

The Coin Speaks

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22



It is a splendid principle – “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.”

This splendid principle, like *all* splendid principles, is a little short on practical advice.¹ It would have been nice if Jesus could have been a little clearer.

As my friend John Leggett says, “Most of us muddle through our lives as if suspended in that pregnant pause between the two parts of Jesus’ words; we live in the pause between what belongs to Caesar,..... and what belongs to God.”²

And that pause, and the tension it caused, was just as real in Jesus’ time. The Pharisees try to use the tension to trap Jesus. The trap is clear when you see that they grabbed some Herodians to join them. Pharisees and Herodians were political enemies – like the conservative Republicans showing up with the liberal Democrats. The Pharisees hated the tribute tax to Caesar and thought it was against the Law of Moses to pay it. They had the people of Jerusalem with them on that. The Herodians were a priestly group who had a power base in Israel funded largely through alliances forged with Rome. They were in favor of the tax.

So here come the Republicans and the Democrats, united in their disdain for Jesus. It is a set up. They butter him up with what on the surface seems like flattery but is calculated to force him to answer. “Okay Mr. Truth-Teller who never shies away from controversy, handle this hot potato!”³ If Jesus says no, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees and most of the crowd will love him, but Rome will move in and neutralize him. If he says yes, it is lawful, the Herodians will be satisfied and Rome content, but he will lose all credibility with the people, and the Pharisees can move in to neutralize him.

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, source unknown.

² From a Sermon John preached on this text in 2005 at Massanutten Presbyterian Church in Virginia.

³ Long, Thomas G.

Jesus asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. One of the real indignities of the tribute tax was that Jews had to pay it in Roman currency, not Jewish. So when Jesus asks to see the coin, he forces his Pharisee questioner to reach into his pocket and produce a Roman drachma. Here is this person who is opposed to the Roman tax, who sees it as a violation of Moses, carrying a coin in the Temple.

Just the sight of this exchange already proves Jesus' point. But he wants to leave no doubt. So he asks a question to which he surely knows the answer, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription."

Whose image? The emperor's, of course. Tiberias Caesar. An image, in the Temple of God is a clear violation of the prohibition against graven images. And the inscription would have read, "'Tiberius Caesar, august son of the Divine Augustus and high priest.'" The coin speaks clearly before Jesus says a word.

By the time Jesus announces, "Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what belongs to God," the point has been made to all with ears to hear. Everybody, even the Pharisees, make their convenient compromises. "What Jesus says is that, although we may have to live under this or that Caesar, and we may have to plunk down this or that tax, *we* are never Caesar's. We belong, body and soul, to the living God, and we are to render unto God what is God's."

We belong to God.

We belong to God in the marketplace, in the voting booth, in the school building, in the middle of a pandemic. There is no clean division. We sing in the old hymn not, "I surrender one-tenth," but "I surrender all." "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the *world*, and *all* who dwell in it." There is no easy way out of this affirmation. It all belongs to God. We all belong to God. It may take a lifetime of discipleship to work out what this means in our daily living, the allegiances and easy compromises it calls into question, the stands it causes us to take. But that is the work we are called to do, in response to the grace bestowed on us in baptism. We belong to God.

That is the place to begin, the grounding of our relationship with God and one another, the path forward in these troubling days. It is the reason Paul begins and ends so many of his letters with "Grace to you, and peace." It is the reason we begin and end our worship at this font – here in this place we are reminded of grace drawing us in and grace sending us out, grace that will bracket our days and form our relationships, grace that will thrust us into the work of healing and hope, justice and dignity, this world longs to see. Without a sense of this grace, this belonging, it is impossible really to answer the

question of what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. But when we begin at the font, there is no question at all. We, and all we have and are, belong to God.

When we begin with the realization of God's grace, when we recognize we are floating on a sea of grace, when we wake into a world we didn't make, into a salvation we didn't earn, it is the first step of a lifetime of grateful response.

Paul cannot contain his gratitude as he thanks God for the Thessalonians. I *always* give thanks to God for *all* of you, *constantly* remembering your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what Paul sees in the Thessalonians, and what so many see in lives captured by grace, filled with gratitude and generosity, and engaging in the work that springs from faith and trust, labor that comes from a deep well of love, and hope that remains steadfast in all circumstances. Paul recognizes the source of such living is God's grace – abundant, free, overflowing, life-giving – grace, a grace that ushers in shalom, peace, within and without.

The coin has spoken. The Pharisees and Herodians have left, carrying their coin with them. And now Jesus faces the crowd, faces us. He has made us his children – all of us – Pharisees and Herodians, Republicans and Democrats, the confused and the clear-eyed. All of us, living in that pregnant pause between “give to the emperor....and give to God,” all of us, debtors to grace, vessels of peace. As we live out our lives in response to God's grace, may we never forget the good news that grounds all our giving, and our living – we belong to God.” Give to God what belongs to God. Grace to you, and peace. Amen.