

The Face of God **Matthew 22:15-22**

Traps and snares

In the passages leading up to today's reading, Jesus has been telling parables that show the religious authorities in an unfavorable light. What happens in Matthew 22:15-22 is a counter-offensive. The Pharisees get together and craft a question that they think will trap Jesus. Then they send their disciples along with king Herod's followers to ask the question. They send their disciples because if the Pharisee disciples succeed, it will put the Pharisees in a good light, but if the Pharisee disciples fail, then the Pharisees won't look as bad in the public eye.

So they start with some flattery and then the trap is set when they ask Jesus if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. It is framed as a 'yes' or 'no' question. If Jesus answers 'yes' then he will alienate the people who hate the tax. The tax is a head tax that everyone must pay. The denarius coin (an image of which is printed in your bulletin) was equal to a day's wages, so nowadays it would be about \$100 for someone making minimum wage. People hated this tax because the money went directly to the emperor. Today it would be like sending money directly to our president's personal bank account.

So Jesus can't say, 'yes, pay taxes' without losing esteem in front of the common people. But if Jesus says, 'no, the taxes are unlawful' then he will get in trouble with the Roman authorities. There had been a rebellion against the tax some years earlier and the result was violent suppression. Many people were crucified and it had squashed any substantial resistance to the tax. Jesus could be thrown in jail for sedition or worse if he says the tax is unjust.

So this question is obviously a trap. But Jesus perceives the bad intentions and turns the question around. He asks the disciples to show him the money.

Graven images

How many of you today are carrying some dollar bills or coins in your pocket? We don't tend to think of these things as graven images, but the Jewish people in Jesus' time would have. You can just imagine Jesus asking, "Hey, do any of

you guys have a coin on you? Oh, wow, you carry an image of the emperor in your tunic. How about that?" The fact that they are even carrying the face of Tiberius the Roman emperor on the coins was an act of idolatry, but the inscription would have read, "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest." The inscription proclaims that the emperor was a god. The Roman's had an imperial cult, which was a state-sanctioned religion where the emperor had divine status. Carrying a coin like that would have been a form of idolatry that is forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

So, by producing such a coin, the disciples of the Pharisees are demonstrating their hypocrisy. It is so obvious that Jesus does not need to point it out. He simply asks who's face and inscription are on the coin and then tells them to give back to the owner what belongs to him.

That probably would have been enough to quiet his critics, but Jesus doesn't stop there. He says give Caesar what belongs to him, and give "to God the things that are God's." (22:21) This added clause is really what Jesus' teachings are all about. The questioners are caught up in the moment. They are trapped in the worldly questions of taxes and how to make their enemy, Jesus, stumble and get in trouble. Their sense of the world is very much confined to the moment and what they can gain. They are the ones who are really trapped. They idolize their status, their position in the social hierarchy, their sense of moral authority with their demonstrations of piety. We don't just idolize objects, like money, but we idolize the things they signify, like prestige. Perhaps you are familiar with the TV show "American Idol"? We idolize success and recognition. All these are the faces of idolatry. The little gods that we turn to, that pull our strings and tie us down to worldly notions of truth rather than the freeing, life affirming Truth of Jesus.

Principle

Jesus' words are always freeing and life-giving. That is because his statement here is based on principle. When Jesus says, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," the statement is not solely directed at the issues of his day. Because his words are based on principle, they apply to us now as much as they applied then. Principles are immutable. They don't change. They are the foundations of the reality in which we live. The angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees, no matter what, no

matter when. Water, in its liquid form, runs to its lowest level, no matter what. Money is only valuable when there is a shared belief in it. In addition, money is an object and no one really owns an object. We just hold on to it for a while. Whatever money or possessions we have will be passed on to someone else someday.

Jesus points to spiritual principles. Immutable laws. In Genesis 1:27 it is written, "So God created (hu)mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." We are to give Caesar's coins with his image back to Caesar. We are to give God's creation, in God's image, back to God. That means us. Our lives are to be an offering to God. Though we are to live in this world, and must contend with the laws and powers of this world, we are to live according to the higher principles of God's law first and foremost in all that we do, think, love and trust.

How are we to do this today?

Belief in this world

I think it is important to recognize where and how and when we are trapped in the lower laws of this world and when we have lost a sense of the higher principle.

Is the quest for money for its own sake a life-affirming, spiritually engaged pursuit?

Work is a necessity for most of us. And these days many people have to work several jobs to make ends meet. But when does work become an exercise in worldly acquisition at the expense of what is best?

Is holding on to material things at the expense of personal relationships a healthy principled way to live? I have a friend who is going through the process of dividing an inheritance with his siblings, but the question of who gets what is causing a lot of ill will between them. When do worldly possessions get in the way of our relationships? When is the right time to let go?

What is a healthy way to view money? I am trying to understand our monetary system. I am reading a book about the Federal Reserve right now and discovering that our money is not what we think it is. I am shocked at how little

we know about a thing that receives so much attention in our lives. It is something worth thinking about.

Anything can become an idol when it is worshiped or placed above God in importance. The task is to understand things in right relationship. William Stringfellow writes how patriotism can become idolatrous. 'Where idolatrous patriotism is practiced, the vocation (or calling) of the nation ... is destroyed. When money becomes an idol, the true *utility* of money is lost. When the family is idolized, the members of the family are enslaved. Every idol, therefore, represents a thing or being existing in a state of profound disorientation" (William Stringfellow, *The Imposters of God*, p.9)

I think that the answer to the question of idolatry is found in the life of Jesus. Jesus was concerned foremost with offering himself to God. Let us never forget that we are made in God's image, each of us with a spark of the divine. Remembering this can help put everything else in life in its proper relationship. Therefore, let your life shine and give to God what is God's. Amen.