

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:15-22

*<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

A young lady was soaking up the sun's rays on a Florida beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, "Do you believe in God?" She was surprised by the question, but she replied, "Why, yes, I do." Then he asked her: "Do you go to church every Sunday?" Again, her answer was "Yes!" He then asked: "Do you read your Bible and pray every day?" Again, she said, "Yes!" By now her curiosity was very much aroused. The little lad sighed with relief and said, "Will you hold my quarter while I go in swimming?"

The little boy was straightforward and honest in his questions because he wanted to entrust to the lady something valuable. The Pharisees and the Herodians are not being honest. They have no intent in entrusting Jesus with anything. They are not looking for the answer to a question. They don't want someone to hold their quarter. They are looking for a way to get rid of this trouble-making Nazarene named Jesus.

The Pharisees were a religious group that contested the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Herodians were a political party that supported Herod Antipas and his policies established by Rome. They came up with what they thought was a foolproof plan to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him into hot water.

The plan began by what the Pharisees and the Herodians felt was setting him up for exposure to be witnessed by each other's group and whoever else may have been listening. They felt they could stroke Jesus' ego with accolades like calling him "Teacher" of God's truth, and telling him he was a man of integrity who could not be swayed from the truth. But Jesus was no fool; he saw right through what they were doing.

They then posed to Jesus the question, which seemed to require a simple yes or no answer: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Surely, the trap was set and there was no escape for Jesus. His conspirators felt they would finally get what they wanted—Jesus in a heap of trouble with either the Jews or the Romans. If Jesus answered in agreement with paying the taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees could accuse him of being opposed to God because the only king they recognized was God.

The Jews were forced to pay this tax to the Roman government, and they hated it because the money went directly into Caesar's treasury. Some of it was used to support the pagan temples and the rich lifestyle of Roman nobility. Many of the Jews argued that paying this tax was an act of treason. Even handling the coinage with Caesar's image stamped on it was offensive to some.

If Jesus said the taxes should not be paid, then he would be guilty of an act of treason against the Roman emperor; and the Herodians would arrest him and hand him over to Herod and charge him with rebellion.

Jesus appeared to be in a no-win situation; but was he? We might say that Jesus was clever with his answer. He did not answer with a simple yes or no. He asked instead to see one of the Roman coins and then asked them the question, “Whose head is on the coin?” They answered “Caesar’s head.” Jesus responded, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

By doing this, Jesus throws the issue back on those trying to trick him and the rest of those listening. Each of them would need to decide where to draw the line between the emperor’s dominion and God’s dominion. His conspirators were amazed with his answer and had no reaction. They just turned and walked away.

Jesus wins again; however, this story is about more than Jesus outsmarting those who opposed him again. This passage is often used as a favorite for addressing the issue of the separation of church and state. On the surface, that may appear to be what it is all about; but is there something more—something deeper—going on here? Indeed, there is.

Remember, Jesus asked whose head and whose title is on the Roman coin. Let’s do a simple word study on the word translated as “head” in the NRSV. The New Living translation uses the word “picture”. The Message uses the phrase, “who does it look like?” The King James translation and the New International version use “image”. So, which is it and does it really matter?

The Greek word in the original manuscript is “eikon” meaning “image.” We’re told that the image on the coin was Caesar’s and, therefore, the coin belonged to Caesar.

Think about this now, the Bible tells us that humans bear the image of God. It says in Genesis 1:26a: “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;” and again in verse 27, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

We might wonder why God refers to himself in the Genesis text as us. One interpretation is that the plural wording is used to mean majesty. Kings traditionally used the plural form in speaking of themselves.

The other interpretation is that “us” means the Trinity—God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, all of whom are God. We know the scriptures support that the “us” at creation is the Trinity. In Job 33:4 and Psalm 104:30, we read that God’s Spirit was present in creation. From Colossians 1:16, we know that Christ, God’s Son, was at work in the creation. In John 1, we also read about Jesus being there in the beginning.

So, if that which bears the image of Caesar belongs to Caesar, then certainly that which bears the image of God belongs to God. We are the image of God—every part of us. In effect, Jesus is saying give your whole self to the One who has imprinted divinity upon you.

That doesn’t mean we are exactly like God, but we are reflections of his glory. We could never be exactly like God because God is our supreme Creator, but we do have the ability to reflect his character of love, patience, forgiveness, kindness, and faithfulness.

This text should then remind us that we all are God’s children who bear his divine image and, therefore, belong to him. Think about that. We belong to God. Knowing that we are made in God’s image and thus share many of his characteristics provides a solid basis for our self-worth. Our worth is not based on wealth, achievements, attractiveness, knowledge, or popularity. It is based on being made in God’s image, so we should feel positive about ourselves.

Criticizing or downgrading ourselves is criticizing what God has made and the abilities he has given us. Knowing that you are a person of worth helps you love God, know him personally, and make a valuable contribution to those around you and to society as a whole.

Recognizing that we are created in God's image and that we belong to him plays a significant role in how we see our world and how we live in it. Let's explore this a bit. Jesus made the point in Matthew 22 that it was okay for the Jews to pay the tax to Caesar, but that did not mean they belonged to the emperor. They belonged to God—as do we.

If we dig deeper into what Jesus means by this, we hear him say that God and Caesar are not to be equals, nor are they symbolic names for separate kingdoms. If this were the point, then it would mean that the emperor could demand our supreme allegiance and God would be assigned to another realm demanding different allegiances. This means we would essentially live in two different worlds. People actually seem to think they can do that, but we can't. Christians who try to do this will, at some point, experience conflict within themselves because at some point they will be forced to choose one loyalty over another.

Jesus tells us that that's not how it works. He concludes through this text that humans bear God's image, and wherever we live and whatever we are doing—whether in the social, economic, political, religious realm—we continue to belong to God.

If God owns all, then we belong to God alone. Yet we live in a world in which competing powers and influences vie to own us, to sway us and capture our hearts. It is not always easy to navigate our way through the mixed leadings—the push and pull of the good and bad of this world. But as we recognize and accept that we belong to God and as we embrace the confidence from the truth that we are valuable, and as we grow in our understanding of His Word and faithfulness in our relationship with Him, we pledge to God our ultimate obedience and commitment. Our top loyalties do not switch when we move out of church and into the secular world. No part of our life is excluded from our fundamental covenant with the One who is our Creator, in whose image we are made. We are the people who bear God's image in this chaotic world. We belong to God. The world needs us. Amen.