

GIVE TO GOD WHAT BELONGS TO GOD
29th Sunday in OT, October 18, 2020
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If you have children, grandchildren or ever been around kids when they're playing with toys, there will inevitably be a disagreement.

"That's mine," says one. "Not it's not, it's mine," says the other. An adult normally steps in to settle the dispute asking one child to give the toy back to its rightful owner. Ownership... what belongs to whom and giving it to the owner is the lesson that Jesus shares with us in today's Gospel.

St. Matthew tells us that Jesus is questioned about paying taxes. This was a hot button topic in the first century. Imperial taxation was a drag on the economy and was deeply resented by the Jewish people who saw taxation as a reminder that they were under the heel of a foreign power.

The Pharisees, powerful religious leaders, are plotting, working out some sort of plan to entrap Jesus. They team up with a group called the "Herodians" who support King Herod and who cooperate

with the Romans. Usually, these two factions are at odds with one another but today they form an alliance solely for the purpose of bringing down the Messiah.

The first step in their plan to lay-on some heavy, extravagant flattery. Respectfully addressing Jesus as “teacher,” they tell him that he is a “truthful man” who teaches the righteous ways of God. They express that he is not swayed by other people’s opinions nor by social or political status. Having buttered-up Jesus, the Pharisees hope that have appealed to his ego, that he’ll drop his guard, and speak boldly and unfiltered.

The trap now set, it’s now time for the bait and that bait comes in the form of a question, “Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” On the surface, it appears to be simple “yes” or “no” question. The Pharisees are trying to box Jesus into a no-win scenario. If he answers “yes” then he will be seen as a Roman sympathizer alienating numerous Jews who see the Roman occupation as intolerable. If Jesus

answers “no,” the Herodians will surely report him to the Roman authorities for instigating a tax revolt.

I suspect Jesus pondered their question for a minute or two while the crowd around him began to anticipate his response. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus senses their malice and sees the trap that they have set. He then asks a Pharisee to produce a coin that pays the census tax... in pulling a coin from his purse or belt, the Pharisee publically shows himself as a hypocrite... the Pharisees preach against the Romans and taxes yet produce a coin used to pay for taxes and products just like every other Palestinian Jew.

St. Matthew’s words lead us to believe that Jesus has the coin in his hands, perhaps flipping it back and forth around in his fingers, looking at it with a curious eye while the crowd eagerly awaits what he’ll say. He plainly asks, as if he doesn’t know, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?”

The coin was the commonly used silver denarius. One side bore the head of Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar and an inscription that

hailed him as the divine son of Augustus. The reverse side declared that he was “high priest,” further insulting the Jewish people.

The Pharisees answer Jesus’ question... “It is Caesar.” We then hear the often used and familiar response Jesus gives, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

The Messiah’s brilliant response has exposed the questioners as the charlatans that they are and that the premise of their question is a false dilemma, a non-issue. Jesus is saying that religious obligations and political obligations can be legitimately met. Paying taxes is not a compromise of one’s duty toward God nor does serving God exempt one from supporting a civil government.

But, there is a much bigger, simply beautiful meaning in St. Matthew’s Gospel that is often overlooked. Of course, the silver coin bearing his image belongs to Caesar and should be given back to him. On the other hand, Jesus tells us to repay or give to God what belongs to God. What does belong to God? What are we to repay? What are we to give?

In his answer, Jesus draws a wonderful and loving response. If we go way back to the first chapter of Genesis, verse 27... remember, Genesis is the beginning, we find these words: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him." So, like the coin that is imprinted with Caesar's image, our hearts, our very souls, our very likeness bears the holy image of God himself so we should what?!... return to God what belongs to God... THAT'S US! Isn't that a striking thought?!

Jesus implores us to do what is just... to return ourselves to our maker, protector and savior. The next time you stand in front of your bathroom mirror, perhaps before shaving or putting on make-up, take some time to deeply and seriously gaze upon that reflection that bears the actual resemblance of God and ask yourself, "How am I repaying? How am I returning to the Messiah that which is rightfully his?"