

“When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.”
In the name of God, Amen.

Maybe this amazes you, or maybe it did once upon a time, but like a lot of phrases in the Bible, it has lost its punch with all the re-telling. *A Good Samaritan*, for example, was once heard as a contradiction, an impossibility. For Judeans, a Samaritan was *an enemy*. But now, to us, it's a *nice stranger* who stops to help. And *giving to The Emperor*, well, that was an insult. Every time you pulled out your coins to buy something, you were reminded that somebody else ruled your country.

The coin had The Emperor of Rome's head on it, so it's his. Money is something a government *makes*. We mostly use it without thinking, like getting water from the faucet or taking our feet off the brakes when the light turns green. Money is just there. We don't think about where it comes from, and who it really belongs to. Give The Emperor his money back, Jesus says, and give God..... *what?*

The government strikes coins and prints bills. The Federal Reserve Bank has meetings and changes numbers on their spreadsheets, and people all over the world raise and lower other numbers on other spreadsheets. We pull out our plastic card and put it in the parking robot, and it tells Minneapolis parking enforcement to leave us alone for the next hour. We tell Visa to lower the number in our bank account on the fifth of the month, because we told our HR department to raise the number on the 31st. Once a year, we find all our numbers and give them to The Emperor, and he does a lot with the money, but not enough, and not exactly what I want him to do.

We put a number on a card at church, and by the way, if you don't wince a little at the number, you might consider writing down a larger one.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not? Jesus was talking to people who had a lot invested in his answer. The Pharisees regarded anything related to the Romans as unclean. Immoral. *Roman Law, Mr. Jesus, or our own Jewish Law, the Law of God?* If they could get away with it, they would boycott the tax system. But at least people changed their Roman denarii to proper Jewish shekels in the Temple. To pay the Temple tax, you couldn't use unclean coins. The Pharisees would say: “*we didn't make up these rules like the Romans made up theirs. God gave them to us!*”

The Herodians wanted to trip Jesus up for the opposite reason. They were the people of Herod's court, and all their wealth and privilege depended on Roman money. They were the One Percent. Herod bought his crown from Rome, paid his goon squads with The Emperor's gold, and paid for his palace the same way.

So if Jesus said that Jewish law would permit paying Roman taxes, the Pharisees would say Jesus was a false teacher, an enemy of God's Chosen People. But if Jesus said it was wrong for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome, to please the Pharisees, then he'd be an enemy of the state, and the Herodians would put him on *their* Wanted list.

Was Jesus loyal to God, who gave us the law of life, or to the State, which enforces the law of the land? *Think again, gentlemen*, was his answer. Figure out what belongs to what. The coin is made in the image of The Emperor. You and your family are made in the image of God. Money is for taking care of business. People are for taking care of each other. You can't serve two masters, so don't start worshipping money. It's a necessary part of life, but it's not the point of life. People invented money. For that matter, people invented religion!

But we didn't invent God, says Jesus. *We discovered God*. In fact, people who hung around Jesus for a little while began to discover the resemblance.

So his questioners backed away. Looking at him, maybe they half-realized who they were talking to. *Come back any time*, Jesus seemed to say, *when you're ready to really talk about this question. Life is not a game of clever questions. Life is about learning the difference between what is The Emperor's and what is God's. The one is invented. The other is discovered.*

You don't have to be a scientist to discover. You can be a parent. A lover. An animal lover. At our best, when we pay attention, we're always discovering the beauty and the incomprehensibility of our lives. And we discover more when we are curious, not anxious. Creative, not driven. Amazed, not amazing. Laughing, not fuming.

If we take our eyes off The Empire, we might begin to see our actual lives the way God sees us, and discover what to give to who.