

“What Belongs to God?”
Matthew 22:15–22
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I will be the first to admit, I am a mediocre sports fan. I wish I was better, but I follow enough just to be relevant in conversation for a few moments. When people start asking me, “Did you see that?” or “Do you know about . . . ?” my knowledge starts to devolve and I do the “Yeah! Totally, it was wild right!?” Lately I’ve been more honest, admitting my failure of close attention. Fantasy Football has helped, and my team is doing great thanks to the Dolphins. So, I’ve watched a good amount of NFL this year and I think it is a really good season so far. The best thing to come out of this season so far, really, has been the State Farm commercials. Mahomes and MaAuto really are the best bundle in the league.

My favorite commercial is when Jake from State Farm and Patrick Mahomes are in the locker room drawing up plays for the team. Patrick says, “This year, it’s all about one word: bundle home and auto”. Someone responds, “But that’s four words.” Then Jake from State Farm hits ’em with; “not if you bundle them.” The locker room goes mad at the wild philosophical masterpiece of a line, ripping their shirts, “Ooh, ooh!” “Bundle, bundle, bundle!” Honestly, I also felt the same way. It is a great one-line response.

What Jake does is a perfect example of a public speaker’s dream. Sometimes when you’re just riffing trying to make your point, inspiration strikes and something comes out that feels brilliant. These in-the-moment catch phrases are just complex enough to get you thinking but accessible enough that you can easily attach to it. Plus, it has just the right ring to it that it sticks in peoples’ heads. Preachers do it ALL THE TIME. It’s not easy, and it takes practice and attention. However, you know it when you land on one.

Jesus did all the time, and I think today’s gospel message is one of those moments. I bet he had this line, with the example ready to go, just waiting for someone to ask him the question. Have you ever imagined a conversation in your head, especially one with a little tension in it, and then found that perfect response to that imaginary question, thinking to yourself, “Oh, I hope they ask me that . . .” Yeah, I think Jesus was there.

In this story, Jesus sets up his challengers. He knows what they’re trying to do, and his sneaky anticipation and attention allows him to let them walk right into a trap of his own. I bet the synagogue was waiting with bated breath. “Okay, Jesus. If you’re so good and smart, what should we do about our taxes?” Everyone’s silent because you lose either way.

If you say, don't pay the tax, that's probable cause to be arrested by the Romans for inciting rebellion. If he says something like "Of course you should pay your taxes," it implies they're a good thing and that will lose you the support of the locals. So instead, he says something so witty it makes the people out to get him look bad. Everyone was in amazement at how Jesus maneuvered around their question while offering astounding, yet accessible wisdom.

"Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God." It is a classic that I cheer for when I read. However, revisiting this passage this week, I noticed that there is a voice missing in this passage that it desperately needs. They're probably there, but they have chosen not to speak up in this moment. Or maybe they're not there, who knows? Either way, I really wish the "who-is-my-neighbor" guy was there. Because when Jesus gives us this line, he clearly shows us what belongs to Caesar, but no one asks the pivotal follow up question: "What does belong to God?"

In this instance, Jesus fails to tell us what he means when he says what belongs to God. It is a great bit of wisdom, but it actually doesn't tell us much outright, and it leaves a lot of room for interpretation. The who-is-my-neighbor guy would have come in handy here. Since Jesus doesn't explain it here, we must look elsewhere in his story to get an understanding of what Jesus means when he says "what belongs God." Spoiler alert: it is a higher price than paying the tax.

Jesus tells a young grieving son to skip the funeral of his father. He tells a good man to sell everything that he has and leave his entire life behind. He tells the disciples that they will likely lose their lives, when feeding the thousands he takes *all* that they could find. He celebrates the widow who gave all she had. He tells the disciples to take nothing when they move from town to town, and tells them to look at nature and see that they have nothing and God takes care of them. In the parables, the Kingdom is like a guardian who leaves all his sheep behind just to find one.

What belongs to God? Everything.

Jesus might not say that outright in our passage today, but if you read along and follow Jesus around long enough, you'll notice that the price that Christ asks of you is everything. I could ask my next question and leave, but thankfully I have more to say. But really, are you willing to give up everything?

It is a steep price, but it's worth it.

I would like to introduce you to the story of Saint Anthony. He was an Egyptian man who lived around the year 300 and is credited with being the first

Christian monk. The way he lived his life has been used as a model even to this day for the monastic life. He heard the words of Jesus, and he took them as literally as anyone possibly could. He was given a steep inheritance and he sold it all and went away to live in the desert, devoting his life to prayer, charity and teaching others.

His way of life caught on because he found something astounding. When he gave everything, he found true freedom on the other side, Anthony discovered. That the pursuit of material things, wealth, and control for one's own self gain was only fertile ground for despair. By rooting those things out and giving to God everything, one finds true purpose, identity, love, virtue, and a sense of power to stand in.

Listen to his words:

“Wherefore, children, let us not faint nor deem that the time is long, or that we are doing something great, for the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us. Nor let us think, as we look at the world, that we have renounced anything of much consequence, for the whole earth is very small compared with all the heaven. Wherefore if it even chanced that we were lords of all the earth and gave it all up, it would be nought worthy of comparison with the kingdom of heaven... so if a man were lord of all the earth and were to renounce it, that which he gives up is little, and he receives a hundredfold... Further, we should consider that even if we do not relinquish... for virtue's sake, still afterwards when we die we shall leave [our things] behind—very often, as the Preacher says, to those to whom we do not wish. Why then should we not give them up for virtue's sake, that we may inherit even a kingdom? Therefore let the desire of possession take hold of no one, for what gain is it to acquire these things which we cannot take with us? Why not rather get those things which we can take away with us—to wit, prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, kindness to the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from wrath, hospitality? If we possess these, we shall find them of themselves preparing for us a welcome there in the land of the meek-hearted.”

Anthony actually changed the world; he started a movement of faith that is still living and breathing around the world. The disciples gave everything and they started the Church as we know It. When Jesus says give to God what belongs to God, I think he means everything.

I tell the youth this a lot — that life with God is wild. I have seen things, done things that I could never imagined all because I decided to follow Jesus around. You all have participated in things that no one does on a regular basis in their normal lives all thanks to this place. Life with God is wild, and it is worth it. But it comes with a price.

It will cost you everything. It will cost you your pride, your grudges, your unforgiveness, your gossip, your desire for control. That “everything” is different for all of us. Maybe it’s your time, your finances, your energy, I don’t know. But I believe that when you truly give your everything with intentionality to God, then everything changes.

I am tired of having a faith that doesn’t believe it can change anything. I’m tired of a stale faith. I love to come here on Sunday and see each other, sing and pray together, but I am hungry for a faith that sees a hurting world and believe that it can make a radical difference. I want a faith that sees the hungry and is willing to give it all, believing God will see that they are fed. I’m ready to leave behind my dying past and step into resurrection life. I’m ready to trust God with all that I have, and watch God build the Church. I’m ready to give it everything I’ve got. Because when you do, it can change everything.

The image of Caesar on the coin is a good lesson. He wanted control, he wanted power, he wanted loyalty and so he conquered and he subjugated as much as he could. When Jesus tosses that coin back to him it is telling him that he can have those pursuits — all he wants for it will only lead to your downfall. Rather it is the relinquishing of them, it is the giving of everything that belongs to God that will truly offer you freedom and power to change the world.

I believe it is possible and that it is real. I believe that when we give everything to the one who rejected the power like the image of the ruler on the coin, and instead gave everything to us, it can change everything. The question is, are you ready to give everything?