

What Belongs to God

Matthew 22:15-22

One of the greatest changes to college athletics over the last few years has been the introduction of the idea of NIL deals. Student athletes and others are compensated for use of their name, image, and likeness. This has led to big deals such as all of the scholarship football players at Utah receiving a new truck. An NIL deal involving Iowa State football players went viral after the Iowa Pork Producers Association made a deal with four football players, who standing in a line form the sentence, “Purchase Moore Ham and Bacon”. Earlier this week, it was announced that the Iowa Hawkeyes Marching Band mellophone section has an NIL deal with The Brick Kitchen. NIL deals remind us that images have power, and whoever has authority and control over an image has that power. For years, athletes didn’t have that control. Now they do.

That’s the point Jesus makes in today’s Gospel lesson. The Pharisees and the Herodians, two groups that normally don’t work well together, come together to question Jesus. They think they’ve got the perfect question to trap Jesus with. After starting out with flattery, they ask him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Jesus is in trouble no matter how he answers the question. If he says yes, it’s lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, than he’s supporting the occupying, oppressive Romans who make life miserable for the people of Israel. If he says no, then the wrath of Rome will come down on him just as it has on so many other rebellious rabbis and would be messiahs. Jesus can’t answer yes or no without angering someone.

Jesus knows it’s a trap. The way Jesus gets out of the trap question he’s asked is by turning the question around. He asks about the image on the coin. The emperor wanted everything stamped with his image on it to show it

belonged to him. Cities had statues of the emperor in the center of town to show who was in charge. Throughout the Roman Empire were many cities named “Caesarea,” reminding people who was in charge every time they said the name. Coins, too, had Caesar’s image on them to show who was in control.

For the Pharisees to be near one of those coins was strange to say the least. The money changers in the temple were there to make sure these coins with the emperor’s image on them didn’t get anywhere near the holy parts of the temple. They remembered the commandment about no graven image. But to trap Jesus, they were willing to work with the Herodians, those who worked well with King Herod, even coming close to something that had Caesar’s image on it.

Jesus gets out of the trap by looking at the coin. When they show and tell him Caesar’s image is on the coin, Jesus tells them to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). If it had Caesar’s image on it, it belongs to Caesar. It is lawful to pay the tax, but even more it’s important to remember what is God’s.

So what belongs to God? The image of Caesar was on the coin, but the image of God was on Caesar, just as it is on every human. When God created humans, He said “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). God’s image is on all of us, even though it’s been distorted by sin. More than that, we know everything has been marked by God to show it belongs to Him. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1).

But all too often we live as though God doesn’t own everything. We act like if we put our stamp on things, it belongs to us, and we have

the authority to use it however we want. We look at things, places, land, even each other as if they only bear the image of Caesar or only have dollar signs on them, as if they're only worth what we can get out of them. We fail to see the image of God in each other.

Whether it's in dehumanizing those we disagree with or objectifying those around us, anytime we fail to see the image of God in another person, we sin. We let sin distort our vision, and fail to see as God does.

Jesus came to restore our image. He came to fix how the image of God present at creation in each of us had been distorted by sin. When the Pharisees ran out of ways to trick Jesus, they presented the false image of him as a rabble rouser and blasphemer, and the Romans sent him to the cross, to show an image of what happens when you defy Caesar. Instead, the image of the cross became an image of God's love, a picture of what God did to fix the effects of sin.

We see that in baptism. When someone receives the sign of the cross upon his forehead and his heart, he is marked as one redeemed by Christ the crucified, one belonging to God. As the water and the Word joined together to make him a child of God, he was joined with Jesus' death and resurrection. The image of God restored by Jesus is now restored.

But we still need to remember that images have power and authority, and change how we see things. As we begin our stewardship talks, we need to be reminded that God's image is on everything, which shows that everything belongs to God. That changes how we use them, and how we think about them.

A few years ago, activist Shane Claiborne and other members of the Simple Way in Philadelphia won a lawsuit against the police department and received \$10,000. Since they

live frugally, they sent one hundred dollar bills to 100 communities around the world that, in their opinion, incarnate the spirit of Jubilee. In the envelope with the money, Shane quoted a passage from Acts about laying money at the apostles' feet. One of the pastors to receive a hundred dollar bill from Shane was Rick McKinley, pastor of Imago Dei church in Portland, Oregon.

Pastor McKinley describes what happened next:

On the day I received it, I put it in my pocket. Now what? I wondered. Sure it was mine now, but I'd received it from one of the poorest guys I know. I knew I had to use it well, but I held on to it for a while.

Every now and then, I'd take my wallet out and see it again. The bill didn't look ordinary to me; it felt different, not really mine. It had the stamp of empire on it. I'm holding a sacred 100 dollar bill, I'd think to myself. I don't know if I've ever held one before.

One day I ended up in a store with no cash, so I pulled out the 100 to tide me over. But Shane had written "Love" all across it, and that's not why I was in the store. Nothing in that particular store had anything to do with love. I put the bill back in my pocket.

By the time I had passed the money on to a single mom I know, I had received a visceral lesson in Kingdom economics. Money is to be treasured—but differently.

Because not all treasures are created equal. And because every bill is marked."

Every bill is marked. Most don't have "love" written across them. Instead, they say "in God we trust" and remind us they are legal tender for all debts public and private. They have pictures of dead presidents on them, or other

famous Americans. Or perhaps you're like most Americans, and you never even worry about having cash on you anymore because you just pull out something that has "MasterCard" or "Visa" written on it, perhaps with a picture of what you hope to earn with your rewards or a picture of your favorite sports team. Maybe you don't even need that, just using your ISU ID to pay for everything on campus, or use your phone to buy your morning coffee across the street.

Whatever you use, though, all money is marked. It all has an image on it. Sometimes you can see it. Other times, you can't see how it's marked. You only look at "in God We Trust" and fail to look closer to see it's the god of the almighty dollar you trust. You look at your credit card and fail to see the image of instant gratification there. Everything is marked, whether you see it or not. E

You've been marked by God in your baptism. As you look around this place, look and see Jesus in everyone around you. As you leave, continue to see God's fingerprints in the world, not just the image and marks of dollar signs. Look for God's image in every person. God sends us out to our homes, our schools, our neighborhoods, our jobs, surrounding us with people who need to hear how much God loves them, and see that love in action. Let God open your eyes to see as He sees, and carry the image of God in you.

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