

Matt 22:15-22
Oct 16, 2011

South Plains

The Face of God

When Moses asked to see the face of God, God said No. Traditionally, anyone who sees the face of God will die. But, Moses was under a lot of pressure trying to move thousands of Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years and he wanted some special token of God's presence. Because he was a friend of God, a special friend, God granted part of what he asked for. God put his friend in a cleft of the rock and passed by so Moses could safely see the backside of God. But, not even Moses was permitted to see God's face. The connection with the second commandment is clear. Human creatures cannot see the invisible Lord of heaven and earth. We cannot even conceive, much less fashion with our hands what God looks like. No graven images for us because it would be a false image; and the temptation would be too great to worship this false image, a false idol representation of God. No one can see God.

It helps to have that background in mind as we read the story of how the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus with their smooth question:

"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." First they seem to compliment Jesus by reminding

everyone that he teaches from the scriptures, and he lets the chips fall where they will. Then they spring their trap. "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

If Jesus says, 'Pay taxes' he will lose credibility faster than a Republican candidate for the presidency. These are people who are oppressed by Rome. On the other hand, if Jesus says, 'Don't pay taxes,' he would be against Roman law and subject to arrest for advocating rebellion. The Jewish leaders thought they had caught the popular rabbi on the horns of a dilemma. It's a gotcha moment, the kind of political theatre we see in debates among our presidential hopefuls. Everyone is listening to see whether Jesus will stumble.

The incident is part of a series of confrontations the leaders provoke while Jesus is in the temple. The courtyard is busy with religious people who would have paused in their rituals to listen, curious about the outcome. Jesus has gained a following in Galilee and other rural places. Can he handle the pressure of the big city?

Jesus is far too clever. He asks his tormentors to produce the coin used to pay taxes. The coin is stamped with the emperor's image and the inscription, "Tiberius Emperor, son of God." For a pious Jew to be carrying an image of the emperor who pretends to be divine, that false god who mints idolatrous images, -- to carry that image within the precincts of the temple was itself a

casual bit of idolatry. The religious hypocrites have been caught red-handed. Despite their armor of smooth piety, they have exposed a huge chink of idolatry. Now, Jesus has the advantage. But he does not play Gotcha. Instead, he replies with a deceptively simple saying that becomes a proverb, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

I have called Jesus' words 'deceptively simple' because they sound like the wisdom of Solomon, a clear formula for managing our money. Whatever belongs to the emperor? Well, give it to him -- from the Atlantic Ocean across the Mediterranean and beyond, from Britain south to Africa, it all belonged to Rome, including little Israel. But, Israel is the land Promised to the people of God. And the Lord is the Creator of heaven and earth. It all belongs to God. Everything, including the empire. What to do?

My father refused to eat pizza. He didn't object to any of the ingredients. He just didn't like the idea of mixing all those ingredients up in a single piece of bread. His favorite plates were a set of china with the blue willow pattern, every plate molded into three distinct divisions: Meat and gravy in the largest part, green beans on the left and potatoes in the right compartment. Life is simpler that way.

The Pharisees were famous for dividing life up into neat compartments. Each compartment had certain

religious duties appropriate to itself. Keeping the rules for each part of life kept a Pharisee as righteous as it was possible to be in this life. Taxes, however, were a gray area. Paying taxes to an emperor who claimed to be god could not have been easy, even for a Pharisee. But, they had to do it.

Jesus did not resolve that dilemma. There is no formula to tell the Pharisees when to pay tribute to the Roman Emperor. By the same token there's no formula to tell us how much we owe to church, to charity, or to our government in taxes. There's no formula that divides our allegiance neatly so that we always know this much of my life's energies belongs to my family, this much to my community, this much to my country, and this much to my faith. If there were, we would not see marchers in Wall Street. We would not see a deadlocked congress. We would not see gridlock in the economy. Gridlock in the government means there is no formula.

Because money is so fungible, so interchangeable with so many of the things we value, it's easy to think that it's neutral: how we spend our money, what we buy doesn't really matter as long as we're within the law. The Roman law, one of the best legal systems the world had ever seen, required Jews to pay tribute to the emperor. In most parts of the empire, it required people conquered by Rome to acknowledge the emperor as divine. Israel had won an exception to that law requiring worship because it was just too much trouble for Rome to keep fighting the peculiar Jewish idea of one God. After all,

monotheism was rare in the ancient world. So, in Israel you did not have to sacrifice to statues of the emperor so long as you paid your taxes and kept your mouth shut about whose kingdom this was.

Whose kingdom do you live in? Who's really in charge? To whom do we owe our allegiance? Is it the government that says we've got to pay taxes and wear seatbelts? Is it the marketplace that says you're worth only what the market is willing to pay? Is it your family saying stick together and we'll get through this somehow? Is it the church that says do this and God loves you? None of these formulas works perfectly.

Jesus presents his tormentors with a paradox: Give God everything even when you give the emperor his due. I like the way David Lose hears this proverb. "I think Jesus invites us – actually demands of us – that we be thinking regularly and relentlessly about how all of our decisions...should be shaped by the confession that...the whole world is God's and everything in it – including us!" (in Textweek.com)

Surely that includes our taxes and by implication our votes, our time and how we spend it, our possessions and what they say about our priorities, our abilities as workers, volunteers, supporters of various causes, even the gift of our personality and the influence it has upon people around us. Our money may be the resource we worry the most about, but money is probably the easiest thing we control despite its power for good or ill.

Give to the world the things that are the world's, and give to God the things that are God's. We serve God with every decision and act. We serve either well or poorly. But, we never escape service to the One who created us and all there is. Every dollar we spend reflects our service to God.

Do you want to see the face of God? You can. If you look in the mirror, you will see as much of God as anyone ever does. You are made in God's image. You represent God's love and freedom better than an idol. Your decisions, your desires, your deeds are the image of God in the world. All that you do and are serves our Creator. Even the taxes we pay represent God's work in the governments ordained by God to keep order in the world.

Give therefore to God what belongs to God. Give yourself in everything you do.