

Scriptures: Genesis 1:26-31

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

²⁹God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Matthew 22:15-22

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 (*image*) 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.

Proclamation of the Word

With the Occupy Wall Street movement going on in our country, and around the globe, these last days and weeks, we see uncertainty and frustration. The people of Biblical days were struggling with many of the same issues with which you and I deal. Following the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin wrote his French Scientist friend, Jean- Baptiste LeRoy, concerning the US Constitution, saying while the Constitution seems durable, nothing is certain except death and taxes.¹There was uncertainty even in Franklin's day. As we enter a year of political campaigns and debates, this debate which takes place in the Temple 2000 years ago, shows that the more things change, the more things stay the same. With the Occupy movement, we may be witnessing the Selma, the March on the Washington Mall, the Kent State of this generation. People are protesting out of frustration and anger even if peacefully doing so for the most part. History has taught us that lack of opportunity, inequity, and injustice usually leads to revolutions and robin hoods. This is not new, either. Did you know that the issue Jesus talks about most is money? Not sex, not salvation, but money.

In Palestine of Jesus' day, people were paying taxes to the empire in which they had no voice. Jewish peasants had not elected their leaders. They had been conquered by them. They were a colony of the Roman Empire. Caesar Tiberius was Emperor. If the Jewish man did not pay his taxes, he could be put to death. Folks here are frustrated with corporations and banks, people we elect, decisions being made. People are exercising the right to free speech. Either way, money and power, death and taxes, are common issues throughout human history.

Jesus had to deal with death and taxes, too. Just four days before he is killed on a cross for crimes against the state, he is cornered and questioned by representatives of two parties, the Herodians and the Pharisees. In these days before Jesus meets with his own death, he is challenged by the power players of his day. King Herod was given charge of Judea by Caesar; therefore, Herodians were the King's men. They were Jews loyal to Rome. They promoted submission to the authorities, just as the Sadducees did. They would be like the Tories in the American Revolution.

The Pharisees were leaders of the faith who followed the letter of the Law. Pharisees promoted faithfulness to God's law first, even if in conflict with the Caesar's law. Both groups approach Jesus with an agenda- to get him. He is gaining too much influence, and they are losing their control. The gospel says, they were plotting to entrap him. But they both should know by now, no one wins a debate with Jesus.

They ask him a question about taxes. If he says, "pay Caesar," the Pharisees will charge him with breaking religious law, worship no engraved images and pay tribute only to God. But if he says, "no, it's not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," then the Herodians will charge him with sedition.

Jesus makes it a reflection on them. Jesus turns the question on them. He says bring me a coin. "Whose picture do you see? Ahhh...Caesar's, you say." But the coin did not only have an image of Caesar. Engraved under his image is the title: "Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest." To pay tribute, or taxes, to Caesar is acknowledging that the emperor is a god.

Jesus says you're asking me about taxes, but this is about sovereignty. You're not asking a civics question. You are asking a theological question. So here's your answer, "Give to Caesar that which is his, and give to God that which belongs to God."

Okay, there you have it- a simple Stewardship sermon. Pay your taxes and pay your pledge. Be a good citizen and be a generous disciple of Jesus. But this is not about pledges and taxes, it is a debate about who and what deserves our worship.

But Jesus won't let us or this preacher off the hook that easily, because we know our Bible. Jesus tricks them by using the word "image." We know that in Genesis we read today that we are made in God's likeness, male and female God created us in God's image. You and I are the spitting image of the Creator. We belong to God. We pray with the Psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." And we remember that all things created by God belong to God, not to the Emperor. God alone is to be worshiped, not Caesar. Caesar is neither august, nor divine, as the coin reads. And yes, we worship God with our money, our tribute, our first fruits, our tithes- those things do not belong to Caesar. They corner Jesus to trap him, and Jesus has come back with a trick answer.

Ultimately, Jesus' response to their question puts the choice in their laps, in our laps. Give God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

I visited with parents this week who were watching their son have to make a hard decision. He is graduating from Harvard Law School and had two offers from two of the top Law firms in the nation. He had to choose between the two that day. They were very aware, that the son wanted them to tell him what to do. They were doing their best to advise the young man and suggested that he pray for God's leading, but they were holding their tongues not making the decision for the son. Being good parents they know that the choice and the responsibility lies with the son.

