

“Each of Us Belongs to God”

Matthew 22:15-22

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Prayer for Understanding Teacher, inspire us with your Holy Spirit. Help us to hear your Word with understanding that transforms our life and enhances the glory of the cosmos. Amen

Each of us belongs to God. The good news of Matthew proclaims: **Matthew 22:15-22 NLT “Then the Pharisees met together to plot how to trap Jesus into saying something for which Jesus could be arrested. They sent some of their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to meet with Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully. You are impartial and do not play favorites. Now tell us what you think about this: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus knew their evil motives. “You hypocrites!” Jesus said. “Why are you trying to trap me? Here, show me the coin used for the tax.” When they handed Jesus a Roman coin, Jesus asked, “Whose picture and title are stamped on it?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. “Well, then,” Jesus said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” Jesus’ reply amazed them, and they went away.”**

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” It is a question about belonging dressed up as a question about law. It is a trap.

The gospel writer lets us in on the setup. This question is not to satisfy curiosity; it is about strategy. The Pharisees want Jesus gone. Jesus is a disruption to their power and ability to control others. The plan is to force Jesus to pick a side. If Jesus answers yes, he is compromised and his movement loses steam. Another religious voice making peace with the empire. If Jesus answers no, he is a threat. Jesus would then be a problem that Rome would be more than happy to deal with.

Jesus asks for a coin. Notice that Jesus does not have a coin. They do. The ones trying to trap Jesus, the ones signaling their resistance to Rome, the ones posturing about faithfulness, they are the ones carrying Caesar’s currency in their pockets. Jesus asks, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They answer, “Caesar’s.” Coins tell you who is in charge. Coins remind you every time you spend one whose system you are living in, whose authority you are operating under. In this case, the coin says, “Caesar, son of the divine”. The Pharisees are carrying coins that demand worshiping Caesar as God in their pockets.

Jesus does not give them a lecture or a political philosophy. Jesus gives them a sentence. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”. In so doing, Jesus shifts our focus away from the image stamped on a piece of metal to the image stamped on you and everyone. The critical question is: What do you do with yourself to reveal God’s image? How do you act, think and feel to proclaim your belonging to God? Jesus turns the trap around to focus on identity, belonging and who gets to make a claim on your life.

Once we move from coins to people, from currency to image, the whole conversation changes. You do not bear Caesar’s image. You bear God’s image which means there is not a part of your life that falls outside that claim. All you are, have, and do belongs to God.

Most of us spend a lot of time negotiating this question. Giving a little to God and a little to everything else that demands attention. Most try to keep the peace between competing claims. Many rationalize this is balance, realism. But somewhere along the way, many start to forget that one of those claims is different. Caesar takes. Caesar takes taxes, takes allegiance, takes more than he gives, and calls it government. God gives. God gives life, grace and joy that we did not earn and cannot repay. In Jesus, God gives Godself. The One who says, “Give to God what belongs to God,” is not making a demand from a distance. Jesus is standing with them as the One who will go all the way to the cross, not to take from them, but to give for them. It is personal. You belong to God who has already given Jesus for you. It is about identity; each person belongs to God and that allegiance runs deeper than everything else competing for our attention. It is about identity that cannot be reduced to the roles we play or the systems we navigate. It is about a God who looks at you and says, “You bear my image,” and then refuses to let you forget it so stop settling for smaller claims. Plenty of voices are ready to tell you who you are. Plenty of systems are ready to assign your value. Plenty of Caesars, ancient and modern, are more than happy to take what they can get. And Jesus does not pretend those realities do not exist. Jesus refuses to grant them ultimate authority. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Fine. But do not confuse that with what belongs to

God. Because what belongs to God is not a coin you can hand over and be done with. What belongs to God is your whole life. And that is not something you settle once and move on. Belonging to God is something you keep discovering in small decisions, quiet moments and the places where it would be easier to belong to something else. You bear the image of God. Are you living like this good news is true?

Leonard Sweet wrote: "Our relationship with God can manifest in two profoundly different ways: the transactional and the transfigurational. A transactional relationship with God operates like a spiritual marketplace. We bargain with the divine, offering up our prayers, adherence to rules, and acts of worship as currency, expecting blessings, protection, and favors in return. This "what can you do for me" mindset keeps us focused on external benefits rather than internal growth in grace. In contrast, a transfigurational relationship with God emerges from within, much as a caterpillar undergoes metamorphosis to become a butterfly. This relationship is rooted in mutual love, trust, and surrender. We seek Christ not for what we might gain, but out of a desire for genuine intimacy and connection. Through personal devotion and community, we open ourselves to a lifelong journey of increasing hospitality to the indwelling presence of the risen Christ."

Fred Craddock said: "To give my life for Christ appears glorious, to pour myself out for others, to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. I will do it. I am ready, God, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to God is like taking a thousand dollar bill and laying it on the table, 'Here is my life, God. I am giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the thousand dollar bill for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give up a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to God is not glorious. It is done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it is harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."

