

Genesis 1:26-2:3 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

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.

When the Roman army conquered and occupied a foreign land,
periodically soldiers would travel to each community
bringing with them a statue, an image of the current Caesar.

The people would be required to bow before the statue,
and say "Caesar is Lord" as they put incense into the fire
that burned in the presence of the image of the Roman Caesar.

The point was to lay claim for loyalty to Caesar's rule in that place.

When a new Caesar came into power, it was common practice
to gather up the old coins with the previous Caesar's image,
and recast them with the imprint and image of the new Caesar,
as a sign that now he ruled everywhere those coins were circulated.

After the planetary universe, the plants & animals had been created,
the final stage of Creation was God creating human beings, vs. 26-27

Then God said, "Let us make humankind **in our image, according to our likeness**; and let them **have dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The Romans used the image of Caesar to indicate their power to rule,
and in a similar fashion God laid claim to authority with his image.

The fact that we bear God's image is a sign and indication
of God's sovereign power to rule wherever we circulate.

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 exercise faithful dominion
as stewards to protect and care for all of God's creation,
**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, **the Lord God uses his coins, which are each one of us
marked at Creation with God's image, identifying to whom we belong.**

**So 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,
for we are to be the light of the world shining into the darkness,**
to reflect God's will, justice, mission, gracious love & purpose,
in fact, **reclaiming as God's kingdom wherever we circulate.**

Our call is to influence and bring hope and healing into this world,
**by serving and circulating as the coins of God's Kingdom
that proclaim the Lord's promise, truth, grace and compassion,
following the life-example, the mission & ministry of Jesus.**

As Janet just read in the Matthew passage,
the Temple authorities were troubled and distressed by Jesus.
The crowds he stirred-up had disturbed the peace of Passover
with loud hosannas as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

He'd interfered and disrupted their lucrative Temple-businesses
when he drove out those selling sacrificial birds and animals,
and then overturned the tables of the Temple money-changers.

He enthralled huge crowds with his miracles and teaching,
with parables that proclaimed God's grace over ritual and Law,
repeatedly accusing the religious authorities of hypocrisy...
... and so Jesus had to be stopped and silenced.

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 gotcha-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?"

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 & my religious sensitivity,
do you think it's OK for us 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
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 even more 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 was a pagan idol
and so most 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 and symbol establishing authority to rule and 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',
then that would offend, and turn the people 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 Jesus and put an end to his meddling ministry.**

And so the story continues vs. 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."

So 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 right 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.
They had to supply the coin. Jesus didn't have one.
Their hypocrisy could not have been more blatant.

Right there at the temple, the most holy and sacred place,
they easily provided a coin that was really a pagan idol,
demonstrating that they have sold out to the idolatry of Caesar.

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.

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 kid's underwear marked for going off to summer camp,

Jesus tells them, "so give back to Caesar that which he claims,
just give it back to Caesar, that which is stamped with his image.

But the heart and point of this passage is the 2nd part of his answer,
and to God (render or give back) the things that are God's,
which then raises the 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?

Earlier, we read the answer to that question in *Genesis 1:26~27*

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,
and that truth is the reason we baptized Sara today.

Baptism is a sign and declaration of God already at work in our lives,
and it serves to remind us of God's promise and covenant,
as it reassures us of God's life-transforming-healing-love,
as we are invited to live & to grow into that image we bear.

For Presbyterians,
baptism is a window through which we can see the grace of God,
for what better than the baptism of an infant or child to symbolize
and bear witness to the truth that God's love lays claim to us,
even before we have knowledge or can respond with any faith?

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.

**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.**

Truth is, what belongs of Caesar? None of it, not a single coin.

BUT rather, all of creation belongs to its Creator, Psalm 24:1

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

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

**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 to us, **but all of it still belongs to the Lord,**
and has been put into our care only for a very short while
for no longer than just the few years of our mortal lives...
... **and** God will evaluate how well we've used the abundance of our lives.

We each one decide **how we choose to use** our lives and our resources.

**Am I focused primarily on acquiring more wealth & worldly security,
or on choosing to respond to God's blessings and grace
through our faithful stewardship of God's Creation?**

**Yes, most of us really do want to be more faithful stewards,
and we do want Jesus to be our Lord and Master
even over our money, our time and all our blessings.**

But the stark reality and difficult truth is,
the attractive glitter & glitz that this world has to offer
is a spiritual struggle we'll battle so long as we live...

... **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,
as we more faithfully live out the blessings of God as intended...**

... and can accomplish good, useful & meaningful things in this world.

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

just as Jesus explained, if we put the Lord God first

then everything else will fall right into place, 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.