Jesus says "Give to Caesar what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to God." Jesus has a way with ambiguous answers.

Amid all the anxiety we have about the future economy. Amid all the "what ifs" and "what might happen?" we come to worship. Maybe we come to remind ourselves that God is trustworthy and faithful. If we really believe that all things belong to God, then we know that God has, does and will take care of us. Remember, the first thing God does after creating people in his image, is to bless them.

Before Adam and Eve did a thing, or earned God's favor, the Scripture says, God blessed them. In the midst of very real hard times: the loss of a job, a serious illness, a troubling issue, God blesses... and in good times, God blesses. That is what God does. God is a generous giver of blessings. Especially in the hard times, God will not forget God's children. Isa. 49:15-16 states:

*Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;*

Your picture is inscribed on the palms of God's hand. Your face, your image, is stamped on God's hand.

Think about whose photos are in your wallet. Are they not the people you love the most? Like a proud mother or father, God's wallet is filled with our photos and the photos of all God's children. God carries around our image. And we carry God's image around too.

I have one child who has a birthmark. When he was very small and asked why that was there, I said, "That's where God kissed you before you were sent to live with us." God's mark is on us. As the Brief Statement of Faith states, "In life and in death we belong to God." And all that we have belongs to God. All of you, all of me, belongs to God, the Creator of the universe. And God will not forget us. God has provided and will provide for us. You can trust that promise.

Secondly, after God blesses humankind, God gives us our purpose: "Be fruitful and multiply. Have dominion and responsibility for my world." You and I are managers of God's resources. We are the spitting image of God, a reflection, of this giving, creative, trustworthy God. We are to be trustworthy, creative, and giving-fruitful. I always find it so ironic that persons who seem to have the least, are sometimes the most generous people I meet. They know that they are blest, and live with a purpose of being a blessing.

Blessed people know that even our money belongs to God. Blessed people know they are blessed to be a blessing.

You might remember the Smith Barney commercial which always ends with the voice of John Houseman, "We make money the old-fashioned way, we *aaaarrrrn* it." Or the line from the 1987 movie, *Secret of My Success* where the female heiress is introducing the Michael J Fox character to the rich businessman and says, "He made his money the really old-fashioned way, he *inherited* it."

Actually, the last statement is the true statement for people who trust and follow Jesus. All that we have was given to us, an inheritance. And God doesn't want our leftover time, our leftover money, our leftovers. God wants our first fruits, as it says in the Bible, our best. God expects nothing less.

In our family we write the check to the church first, before we have haphazardly spend it on something else. But I confess, giving our first fruits, can be a challenge. Many times, I think what could that money do in our kids' college savings accounts? And then I remember God has always provided what we need (mostly through the generosity of others) and will continue to do so. I am learning to trust that. We do not give because we are good, but because we love and serve God who is good.

Because we have been blessed and given a godly purpose, we keep, death, taxes, and money, in perspective. We use money to live, but it is not worthy of our worship. We use money to support the fabric of our community, our neighbors, and our nation. Yes, most of us pay our taxes. While we are free to worship without fear of imprisonment, we make choices about our allegiances and loyalties each day. For people of faith, imprinted on God's hand, God alone is to be worshiped. How we use our resources of time, skills, abilities, and money, all gifts from God, show what we most value and hold dear. Jesus calls disciples to follow him with their whole lives.

So the question for us is will we trust Jesus Christ as lord of our lives? the One true God who has our photos in his wallet?

OR

Will we be defined by counterfeit currency and by Caesar, a counterfeit god? Will we place our trust in our money, our possessions?

OR

Will we follow our own confession of faith written on our coins, "In God we Trust"?

Those are questions Jesus does not answer for us. He lets us figure it out for ourselves.

And as we figure that out and as we live that out

...we trust, we trust, we trust....

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

¹See background here (<http://www.thisdayinquotes.com/2010/11/nothing-is-certain-except-death-and.html>).