

## **SERMON “GIVE THE GREATEST GIFT TO GOD—YOURSELF!”**

(Matthew 22:15-22 Preached at MPC on October 22, 2017)

In today's text, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspired to trap Jesus. Now that was a remarkable pairing, because the Pharisees and the Herodians were often enemies. You see the Pharisees hated the Romans, but the Herodians advocated accommodation with their Roman conquerors. But nothing works better than a common enemy to get people working together, and for the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus became that common enemy. Jesus' ministry threatened both the Pharisees and the Herodians, so they combined forces to destroy him.

The Pharisees and Herodians didn't mount a frontal attack on Jesus. They didn't invite Jesus to debate them. They didn't urge the crowd to crucify Jesus. In fact, they came to Jesus with flattery on their lips. Listen to their seductive dialogue: "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are honest." "Teacher, we know you teach the way of God." "Teacher, we know that you aren't partial to anyone." (Here it comes, Jesus!)

"Tell us, therefore, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (Let's see you handle that one, Jesus!) What do you think? Were the Pharisees and Herodians sincerely interested in seeking Jesus' advice? Of course not! They had already made up their minds.

You see, the Pharisees hated the Roman tax, which had to be paid only with a Roman coin. The Roman coin was stamped with a picture of the emperor, and it bore this inscription. "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest." This was a religious inscription, and identified the emperor as a religious personage.

The Pharisees considered the coins and the tax as idolatrous. They would have done nearly anything to avoid paying it. Their minds were made up! Jesus could say nothing to change the Pharisees' minds!

Now, the Herodians, on the other hand, saw and feared the power of Rome and said, "If you can't beat them, join them! They saw Rome as mighty and Israel as weak. They believed that resistance to Rome would end in disaster. They advocated, "Go along to get along!" Their minds were made up! Jesus could say nothing to change the

Herodians' minds!

But to stop Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians joined forces and put their heads together. They brainstormed ways to trip Jesus up. They gave it their best thought, and finally came up with this question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" It was a perfectly "loaded" question! If Jesus said yes, he would alienate the people, who hated the tax. If he said no, the Romans would arrest him for sedition. Either way, Jesus would lose and the Pharisees and Herodians would win.

But Jesus recognized their treachery. He said, "Show me the tax money"—by that he meant the actual Roman coin that people used to pay the tax. The Pharisees and Herodians brought Jesus a denarius—the hated coin with the picture of Caesar depicted as divine or a god.

Where did these Pharisees get that coin? They produced it so readily that they must have gotten it from their own pockets. That was remarkable! They were in the temple standing on holy ground. Their religious beliefs prohibited idolatry, but they were carrying the idolatrous image of Caesar in their pockets. They used these idolatrous coins not only to pay the Roman tax, but to buy their lunch and to pay their debts.

When they so readily produced the hated coin, they made it clear what they really believed! They believed in money and what it could buy even if their coins bore the image of Caesar—even if their coins violated their religious beliefs.

When we hear this story, we say, "Oh, those Pharisees! What terrible people!" But perhaps they weren't so different from everyone else. The world view is we get to enjoy the benefits of having money even if we have to get it by selling shoddy products—or billing inflated hours—or selling a poor person something he doesn't need. We say, "A person has to live"—by which we mean that we must do whatever we have to do to make a buck.

But Jesus saw the graven image on the coin which these men had given him, and he asked, "Whose is this image and inscription?" They answered, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said to them: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus' comment was so subtle yet so rich in meaning, that we need to think about it for a moment. The coin was created in the image of the emperor, so it was appropriate to give it to the emperor. But there is something created in God's image, and we should give that to God. What or who is created in God's image? Do you know? We are created in God's image. Genesis says: "God created man in his own image; In God's image, he created him—male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Jesus calls us to give ourselves to God. I heard a story that helps us understand what that might look like. A church in a small Tennessee town had a bus ministry. The pastor went door to door in poor neighborhoods to identify people who might ride the bus to church. At one home, he found a nine-year-old boy at home. As they talked, the pastor asked the boy if he would like to receive a free gift, and the boy, of course, said yes. The pastor began to explain the plan of salvation, and the boy said, yes, he would like to receive the free gift of life.

