

Genesis 1:26-31

Matthew 22:15-21

October 18, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE SPITTING IMAGE OF YOUR FATHER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Two years ago today, I visited with my mother in her room at Gracemont Assisted Living in Cumming, Georgia. I remember the date because I had gone to Georgia to attend the memorial service in Atlanta of my best friend's father, who was like a second father to me. On my way from Dahlonga to Atlanta, I stopped by to see my mom. When I walked in her room wearing my black suit and tie, she looked at me and said, "You sure look like your father!" Then she added, "And that's a good thing!"

The older I get, the more I hear that from family members. Any remaining doubts were put to rest this week when my brother, the family historian, sent me and my sister the picture you see on the screen.



The picture was taken in New Orleans in 1942, when my mom was 20 and my dad was 22. They were engaged and he was getting ready to ship out to serve four years in the Pacific Theater in World War II.

I posted the picture on Facebook and got lots of likes, hearts, and thumbsup. Seventeen people wrote messages, and twelve of the messages included variations of “You sure look like your dad.” The most interesting message was from Ray Hines, who lived next door to me on our college freshman hall at Davidson. I don’t think I’ve seen Ray since we graduated in 1978. He wrote, “Had to do a double take. You are the spitting image of your dad.”

. . . which is a perfect jumping off point for today’s sermon!

Historically, this story about Caesar and taxes has been interpreted one of two ways: either a justification for a sharp division between an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom or instructions about paying taxes and your duties to government. Both of those topics are interesting on their own, but there is something much bigger at stake in Jesus’ amazing response to the trap set for him by the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Instead of falling into their trap by giving a “Yes” or “No” answer, Jesus asked to see “the coin of the tax.” Then he asked his own question which sprung the trap on his opponents: “Whose image is this, and whose title?” Now that’s something we can all relate to, because we carry the “coin of the realm” in our pockets and purses. The penny has Honest Abe on one side and the Union Shield/E pluribus unum of the other, representing President Lincoln’s saving the Union. The nickel shows Thomas Jefferson on the front and his home, Monticello, on the back, again with the words E pluribus unum. FDR graces the front of the dime, along with the words Liberty and In God We Trust. On the back you find the torch of liberty, an olive branch of peace, and an oak branch of strength and independence. And, of course, George Washington is on the quarter, along with Liberty and In God We Trust, with national parks and other national sites on the other side. The coins we carry proclaim a message.

And so did coins in the first century A.D. On the screen you see a Roman coin from that time.



Matthew tells us, “they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose image is this, and whose inscription?’” This picture of a Roman denarius shows Caesar, Emperor Tiberius, who ruled from 14 - 37 A.D., when Jesus walked the earth. The Latin inscription around his image says “Tiberius Casesar, son of the deified (or divine) Augustus, [who is also Augustus].” The woman on the back holds a scepter and a branch and the Latin words say “High Priest.”

That’s the coin the Jewish people were compelled to use to pay the hated Imperial tax that the Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians were talking about. For the Jews, the coin was blasphemous because it contained a graven image of a person and defied their central belief of one God (who was not Caesar or the emperor). Every time they paid the tax (which was one denarius per person per year), they were reminded that Rome was in power, that Rome was their oppressor, and that they were supporting their own oppression. So, if Jesus said, “Yes, you should pay the tax,” the crowds would turn against him. If Jesus said, “No, you shouldn’t pay the tax,” the Herodians could run to the Romans and turn him in.

Instead, Jesus said, “Show me the coin used for the tax.” And thus we have one of the great “Gotcha!” moments in the Bible. Remember, they are in the temple and Jesus is talking with Jewish religious leaders. Just imagine one of them pulling out the denarius with Tiberius’ image stamped on it and realizing, “Oops!” Having “the coin of the tax” at hand trapped them in the very trap they were trying to spring on Jesus, and exposed their hypocrisy.

Jesus’ question — “Whose image is this?” — gets to the heart of the story, not only for the Pharisees and Herodians, but for us also. “Image” — it’s the word we get our word “icon” from, and it’s the same word used in the creation story when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27) In other words, God has stamped us with God’s very image, sort of like those Romans coins were stamped with Tiberius’ very image. We reaffirm that idea when we baptize someone and claim the promise over the baby, young person, or adult: “Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

You might be more familiar with Jesus saying, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .” “Give to the emperor” doesn’t carry quite as much weight as the idea of “Give **back** to the emperor . . .” That coin has Caesar’s head and inscription on it; well, then, give it back to the emperor, since it belongs to him.

But “give back to God the things that are God’s . . .”? Maybe that’s why Jesus’ opponents, who were intent on trapping him, ended up being amazed. And, if we’re honest, maybe we should be amazed, also. How do we give back to God the things that are God’s when, as the psalmist reminds us, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1) (including the emperor and the coin of the tax)?

The thing about Caesar’s tax — then and now — is that it is limited. If we pay what we owe, we can go on about our business. We always want to pay as little as pos-

sible, and not too many people, if any, happily and voluntarily pay more. But how do we give back to God the things that are God's? If we approach it in a transactional way, we end up thinking we can somehow buy God's favor or else we set a cap we have to meet so we can go on about our own business.

But Jesus isn't just talking about money and taxes, is he? Giving back to God the things that are God's certainly includes our money, but it's really about our ultimate allegiance. In his commentary on Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner says, "Jesus' Caesar-God formula means that we are to give to Caesar a great deal, but not our conscience, not our worship, and not an absolute allegiance that knows no bounds." With a somewhat dated, but still effective, image, he says, "Jesus' Caesar sentence is a slide rule asking us perpetually to readjust our use of time and priorities."¹

If you wanted tax advice from this story and sermon today, I'm sure you're disappointed, but better off, trust me! If you wanted a "to do" list of how to "give back to God the things of God" so you can meet the bare minimum and check that off your list, I'm sure you're disappointed. Instead, Jesus leaves us with the question of how each of us will show forth the image of God. The good news, as someone has said, is that "the God whose image I bear is a God of love."²

Physically I may be the spitting image of my father, but I hope it goes beyond outward appearance. Every day I think about him and hope that I honor him and his memory by how I live, who I am, and what I do.

Obviously we're not the spitting image of our heavenly Father in our physical appearance. So how will we give back to God the things that are God's by how we live, who we are, and what we do?

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, you created us in your own image and crowned us with dignity and honor. In all that we do and all that we are, may we reflect your glory and love made known to us in Jesus Christ, who is the very image of you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew, Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28 (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1990), pp. 784-785.

²Debie Thomas, October 22, Ordinary 29A (Matthew 22:15-22), It's Important to note what Jesus does not say about the Roman coin, September 21, 2017, at www.christiancentury.org.