

“Sacriligious and Holy Images”
(18Oct2020) Mt22:15-22

The issue here is not taxes, *per se*.

Kathy Henning raised that in BYOB Bible Study this week, that she couldn't see why Jesus would be opposed to paying taxes—when taxes pay for water lines (aqueducts, she said) or the roads we need, or help fund schools that care for our children who will go on to help care for us, or serve our common safety and security, or whatever.

I regularly recall a retired English teacher in my internship congregation declaring he would never vote for someone who wanted to cut his taxes.

In those ways, I say clearly God is working through our government for the good of loving our neighbors. That is how it should work.

Martin Luther wrote similarly in the Large Catechism, reflecting on daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, saying:

The greatest need of all is to pray for the civil authorities and the government, for it is chiefly through them that God provides us daily bread and all the comforts of this life. Although we have received from God all good things in abundance, we cannot retain any of them or enjoy them in security and happiness were God not to give us a stable, peaceful government. For where dissension, strife, and war prevail [we might add: illness], there daily bread is already taken away or at least reduced.

It would therefore be fitting if...a loaf of bread were stamped on coins, in order to remind both [authorities] and [citizens]...that without the [government] we could neither eat nor preserve the precious gift of bread.*

An image of bread stamped on money as a reminder for leaders and the people of what's important, of trying to sustain life: I like it! A helpful sense of the role of government as we move toward an election.

But that's very clearly not what Jesus was dealing with. To peel back what was going on in the conversation with Jesus, maybe begin by picturing if our money had not bread but Donald Trump on it. Then picture that we had conquered Mexico and forced those people to use this money to pay tribute to the U.S. because of how great we are. The Romans conquered Palestine and required

everyone to pay with this coin with an image of Roman Caesar.

Oh, and in our updated version, it would declare Donald Trump to be the son of god on the money. You can begin to see why this is a bit more pointed discussion than simply paying taxes?

Another important aspect of the offense, then, is to take the top ten commandments in Jewish faith and realize this little coin was breaking a restriction on having other gods and on making graven images. This is top tier offensive stuff.

We could also mention this conversation is happening in the temple.

There's plenty of history for this mega commandment-breaking idolatry in the holiest place. The biggest politico-religious revolution 200 years before Jesus' time is the story of Hanukkah, when the Maccabees reclaimed the temple after a horrendous Greek emperor had changed it to worshipping Zeus and maybe even sacrificed pigs in there. The desolating sacrilege or desolation of abomination, it gets called in the book of Daniel (or, in the Good News translation, the capitalized Awful Horror).

Again, just before Jesus was born, Herod the Great was a local ruler but was always trying to show off for Rome. He doubled the area of the temple, which could've been doing something nice for his people, but that was offset as another building project to impress Caesar—clearly the predominant point, since over the entrance to the temple Herod put up a huge golden eagle, again a symbol of Zeus. Again, a desolating sacrilege, a breaking of worshipping other gods and making images to them. Some people of faith chopped up the golden eagle with axes, so Herod executed them.

That's not all. In between the time of Jesus and when the Gospel of Matthew was written, a subsequent Caesar, Caligula, wanted a statue of himself put into the temple. One of Herod's descendants was maybe a little more nervous about Jewish revolt and convinced the emperor to back down.

A statue may seem more than a coin, but this today is basically the same offense. Meaning: Jesus is, at is says, trapped by the questioners. Should you pay the tribute coin, submitting as conquered

* *Book of Concord*, p450 / Large Catechism 74-75

captives, foregoing your religious convictions? Or should you obey the only true God and therefore resist Rome, likely be punished, perhaps executed, for standing your ground?

Jesus flips the trap, with a first trick of asking them to show the coin. They fall for it, right there in the temple, and hold up the graven image of this foreign idol. They desecrate the temple by this action, turning the people against them. You could practically hear the gasps and astonished shudders.

Not just winning an argument, Jesus also makes an important theological point here, a matter of faith. He asks whose image is on the coin, and they say it is Caesar. Jesus seems almost dismissive and says, well give the coin to the one whose image is on it, then.

But! Give to God the things that have God's image!

That makes us ask: if engraving and carving images was forbidden, if you especially weren't supposed to make idols of foreign gods, but were just as restricted from representing the one true God, then what things would have the image of God?

The answer is right at the start of the Bible. What has the image of God? You do! You are created in the image of God, humankind, of all genders.** Much more than some silly little coin with false claims to divinity, you yourself embody and bear the image of God. In your very existence you mark God's presence. You are God's reflection. Not because of what you do or don't do necessarily at all. Because that's who you've been created to be, and in Jesus also who you are destined to be.***

Clearly we could turn this into an ethic, and ask what it is that you are giving back to God, what you are rendering with the image that is placed upon you. By the end of the Noah story, for one example, this commands that, since each human bears the image of God, you shouldn't hurt any human life, because that is somehow equivalent with hurting God's own self.

That's true and good. But this is less about expectations from you. Where Caesar demands payment of allegiance, God reassures a gift. This is not about what you owe to God. This is that God

owns you, identifies with you, embraces you, cherishes you, and will give you everything.

God's stamp is on you. When God looks at you, God sees God's own reflection. In these days when you're perhaps especially confounded by trying to do it right, when so much seems to be going wrong, you may be confident in this assurance: God sees you as good. You are created in the image of God. You belong to God. That's larger than any demands of a lousy leader with an inflated ego. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you are destined for the fullness of what you already are: the image of God in Christ. You are God's.

Hymn: "God, You Spin the Whirling Planets" (The Presbyterian Hymnal 285)

** Genesis 1:26-27

*** see Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:49, 2 Corinthians 3:18