

“You Belong to God”

Matthew 22:15-22, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Exodus 33:12-23

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We all belong to God. Belonging is defined as a close, intimate relationship. You are loved and cherished by God. God is always with us yet sometimes it is extremely difficult to perceive God. Sometimes life is lonely, the way confusing and one feels like they don't fit it, abandoned. The

Pharisees and supporters of Herod loss their sense of belonging to God. They were unable to perceive God's love. They sought belonging in the institution of religion, belonging in the letter of the law, belonging in a political party, belonging in money. Without a sense of belonging to God they had an identity crisis. Their loneliness festered over time making them bitter, selfish and hateful. Their hurt blinded them to Jesus message of forgiveness, healing and belonging. Their hurt caused them to hurt others, to seek fleeting comfort in power, money and legalism.

The gospel of Matthew proclaims **Matthew 22:15-22** **“Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are genuine and that you teach God’s way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people’s opinions, because you don’t show favoritism. So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used to pay the tax.” And they brought Jesus a denarion. “Whose image and inscription is this?” Jesus asked. “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.**

Give to God what belongs to God. What belongs to God? Everything! Who belongs to God? Everyone! You belong to God. Jesus full of grace is always working to heal, redeem, make whole and unite everyone in love. God's love is steadfast, everlasting, always inviting us into an intimate relationship with God. Jesus came to show everyone that we belong to God.

The Pharisees and supporters of Herod have been hurting people all their life. They have been spreading lies about God. They have driven people away from God by wrongfully wielding the letter of the law, ignoring God's grace, ignoring that everyone belongs to God. They come at Jesus in hopes of destroying him, turning the people against him and killing him.

Jesus seeks to heal them by identifying their misunderstanding, confusion, hurt, loneliness, hate and sin so they can let it go and let come God forgiveness and healing. Jesus does not condemn them. They still, no matter what they do, are loved by God. They will always belong to God. Jesus condemns their “evil motives”. Jesus calls them hypocrites, for their thoughts, life and actions are all in contradiction to God. As religious leaders they are suppose to know God and be pointing out God to the people. They are suppose to be showing people how everyone belongs to God, how everyone is loved, forgiven, healed, redeemed and blessed to enjoy abundant life, blessed to bless others.

Jesus asks them, ‘whose image is on the coin?’. They reply, “Caesar”. **Matthew 22:21** **“Then Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”**

They knew the scripture well. They knew God created humanity in God's image. Each of us is stamped with the likeness of God. Each of us is a living visual reminder of our belonging to God. Whenever we love, laugh, serve, relax; we reveal God's image. Whenever we create anything good,

from music to a book, from art to a building, from clothing to jewelry, from a delicious meal to a poem, from a job well done to parenting. Whenever one creates anything good you can find the image of the creator in the creation.

Jesus gets their attention by reminding them of what they know—that they are created in the image of God. In order to heal them Jesus tells them they belong to God. Perhaps the words you need to hear from God today are: You belong to God. You are the very image of God. You are God's beloved child. God created you and designed you specifically to be you. God claims you through Jesus. If you are baptized you are sealed by the Holy Spirit into God's family for eternity. If you come to the Lord's Supper then God seats you at your special, honored and cherished place at God's table. God is inviting us to belong to a family of faith to support, encourage, to point out the beauty, the image of God, in each other, to build one another up into the likes of Jesus. Since everyone belongs to God. God is inviting us to belong to our world wide family, to serve, to share and discover the beauty, the image of God, in all people.

Romans 14:7-8 “For none of us lives to ourselves, and no one dies to their self. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord”

God has chiseled out a place in the exact shape of your soul, a safe harbor, where you can enjoy God forever. You are an accepted member of God's family. You are a part of the greatest love story. You are helping God resurrect the world. You are created in God's image with special gifts and abilities that only you can provide. You fit perfectly into God's family. You are infinitely valuable to God. God has a special place for you in God's family that only you can fulfill.

Whenever you feeling alone, afraid, devalued or are hurting tell yourself, “I belong to God”

Kayla Berger writes “I have compiled a short, and incomplete, list of what belonging to God means to me.

•I am never alone. When I feel lonely or friendless or afraid, I don't have to feel like one tiny mortal out against the whole world because God is right there with me.

I have a friend, ally, and confidant no matter where I might find myself.

•I am loved. God knows my name and my personality. God likes spending time with me and wants to keep me with God forever. I am precious in God's sight. No matter what happens to me, even if I am caught up in worldly violence or natural disasters,

God will seek me out and find me.

God is willing to sacrifice for me and to work for my good.

•I have something to live for. My life has meaning because I live it for God. Even if I am incapable of leaving behind a legacy of success, benevolence, or wealth, I still have the power to make a difference by sharing God's love with others. Following God means living up to my true potential and maximizing my impact on the world. Even if my good works are small, they have meaning because God has given me and my efforts a purpose.

•I don't have to fear death. {...Since} I belong to God, I'm never going to run out of tomorrows. I can live each day to its fullest without worrying about the future. Even when I die, my soul will live on. When my loved ones die... I will get to see them again in Heaven.

