***COINS IN YOUR POCKET***

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Texts: Matthew 22:15-22 and Micah 6:6-8

*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?* It wasn’t a question; it was a trap – deftly devised, carefully baited. The appearance of innocence but the reality of evil. A wolf in sheep’s clothing. “Tell us, teacher, *is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*” Who posed the question? Who set the trap? A vineyard owner had two sons. He said to the first: “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The son refused, but later changed his mind and went. The father said the same to the second: “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The second son said, “I will”, but did not go. The second son, who did not do his father’s will despite his statements to the contrary, he set the trap for Jesus. He asked: “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*”

An owner of land leased his farm to tenants. When the harvest came the owner sent his servants to collect the rent. The tenants beat one and killed another. More servants were sent, with the same result. Finally, the owner sent his son, saying, “Surely they will respect my son.” But the tenants killed him too and now face the judgment of the landowner when he comes. Those tenants, who had regard for neither the servants, nor the son, nor the landowner, they set the trap for Jesus. They asked, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*”

The second son, the wicked tenants. Jesus had not named them, but they recognized themselves in the parables - Pharisees. The son who claimed to do the father’s will by following the letter of the law, the tenants who rejected all who were sent from the landowner, even the one who claimed to be the son of God. Pharisees. Jesus had mocked them with his parables, had chastised them in his stories, had publicly humiliated them. He who violated the laws of God handed down from Moses by eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, by touching those who were unclean, by healing on the Sabbath, he had the gall to lecture them! They kept the Law; no one kept it better. No “T” uncrossed, no “I” undotted on the pages of their lives; and so they piously prayed:

*I thank you, Lord, that you have made me a Pharisee, not like the others; for I journey to the life of the future world, and they journey to the grave of corruption.*

The Pharisees were smugly self-righteous and feeling good about themselves, then along came Jesus, willy-nilly violating the Law and criticizing them – and the people listened to him, believed him, followed him! His journey to the grave of corruption needed to be accelerated for the sake of the Law – and for the sake of the Pharisees! And so the bait in the form of a question, innocently asked:

*Teacher, you are really great! You’re sincere, honest, courteous, kind, trustworthy, brave, clean, and reverent. We’d say even more good things about you, but we’ve run out of adjectives and Greek participles. You are impartial, so tell us, driveling morons that we are – (and then the trap) – Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar*?

It was a question with a no-win answer. If Jesus said “No” he would anger the Roman authorities for encouraging rebellion against Roman law; Caesar did not tolerate those who flaunted the laws and challenged his authority. But if Jesus said “Yes” then the zealots who were chaffing under the bit of Roman rule would reject him and perhaps silence him as a supporter of Rome. The Pharisees had tossed a coin: “heads” they won; “tails”, Jesus lost.

But Jesus saw through their ploy, through their false compliments, through their objectively innocent question. He recognized the Pharisees for who they were in their deception: the second son, the wicked tenants. Again, he publicly called them to account, saying, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites?” He exposed them for what they were – wolves in sheep’s clothing who preyed upon the Lord’s sheep. And then he answered their question: “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*”

Jesus asked for a coin, the coin used to pay the tax, a denarius. It was a silver coin worth about 18 cents, a workman’s average daily wage. It was designed in Rome, minted in Rome, and was the currency of Rome. But it was drawn from the pocket of a Pharisee in Jerusalem, a Jew who despised Roman rule but knew the realities of economic life. Economics were controlled by Rome. In drawing the Roman coin from his pocket, the Pharisee was forced to acknowledge the dominant place of Caesar in his life. “*Whose likeness and inscription is this*?” Jesus asked. All knew the answer. It was a denarius. The denarius bore the likeness and inscription of Caesar. It was his money used to pay his tax in his empire. Jesus knew that. The Pharisees knew that. But it was the questioning Pharisee who was forced to admit it: “It is Caesar’s.”

“Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and give to God the things that are God’s,” said Jesus. Jesus had escaped the trap. In a no-win situation, he had won, for no pious Jew would object to returning to Caesar that which was Caesar’s, not wanting to be tainted by the filth of Rome. The Romans were satisfied to hear Jesus acknowledge that Caesar should receive what was his. Forced to separate church and state, Jesus had done so to the satisfaction of both, leaving the Pharisees stunned, their unanswerable question answered, their unbeatable plan beaten. And they left him and went away.

