

Whose Image

Matthew 22:15-23

INTRODUCTION

Late last year the United States Department of the Treasury made the decision to stop producing the penny, a decision driven primarily by financial considerations.

- It costs \$3.69 to make a penny, nearly four times its face value.
- The U.S. Mint projects that by stopping production they will save approximately \$56 million this year.
- That still leaves 114 billion pennies in circulation.

I wonder how long it will take before people no longer remember whose image is stamped on the penny.

- In fact, I wonder how many Americans can identify any of the people stamped on our coinage.
- As you look at these coins, are you able to answer the question:

Whose image is it?

That question is at the center of today's Gospel reading.

We are working our way through the final chapters in Matthew's Gospel – chapters, as we have said, that tell the events of the last week of Jesus' life ... from His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21 to His arrest in Matthew 26, His crucifixion in Matthew 27 and His resurrection in Matthew 28.

- These chapters are filled with stories and parables that point us to second coming of Christ and His eternal reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Up to this point in this series of sermons, we might say that Jesus was the one on the attack.

- For example, He told three parables that were specific indictments of the religious leaders of the day.
 - There was the story of two sons who did not do what their father's wanted them to do.
 - And the story of the wicked vineyard tenants who killed the messengers sent by the king.
 - And last week we read the story about the wedding guests who refused to attend the king's wedding banquet.

Those parables made those religious leaders mad. Understandably so! So in today's text those religious leaders start to fight back.

- They did so by posing a "trick" question to Jesus ... and by asking that question in a very public setting.
- They hoped that Jesus would misspeak and upset the crowds who surrounded Him and who thought He was the one who would overthrow Roman rule.

Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" (Matthew 22:17)

There were actually three different taxes the Jewish people had to pay during the time of Jesus.

1. The Ground tax amounted to one-tenth of the grain you grew or one-fifth of the wine you produced. You could pay that either in money or products.
2. The Income tax was one percent of a man's income.
3. This third tax was the one in the question posed to Jesus.

Our text calls it the Imperial tax. The tax was one denarius, which is the equivalent of a day's wage. It had to be paid by every male age 14-65 and every female age 12-65. You were exempted if you were over 65. So congratulations to many of you. It was paid to Caesar because he was the king and you were privileged to live under his authority.

It was quite the dilemma Jesus faced.

- If Jesus said, "Don't pay the tax," the Roman officials would arrest Him and convict Him of sedition – probably resulting in the death penalty.
- If Jesus said, "Pay the tax," the crowd would turn on Him because the people believed only God had the right to rule them.

These religious leaders were pretty smart. It was a great trap. But Jesus was wiser.

- He asked to see a denarius. It became an object lesson in His hands.

Just like we honor previous Presidents with an image on a coin, so the Romans stamped the emperor's image on their coins. As soon as there was a new emperor, new coins were minted. And that was the only coin that could be used.

Jesus took the denarius, looked it over carefully, and asked a question of His own:

"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" (Matthew 22:20)

The answer was obvious, right? It was Caesar's image. Everyone knew the answer to that question.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21)

The deeper question is:

What do we owe ... and to whom do we owe it?

TEACHING #1. Give Caesar What Belongs to Caesar

Look at verse 21:

Then he said to them, "So **give back to Caesar what is Caesar's**, and to God what is God's." (Matthew 22:21)

Jesus acknowledged that we have responsibilities in our earthly lives. We live in communities, societies, and nations. We have obligations that come with being part of those communities.

- We have responsibilities to obey just laws, pay what we owe, work honestly, and treat others with respect.

Romans 13:7 says:

Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (Romans 13:7)

Just because Jesus is our coming soon King, does not give Christians an excuse to become irresponsible.

- Our faith should make us more honest, more dependable, and more faithful in our dealings with others.
 - If you owe a debt, honor your obligation.
 - If you have a responsibility, fulfill it faithfully.
 - If you have been entrusted with a position, serve with integrity.
 - If you live among others, treat them with fairness and respect.

But let us understand something important: Jesus was not saying that earthly authorities have unlimited power. Our obedience to human authority has limits when it conflicts with obedience to God.

In Acts 5:29, Peter and the other apostles declared:

We must obey God rather than human beings! (Acts 5:29)

When human authority demands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, our ultimate allegiance must remain with the Lord.

- The lesson is this: Be a responsible citizen on earth, but never forget that you are a servant of heaven.

TEACHING #2. Give God What Belongs to God

Look again at verse 21:

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and **to God what is God's.**" (Matthew 22:21)

This is the heart of the message.

- Jesus did not stop at giving to Caesar. He said, "And unto God the things that are God's."

Romans 12:1 urges us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God.

What, then, belongs to God?

- **Our hearts.** Proverbs 23:26 says, "My son, give me your heart."
- **Our worship.** Jesus taught that we must worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).
- **Our time.** Ephesians 5:16 calls us to redeem the time.
- **Our gifts and resources.** Everything we possess ultimately comes from God.
- **Our obedience.** Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commandments."
- **Our whole lives.** We are called to glorify God in all that we do. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Church, we must ask ourselves: Have we given God what belongs to Him?

- We give our jobs our time.
- We give our families our attention.
- We give our bills our money.
- We give our phones our eyes.
- We give entertainment our evenings.

But have we given God our hearts?

- Have we made time to pray?
- Have we studied His Word?
- Have we served those in need?
- Have we loved our neighbors?
- Have we surrendered our will to His will?

God deserves more than the leftovers of our lives. He deserves first place.

APPLICATION: Remember Whose Image You Bear

Caesar may have had his image stamped onto a coin, but God has something far more valuable.

Genesis 1:27 tells us:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

The coin bore Caesar's image. But humanity bears the image of God.

- That means we can pay Caesar with money, but **we owe God our very lives.**

God does not merely want a portion of our possessions. He wants our hearts. He wants our worship, our obedience, our love, and our faithfulness.

Let us return to the coin.

Jesus asked, "Whose image is on this coin?"
They said, "Caesar's."

The coin belonged to Caesar's monetary system because it bore his image and inscription.

- But when we look at the people around us, we see something greater. We were created in the image of God.

That truth should change how we live.

- If we belong to God, then our lives should reflect His character.
- Our words should reflect His truth.
- Our actions should reflect His love.
- Our decisions should reflect His wisdom.
- Our treatment of other people should reflect the dignity of those who are also made in God's image.

We cannot claim to belong to God while deliberately living in opposition to His ways. The question is not only whether we attend church, sing in the choir, preach sermons, or serve on committees.

The question is:

Can people see the character of God reflected in the way we live?

When you are at work, do people see honesty?

- When you are at home, do your family members experience love and patience?
- When someone mistreats you, can you respond with grace?
- When you have the opportunity to take advantage of someone, do you choose integrity?
- When no one is watching, do you still honor God?

Remember: we bear His image, and our lives should bring Him glory.