•I'm part of a bigger picture. I don't have to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders—God's taking care of that for me. I don't have to be some kind of superhero because God is already in charge of saving the world. Being a normal person is OK, because God is making sure that my contributions are being integrated into a greater whole, and that gives meaning to the small things that I do. We are all in this together, so I don't have to feel the pressure of being God's extra-special child or something. I have lots of brothers and sisters, and God loves us all and doesn't put shattering expectations on any of us.”

Kayla concludes, “Realizing that I belong to God helps me feel free to just be me.” Take some time to make your own list of what you're belonging to God means to you.

Perhaps you already know all of this and are secure in your certainty that you belong to God then perhaps God's word to you today is to give to God what belongs to God. Peter declared,

1 Peter 2:9 “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of God who called you out of darkness into God’s wonderful light.” Give to God yourself, all that you have and all that you are for you belong to God.

We don’t know where the Pharisees and supporters of Herod went off track. It was either their failure to realize that being created in God’s image meant that they belonged to God or it was their failure to give to God. Belonging is an intimate relationship. An intimate relationship is only possible when both sides are loving and giving. Clearly God is always loving us and giving to us. Are you loving and giving to God?

Later that day Jesus said to the Pharisees, the supporters of Herod, all the people, to the disciples to us, **Matthew 22:37 “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”** Eugene Peterson interprets this as, “You must love God with all your passion, prayer and intelligence. The primary benefit of loving God is for you. Love is the most excellent way to live. Love enables you to give. Love reciprocates, it nurtures your intimate relationship with God.

Giving to God sets us free from being controlled by the world, enslaved by the coin. Giving to God sets us free from searching for belonging in stuff. Jesus gives us back ourselves, polishes God’s good image within us, restores our intimate relationship with God, our belonging with God; which our failure to love, our failure to give, our mistakes, our hurts, distorts. Jesus forgives, is washing us clean, is loving us into health and will ultimately love us into glorious eternal life with God.

Giving to God freely and joyfully of all we have and all we are makes tangible to oneself their intimate relationship with God. Giving to God shows us that we do indeed belong to God. Romans declares **Romans 12:1 “Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering.”**

Jesus said, give to God what belongs to God. In everyone of the Apostle Paul’s letters, you can find a section that describes our belonging to God, encouraging us to love God and directs us to give ourselves to God. Listen for these elements in this excerpt from 1 Thessalonians. **1**

Thessalonians 1:1-10 “This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May God give you grace and peace. We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. As we pray to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be God’s own people. For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece...And now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere...for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God. We don’t need to tell them about it, for they keep talking about the wonderful welcome you gave us and how you turned away from idols to serve the living and true God. And they speak of how you are looking forward to the coming of God’s Son from heaven—Jesus, whom God raised from the dead. Jesus is the one who has rescued us from the terrors of the coming judgment.”

We need to keep reminding each other and ourselves that: We belong to God and we are to give to God what belongs to God. Even Moses needed to be reminded. The complaining of the people, the hard life in the wilderness and the uncertainty of the exact way to the Promise Land

overwhelmed Moses and was eroding his belief that he belonged to God. Moses had plenty of proof that he belonged to God; there was the burning bush, God's promise that God would always be with Moses, the deliverance from Egypt with mighty miracles, crossing the Red Sea, a guiding pillar of fire by night, a cloud by day, manna, water and quail. Moses grasped the concept that he needed to love and give to God. Moses served God by leading the people.

He nurtured his relationship with God through prayer.

Maybe you can identify with Moses, his longing for more assurance of belonging to God, a clear, detailed plan of exactly what he is to do, how he is to love and how he is to give.

Exodus 33:12-23 Moses said to God, "Look, you tell me, 'Lead this people,' but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, 'I know you well and you are special to me.' If I am so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is your people, your responsibility." God said, "My presence will go with you. I'll see the journey to the end." Moses said, "If your presence doesn't take the lead here, call this trip off right now. How else will it be known that you're with me in this, with me and your people? Are you traveling with us or not? How else will we know that we're special, I and your people, among all other people on this planet Earth?" God said to Moses: "All right. Just as you say; this also I will do, for I know you well and you are special to me. I know you by name." Moses said, "Please. Let me see your Glory." God said, "I will make my Goodness pass right in front of you; I'll call out the name, God, right before you. I'll treat well whomever I want to treat well and I'll be kind to whomever I want to be kind." God continued, "But you may not see my face. No one can see me and live." God said, "Look, here is a place right beside me. Put yourself on this rock. When my Glory passes by, I'll put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take my hand away and you'll see my back. But you won't see my face."

God did not reveal precise plans, timelines and directions to Moses. God did not reveal the future glory of God which we all will enjoy for eternity. God did call out God's name and reveal God's goodness. The Hebrew here means God revealed profound intimacy, presence, purpose, identity, deserved reputation, belonging to God. Give to God what belongs to God. You belong to God. Amen