

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 everyday?" 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 swimming?"

The little boy was straightforward and honest in his questions because he wanted to entrust to the lady something valuable. The Pharisees 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 so angry it blinded them. Think for a moment about the ironies here: We know, because we live on this side of the resurrection, that Jesus is God. They thought he was a prophet or troublemaker. We know that Jesus is the King of kings. They thought he wanted to be the King of Israel. We know that he was the Son of God. They thought he was simply Joseph and Mary's son. We know that Jesus has influenced the world for 2000 years. They thought his influence would end at the cross.

It's a fascinating story. We look at the Pharisees and we shake our heads. How could they have been so wrong when the truth was standing right in front of them? I believe they were upset because Jesus held them accountable and exposed their hypocrisy. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere," they say to him, "and teach the way of God." Not for a moment did they believe in Jesus' sincerity. It was a set up. It was a way of putting him at ease before they stabbed him in the back. Tell us then, they continue, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

I suppose we ought to be grateful to the Pharisees. In their question, which Jesus says was motivated by malice, they prompt one of the greatest of Jesus' teachings. It may not seem like much on the face of it but its implications have echoed through the centuries and has shaped western societies. Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Let us ask three questions this morning and find out why this little teaching has had such a great influence.

The first question is: What is Caesar's? I will answer that question in a moment. First, I would like to backup and take a look at the actual question that is being asked of Jesus.

For the Pharisees are not asking Jesus a secular question: What do you think about paying Taxes? They are asking a religious question. Look at how they phrase the question. They say, "Is it permitted..." The question could be paraphrased: Is it in accord with Torah to pay taxes to Caesar? They are asking Jesus if the Mosaic Law would support taxes paid to a pagan ruler?

We are told that the Pharisees went out of the temple and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. That's interesting in itself. They had to go out of the temple to conspire; they dare not do it in that holy place. This is no absence of malice; they have deliberately fashioned this tricky question. When they return, Jesus is presented with a dilemma. If he says don't pay the tax they will be able to accuse him before Pilate of anti-Roman activity. If, on the other hand he says, pay the tax he will lose favor with the people for whom the Roman tax was a necessary evil and a symbol of their lost freedom. So, what to do? He calls for a coin.

If you were to hold a Roman denarius in your hand you would quickly understand the use Jesus makes of it. Go to any serious coin shop today and they will have one on display. The head displays the reigning emperor, and on the tail an inscription, reading, in the time of Jesus, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus." The emperor was the high priest of Rome's pagan religion.

There is a bit of humor here. Standing on the Holiest ground in all of Israel, within the Temple walls, Jesus' adversaries have quickly produced a coin that bears a graven image, an idol. The second of the Ten Commandments expressly warns against the use of idols. Their hypocrisy is exposed.

And then Jesus answers, render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's. George Weigel, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center of Washington, D.C, has called this a revolutionary text, whose public implications have been working themselves out for almost two millennia." As a Christian, who is a citizen of the United States, what does it mean to give Caesar his due?

Let me answer in the most obvious way I know. Give to the Caesar what is his and give to God what is his. It's an idea, which had to be worked out over the centuries. The Apostle Paul recognized the role of government, when he said that government is "God's servant, and agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). I know many a Christian who is squeamish about judgment. They say we are not to judge. But my friends if you pay taxes you are supporting a judicial system that judges. There is no way around it. There is a role for the punishment of crime and a Christian's duty is to support that system.

What is Caesar's? That is the first question raised by Jesus. The second is: What is God's? I want you to imagine the religious leaders as they go out of the temple to scheme, & return with their trick question, and then wait knowing that they have placed Jesus in an impossible position. Jesus then asks for a coin and asks his question: Whose image is on it? They say, "Caesar." Don't you wish you could reply in those moments with the clarity of Jesus? Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's! You could think for a month & not answer any better. If Caesar wants his tax, give it to him. His face is on the coin anyway, so it must be his. But what is God's? What is God's? I want you to know that this is not a fifty-fifty proposition. God is due more than the government. Caesar's role in your life is vastly inferior to God's role in your life. If the coin bears the image of George Washington then it must be his, give it to him. But you bear the image of God. You are created in God's image; we give our lives to God!

Luciano Pavarotti says that when he was a boy, his father, a baker, introduced him to the wonders of song. He urged him to work hard to develop his voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in his hometown of Modena, Italy, took him as a pupil. Pavarotti also enrolled in a teachers college. On graduating, he asked his father, "Shall I be a teacher or a singer?" "Luciano," his father replied, "if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair." Pavarotti, later in life wrote: "I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it's laying bricks, writing a book whatever we choose we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that's the key. Choose one chair. I do believe that Jesus understood the importance of government in the life of his followers. In the United States we live in a great country. I am a citizen of this land. But I am first & foremost a citizen of heaven.

Who and what belongs to God?

You do. And nothing Caesar can do can ever take that away from us. For every one of us is made, stamped, & sealed by a far greater & more pervasive image: the image of God.

Every one of us has been created in God's image to be a son and daughter of God. We are already signed, sealed, and committed to God by our faith, our allegiance, and our relationship with Jesus.

No secular thing, whether politics, wealth, threat, or demand can ever take that from us. So, let the secular world create its own idols, its own currency, its own politics, its own power plays.

God's people know in their hearts, that God is so much greater than any of the worldly possessions we strive for. And all things sacred and secular ultimately belong to God.

We live in a world of which currency matters. And as a citizen of the world, we can take part in that currency. But it does not define us.

For as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, as disciples of Jesus, Christians of the Church, we navigate with a currency of love. And that currency bears the image of God in Heaven.

As we enter into one of the most tumultuous times in our country's history, I encourage you to remember who you are.

You may adhere to a party, a politics, or even an economic preference or system of your choice. You may choose to play the game of life in whatever ways you choose.

But as Christians, never forget whose image is seared into your heart, and whose currency must supersede the rest. Christ Jesus', who sacrificed his life to save yours. God's, who created you and sustains you.

May God bless you in your living and bless you in your loving of all God's creatures--great & small. Amen.