

The political situation has heated up to a dangerous level. The powers inside the beltway are very nervous. The challenger has come to the capital, and he's taking them on, on their home turf. The polls show that he enjoys great support in rural areas. His urban numbers are increasing rapidly. The challenger is critical of the incumbents. They'd like to use the police to shut him up, but they're afraid the crowds might riot if they try to arrest him. So they're using a smear campaign. They figure that if they can sling enough mud in his direction, some of it may stick. But the challenger is smart. He evades all of their traps. They're putting on a full court press, trying to discredit him, but it's not working.

Then they think they've got the ultimate wedge issue to nail him with: taxes. Paying taxes to foreign invaders is very unpopular with the people. If he comes out pro-tax, his support among the people will evaporate. Yet if he comes out as anti-tax, the occupation government will come down on him like a ton of bricks. It's a real Catch-22. Either way he answers, he'll be in trouble. The trap is set. So they spring it...

"Rabbi. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

But Jesus eludes the trap. He says, "Show me a coin." Someone fishes out a Roman denarius. Jesus looks at the coin and asks a question: "Whose picture is on this coin? Whose name is on it?"

It's a no-brainer. The face on the coin belongs to the Emperor Tiberius. And anyone with even the most rudimentary Latin skills could read the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine (Caesar) Augustus, High Priest (of the gods of Rome)."

And then, Jesus exhibits an awesome display of wisdom. Jesus cuts through the Gordian knot of the dilemma. He neatly escapes the trap. "It's Caesar's coin. Give it back to him. But... BUT give to GOD the things that belong to God."

The coin was minted by Caesar and distributed by Caesar's government as a means of paying Caesar's taxes. In a way, Jesus is saying, "Why is this even a problem? Why are you concerned about such a trivial matter?" The coin, at heart, is Caesar's property. It bears his image and his name. Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He adds, "Give to God the things that are God's." Paying taxes to secular authorities is a trivial, paltry thing, compared with our duties toward God.

What of that second part. How should we "give to God the things that are God's?" What is it that bears God's image? What is it that bears God's inscription?

The answer is very simple, yet we often overlook it. It's not a coin that bears God's image. It's us. Caesar's image could be found on his coins. God's image is found in us. We are created in the image of God. We bear God's inscription. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. We have been branded and marked and stamped as Christ's own forever. God's coin, God's image and inscription is us.

Jesus' message is that we owe God everything. We shouldn't confuse the totality of what we owe God with the triviality of what we owe secular authority. We owe God everything. We owe God our very selves.

You are created in God's image. You bear God's inscription. Therefore, "Render unto God, the things that are God's."

So how do we give to God what belongs to God, especially when we owe him everything?

That's a hugely important question. What do we owe God? What's expected of us? How do we live the Christian life?

Just a few verses after saying "Give to God the things that are God's", Jesus makes a pronouncement that is sometimes called the Great Commandment or the Summary of the Law. Jesus summarizes the entirety of the Law, the Torah, the first 5 books of the Old Testament by focusing on two verses.<sup>1</sup> We'll hear it as our Gospel lesson next week.

Jesus first quotes Deuteronomy:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."<sup>2</sup>

Then he quotes from Leviticus:

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>3</sup>

What do we owe God? We owe him love. He creates us in his image to represent him in the world, to do his work in the world. He loves us, and we are to love him in return, as much as we can—with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>4</sup>

And... And... And we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are created out of love, in God's image. And we are to love all those other people who are also created in God's image. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And yes, we are in the middle of our annual pledge drive. And yes, a part of loving God and doing God's work and loving our neighbors is to share of our time, and talent, and treasure. If we were not in a pandemic and trying to preach shorter sermons, I might say more about that.

But there's another aspect to what Jesus is commanding. And y'all, this is being severely tested in our country right now.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:37–39, also Mark 12:29–31, Luke 10:27

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>4</sup> Mark's version in 12:30—expanding on Deuteronomy 6:5 slightly

And remember there's no asterisk on Jesus' command. There's no escape clause. Jesus never says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' unless there's an upcoming election.' Jesus never says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself unless you're living in a time of extreme polarization.'

Jesus never says, 'Love your neighbor as yourself, unless your neighbor looks different from you, or unless your neighbor votes differently from you, or unless your neighbor thinks differently than you.'

Nope. It's an absolute command: Love your neighbor as yourself. You owe that to the God who created you in his image. You owe that to all others... ALL OTHERS who are also created in the image of God.

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It's not easy, but that's what God commands. Yes, vote your conscience. But always love your fellow Americans, even those who are different from you. That's the only way to remain one nation under God.

May God give us grace to love him, and to love ALL our neighbors as ourselves.