

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s.” These words of Jesus have become a sort of rule to live by, a proverb of sorts, and those who don’t know scripture very well may still only have heard, “Render unto Caesar.” Yet, digging beneath the surface of this short encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians may certainly help us uncover some of the deeper meanings in the exchange.

First, the combination of people approaching Jesus is interesting. Matthew tells us that the Pharisees come together with the Herodians. The Pharisees were opposed to paying taxes to Rome. On the other hand, King Herod’s position of power came courtesy of the Romans, so even though the taxes were widely considered to be severe and unfair, the Herodians had a vested interest in keeping the Roman taxes paid. Therefore, the Pharisees and the Herodians each represented one of the two sides of the problem.

Then the two unlikely partners set their trap with the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” This reference is obviously to Jewish Law. Clearly, it was lawful to pay the tax by Rome’s standards; the question was whether it was proper for a Jewish people to do so.

It would seem that they have trapped Jesus, leaving him with no

way out. He can't speak against the tax, for that would anger the Herodians, and lead to a charge of treason against Rome. He could not speak in favor of the tax, without making most of the crowds that followed him angry.

Jesus, being very much aware of their attempt to trick and trap Him, asks for one of the coins used in paying the tax. This is Jesus' own trap, because it will prove that at least one of the questioners, either the Pharisee or the Herodian, is a hypocrite.

You see, the coin used for the tax was a silver Denarius, with the image of Caesar on it. The coins were against Jewish Law, which prohibited carved images.

You may remember the incident when Jesus chased moneychangers from the outer courts of the Temple. These money changers had a very lucrative business going, because one was required to exchange the pagan Roman Denarius for Temple coins before going to do business in the Temple.

Carrying the image of Caesar into the Temple was considered sinful. But note that when Jesus asks for a Denarius, one is quickly found and handed to Him.

Jesus then asks the question that everyone in Israel could have answered without a coin in their hand, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" When they answer Jesus' question, saying that the image and likeness are "Caesar's," Jesus replies that they are to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar's. Give back to Caesar those things that are Caesar's in the first place. In other words it is his coin anyway, so who cares if you give Caesar back his coin for the tax?

Then Jesus gives the most amazing line of the short encounter when he continues by saying that we are to "give back to God the things that are God's." Now, we all know that any sermon writer worth his or her salt, is going to highlight that comment

by Jesus. That comment by Jesus should have us all trying to figure out what exactly it is that we have in our possession that belongs to God, that we are supposed to give back to Him. To help us in our trying to figure that out, the clue was the word “image” and the word “likeness.”

To further help us see, Jesus’ answer came from the Book of Genesis which says, “And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,’” and goes on to state “God created humankind in his Image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

The principle is this: Just as the coin has Caesar’s icon on it, so it is Caesar’s, we were made in the image and likeness of God, so we are God’s. Jesus affirmed the tax and its payment, while making it all but unimportant to our faith. Jesus implies that, though we do owe the state, we only owe the state what actually belongs to the state. Yet, Jesus places no limits on what we owe to God.

This reading is often used to talk about stewardship, about what we give to the church, especially when churches are engaged in Stewardship Programming. But this passage is not just about the tithe. For if giving 10 percent of our income to God is all we do, we would be falling 90 percent short of the mark. Jesus says that everything we have, and everything we are, is God’s already.

While this would certainly apply to the money we make, the formula is not that we give 100 percent of our income to God, for God knows we need money for the necessities of life. The teaching is that once we have given God some of the money we earn, don’t feel that we have fulfilled our obligation. God wants to share in some of our time and energy, so the 100 percent formula relates to our time, talents and energy, as well as our

wallet.

What God desires is nothing less than to come and dwell in our heart, for our whole life. The point is that we have been made in the image and likeness of God. God loves us, unconditionally.

God keeps our picture in His divine wallet, and on His heavenly refrigerator. Jesus didn't care about the tax, his real concern was that we live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created us.

We begin to live into the image and likeness of God by modelling our life to be more like Jesus' life. Giving back to God through the church does matter, but merely giving money to the government, to this church, or anywhere else, is only part of the picture.

To live more fully into that image and likeness of God that is in us, let's give back our heart to God, it's His anyway. All of us, no matter what our background, we can meet Jesus anew every time we worship. You see, we ourselves are what we need to give back to God.

AMEN.