

RENDERING AN IMAGE

Rendering an Image – Pastor Scott R. Larson

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

(English Standard Version 2001)

As Matthew often emphasizes in his gospel, there were really only two ways that people react to Jesus during His ministry – homage or hostility. Starting all the way back with the Magi and Herod at the beginning of Matthew, we see hostility, and we see homage. When confronted with the living God, and who Jesus really is, it is difficult to be indifferent. Jesus is anything but Ho-Hum. And in this passage, we see the hostility, albeit masquerading as homage.

It would be an incredible **understatement** to say that by this point in his ministry, Jesus had become a thorn in the side of the Jewish religious and political leaders. They had tried repeatedly to have him discredited or rebuffed, several of which are recorded in the Gospels (where??) – only to meet with failure at every turn. But they shrewdly take a page from Jesus' playbook himself, and try to turn the tables on him (speaking of the question of Jesus to Pharisees in Matt. 21:23-

27). And we see the results – and this is a fun narrative for followers of Jesus to walk through. But at the same time we can't miss that in Jesus' succinct response he not only outwits his opponents and gives one of the most mature pronouncements on civil power, but also lays out the basis of our relationship as it relates to God.

We're going to do a couple things today:

1. See what's really going on here (Walking through the story and the context)
 - a. We'll see that is really more than just a clever evasion of the topic
2. Connect how this is important to us as believers and what I think God has put on my heart for us today (application)

So let's set up the context of the conflict. The Pharisees and the Herodians are tackling a particularly heated topic of the day in their question (whether or not this tax should be paid by God-fearing Jews. Rebellion was the rule of the day, and squelching rebellions was seemingly a favorite pastime of the Roman rule. The Pharisees were the legalistic elite, while the Herodians were the pro-Roman leaders – who, normally would go toe-to-toe and head-to-head. But today they have a common problem – i.e. Jesus. And they have to figure out how to deal with this problem. And this passage tells us that they get together and collude to do this.

¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

It's interesting that when we start to dig into this, we notice the simulated irony in verse 16. You can almost hear the insincerity dripping through their statement. I'm not sure how they actually thought they were going to fool Jesus

with that. But the irony is that even though they didn't mean it, what they said of Jesus was quite correct. Indeed He **is** true, and He **does** teach the way of God truthfully – and if they really believed the deceptive words seething from their own lips, they would know the truth and not be trying to trap Him, but rather learn from Him.

Now the wording that we find here: “swayed by appearances” = original phrase is more literally “The face of men” – Here they are effectively saying that Jesus does not judge a book by its cover, but rather sees things for what they really are. This is also strange irony in that they are heaping false flattery on him when their hearts are deceitful.

THE QUESTION:

--phrased to trap (much like Jesus' question in Chp. 21:23-27 – except Jesus there traps them in their own words.)

-- vs. 15 “trap him” (παγιδεύωσιν) only place this word shows up in the New Testament – the picture here is “birds caught in a snare/net” (verbal trap) – they are trying to verbally trap Him in this way

– Why and to what effect? We see their intentions clearly in Lukan account (**Luke 20:20** ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.) – they were doing this so that they could trap him; there is no question of their insincerity in this matter.

– they don't really want an answer so much as fodder for prosecuting Jesus. They want incriminating evidence (and the sad part is this is the “evidence” they fabricate to prosecute Jesus later)

--phrased as simple “yes” – “no” answer (not asking for discourse on it) – a trick question, a double-edged question, meant to draw blood either way.

They set the question up as a “Yes-No” question.

“YES”, pay taxes → Jesus would lose many of his ardent followers (supporters)

“NO”, even better → turn over to Roman authorities

Notice there are really two questions, “Is it?” and “Or not?”

They are essentially saying, “Pick your poison, Jesus!” “Which is it? You can’t have your cake & eat it too!”

THE COIN:

-the coin used for this tax mentioned here is a silver denarius used for the tribute-tax to Rome – “nomismo” ~ “legal tender”

--patriotic Jews resented even the usage of this coin. Why?

--two important things we learn about this coin from archeology: image (eikon) and inscription (epigraphe) – the image is an image of Tiberius Caesar – images were forbidden by the second commandment -- and in the temple no less. The Latin inscription means, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” On the other side of the coin is the image of Pax, the Roman Goddess of peace, with the inscription, “High Priest”

So the coin is an idolatrous coin with a blasphemous scripture! No wonder that pious and nationalistic Jews would object to the use of this coin, and in the temple no less!

--Note that when Jesus asks them for the coin that they had one handy, he didn’t even have one at all. This would be like asking Jesus if it is Ok to shoot a gun, then producing an AK47 from beneath your cloak when asked – their insincerity and embarrassment softens the edge of the ‘tough’ question)

THEIR RESPONSE TO JESUS’ QUESTION:

--I imagine that they were mumbling when they responded "Caesar's" (because of the idolatrous associations) – pious Jews objected to the human icon (against 2nd commandment) and a blasphemous inscription describing Caesar as God and high priest

--Jesus is pressing the point – if it belongs to him (Caesar's possession), then there is certainly nothing wrong with returning it to him

JESUS' ANSWER

--the word used here should be translated as "render" or "give back" (apodote) to Caesar what he gave to them. (note that they said "didomi" (= would be "dote") in vs.17) (the NIV misses it here with simply "give", although it has been updated in the 2011 version)

--Jesus basically says, "Well, then, give it back!" (emphasized in Greek at the end of the sentence)

--not a terribly paradoxical statement, but a rather profound simple one – the one to whom it belongs to should receive it back – the sense is to return something borrowed or payment of something to whom it is DUE – this seems all the more likely given the context of the Matt. 21:41 parable of the vineyard which focuses on "giving back"

--Illustration of Cattle branding – cattle are branded with a symbol which indicates to whom they belong.

