

***Taxes and the Image of God***

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity

November 12, 2023

Matthew 22:15–22

You and I don't understand idolatry. Not really. We hear idolatry and think of those people in the Old Testament who actually handcrafted idols and bowed down before them and prayed to them. We think idolatry is a primitive expression of religion. We are far too enlightened for that. We know that an idol cannot save us, let alone hear us. It's not a god, it's just stone or wood. Idolatry is a First Commandment problem, You shall have no other gods. We don't fashion material into idols. But the First Commandment is our chief problem. Paul says in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 that coveting is idolatry.

We indeed have fashioned our own idols. They just look different. Sometimes they don't even look like anything because they aren't things that are tangible. Our idolatry is often of a more subtle nature than outright fashioning stone into an image and looking to it for our good. In our twenty-first century American existence we have grown very comfortable. We have come to expect and even depend on many of the conveniences we have. We are consumers and the more we consume the more our appetite grows. Even comfort is not enough, we want instant gratification. Even with our religion, we want it on our own terms, don't we? More and more activities are held on Sunday morning. If we choose those over being here in the House of God hasn't that now become our god? Even if it's not other activities, but just a chance to not be rushing around all the time, do we choose that over being here? Are we so busy that Sunday morning is the only time to take a break from everything?

We have turned many of our American ideals into idols. The drive for success at the expense of our own family. We have come to prize American individualism and rights so much that we sometimes fail to see that we can't go it alone in this life and that we need each other and should not insist on our own rights. Even in Christianity we can worship at the altar of success, thinking that we are a failure if our church is not growing or believing that we are being faithful to God simply because our church is growing.

You and I don't understand idolatry because we too often look to things for our satisfaction and welfare above the only one who can provide for us what we truly need. An example of this is the Pharisees and the Herodians of the Gospel reading today. The Pharisees were good people. They were religious leaders who followed God's law. The Herodians presumably were part of the rulership of king Herod or perhaps adherents of Herod. These two groups were attempting to bring Jesus down. They didn't believe in Him, they believed He was a threat to their power. They weren't asking Jesus a legitimate question. They were trying to entrap Jesus.

The topic they attempted this with was taxes. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? How is Jesus going to answer that? If He says yes then isn't He denying that we should be giving to God and not to the emperor who has ascribed to himself divinity? If He says no isn't He promoting sedition, let alone encouraging His followers to dispense with the Fourth Commandment, in

which we are commanded by God to give to those in authority what is due them? They were trying to put Jesus in a Catch-22, He's damned if He does and damned if He doesn't.

But Jesus is not going to answer their question, not really. He will give a serious answer to a serious question. But He recognizes this for the trap that it is and will not blindly fall into it. So He asks them for a coin. Whose image is on the coin? What is the inscription on it? It is Caesar's, they answer. Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. This is not really about taxes. Yes, Jesus does say that we should pay taxes, perhaps something we'd rather not do. But the Bible speaks of earthly authorities as having their authority from God. We must render what is due them because we are rendering to God.

The image on the coin was that of a man. This man, the Roman emperor, was powerful. What he said went. He put the image of his face on the coins so that everyone would know who he was and the power he had over them. If anything, Jesus is being sarcastic. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? Yeah, Jesus says, give him what is due him. It's all he has, really. He has power for a limited time, on this earth. But, Jesus goes on to show those opposing Him, you are really missing the point. This is not about taxes but about you. Give to God what is God's. Do you truly believe in God? Do you truly desire to give to God what is due Him? If the image on the coin is that of a man, what is the image of God and where is that imprinted?

Genesis 1 says that when God created human beings He created them in His own image. We are the image of God. If the image on a coin tells us what we are to give to a human being, namely, money, what is Jesus saying when He says to give to God what is God's? Ourselves. Our entire being, our whole life. Everything who we are and everything we have. This is not about that you need to pay your taxes and you should also give offerings to God. Yes, we do need to give a portion of our income to God. And if what we are giving to God is a paltry sum then we need to rethink why we are giving to Him in the first place. What Jesus is getting at is idolatry. We need to destroy all the idols in our lives. We are the image of God. God created us in His image and created us in perfection. But Genesis also speaks of the fall into sin. In our sin we have damaged our humanness. In Jeremiah 17 our sin is shown to be engraved on our heart.

But if we can see that we have a problem we are also shown that there is a solution. In 2Corinthians 4 we are taught that Christ is the image of God. And what did He do? He gave to God what is God's. He gave His whole life, His whole being, to God. He offered up His body as the sacrifice for our sin and poured out His blood for our condemnation. And He has brought about a new creation. In Baptism we are born anew, created anew. In Baptism we are united with Christ. We now bear the image of Christ.

We should pause before criticizing those in the Old Testament for fashioning idols out of stone or those in the Gospel reading for attacking Jesus without recognizing that we often end up in the very same idolatry. We are made in the image of God and we are in Christ who is the exact imprint and image of God. Do you see your money as your own? Instead consider how it all belongs to God in the first place and that even the ten percent the Bible gives as a guide really isn't all that much after all. How much time do you spend scrolling through your social media

feeds or watching cable news or binge-watching TV shows? Limit yourself and pick up your Bible and read it and then also take time for Bible Class where you get to study the Word of God with your brothers and sisters in Christ. When you wake up each day, go over all the things you need to do that day and pray about how you may do them to serve others and be a blessing to them. Call up someone you haven't seen in church in a while and tell them that you miss them and ask them if there's anything you can pray for for them.

God has given you many good things, but they are not what you should look to for your good. God has given you your life. He has made you in His own image. The new life He has given you in Baptism is in Christ. He has given Himself to God by offering Himself up for you so that now what you give to God is holy and a blessing to others. Amen.

SDG

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