

“Whose head is this and whose title?” Jesus asks (Matthew 22:20). “Caesar’s,” they answer. Of course it is. What other image would there be? Coins tell us who’s in charge. Coins remind us, every time we spend one, whose economic system we live in and whose authority we are operating under. In this case, the coin does not just bear Caesar’s likeness; it bears a description, something like “Caesar, son of the divine.”

Julius Caesar was the first Roman leader to stamp his own face on currency. This shocked the traditionalists and made Rome’s senators fear Caesar wanted to be king. It was this blatant display of autocratic power which fueled the conspiracy that led to Caesar’s assassination on March 15, 44 BC. Caesar’s successors took his name as a title: Caesar became synonymous with kingship and the title resonated down through the ages as kaiser and tsar. Subsequent leaders became kings and emperors of Rome, completing the prophecy of Caesar’s unbridled power-grab. By the time of Caesar Augustus, the emperor when Jesus was born, the role of emperor was both political and religious. The emperor was a deity, a god, revered and feared, flattered and prayed to. He was both political and spiritual, roles summed up in the phrase on the coin, “Caesar, son of the divine.”

For the Pharisees, any claim of divinity would be considered blasphemy. Any claim to an identity on par with the One, True God of Israel would be heresy. Remember that the Pharisees later leveled the charge of blasphemy against Jesus for claiming (rightly!) to be the Son of God. Yet here the Pharisees are with these blasphemous coins in their pockets and using these idolatrous symbols of empire to conduct business. They too-easily offer Jesus these identity-fracturing bits of silver without considering what they are doing

Jesus does not give them a lecture about theology or outline a political philosophy. He gives them a sentence. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). We’ve heard that sentence so often that we easily turn it into something polite and manageable. We make a clean division: take care of your civic responsibilities, keep your spiritual life intact, and try not to let the two get in each other’s way. It sounds reasonable. It also sounds nothing like what Jesus is doing, because Jesus is not dividing the world into two neat categories. Jesus is exposing how much smaller their question is than the reality in which they live. Yes, the coin has Caesar’s image. Fine. Give it back to Caesar. But that is not where the conversation ends.

The more pressing question is not about the image stamped on a piece of metal, but about the image stamped on us. Jesus’ adversaries never ask that question, but Jesus makes them face it anyway. If the coin belongs to Caesar because it bears his image, then what do you do with something that bears God’s image? Jesus turns the question around: it’s

not really about taxes at all, but about identity, belonging, and who gets to make a claim on our life. This is not a question we can answer with a coin.

Things would be so much easier if we could solve the identity question with a coin. Things would be simpler if following Jesus meant carving out a portion of our life, giving one piece to God, and keeping the rest for ourselves. A little here, a little there. Enough carved out for God to feel faithful without having to rethink everything. We are good at that version of faith. We know how to give God a slice: an hour on Sunday morning, a few prayers, some of Caesar’s coin in the offering plate. We know how to look like people who belong to God without having to wrestle with what that truly means.

Jesus will not let us get away with easy answers or simple faith. Once you move from coins to people, from currency to image, the whole conversation changes. We do not bear Caesar’s image. We bear God’s image, which means there is no part of our life that falls outside God’s claim. Not our time and not our relationships. Not our work and not our fears. Certainly not our politics, which is where this text usually gets dragged whether we want it to or not.

Jesus refuses to give us the kind of answer that would make things easier. Jesus does not tell us which side to take. Jesus does not give us a slogan or endorse a platform. We cannot settle the question of faith with a vote, a position, or a well-argued opinion. Jesus reminds us that whatever else is true, we belong to God and we must come to grips with that fact. The tension is not resolved. It intensifies. The question of identity keeps coming back, in every context and decision: to whom do you belong?

That question follows us into conversations where we would rather keep things neutral. It follows us into decisions where we would prefer a clear answer. It follows us into the parts of our life we’ve gotten used to managing on our own. Which is why we keep trying to shrink the issue and make the tension manageable. We turn “render unto Caesar” into a permission slip to keep things segregated: separated but equal. We tell ourselves that if we do our duty here and maintain our devotion there, everything is copacetic, kosher, in order. Jesus never gives us that kind of easy arrangement. He gives us a question we can’t shake: to whom do you belong?

