I fill up a coffeemaker with water from flowing streams; I add in coffee beans harvested from the earth by the hands of people fashioned in God's image. In just the first five minutes of my day, I accept a substantial amount of God's provisions. Can you imagine how long our list of provisions would be if we tracked an entire morning, or even an entire day?

It's funny though. I don't ever remember racing to the post office at 11:58 p.m. on April 15th to settle our annual account with God. I've never paid God's park ranger to admire a waterfall. I've never paid a fee for God to acknowledge my credentials, nor have I ever stood in line at one of God's agencies, hidden away in some suburban office park on the other side of town, in order to convince one of God's bureaucrats that I have my proper documentation to throw a party, or drive a vehicle, or enhance a property. And God has never, not once, asked me to prove my existence with a piece of paper.

For years, when studying this morning's text, I have been drawn to exploring a line, or threshold: when/where do we stop rendering to Caesar and when/where do we start rendering to God? Sidewalks, schools, hospitals, roads, environmental preservation? Yes. Great. Sign me up. Here's my money. But what happens when Caesar uses our coins to harm our neighbors or sanction violence?

In an election year, we want Jesus to be specific. Do you think he could give us a voter guide, or bookmark, or detailed synopsis? Hey, Jesus, “What’s legal, who’s righteous, how far can we go without feeling guilty, or uneasy, or queasy?”

But Jesus refuses to give us a checklist. You know by now he’s never been one to be overly proscriptive in his advice. He simply says, “Render to Caesar what’s his. Give to God what is God’s.”

Jesus’ response turns the question back on us. He makes us discern what we truly receive from Caesar and what we truly receive from God, and where those claims collide. We must decide, for our own selves, how to give back to each source what rightly belongs to it. In the end, Jesus reminds us that our faith requires honest reconciliation between our civic obligations and our spiritual convictions. As Baptists, we call this the liberty of conscience. When we feel something pulling at us, or tugging at us, we’re encouraged to dissent.

This week, I saw our text in a light I had never considered. This isn’t a passage about pocket change, or taxes, or any sum of money. This is a text about scale. Specifically, God’s vastness juxtaposed against Caesar’s finiteness.

The setting of our text, the Jerusalem Temple, is a pointed reminder of God’s vastness. God is constant and generous in every generation. God possesses salvific power and extends infinite grace. The Temple is also a living monument to the Exodus story, a testament of God’s liberation throughout history. And here in this sacred space, religious and political leaders choose to dishonor God by talking about taxes. Taxes? Really?

They go so far as to try to trap Jesus: endorse the tax of the Emperor and risk offending the faithful; reject the tax, and risk sedition. Their hypocrisy is glaring.

There is no time, no circumstance, no realm, where anything we receive from Caesar can compare to what we receive from God.

Caesar can take away breath, but he can't give it. Caesar can document and register a life, but he can't recreate it. Caesar's survival, indeed, his very existence, is bound to revenue streams and compliance.

God, on the other hand, creates; God gives breath, and life, and being, and existence, and value. God's magnificence, God's love, and God's very existence are not contingent upon our generosity, nor our subordination, nor our approval, nor even our acknowledgement.

God is Creator. Caesar can only be created.

One more glaring distinction. Caesar insists on a world of subordination. God invites us into a world of partnership and collaboration. Perhaps the greatest miracle of the universe is not the creation of our planet, nor the parting of the seas, nor the even the fact that bears can hibernate in winter, but is instead, God's humility. The most complicated being in our universe and even beyond it, desires and pursues collaborative relationships with the smallest to largest elements of creation, specks we can't even see, and those living in spaces beyond our imagination.

When Jesus flips that coin in the air, I hear a pin drop. I realize how easily I'm distracted by Caesar's finite wonders, and how often I fail to render gratitude for God's infinite miracles.

Caesar demands my signature, my money, my vote, and punishes me when I fall short of his standard. God asks for my heart, mind, strength, and soul. When I fall short, and believe me, I do a whole lot more often than I wish I did, God responds with empathy, and grace, and love. Caesar calls that weakness, criticizes the inefficiency of it all. But I call it righteousness. And a messy, patient, coming-together of things.

This morning, Jesus reminds us that both taxes and Torah can burden us when we cling to them so rigidly, so forcefully. The Pharisees weaponize the law while funding their temple with the very same coin they condemn. In so doing, their pettiness is exposed against God's vastness.

So yes, I'll gladly pay Caesar for the provisions I use. But if I'm going to authentically render to God what is God's, that means I need to be ready to call Caesar to account when his math gets funny. It means, I've got to feel things in my gut; it means I've got honor the dissenting tradition of my saints. It means we must be vigilant, friends. We must be mindful of those times when our participation in Caesar's systems pull us away from God's presence.

Jesus calls us to love God and love neighbor. I believe that means we are called to render empathy, compassion, respect, dignity, hospitality to those whom we encounter, and to recognize our interdependence and rootedness in God and one another. That's the honor we're asked to render. That's the honor we can never forsake.

**Pocket Change**

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**Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 22:15-22**

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Here's the question that should shape our week ahead: Do our actions reflect the honor we are asked to render?

Friends, may God give us hearts to act – with our voices, with our votes, with our pocketbooks, with our choices, with our prayers – in ways that love God and neighbor, in ways that honor righteous renderings. And may God give us courage to refrain from those actions that prevent the rendering of our hearts. May our eyes be averted from shiny coins, merely pocket change, and redirected toward God's vastness.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.