

Proper 24YA Coin of Caesar

What is Caesar's and What is God's

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Now is the opportune time. The miracles are over. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is done. Perhaps the people waited for more miracles. But, now at the temple, Jesus no longer wows the crowd with acts of power. Now, only the teaching—those outdoor lectures in the form of parables that baffle; now the jaw-cracking yawn of his disciples when the mind resists working hard to unpack his mysterious words. Now is the opportune time.

Three years ago, right before Jesus entered public ministry, the devil tempted Jesus. There were three temptations, but all were the same test: Did Jesus let the world's desire for power and control, safety and security, esteem and affection define him? Or, did he trust in God to know who he is? Did he belong to the appetites of the world or did he find his belonging in God? When he passed the test and rejected the devil, it didn't mean it was over. The devil waited to test Jesus again at an opportune time .

Now is the opportune time for another test. Who are you, Jesus? To whom do you belong? Now that you're in Jerusalem, now that the crowds won't desire to be close to you without your performances of power, now that you will continue to diminish in the sight of the masses, now that you're moving inexorably toward torture, betrayal and death—now it is the time to test who you really think you are.

So the Pharisees and Herodians come to test Jesus. This is bad. It is like the Democrats and Republicans, two groups that usually see each other as adversaries, banning together to entrap Jesus. Before they came today, they had brainstormed how to get Jesus in trouble with the empire. If they show him to be disruptive to the empire, they could have the Romans kill Jesus. Having just

finished submitting their 1040 tax form, they said, “Ah hah! Let’s entrap him about taxes. Everyone hates paying taxes, but the empire loves collecting them. We’ll turn the crowd and the empire against him all at once.”

So they go to the temple court and find Jesus. They start with flattery. They say, “Jesus, we know you’re a super fair guy and teach with sincerity. So, please help us understand something. Tell us what you think. Is it lawful according to our tradition to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Jesus fishes in his pockets and says, “I don’t have a coin. Can someone give me a coin?”

Among the Pharisees and Herodians, one says, “Here, I got one!”

Jesus says, “Look at it. Whose image is on it?”

The man looks at the coin and suddenly he drains of color. Jesus asks again, “Whose image is on it?”

The man whispers, “The emperor’s.”

Jesus says, “What, I didn’t hear you?”

The man speaks a bit louder, “The emperor’s.”

“And what’s his title?”

The man says through gritted teeth, “The Divine Caesar Augustus.”

The crowd all gasp! This man did not change his denarius with the money changers for a shekel! He came into the temple area carrying an image of a man and with a blasphemous title claiming to be divine. How many times can you break the law?

Jesus addresses the Pharisees and Herodians, “You hypocrites! Why are you putting me to the test? Now, let me give you a test. I say, render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. What belongs to God? What belongs to Caesar?”

Jesus is no longer talking about taxes. He is talking about the human soul. Caesar is not only the image on the coin and not even just the emperor, but all and any image that makes claim on our soul, other than God. Today, our souls are bombarded by non-divine images, each trying to make claims on us, each wanting to define us, each making us beholden to them for our identity. Consider images that have a good grip on you? What could they be? Non-divine images distort our relationship with God. We live all the time among distortions. They come at us from without and within.

And yet, we are made in the image of God. This means that no matter the distortion, it can't distort the truth of who we are. As soon as Jesus comes to Jerusalem, those with distorted perceptions kept wanting to know by what authority he speaks. They could not understand that for Jesus his authority comes from the author of life. Those around him couldn't understand because their authority was based on the images of power, security, and esteem that was at a distance from this undistorted truth.

Today, when we render to God what is God's, let us understand it in this way. No matter our confusion, our despair, our depression; no matter our mistakes, our anger, our arguments; no matter how taken we are by the anxieties that fling us out and make us spin, let us remember that we can always return to this central truth of being made in the image of God: the love that loves us so is always calling us to return to what is never distorted in us. If we live here, we will know what is Caesar's and what is God's.