“What image is imprinted on you?”

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Matthew 22:15-22

October 22, 2023

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***15Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. 16They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are genuine and that you teach God’s way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people’s opinions, because you don’t show favoritism. 17So tell us what you think:*** ***Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”***

***18Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used to pay the tax.” And they brought him a denarion. 20“Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked.***

***21“Caesar’s,” they replied.***

***Then he said******, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” 22When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.***

“There is a popular Aesop's tale about the foolish crow and the wily fox. A hungry crow finds a piece of cheese and sits on a branch of a tree to enjoy his meal. A fox who was equally hungry sees the crow with the piece of cheese. Since he badly wants the food, he decides to trick the crow with flattering words. He lavishes praise on the crow by calling him a beautiful bird. He says that he would like to hear the crow's sweet voice, and asks the crow to sing. The foolish crow believes that the praise is genuine, and opens his mouth to sing. Only to realize that he had been fooled by the wily fox when the cheese was hungrily devoured by the fox.”1

This is flattery – a type of over-complimenting, that may or may not be true (the crow may or may not have a sweet voice), that in intended to manipulate the other into doing something favorable to the one doing the flattering. You know, buttering up your boss before you ask for a raise. Praising someone’s expertise in order to get them to agree to help you. In the new NBC drama called The Irrational, Jesse Martin plays a psychology professor who is often called in to assist the FBI in their attempts to foil the irrational behavior of criminals. In one scene a man approaches the professor at a book signing and over-compliments him in order to get the professor to help him find his kidnapped daughter.

This is exactly what the Pharisees’ disciples and supporters of Herod are doing when they approach Jesus. What they know about Jesus is true – he is generous, he does tell the way of God as it really is, he does not show favoritism -- but the way they use the compliments is manipulative. For the last few Sundays we have seen Jesus talk to the Pharisees in such a way that they fall into traps of their own making. In today’s talk, they are trying to set a trap for Jesus. By using flattery with intent.

So far, in this section of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been in the temple talking to the Pharisees – the keepers of the Jewish law of the temple. In today’s reading, those same Pharisees have disciples of their own who they send to help set this trap for Jesus. Those the disciples of the Pharisees who are keepers of the Jewish Law have been joined by supporters of King Herod. The Pharisees and the Herodians are not often allies. The Pharisees keep the temple law. The Herodians keep the Roman law. Both however, this time, are united in their desire to keep Jesus and his message from spreading too far. So they set this trap. They ask a question designed to make it so that either answer to their question will give one of the groups reason to arrest Jesus. They ask, “*Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”* A yes answer will upset his followers because it is contrary to Jesus’ message of complete loyalty to God alone. A no answer would make him an anti-imperial radical revolutionary. What the Pharisees’ disciples and the followers of Herod were expecting was an all-or-nothing answer like, “If you give everything to God, there is nothing you can spare to give to Caeser, or vice-versa.”2

Something I would love to be as good at as Jesus is his ability to see any situation in a deeper more relevant way. The questioners are superficially talking about money, and loyalty to the temple or the kingdom. Jesus though, takes the coin itself and moves beyond the conversation of money and loyalty, to the deeper level of belonging.

What if the imprint on the coin determines to whom the fruits of that money go? The coin, with Caesar’s image means that whatever comes from that coin goes back to Caesar. Jesus reply, “*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar…”* seems to say this very thing. They have caught him in a “yes” answer! Except for what he said next. *“…and to God what belongs to God.”*

Wait. Was that a yes answer or a no answer?

There was no follow up to that. The questioners were astonished and went away. But we didn’t go away. We’re still here. What does that mean for us?

Jesus acknowledged the governmental laws, and taxation with his answer and he didn’t seem opposed. We get the idea of taxes. The reality of taxes has of course played out in our own history as a country as we sought to no longer pay taxes to Britain. And Benjamin Franklin wrote to a friend in 1789, about the brand new constitution that had just been ratified in the land recently separated from British rule, “Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”3 Yes, we get taxes.

