

Sunday – October 16, 2011  
Pastor – Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon – **Jesus and Taxes**

St. Matthias UMC  
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Scripture: **Mathew 22:14-22**

The Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus. If he says not to pay taxes, the Jews (including the Herodians as well as everyone working at the Temple) who support the Romans because their system works for them will be angry. If he says not to pay taxes, the Romans could arrest him for sedition.

But, Jesus doesn't answer directly. He asks for the coin used to pay taxes (which had to be a Roman coin to pay taxes to Rome). That coin would have been offensive to good Jews because it had the image of the emperor on it, and it read, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

1. Divine - in opposition to God, a pagan god.
2. High priest - of the pagan temple that taught emperor worship.

This sacrilegious coin was pretty darn convenient. They brought it to him right away, even though they were all in the Temple! It was blasphemous to have THAT coin (any Roman coin) on the holy ground of the Temple. That's why there were money changers, to change whatever money anyone brought into Temple money.

Jesus asks whose head and title are on the coin. Clearly, the coin must belong to the emperor since it bears his head and title.

When Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," he appears to be giving his approval to pay taxes to the Jews' Roman oppressors.

But, this brief exchange is about much more than taxes. The question the reader has to ponder is, "If the coin belongs to the emperor, what exactly belongs to God? Are we giving to God the things that belong to God?"

The coin belongs to the emperor because his image is on the coin. What, then, bears the image of God?

We do. Human beings are made in the image of God.

**Genesis 1:26-27** - And God said, “Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Using the ancient story of Creation, Jesus sets before his audience the truth that, if coins bearing the image of the emperor belong ultimately to the emperor, then human beings bearing the image of God belong ultimately to God. This Genesis story opens and closes with the statement that human beings are made in God’s image. In the middle is the list of all the creatures human beings have been given responsibility for. I would contend that our whole planet is part of the package of who and what belong to God.

Please notice that Jesus gets no more specific than, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” I think this statement gives us plenty of room to think for ourselves.

What we owe the emperor should become clear once we’ve decided what we owe God. So, what exactly belongs to God? Well, *we* do, according to the idea that we’re made in God’s image. And, considering that God made everything else, as well, that probably belongs to God, too.

The people occupying Wall Street belong to God. The millionaire bankers who may be inconvenienced also belong to God. The homeless of Fredericksburg belong to God, just as much as the downtown merchants who have pressured Micah Ministries to shut down its very important hot breakfast program for the homeless.

If we consider that each human being is made in the image of God, we would realize that how we treat people - ALL people - indicates how much or how little we value God and his image living among us.

If we consider that God made everything, and gave us this world to take care of, to act as stewards, then we might think twice about exploiting the earth for our insatiable need for cheap gas, cheap electricity, and cheap consumer goods produced with no concern for paying workers a living wage or for the negative impact of its manufacture on the environment. The bottom line

seems to be more important than the world God created and the people made in God's image.

You can see that this story is about a whole lot more than paying taxes. It's about our relationship with God and with God's people and God's creation. It's about priorities. It's about values. It's about seriously considering how we choose to spend our money, our time and our energy. It's about making sure we offer ourselves to God first and foremost, being determined to do God's will in every aspect of our lives. Once we've committed ourselves to living in the light of God, figuring out what we owe the emperor will be easy.