Each person is made in God's image with dignity, worth, and the capacity to discern how their life should be led and lived. That is a liberating and empowering word. The Caesar question is a question of discernment. When does following God's mean challenging and disobeying unjust human laws? A Presbyterian tenet is that God is Lord of each person's conscience. Therefore, all human authority, including the church, pastors and governments, should never dictate what a person must believe or do. The Presbyterian Constitution includes the Westminster Confession which explains that God frees the human conscience from human doctrines and human commands, so we are free to love. Blind obedience to human authority destroys freedom and reason. Each person holds the personal responsibility to understand and obey God's will in their own life. In wrestling with this concept, I have come to believe God's will for you might be contrary to God's will for me. Perhaps God is big enough that God has multitudes of ways for different people to live an abundant loving life. The Apostle Paul came to a similar conclusion when he wrestled with food purity practices. Paul concluded if it is meaningful for some to practice food purity then they should live it. If it is not meaningful for another, then they are free to eat whatever and however they want. Jesus makes it clear that each person belongs to God. God's will for each person is always superior to any human convictions. The tricky aspect is how can one be sure of God's will for them. Each person has history, biases, and influences that muddle the clarity of God's message. Two things that help me clarify God's will are: a sense of inner peace and God's will gives guidance to me, how I should live abundantly and love completely. Whenever I hear someone, including myself, say someone else should do something, or be a certain way, immediately I am extremely skeptical that this is God's will. God's will is for each individual. God's will transforms each person directly. That transformation sometimes causes others to seek God's will for their life which sometimes changes them. God typically loves directly to each person. When I dug deeper into the moments when I initially thought God had a message for me to give to someone else, I have found that it is really God's message for me. When I think someone else should do something about that situation, it is usually God prompting me to do something. Living God's will often produces inner peace. When I am unsure of God's will, I go for a walk in nature or a bike ride. I unload on God all the information, pros and cons that I think and feel. Then I listen. Then I formulate my next step. If it is a big decision, I will do this several times. If I have three successive senses of inner peace, then I take action. If there is anxiety, then I keep working the process. I split peace over the decision from anxiety over living the decision. I have come to inner peaceful decisions that have caused a great deal of stress, strife, pain, and anxiety as I lived out the decision. I have participated in protests. There was a part of me that wanted to win, to change others to behave in the way that I decided was more loving. This line of thinking is not God's will for my actions. Rather,

when I protest, I perceive it is God's will that I do it in a way that clearly explains what I perceive is an unloving action, causing those doing the unloving action, to personally evaluate their actions, to wrestle with God, to discern what is the most excellent way of love. For no one belongs to me. Each person belongs to God. I realize I am on an extremely slippery slope whenever I ask others to reevaluate their decisions and lifestyle to see if it is in accordance with God's will.

The most extreme example I am aware of that violates my principle of God's will directly impacting another is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's assassination attempt of Hitler. If you want to explore more read, *No Rusty Swords*, which is a collection of Dietrich's letters, lectures, and notes over eight years. *No Rusty Swords* reveals Dietrich's evolution as he wrestled with, trying to clarify God's will for him in his conscience, wrestled with when some church members agree that government is acting counter to God's will then how should the collective conscience of the church disobey government and wrestled with how the individual, church and state should interact with each other. Over a decade Dietrich came to peace with his decision that the most loving thing to do for the most people is to overthrow Hitler's regime, believing it was a necessary evil to stop mass murder. Unsuccessful in overthrowing Hitler, Dietrich became involved in a plot with others to kill Hitler. Dietrich was imprisoned for his rescue operations saving Jewish people. Later, the Nazis linked Dietrich to the assassination plot. Dietrich was condemned to death and hanged. To be crystal clear, I am not advocating hurting anyone. Living God's will means opposition to fear, hate, violence, and unloving ways. The dilemma is each person has a different definition of what is not love and what is love. The day is coming when everyone will clearly perceive God's will fully bringing the glory of heaven to earth. Until that day, each of us is to courageously live what we perceive to be God's will for our self. As a pastor, it is my calling to suggest what God's will might be for you. Worship is your work. Worship is you wrestling with what you perceive God is communicating to you, to reach your own discernment of God's will for your life. This is why my sermons have so many questions. It is good for one to state what they believe. It is good to help others wrestle with what they believe. No one belongs to anyone else, so avoid telling anyone what they should believe, do, or be. A great fear I have is that something I say or do contradicts God's will for another. No one belongs to me. Being a pastor does not give me any more insight, wisdom, or enhanced discernment than anyone else. That is why each sermon takes so long to formulate. Often, the sermon starts with anxiety, I keep prayerfully scrutinizing and editing until I get a sense of peace. Often times, I awake at 3am with clarity that some aspect of the sermon needs to be changed.

Where is the point when one moves from helping everyone live God's will to imposing their distort views on another? Where is the point when one moves from celebrating that each person belongs to God to believing others belong to them so they seek to control another? Where is God asking you to be silent, holding space, creating freedom, for others to discern God's will for their life? Where is God asking to protest unloving ways? How will you decide what is unloving? How will you discern which unloving way God is calling you to transform? How will you discern what is the most excellent way of love for you?

God is Lord of your conscious. You belong to God alone. God created you to be free to make your own conclusions of God's will for you. Each of us belongs to God. Amen