If we are honest, we spend a lot of time negotiating that question. We give a little to God. We give a little to everything else that demands our attention. We try to keep the peace between competing claims. We tell ourselves this is balance, wisdom, realism. But somewhere along the way, we start to forget that one of those claims is different. Caesar

takes. That is what Caesar does. Caesar takes our allegiance, takes our resources, takes more than he gives, and calls it stability, progress, and good citizenship. God gives. That is what God does. God gives life, mercy, and grace that we did not earn and cannot repay. Then, in Jesus, God gives himself *for us*, for our forgiveness, for our salvation, for our eternal life.

When Jesus says, “Give to God what belongs to God,” he is not making a demand from a distance. Jesus is standing in front of them as the One who will go all the way to the cross, not to *take from them*, but to *give for them*. That does not make the identity claim smaller. If anything, it makes it more complete; because now the question of belonging is no longer abstract. It is personal. We do not simply belong to an idea. We belong to the One who gave himself for us.

This is about an allegiance that runs deeper than whatever else is competing for it. This is about identity that cannot be reduced to the roles we play or the systems we navigate. This is about a God who looks at us and says, “You bear my image,” and then refuses to let us forget it. This should not make us feel guilty; it should help us stop settling for smaller claims.

There are plenty of voices ready to tell you who you are. There are plenty of systems ready to assign your value. There are plenty of Caesars, ancient and modern, who are more than happy to take what they can get from you. Jesus doesn’t pretend those realities do not exist; he just refuses to grant them ultimate authority. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” but do not confuse that with what belongs to God.

What belongs to God is not a coin. What belongs to God is us: our identity and our whole life. That is not something we settle once and move on; it is something we keep discovering in small decisions, quiet moments, and the places where it would be easier to belong to something else. We each bear the image of God. The question is not whether God has a claim on us, but if we’re willing to live like this good news is true.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for loving me so completely and calling me Your child. I come to You today to anchor my heart in who You say I am, rather than how the world defines me, what I have achieved, or my past mistakes. Remind me that I am chosen, deeply loved, and fully accepted. When I feel weak, broken, or rejected, remind me that I am Your masterpiece, fearfully and wonderfully made for good works You planned long ago. Help me to see myself through Your eyes and live as a reflection of Your marvelous light. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Whose Image Do You Carry?

Sunday, October 18, 2026

Matthew 22:15-22

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a question that sounds responsible, even thoughtful. It is the kind of question that people who take faith seriously are supposed to ask: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (Matthew 22:17). It sounds like a question about policy, but it’s not. It is a question about loyalty dressed up as a question about law. It is a trap.

Matthew lets us in on the setup. This question isn’t to satisfy curiosity; it’s about strategy. The Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, align themselves with the Herodians, a political faction that supported the descendants of King Herod and their affiliation with the Roman Empire. These two disparate groups find common ground in wanting Jesus gone. Jesus is a troublesome preacher who teaches a gospel of grace which is different from the law-based teaching of the Pharisees. Jesus speaks of allegiance to a heavenly kingdom which challenges the power of the Herodians and their allies the Romans. Their plan is simple: they will force Jesus to pick a side.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” If Jesus answers yes, he is a Roman sympathizer, another religious sellout making peace with the empire, and his movement loses steam. If Jesus answers no, he is a threat to the economic system, a political problem with which Rome will have to contend. The Pharisees and the Herodians do not really care about Jesus’ answer: they just want Jesus neutralized.

Like people who are trying a little too hard, they start with flattery. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere...” (Matthew 22:16), which is usually how you begin when you are about to say something insincere. Jesus doesn’t buy it, and he doesn’t play along. He does not reward their disingenuous tone. Instead, he names the game. “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” (Matthew 22:18). Jesus flips the table before the conversation even gets going.

By way of an answer, Jesus asks them for a coin. It is a small detail, but it carries more weight than we initially see. Notice that Jesus does not have a coin on his person. They do. The men trying to trap Jesus, the ones signaling their resistance to Rome, the ones posturing about faithfulness are the ones carrying Caesar’s currency in their pockets.