The next Sunday, the bus picked up the boy and took him to church. Keep in mind that this boy had never been to church before. He sat in the pew clueless as to what was happening. At one point in the service, he saw several people go to the front and pick up wooden plates. He watched as they walked up the aisle passing the plates down each pew.

Suddenly, the boy realized what was taking place. The congregation must be giving money to Jesus. He reflected on the free gift he had just received. He searched his pockets, but couldn't find a thing to give Jesus. When the plate came to him, he had to let it pass without putting in any money.

Then he had an idea. He walked to the back where the ushers were gathered and asked for the plate again. He put it on the floor and stepped into it. He then said: "Jesus, I don't have any money to give you today, but I give you myself!"

Some years ago, John Killinger A former pastor in Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches, professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School and author of over 50 books, among them, "God, the Devil, and Harry Potter" conducted a workshop in Texas. During one of the breaks, a woman rushed to the front to talk to him. "Do you know what I used to be?" she asked.

The workshop was being conducted in a Disciples of Christ church, so Killinger guessed that she had been something truly evil and ghastly before coming to Christ. She said, "I was a professional gambler." She went on to tell about betting \$109,000 on one turn of the roulette wheel. She said, "That was the biggest risk I had ever made in my life, and I lost the bet." But she continued, "Since then I have made an even greater risk."

Someone told me that God loved me and that his Son, Jesus, died for me on the cross and was resurrected from death and that Jesus wanted to live within me. So, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. That's the biggest risk I have ever taken in all my life."

She had to tell her husband that she was becoming a different person than the woman he had married. She had to turn her back on everything that she knew and walk into the life of the church about which she knew nearly nothing. When Killinger met her, she was directing the whole educational program for her church, and was filled with joy. She had given her life to God, that which already belonged to God and it made her a winner.

Christina Rossetti, renowned 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet expressed it in the last stanza of her Christmas carol entitled, "In the Bleak Midwinter." She says in that poem, "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: give him my heart."

Jesus said, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus was not suggesting that we divide the world into two equal parts, half of which belongs to the emperor and the other half of which belongs to God. Jesus was not setting up Caesar as God's equal or God's earthly counterpart.

Quite the contrary! Jesus was saying that Caesar has a mint where they manufacture pocket change. Your pocket change comes from Caesar, so you may give it back to Caesar. The point is, don't worry about your pocket change, because it isn't important. But what's really important is You! God created you in his own image—in his own likeness. You come from God and will return to God. So, friends the greatest gift you can give back to God is YOU!

Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said: "Don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?"

'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek **first** God's Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31-33). How do we give ourselves to God?

In the context of the purpose driven church, there are five goals for all believers that will help promote and personalize 5 purposes to give ourselves to God. 1) God wants us to be a member of his family—that is the personalized goal fellowship. Following Christ is more than just believing, it's also belonging. Belonging to MPC brings great benefits as well as opportunities to participate and excel.

2) God wants us to be a model of his character—this is the personalized goal of discipleship. Becoming like Christ is the biblical definition of “spiritual maturity.” Maturity is something we can measure by our lifestyle—not by learning. This was illustrated today by the lady who had a gambling problem and took the risk to accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior—her lifestyle changed to one of serving God in the educational programs of her church.

3) God wants us to be a minister of His grace—this is the personalized goal of ministry. God intends every believer to have a ministry—to serve on one of 5 ministry teams using all our gifts, talents, resources, and opportunities to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10).

4) God wants us to be a messenger of His love—this is a personalized goal of evangelism. We are to plead with unbelievers to receive God's love He offers—to be reconciled back to God. We try to accomplish this at MPC through our outreach and evangelism activities like River of Life, 5K run for peace, adopt a park, movie night, upcoming dance at Mililani Mauka Elementary, the block party, and our Alpha program.

5) God want us to be a magnifier of His name—this is the personalized goal of worship. God has implanted that diving seed or image within each one us for the purpose of fellowship with God and service to God. The church provides things that cannot be found anywhere else in the world—worship puts people's focus on God—fellowship helps people face life's problems—discipleship helps to fortify and build people's faith—ministry helps people discover and express their gifts—evangelism helps people fulfill their mission.

In our text today, Jesus says something similar. Don't worry about small pocket change. Focus on what's really important. Give yourself to God and everything else will fall into place. Let's give the greatest gift back to God not only as good stewards as we begin that season—let's give ourselves with open minds, open hearts and open hands!