

“Give to God what is God’s”  
 October 22, 2017  
 Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

*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.*

Jesus has been teaching in the temple for a good while now. With one parable after another, he has been describing the kingdom of heaven to anyone who will listen. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who went out to sow seeds... The kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner who went out to hire workers... The kingdom of heaven is like a king who had a wedding banquet for his son...”* And so it goes, each time shedding more light on the subject matter. But his teaching offends. His words are unsettling, especially when the troubling truth in the parable points directly at those in the audience. Mostly, Jesus is upsetting the way things have always been. And that means trouble.

#### A Clever Question

So now the machinery is turning. The plot is beginning to take shape. Principals and authorities are determined to destroy Jesus. And their idea in today’s passage is to trap Jesus between the church and the state and goad him into saying something that will cross the line, then they will have him.

Beware of flattery. It’s the fancy sleeve that covers up the knife. It’s the way the enemy sets you up right before the kill.

*"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?”*

Their question is clever, because there will be no good answer. If Jesus says, *“Do not pay the tax,”* they can identify and report him as a seditionist—someone against Rome and against the one who sits at the top of that power, Caesar himself. But if Jesus says, *“Yes, pay the tax,”* they can spread the word that he is a traitor to his own people, an enemy of God and in collusion with Rome. So clever. This knack to set up false choices and force people to take sides in a no-win situation, and only causing division. So clever and so devious. But there is so much more to be mindful of than whether paying taxes is lawful or not.

### Two Sides of the Same Coin

The forces that would divide us are busy at work. They are nothing more than a distraction to keep our minds and hearts off the things in life that matter. Do not be led into making false choices set up by a system that thrives on our contentious division.

*“Take a position! Where do you stand on this? Where do you stand on that? What is your position? We will put you in box and label you, pin you down and we will have you.”* Be careful of those who come to divide you. They are two sides of the same coin. And this is how they plan to get Jesus on this day with their question about the tax, and where he stands in regard to Caesar and to God. But when that question is posed to the Son of the Living God you know the answer is going to rock their world. You know his answer is going to amaze. You know that Jesus has his mind on something bigger than the divisiveness caused by arguments over taxes. *“Bring me a coin! Show me the coin that is used for paying the tax.”*

### Whose Image? Whose Title?

The coin of the realm. The in-hand reminder of who owns it all. Roman occupation is in all parts of life. Soldiers are on the street corners, centurions are wielding power over whole communities, all of them in the area of Jerusalem answering to the resident Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate.

There is an image on the coin. There is a title. It is Caesar, Tiberius Julius Caesar, and he is the emperor, the center of the universe. Jesus can see that. It's clear for everyone to see. It's a power so great it has moved into all aspects of life, including the temple and including the currency. There is the image right there on the coin that Jesus holds up for everyone to see.

But the center of the universe is about to change before their very eyes. If God seems far off, it's because God's people have pledged allegiance to Rome and look to the security *it* promises, and cannot see that the kingdom of heaven has come near. If there is a despair and a hopelessness in the land, it's because a disconnect has happened between humanity and God, and God's promises have been forgotten. If there is division among the people, it's because they are misled and fight over things that fall short of the glory of God. If the people cannot see God in their midst, it's because they are ruled by the images found on coins. But now the actual Center of all being from the beginning of time stands before them and has found human voice:

*"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."*

#### Give to God What is God's

It all fades away. In the end all is a puff of smoke blown away by the wind; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. As life moves forward we are eventually forced to surrender all that we have. One day it is all gone, and it all goes back into the earth. But some things are eternal. Does anybody know what I'm talking about?

The words of Jesus bear repeating: *"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."* This life will take from us whatever it may, and what choice do we have but to give it all away. But then we come to the part of *"giving to God what is God's."* Caesar wants what is Caesar's, but God wants what is God's. And so, we must consider, what is that? And what is God willing to do to get it? To what lengths will God go?

All the way, because God wants all of you. Not out of greed, but out of love. The good news is that God will lay his life for the sake of ours. *Give to God what is God's.* There is a heart beating at the center of the universe. All of life emirates from that center. Every other heart is trying to catch that beat, trying to find that rhythm. It is the longing planted there by the Ancient Spirit. It is the need articulated over centuries by those in search of the Divine.

Sometimes all we can understand is an image. Many images are flashed before us, and they demand our attention and our devotion. But then the very image of God appears and asks for our very lives when he says, "Give to God what is God's." Amen.