

Matthew 22:15-22

**Belonging to God©
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In the year 1789, Benjamin Franklin was known to write to a friend that nothing in life is certain – except paying taxes and death.

I had a teacher in grade school that used to love to say that we weren't really completely free because of those two factors in our lives. I honestly never could figure out what he really meant.

Our Bible passage today speaks of one thing that was certain in Jesus' day. There were certainly taxes to pay. Those poor people were being taxed every time they turned around.

Probably the tax that caused the most frustration and anger was the flat tax they paid to the Romans. This tax was a "census" tax that was instituted in 6 CE, when Judea became a Roman Province.

It was this tax that kept the Romans financially able to continue occupying Judea and having rule over the Jewish people!

And not only that, but the Roman coin had some inscription under the image of Caesar, the Emperor, declaring that he was divine! So every time they looked at the coin they needed to use to be able to purchase anything, (or pay their taxes) they were reminded that they were paying for their own occupation to someone who demanded allegiance and loyalty.

Now, the Herodians were those leaders who were overt supporters of the Roman regime. They supported Herod, who was the governor, and they supported the tax, as well.

The Pharisees were temple leaders who were, for the most part, popular with the people. They resented and resisted (although not publicly) the tax.

So, for these two groups to come together and agree on anything important was unusual. But we see it in this passage, as they put their heads together and plan a plot against Jesus, the young rabbi who has come into town, riding a donkey, and getting the crowds really stirred up.

They agree on this – they want to trap Jesus so they can get rid of him before they lose control over the people. So they start with an underhanded compliment, saying they know Jesus does not show partiality and that he teaches truth and the way of God.

But of course, our Jesus can see right through their devious plan. He won't get trapped, but he will answer the question. The question being "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

So Jesus, who has no money, asks them for a coin. So, one of them pulls a coin – a denarius – out, and hands it to Jesus.

Woops. Right there was a slip up!

Here was a coin stamped with human hands for human purposes with a human image on it and a blasphemous inscription declaring that this human was divine – god-like.

Now, we all know that the Ten Commandments say, "Thou shall have no gods before me." You shall have no idols.

It was against all the laws to have anything with any image that was over God! Yet, here were temple leaders who could produce this coin in question!

Jesus could have said, "Gotcha!" But, of course, he didn't.

Can't you just see him, flipping the coin, maybe wanting to say something like ... "tails you win; heads (that would be Caesar's head) you lose."

But, he didn't do that either.

Instead he looked at the coin a minute and then he asked, "Whose head is on this coin? Whose title?"

They answered, "The emperors."

And then, I just see Jesus handing it back to the one who possessed the coin as he said, "Give to the emperor that which belongs to the emperor. But give to God that which belongs to God."

Surely he shook his head as he walked away, saying, "Hypocrites!"

But what does it mean? What did Jesus mean and why does it matter to us today?

Is this some basis for separation of church and state, as some would say?

Is this a scripture to use for fighting our own government and taxes we pay?

Most scholars don't think so. I don't think so either.

We know that Jesus, in an earlier passage in Matthew said something like “Where your heart is, that’s where your treasure is.”

If you look in your pocket or your billfold or your purse, you would surely find coins that, just like in Jesus’ day, have an image stamped on it. Who can tell me, without looking, whose image is on which coin?

- 1¢ - President Abraham Lincoln
- 5¢ - President Thomas Jefferson
- 10¢ - President Franklin D. Roosevelt
- 25¢ - President George Washington
- 50¢ - President John F. Kennedy

And there are others on our paper money.

We would be in big trouble if we did not have money, wouldn’t we? We would have a hard time buying food, paying bills, having a home to live in. Paying taxes.

Part of being human and living here in our culture (and it was true in Jesus’ day as well) means that we cannot avoid following the laws of the land, which, if things go our way, are laws we have helped establish and support. Of course, that is always subject to change, isn’t it?

I think Jesus was really saying to those leaders – there is no trap here. I’m not going to get caught siding with one or the other. You have to do what you have to do. Pay the taxes. It’s the law.

But the danger is when we forget whom we belong to ... whose image we are created in and to whose allegiance we are loyal. Whose image is engraved on our hearts?

It’s so easy to have idols. Those idols are often money and all the things we can buy with it to make ourselves feel good; feel special and worthy ... and even powerful.

David Lose, one of my favorite commentators tells about a sermon he heard about on how we spend our money as Christians. He said the preacher asked the congregants to take out a credit card or, if they didn’t have a credit or debit card, to use a dollar bill.

She asked them to draw a simple cross on the card, or money, where they could see it when they pulled it out to buy something. David said every time he pulled out that credit card it made him think about his spending habits, and he would think harder about whether or not it was good stewardship. He would consider what his spending showed about his faith as a disciple of Jesus.

I would challenge you to do the same. I'm not going to ask you to do it right now but consider doing it when you get home. If you decide to do it, be sure it's something that you use often for spending. Something you will see often.

I haven't done it myself yet. But I plan to. And I know already that there will be things I will think twice about purchasing as I think about how it reflects on my faith, on my discipleship, and on my spiritual practice of stewardship.

Am I putting other things before God? Do I need something special to make me feel special?

Am I forgetting that I already am special and precious and worthwhile in the eyes of the One whom I belong and have committed my heart, my soul, my all to?

I think Benjamin Franklin wasn't quite right when he said the only things we can be certain about in life are death and taxes.

I think we can be very certain that we belong to our Creator – the one in whose image we are created. The one whose image is stamped on our hearts.

I am certain we belong to Him ... first and foremost.

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