



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

RENDER TO CAESAR...

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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 22, 2017

ISAIAH 45:1-7; PSALM 96:1-7, 10-13; 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10; MATTHEW 22:15-22



Matthew 22:15-22 [The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus 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.]

"I have a silver dollar here in my hand. It's not just any silver dollar. It was given to me by my great-grandmother. She died at age 103 when

I was in my early 30s, but every year at Christmas, with the family all gathered at the old homestead in the Ozark foothills, five

generations, sometimes as many as forty people pressed into the small four-room house. We'd have a feast, followed by a gift exchange, names chosen by lottery on Thanksgiving Day. Then in ritual fashion marking the occasion, my great-grandmother, whom we called Ma, would take her seat next to the fire and one by one, we'd present ourselves to her to bless us and to tender one of these silver dollars into our hand. Every person, regardless of age, received one.

About a decade ago, we pulled out all the silver dollars that had been given me, and Kathy since she joined the family, and our daughters, too. I recall there were 58 coins altogether. How much were they worth? Well, that's an interesting question. \$58 dollars, some might say. But if they remain in a box in the closet, one could argue that they were worthless since they were out of circulation—or one could argue that, given their sentimental value, they were priceless.

A few years ago we combined them all in a bagful of blessings, ritually held one back (this one, in fact, as a keepsake), and then cashed in the rest and deposited the amount equally into the girls' education funds.

I pulled this one back out this week as I pondered this rough and tumble text from Matthew's gospel once more. Jesus talks a lot about money and our relationship to it. He invites us to wrestle with the value we place on our money and possessions.

Perhaps the blessing that this coin represents for me in my life makes it an impractical prop

for the work Jesus is inviting you and me into. So I have a quarter here also—one that is in circulation, no special attachment to it. You might have a coin in your pocket or purse. If so, feel free to pull it out.

Whose head is on the coin? A President's perhaps. George Washington on the quarter. Flip it over, and it will tell you among other things how much the coin is worth...one cent, a nickel, dime, or quarter.

Now consider for a moment that you are standing with Jesus, who has invited you to pull out a coin used as currency across the empire, one with which subjects would pay annual tributes and taxes, and he asks you whose image is imprinted there.

It's a denarius, a silver coin worth about a day's wages for a laborer, and it was extremely common—like a quarter today. Only the image on the denarius was that of Caesar's—presumably the emperor Tiberius. Moreover, its Latin inscription heralded Tiberius as "son of the divine Augustus" (that is, son of a divine being) and would have been offensive to many Jews.ⁱ The Romans gloried in such titles; the Jews were scandalized by them.

Can you see the irony here? It is the Pharisees who are intent on entrapping Jesus with their question about paying the tribute to Caesar each year. Either a yes or no answer would have gotten Jesus in trouble. "Yes" would have discredited him with those who found the imperial domination system of Rome oppressive and reprehensible. "No" would have made him subject to arrest for sedition. But it is

Jesus whose wile turns the straw man on its head by asking them to show him a coin with which to pay taxes to Caesar. Apparently he does not have one...but they do.

“Whose image is on the coin,” he asks.

“Caesar’s.” “Well, then, render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” To render means to return it to him—it is his anyway. What value have you placed on it?

“But render to God what belongs to God.” Continuing our theme of considering the images, then the instruction is crystal clear: Return to God, that which bears God’s image.

And what bears God’s image? You and I, who have been created in God’s image. A central proposition of true identity. It is an invitation to offer ourselves entirely to God.

This passage from Matthew’s gospel has been used by some to suggest that Christians should opt out of their investments in societal politics, that we should distance ourselves from civic involvement, from the realm of Caesar, but that grossly distorts the point here. Surely society needs the church and its conscience of justice and mercy now more than ever, but Jesus is saying get perspective in it all.

Render the energy necessary to play your part in this political and economic system that seems so distorted when viewed through the prism of our gospel values. But keep perspective. Give it the value it warrants, and not one iota more. And the best way to do that is to orient your life, the whole of it, in

relationship to God who calls you into this identity as one created in the divine image of love and mercy and justice and peace.

Friends, this is a stewardship text, but know that stewardship is not ultimately about money. It is about answering questions in the context of this gospel, questions like: What value do I place on that which bears God’s image? What value do I place on that which bears an image other than God’s? And which God do I serve?

I know in my life, as I strive to pay the bills, plan for retirement, and set aside some for fun, this proverbial quarter becomes worth much more in my hand than if I let it go. It holds more sway over me when I attribute to it more value than it really should have in my life.

It is a token of trade, nothing more, nothing less, used as a means for us to be in relationship with one another... and make no mistake, God desires us to be in right relationship with one another—to use this and all that we have and all that we are in life-giving, wholesome ways.

And Jesus comes along and says: Take stock of your life...and offer to God what is God’s—namely, all of it. Use it for God’s life-giving purposes. Use it for good. Give some away and experience the blessing that comes in doing so.

Present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.ⁱⁱ Amen.

ⁱ Akerman, John Yonge. “Numismatic Illustrations of the New Testament” Chicago, Argonaut, Inc. Publishers, 1966, p.11.

ⁱⁱ Romans 12:1. *Worship is an early English contraction of the word that intends “worth-ship”—that is, the means by which we find our worthiness, our inherent value as creatures made in God’s image.*



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