

So What Doesn't Belong to God? 2020
1 Chronicles 29:10-16 Matthew 22:15-22

1 Chronicles 29:10-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly; David said: "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.

Matthew 22:15-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

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.

In Texas, several years ago a city attorney made the news
when he issued a subpoena on behalf of the mayor and city council,
that demanded several local pastors to turn over
their church correspondence and sermons notes.

In an interview, one of the pastors protested that the government
has no right or claim to those things that are of God and religion,
and cited verse 21 of our Matthew text:
"Then Jesus said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and
to God the things that are God's."

Unfortunately, the way he interpreted and used that verse
completely misses the point that Jesus was trying to make.
This passage is not about the Lord trying to define or establish
some boundary to separate or isolate the church from the state.

In the Matthew passage we read,
the religious leaders recognized that as he became more popular,
Jesus would be an even more dangerous threat to their authority.

So while Jesus was teaching the crowds gathered at the Temple,
they came, trying to trap him with a loaded-trick-question, vs. 15-17
Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said ... "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. So tell us,
then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

At that moment,
Jesus was teaching at the temple, a holy and sacred place,
and there they took the opportunity to discredit Jesus
or to get him in trouble with the Romans as an agitator.

By asking, "Is it lawful", they were attempting

to frame the debate as a theological and religious question,
 "Is it lawful, is it in accord with God's commandments?"
... or since it bothers my conscience and my religious sensitivity,
 do you believe it's OK to pay this tax to the Romans?"

The Pharisees are referring to a very specific Roman tax,
 the much-hated census tax on every person over age 12
 who was living in conquered and occupied territory,
and that had to be paid with a specific Roman coin each year,
 which was a symbol of their subjugation under Roman authority.

And what made that tax most onerous and offensive to the Jews
 was that the required Roman coin featured the inscription,
 "Tiberius Son of **Divine** Augustus" along with his image.

From a Jewish religious perspective that coin was a pagan idol,
 so many devout Jews refused to carry or even touch
 such a blasphemous and idolatrous Roman coin.

It was a politically adroit move by the Romans to insist on that coin
 because everywhere that the Roman denarius circulated
 was thereby marked as being under their influence and power...

**... sort of like planting a flag to claim a conquered territory
as a sign & symbol establishing their authority to rule & govern.**

The religious authorities saw this unpopular and offensive tax
 as an opportunity to entrap Jesus with an impossible question.
If Jesus said, 'just pay the tax',
 that would offend and turn the crowd of supporters against him.

On the other hand,
 if Jesus said it was not 'lawful', you shouldn't pay the tax,
 then they could accuse Jesus of inciting insurrection,
 which of course the Roman authorities would crush.

**Either way, either answer could be exploited by his enemies
to silence him and put an end to his meddling ministry.**

Continuing, verse 18 - 20

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."

"show me the money"

Rather than directly answering their question and challenge,
 Jesus demonstrates and reveals their hypocrisy and greed
 by asking to see one of the coins in question,
a seemingly innocent question,
 except for where they were, and who produced the coin.

Picture the scene with me ----

they are standing in the crowded Temple courtyard area...
 ... and in a very public way, the religious leaders have
 approached Jesus intending to embarrass and trip him up,
 by asking if it's OK from a religious perspective

to go along with the tax, paid with an idolatrous coin.

When Jesus asks the leaders to show him one of the coins in question,
one of them reaches into his pocket,
and without much thought, holds it out to Jesus.
Jesus didn't have one. They had to supply the coin,
demonstrating that they have sold out to the idolatry of Caesar.

Right there at the temple, the most holy and sacred place of God,
they easily provided a coin that was really a pagan idol.

Now if it was really a problem of religious sensitivity and ethics
if it was really a matter of exclusive faithfulness to God,
then what were they doing even possessing such a coin,
much less bringing it onto holy ground of the Temple?

They are the ones carrying around Caesar's image, not Jesus.
They are the ones who've bought into Caesar's system, not Jesus,
for they had Caesar's idol-coin in their pocket, not Jesus.

How hypocritical to carry and accumulate wealth using that coin,
then to bring it with you into the Temple, the holy place of God,
and then claim that it offends your religious sensitivities.

They seem to have no problem
with the compromise of owning Caesar's idolatrous coin,
nor with bringing it onto the holy grounds of the Temple ...
... they just don't want to give it up to Caesar in taxes.

At issue is not the faith and moral question of Law they had posed,
but as Jesus reveals, it's about their hypocrisy and greed,
so Jesus turns their trap back onto them: vs. 20-21
Then he (Jesus) said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Since Caesar had his image and title stamped on the coin
like some little kid's underwear marked for going to summer camp,
Jesus tells them, "so give back to Caesar that which he claims as his...
... and give God what is his ... BUT Jesus doesn't say exactly, which is which.

