

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

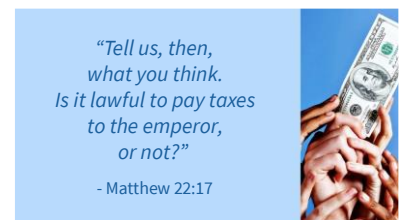


In this week’s gospel text, the religious leaders seek to trap Jesus with one of the hot-button topics of the day: paying taxes to the Romans. Taxes remain a pretty sensitive topic

today. In fact, taxation has been a topic of interest ever since our beginning as a nation, when our founding fathers took issue with England’s “taxation without representation.” That was the situation that the Jews found themselves in. Israel was an occupied territory. Yes, Rome allowed the Jews to have their temple worship and the religious leaders still sort of had some power. This structure was allowed to continue because it aided the Romans in their control of the people. The Jews had very few rights and they were taxed unfairly to support the Roman government and the military machine that kept them captive. As we delve into today’s teaching and its application, let us pray...

As we turn to verses 15 and 16, we see that the Pharisees and the Herodians hatch a plan to trap Jesus. The topic in question is, yes, paying taxes to Rome. But this group is an odd marriage of sorts. The Pharisees are the orthodox group; they are the strict nationalists. They are on one side of the aisle, and they would love to see the Romans expelled from their nation. The Herodians, on the other hand, benefited rather nicely from the Roman occupation. This religious group has aligned themselves with King Herod, the leader installed by the Roman government. This relationship has been very profitable. Greed is driving their agenda. Another type of greed is driving the Pharisees' agenda. Theirs is a greed for power, to stay in control of the religious world. As you can probably imagine, the Pharisees and Herodians did not really get along very well. The platform that they share, the cause that has united them is this: Jesus must go!

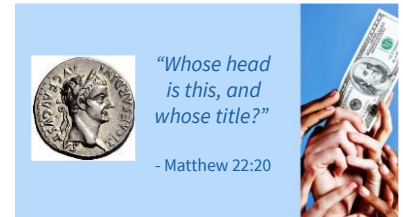
The Pharisees and Herodians send a mixed group of their disciples to Jesus. After buttering him up a little bit – *“you are sincere... teach the way of God... show deference to no one... do not regard people with partiality”* – they pop their well-crafted question: *“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”* This is the loaded question of all loaded questions. The Pharisees and the Herodians are 1000% sure that they have Jesus caught. They think the deal is signed, sealed, and delivered. If Jesus says it is unlawful to pay taxes, the Romans will scoop him up and try and execute him as a traitor. If, on the other hand, he says it is fine to pay taxes to Caesar, then the religious zealots will stone Jesus for going against God's word. It is a no-win situation. Except that this is Jesus that we are talking about.



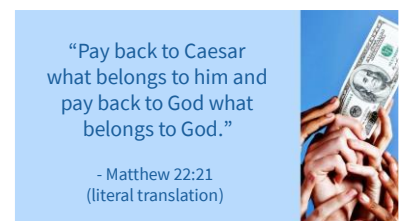
Jesus identifies their evil intentions – *“Why are you putting me to the test you hypocrites?”* – and then he asks for a coin.

I sure hope that it was one of the Herodians that came up with the coin. The Pharisees preach that Roman currency is detestable, that it is appalling to God. For one of them to produce the coin, well, that would prove Jesus' accusation of hypocrisy. In any event, someone digs a coin out of their pocket and they hand it to Jesus. It speaks volumes that Jesus, the king of kings, does not have a simple coin in his pocket. Jesus looks at the coin as if he'd never seen one before and then he asks,

"Whose head is this, and whose title?" Duh, Jesus, it is Caesar's image and title. He is the emperor, you know. In my imagination I can see and hear Jesus going, "Hmph" and titling his head quizzically just for a few seconds before responding. It is just for affect. I believe Jesus knew how this was going to unfold before it even began. As I said earlier, this is Jesus that we're talking about.



The Pharisees and the Herodians were sure they had Jesus on the ropes. But then Jesus speaks. He delivers this knock-out blow: *"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God's."* The literal translation would have been this: "Pay back to Caesar what belongs to him and pay back to God what belongs to God." Give them what they each deserve. Wait a minute – Jesus is not even talking about taxes here. What he is talking about is way bigger than a coin, way bigger than a picture on that coin. Jesus is talking about what belongs to God.



Jesus is saying, give to God what has God's image on it. Let Caesar have his little coins. This is about the people of God deciding whom they will serve. It is a matter of deciding that what they have, what they are, what they do, what they think – it all belongs to the God who knew us before God knit us together in our mother's womb.

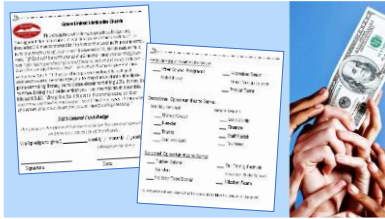
We began this stewardship series at the beginning of the month, when we talked about nostalgia. Nostalgia is that habit that keeps us looking backwards, to an unrealistic version of a time that was. We were reminded that we are called to look forward, being open to where God is leading us. The next week we touched on worry. Worry keeps us focused, negatively, on the now. We heard the call to trust God and to step forward in faith, seeking to discern where God might be leading us and our church. Last week we looked at entitlement. Entitlement – that emotion that keeps us holding onto our things, our status, our titles. We were called to remember that we do not deserve our place at the table of grace, yet we are here. With that understanding we were invited to humbly take our place at the table and to gratefully invite others to join us there.