--Jesus' answer is quite deep when you realize based on the context what Jesus is implying. The coin has Caesar's image, so give it back to him. But what about what is given to God? What has his image? WE DO. Gen. 1:26-17 tells us that we are the image of God.

Genesis 1:26-27 ²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth

and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

--so the Jewish leaders made it a mutually exclusive question (either this or that), but Jesus points out the fundamental problem – they are not essentially incompatible concepts

--1. Respect for state – a due (not divine) reciprocity – Rom 13:1-7 1 Pet 2:13-17 develop this

--2. Limitation of the state – human beings bear God's image and belong to God alone. God is the boundary of the state.¹

So in the end, Jesus neither totally identifies with the Zealots (hyper-revolutionaries who give nothing (\$ or submission) to the state) nor does he totally identify with the Herodians (hyper-patriots) who give the state almost divine authority.

--and after Jesus speaks, they are amazed (Luke tells us they leave SPEECHLESS) – perhaps amazed at the depth of the answer, but probably more amazed that Jesus adeptly evaded their verbal trap so easily. I mean, this sort of verbal word-smithing was their life-blood, their political-religious bread and butter, and Jesus was just an illegitimate Carpenter, right? On the contrary we know, Jesus is God, He is the Word, and as I like to say,

Playing word games with the Word of God leaves you speechless.

Now going back to Jesus' answer – the answer is as simple as it is deep – Jesus has a positive appreciation for the role of the state (God puts gov'ts in place) and even more appreciation for what is God's alone.

¹ Presbyterianism's Confession of 1967 – "Although nations may serve God's purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling."

BUT SO WHAT? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

We must give back to God what is due to him. Because we are His image, **we** are due to Him – just like the image on the coin. What was given to us?

Our life, our all, our salvation.

What must we give back?

Our life, our all, the Glory He alone is due.

So you might be saying, OK Scott, I understand that **we** are due to God, but what does that mean for us in a more concrete and less abstract sense? So what does that mean for us this very day?

CHALLENGE:

What are you withholding from God? And if you're anything like me, anything like most people, this is not about searching for the SINGLE thing we're withholding – (that is, holding back) from God, you'll have plenty to choose from. Remember – we owe everything back to Him – all of ourselves. So what we really need to do is to find the ONE SINGLE thing which God wants us to focus on first. What is it today that God wants us to give back to Him? And that's something that each of us needs to wrestle with. And by "wrestle with" I don't mean texting yourself a note during the commercial break of your favorite TV show, or just making a mental note while stopped at the stop light. Jacob wrestled all night with the LORD, and although it may not take quite THAT long, my point is that wrestling means going back and forth – in prayer, in writing, in reading his Word – and just listening to God until we find the answer. So each one of us needs to wrestle with the one individual thing which God wants us to GIVE BACK to him.

We are the image of God, and as the image, we must work at becoming more like Christ. THE IMAGE MUST LOOK MORE LIKE its CREATOR. We need to become more Christ-like. As John the Baptist noted: He must increase, and we must decrease (John 3:30) for that to happen. This is probably the best answer to

what it means to truly give ourselves back to God, to truly “render unto God what is God’s”. However, the process of sanctification and becoming more and more like Christ is probably best as the subject of another sermon and another text.

But I did feel today that God was leading me to Challenge you – to challenge US – with something specific from this passage today. So why don’t I start with a suggestion. Let’s start with giving back ourselves in our **relationship to Jesus**. Just at the end of this very same chapter of Matthew (verse 37-40), the Lord gives us the Greatest Commandment, which is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind.

I suggest today, that we start GIVING BACK ourselves in our **relationship to Jesus** because this is the foundation of so many other things – we need to KNOW HIM, not just KNOW OF HIM – the parable of the sheep and the goats should sober us enough to realize that. We need to KNOW HIM, not just KNOW OF HIM. And when we truly know Jesus, then our time, our talents, our trust, and our service – will all follow suit. Like when playing the card-game “hearts”. When you lead with a heart, everything else after that follows suit.

You see, we so often forget that the God of the Universe, Jesus, to whom all glory and honor is due LONGS for a relationship with us. He LONGS for it. He LONGS to gather us as a “hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Matt 23:37), yet time after time we hold back. I think of the illustration of a little boy sitting in the outfield who waits patiently and expectantly for His father to come watch him play, for a father who always promises, but never shows up to watch his son – He never shows up, and the little boy’s eyes well up with tears as the innings continue to progress. Except that the scriptures portray God as having the longing of the little boy, and we are more like the father who never shows. He wants to have a deeper relationship with us individually, He LONGS for it. So this

is where we must start showing up and start building that deeper relationship with Him.

But maybe some of you are sitting there asking, “Where do I start?” Well, first of all, if you have never given over your heart to him, then start there. For until you’ve done that, you’re only working within your own strength, and it will be useless and for naught. But perhaps you’ve already accepted Jesus into your heart, and you struggle with where to go next. Well, may I suggest that you find a place to give God a foothold in your life? Pray about it, and find a place to give God a foothold in your life. For some here, that may be even 5 minutes early in the morning. For others, it may be much much more. That’s something each of us must wrestle with, and to listen carefully to God for the answer.

We are the Image of God, all we have and all we are is due to him, therefore we must render ourselves by surrendering ourselves in **greater relationship with Jesus.**