But Jesus didn’t follow up with a list of his second imperative – give what belongs to God to God. If Caesar’s image is imprinted on the coin, which belongs to Caesar, then who’s image is imprinted on us? For that we go all the way back to Genesis chapter 1, where we read, “*So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them.*

By this logic, what belongs to God, is us. Our very selves. We are created in the image of God. Jesus doesn’t embellish his answer with two lists – one list of the things that belong to Caeser and one list of things that belong to God. One list of life choices to benefit Caesar and another list of life choices that will be a gift to God. Jesus is not often that explicit. He talks in parables, answers questions with questions, leaves us to figure out the details. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, but he doesn’t tell us how or what that would look like, or even who to consider our neighbor. Jesus tells us to feed the hungry but doesn’t say how or when or where. Jesus tells us to free the prisoner but leaves it up to us to decide what or who a prisoner is. Anyone who has ever been trapped. Had been held by some other force in a place dangerous to themselves. Other people, our illnesses, our choices. There are lots of ways to be prisoners.

Unfortunately the Bible is not a scientific document or an instruction manual. The Bible is a book of historical writings that describe and follow God’s work in and amongst humanity. The history, the songs, the tales, the prophets, the writers of the gospels and the letters to the earliest followers of Christ, all have been adding to this story of God in our midst. For 2,000+ years people have been faithfully wrestling with this book, to understand it’s relevance for them in their own context. Jesus asks that of us. Our faithful interpretation of this book matters so that what we learn can be applied to our lives and the lives of those we encounter.

If we remember that we are made in God’s image and belong to God, does that change anything inside of us? Will we be continually restless for improvement; continually open to a new thing even beyond what we imagine will add to the global good desired by God? Never satisfied, always reflecting, watching and waiting for God’s invitation to be even better, ready to be startled by opportunity or a life that we couldn’t have imagined.

Have you ever been stuck – maybe you’ve been ill for way too long; maybe you need to change jobs; maybe you’d like a different apartment; maybe you wish the popular kids at school were your friends – you just want something different. One popular way to think about desired change is to try to picture it. Imagine your next job; imagine your next living space; imagine those popular kids being your friends; imagine being healthier. But then get ready. Stay open minded – because God is going to startle you with something even wider than your own imagination. My current living situation is a perfect example. If I had stopped with what I imagined, I never would have seen what I have now. My imagination didn’t include outside San Francisco, and it certainly didn’t include a patio.

None of this is just for ourselves. We have to remember those who want a different life, in our own surroundings, in our own country, and all over the world. They are children of God too. They want the freedom to imagine their future. From one child of God to another child of God, we share a family resemblance – the image of God. Even in our baptism promises, we are given the same family last name – child of the covenant. In real life, we are all part of families, so we know it’s pretty complicated. But we also know that there are many different kinds of families. Whether it’s a family of origin or a family of choice, we use the word family to describe that place where we find acceptance, a place of support and love, a place where one helps another. As part of God’s family, we are called to let the image of God shine.

Let’s pray…

1(<https://www.thoughtco.com/praise-or-flattery-quotes-2830778#:~:text=The%20difference%20lies%20in%20the,%2C%20undefined%2C%20and%20even%20false>.)

2Yung Suk Kim, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-matthew-2215-22-6>

3The earliest known iteration of this can be found in a quote from [*The Cobbler of Preston*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cobbler_of_Preston) by [Christopher Bullock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Bullock_(actor)) (1716), “*You lye, you are not sure; for I say, Woman, 'tis impossible to be sure of any thing but Death and Taxes”* — *Toby Guzzle, in Christopher Bullock, The Cobbler of Preston, p. 21*

**Rendering to Caesar and to God: Paying Taxes in the Roman World,** Brad Kirkegaard, 04/01/2006 <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/605>