*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar*? Reach into your pocket or your purse; what coins do you find there? Whose likeness and inscription do they bear? Most of us carry few coins anymore, especially since COVID arrived. But I suspect that what coins are there bear the inscription and likeness of the USA. Jesus’ words to us are akin to those spoken to the Pharisees: Give to the nation the things that are the nation’s and to God the things that are God’s. Can you distinguish the two? Can you sort out what belongs to the nation and what belongs to God?

According to the psalmist, the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it. The Great Commandment says we are to love the Lord with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves. All that we have and all that we are belongs to God, so if we are to give to God the things that are God’s, that basically encompasses our whole lives. What then is left for the nation? Those things that are consistent with God’s plan and purposes for us – sharing our resources to protect the vulnerable and aid the poor, working ***for*** justice and ***against*** injustice, using our gifts both tangible and intangible to make our communities and nation and world a better place, righting the wrongs of the past while seeking to avoid new wrongs in the present and future, welcoming the stranger who is our neighbor too. The list goes on and on of those things we are to give to our nation, not because our nation is deserving of them in and of itself, but because our nation offers a means of living faithfully together as a community of God’s children. Sometimes we seem to get those priorities confused. As one erstwhile poet has written:

*The Caesars off to war they went*

*With weapons built of billions spent*

*While hungry children cried in pain*

*And huddled in the wind and rain.*

*The flags waved proudly, safe from fire*

*Preserving them, no fervor higher*

*While stars and stripes a child enfolds*

*To shield her from the wind and cold.*

*If God were just red, white, and blue*

*Perhaps then we could see God too*

*And bring the child in from the rain*

*And shield the child from so much pain.*

Immediately after 9/11 the pews here and in churches across this country were filled with folks anxious to lift to God their prayers; some of those prayers were raised from the lips of folks who had only called Jesus by name when they stubbed their toes or hit a bad drive on the golf course. Churches were filled with Americans who loved their friends and country and wanted God to love them and protect them too. Bibles, long buried in dust dating to the last visit of the pastor were opened for words of assurance and hope. So it has been at virtually every crisis or conflict in which we as a nation have been engaged. Anxiety and love of country and its citizens turn the nation to God – until the crisis passes or the war ends. Then the Bibles return to their dust, the church pews empty, and the prayers fall silent upon the lips of citizens of the nation. In the words of the proverb, “*Danger past, God forgotten*.” We pray to God for the nation and its citizens, not because as a nation we are in any way more deserving of God’s attention than other nations and peoples, but because neither are we any more able to thrive and survive without God’s help than are they. So, give to the nation the things that are the nation’s, but give to God the things that are God’s!

There are other coins in your pocket of a less tangible sort. Whose likeness and inscription do they bear? Perhaps it is the likeness and inscription of work. Papers to write. Patients to heal. Accounts to reconcile. Houses to build. Cases to try. Lesson plans to prepare. And at home – mow the grass, clean the house, weed the garden, bathe the baby, cook the dinner, wash the clothes. We need more hours in the day! Feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe the naked, love your neighbor, come to worship, pray? Not now, Lord, there is too much work to do! But whose work? So, give to your work the things that are your work’s, but give to God the things that are God’s!

Whose likeness and inscription is this? It is a pastime’s. In a Zoom meeting a few weeks ago, the speaker told us there are an estimated 700,000 males between the ages of 21 and 30 who are not working at present because they are playing video games at home – home being with their parents. We wonder where the workers have gone to fill the positions that are needed in our economy – well, a large group of them are whiling away their time playing games online! While that may not be you, perhaps there is another pastime that is consuming your time and energy to the exclusion of God and God’s good work. So, give to your pastime the things that are your pastime’s, but give to God the things that are God’s!

Whose likeness and inscription is this? It is yours. It is mine. We are created in the image of God. We bear the likeness and inscription of God, but we’ve tarnished the image. We have claimed for ourselves what is God’s, yet God has given us what was not ours – God’s own Son, that we might have forgiveness, hope, and eternal life. So, give to God the things that are God’s – the love of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Give to God what God asks of you – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God and with one another; feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, comfort the grieving, visit the prisoner, serve those in need. And love your neighbor as yourself. In sum, give to God all that you are and all that you have – give to God your life, for first and foremost, now and always, you belong to God! Amen