

“The Things That Are God’s”
Psalm 99:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10;
Matthew 22:15-22

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In today’s Gospel, there has been a little conflict set up because some powerful people are not happy with Jesus. They have become rivals of sorts with him, so they come to entrap him. It’s a little like they are playing a game. Perhaps it’s a little like a basketball game (we’ve just had the NBA championship). They came to try to trap him and take the ball away. The ball here, of course, is who the people going to listen to. Who has the right way to go forward? Then, there might be a little more to it. The one who is able to hold on to that ball, the one in charge, the one who is able to dominate—a little like Kobe Bryant in the championship game—gets to be called king. Or perhaps, in this case, they are trying to decide who is the true emissary of the king. Who really has God’s ear and knows God’s voice?

Certainly, Jesus has done and said enough to imply the pharisees are not living up to who they say they are, so there is this rivalry and they want to take it back. This idea of sparring with Jesus is something I wouldn’t normally think about. I yet, I wonder. Whenever I hear a parable or a story like this and I hear somebody like the Pharisees sparring with Jesus, it makes me wonder if there’s any way I do that? Am I anything like those Pharisees? Do I sometimes want to say, “Jesus, I don’t think you have it quite right,” or “That’s fine for them, but I think now we need to do this?” Is there any way I don’t want to hear something Jesus said so I don’t have to change what I’m doing? It’s a question worth pondering, and I do ponder it.

But Jesus responds and he does so in an incredible way. Because they thought they had an open and shut case, they brought him a question they think he could answer either, “Yes, pay the tax,” or “No, don’t pay the tax.” They brought along the Herodians, the people who think you should pay the tax. The Pharisees are the ones who think you shouldn’t be paying. So, they are going to have somebody to witness how he’s made the mistake either way.

In their time, it wasn’t quite as clear-cut between government and religion as it is today, so this is not simply Jesus saying you should pay taxes to the government and then do your religion separately. More than that is going on. It’s interesting, when he asked whose name was on the coin, they only kind of answer that question. They say “the emperor’s.” They answer in general, because it really says, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of Divine Augustus.” You see, that coin represents an idolatry. It represents the Roman realm saying it is the divine realm. So when Jesus is asking them about the coin, he has exposed this idolatrous coin in the temple—he’s already pointing out their mistake—then goes on to say, “Give that idolatrous coin to the idolator, but give to God what it God’s.” The question is, what realm are you really paying attention to? Do you care about the tax? Tacitly, he says to pay the tax. But it’s that other realm. Are you really paying attention to what God’s realm is? Are you giving to God what is God’s?

As we think about that idea of giving to God what is God’s, we see that Jesus is pitting two realms against each other. Jesus is unmasking the idea that we so easily

can have a realm in our lives that could take priority over the realm of God. And he is claiming we might hold as a priority giving to God what is God's. If we think about what God's realm is like, we might note the Psalms description: The king is a lover of justice and righteousness and makes equity the way of the people. We have in this Psalm a clue to what God's characterizes God's realm.

We have been walking through, in a number of ways, Jesus inviting us to do a necessary reflection, to think about the way of righteousness, to recognize that Jesus is inviting us to give priority to God, to understand what is central. Here again, as he is asked this question, as they try to entrap him, he points out that the real, important thing is not answering the question with a yes or no, but recognizing what realm you are paying attention to. Are you paying attention to just the realm of the idolatrous coin or are you paying attention to God's realm, God's way, God's will?

As I worked through this passage, I have noted several things. One, how often do I try to spar with Jesus, saying, "I understand what you are saying but I don't think that works in the world I'm living in." What I hear Jesus responding is, "I think what you're doing is making something else more important than God. Are you giving to God what is God's?" And two, recognizing what I might have made more important than God leads me to adjust my view. If I use that way of looking at things, what are my priorities, I can form the question: what kinds of things might I prioritize instead of God? I could do that with my retirement savings. I could make it the most important thing. I could make it so important and focus so much of my energy and life on making sure I have that retirement savings or even just the modicum of wealth I think I need that I could forget what God is asking of me.

There are all kinds of ways we could do that. Sometimes I hear it said that we should make the world work for business. Sometimes it feels like we put business first and the ways of God second. Sometimes it feels like we put power and privilege first. We have a history of white supremacy and it gives the power, the advantage to white folk, and yet if we allow that to function in this way, we are going against God's desire for equity and righteousness and justice.

There are all these ways we could begin to think about what it is in my life that I want to make important enough that I can say, "Jesus, I think you're wrong?" and recognizing that I'm not prioritizing God enough, that I don't give God what is God's.

Sometimes I think what gets in the way is simply wanting to be right. Have we made being right the priority in our lives? I have to be right about everything, so that's what's important and it conflicts with giving God what is God's and learning the humility that Jesus teaches, the openness to the grace of God. In fact, wanting to be right tends to interfere with our ability to give grace.

So, as we hear Jesus in this sparring with the Pharisees, it makes me ask again, "How am I that Pharisee?" Where do I spar with Jesus? When do I not quite want to pay attention to what he's saying, or saying it doesn't really work in my life? How is that, then, putting something else as more important and refusing to give God what is God's? Amen.