The heart and point of this passage is the 2nd part of his answer,
and to God give back the things that are God's...
The Grk is very specific, return the property that belongs to them,
or, repay the debt that is owed to someone.

That places a fundamental question before us,
**so just what exactly are the things that belong to God ?,
i.e. what are the things that specifically bear God's image,
and where has God's name and image been inscribed?**

The answer to that question is Genesis 1:27
So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Where has God laid claim with his image?, what belongs to God?
We do!! We bear God's image, so, therefore we belong to God.

Now image doesn't mean that somehow God literally looks like us,
but, that in us the image of God has been placed, created in us,
and is revealed as we reflect God's truth, glory and purpose.

At Creation, God marked us with his image, marking us as his own...
**... meaning that we are called to a life of faithful stewardship
as obedient bearers of God's image and glory and mission,
in all that we do and say, all we accomplish and achieve.**

Caesar's got his coins, and God's got his, which are each one of us,
as we give ourselves freely, fully and faithfully back to the Lord.
Caesar used his coins which were marked with his image
to establish his authority to rule throughout his empire.

So too, **God uses his coins, each one of us
marked at Creation with God's image, identifying to whom we belong.
We are God's coins sent out into the world to make a difference
as agents of transformation to reflect God's gracious love & truth,
to give ourselves, fully,
faithfully & entirely back to God, who loves us.**

Our call is to influence and bring hope and change into this world,
**by serving and circulating as the coins of God's Kingdom
that proclaim the Lord's promise, truth, grace and compassion.**

In this passage Jesus is reminding us that we already belong to God,
and that we are the coins of God's realm, **God's beloved treasure,**
to reflect God's will, justice, mission, gracious love & purpose,
in fact, **by reclaiming as God's kingdom wherever we circulate.**

So the real challenge that Jesus posed to his critics and accusers
was not to determine what is Caesar's and what belongs to God.
But rather, all of everything already belongs to God, the Creator.
All that any of us has was first freely given to us, a gift of God.

As we read in Psalm 24:1
The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

The point that the pastor in the news from Texas didn't understand,
is that Jesus wasn't saying that some things belong to Caesar,
and only some things and some areas of life belong to God.

It is not, here's one slice of a Christian's life given over for work,
another for home and family or friends and another part for church.

**Truth is, what belongs of Caesar? None of it, not a single coin.
BUT rather, all of creation belongs to its Creator.**

Therefore, all that we are, and to all that we have and possess
we receive only by the mercy and grace of God
entrusted to us to use for a while for the glory of God...

... which is exactly what King David proclaims in 1 Chronicles 29:14,
"But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you,
and of your own have we given you.

David had wanted to build a temple that would honor the Lord God,

but the Lord insisted that his son Solomon would build it.
So David and the people of Israel had given generously and freely
a huge amount of wealth and building materials toward the project
for when under Solomon the construction would finally begin.

In this passage, King David and the people of Israel were amazed
at how very much wealth they had accumulated toward the Temple
that later Solomon would design, build and complete.
They felt incredibly privileged and richly blessed by God
that they had even been able to give and contribute so much.

David considers and reflects on how far they have come,
that they had once been oppressed as slaves toiling in Egypt,
that they had long wandered in the desert wilderness
as homeless nomads, rejects and outcasts,
owning nothing more than what they could carry...

... and now just look at all they had been able to present before God
whom they recognized as the true source of all their prosperity vs. 16

O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name **comes from your hand and is all your own.**

**And that is the heart of godly and gracious and faithful stewardship
of all that God has blessed & entrusted to our care & discipleship.**

God has entrusted it all to us, **but it all still belongs to the Lord,**
and has been put into our care only for a fairly short while
for no longer than just the few years of our mortal lives...

... the question is, how well are we using the abundance of our lives.

We each one decide **how we choose to use** our lives and our resources,
focused primarily on acquiring more wealth to fulfill our desires,
or choosing to respond to God's blessings and grace
through our faithful stewardship of God's abundance...

... and that is the main point and purpose of Christian stewardship,
for that is how we can overcome the polluting toxins of our culture
of materialism, consumerism, selfishness, our fear of scarcity.

By recognizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all we possess,
including life itself – our time, our talents and our resources,
we more faithfully live out the blessings of God as intends,
and can accomplish good and meaningful things in this world.

The truth and grace and blessings of God's promise is this:

put the Lord God first and everything else will fall into place,

as Jesus explained, Matthew 6:33, But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.