This week we read a teaching that ultimately asked what belongs to whom. This is a hard subject. Something deep inside of most of us cringes at the suggestion that what we

have doesn't belong to us. Our bank account, our job title, our possessions, our status – these are things that we have earned, that we have worked hard for, that we should have autonomy over. That is, in the terms of today's teaching from Jesus, the very human Herodian inside all of us. On a spiritual level, the devout follower of God says, yes, everything belongs to God. God created us and formed us. God has given us gifts and talents and blessings. God offers us the gift of relationship and graciously keeps us in that relationship through unending and undeserved grace and forgiveness.

Yes, all that we have and all that we are belongs to God. My friends, in the terms of today's teaching from Jesus, that is the Pharisee inside all of us.



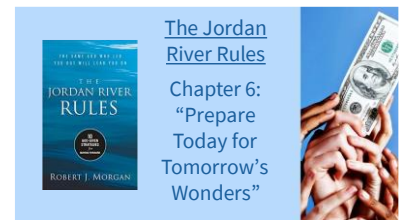
Next Sunday you are asked to bring your commitment to Grace United Methodist Church along with you to worship.

There was an article in this month's newsletter that talked about being **A** church and being **THE** church. In that article I invited you to consider the difference between being **A** church and being **THE** church. The budget is part of being **A** church. Yes, we need your financial support to maintain the physical church – utilities, salaries, etc., etc. – and to offer ministry within and beyond these walls. The challenge given was to consider a tithe. On the front side of the form that you'll turn in, I reminded you of the command from Proverbs *"to honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of your crop."* This is exemplified in Abel's offering of the firstborn in Genesis 3 and in the widow's offering in Mark 12 and Luke 21. Each gave trusting in God to provide. That is the spirit of the tithe – setting aside a portion at the beginning of the month, trusting that God will provide through to the end of the month. It is my belief that when we trust in the Lord, as it says in Malachi 3, God will *"open the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."*

I also spoke in the newsletter of the ways that we are being **THE** church. We are **THE** church at camp, in the holiday meal boxes, in our "Mission of the Month" offerings, out there in the gardens, at VBS or in our after-school programs – just to name a few. I invited you to consider how you could be a part of being **THE** church as you considered how you could also be a part of being **A** church. These two are closely related.

We would not be able to have an after-school program, for example, without the funds to purchase snacks, curriculum, and other needed supplies. But the lifeblood of the after-school program and all of the other ministries that Grace offers is the people that are a part of these ministries. To give of your time and talents is also a vital part of what makes Grace such a wonderful place. Paul encourages us *“to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”* Whether this is serving with the after-school program or providing treats on a Sunday morning, whether this is volunteering with Clothe-A-Kid or helping out in the garden, whether this is serving on our Trustees team or helping out at the Turkey Dinner, we all have a place to be a part of the ministry of Grace United Methodist Church.

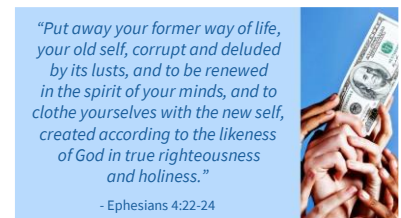
In this week’s chapter of The Jordan River Rules, Joshua calls the people to consecrate themselves as they prepare to cross the Jordan River as they enter the Promised Land. Author



The Jordan River Rules
Chapter 6:
“Prepare
Today for
Tomorrow’s
Wonders”

Robert Morgan explained, a holy God needed a holy people if God was going to do a great thing among them. Their condition, or their holiness, needed to match their position as the children of God. Partaking in the life of the church is part of our spiritual journey. In Ephesians 4, verses 22-24, Paul writes, *“Put away*

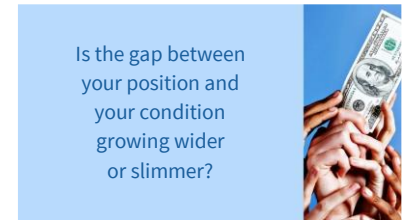
your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the



“Put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”
- Ephesians 4:22-24

likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” In order for our the condition of our souls to match our position as children of God, we must first put away the old self – the part of us that loves the things of this world. Then, allowing the Holy Spirit to renew us, we can clothe ourselves in the likeness of God. We can put on the wedding garments.

As we grow in our willingness and in our ability to give ourselves to and for God, we increasingly bear God's likeness. More and more, our condition grows to match our position. The question asked in the book was this: Is the gap between your position and your condition growing wider or slimmer? Take a quick minute and share your honest thoughts on this self-evaluative question with a close friend...



Whether we are talking about our possessions, about our time, about our gifts, or about anything else that we can consider giving a portion of to God, ultimately it comes down to these battles between greed and generosity, between self and God, between fear and faith, between worry and trust. Today we are talking about greed and a willingness to recognize that this too is an enemy that prevents us from expressing our gratitude to God. Earlier we learned that in the discussion about what belongs to Rome or not, Jesus was not even talking about taxes. Jesus was really talking about what belongs to God. Jesus said, give to God what has God's image on it.



You and I, my friends, we have God's image stamped upon us. We are made in God's image. As we ask the question today, "What belongs to God?" the answer is that we do. We belong to God. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do – it belongs to God. The questions to close with and to take with you into the week are these: First, how do we put what we have been given back into God's hands?



And, second, how do we lessen the gap between our position and our condition this week? May you be blessed this week as you ready yourself to bring your answer back to church next Sunday. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider your response next Sunday, where is there an area or two that you can grow in as an expression of gratitude towards God?
- 2) *Pray*. When has it been most difficult to trust God recently? How has God proven trustworthy and when has God provided? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 22:34-40. How would your life look different if all of who you are, what you do, and where you go “*hung on two commandments?*”