

What Were You Made For?
Mark 12:13-17, Genesis 1:26-28
The First United Presbyterian Church of Craffton Heights
February 3, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/sermon02-03-2019.mp3>



As I begin this morning, I feel my affinity for the Professional Organization of English Majors compels me to acknowledge that the title of this message, and therefore the signboard outside of this church, consists of a phrase which includes a dangling preposition.

Most normal people will readily understand questions like “Where are you at?” or “What are you talking about?”. Sticklers for some of the archaic “rules” in English, however, will cringe when they hear such construction, and even more annoyingly, will smugly correct you.

When faced with an editor who attempted to rebuke him for such a “crime”, Winston Churchill (who knew a thing or two about the English language) is alleged to have scrawled in the margin this note: “This is the type of tedious nonsense up with which I shall not put!”

As any speaker of any language knows, sometimes the most effective communication goes against the strictest rules of the grammarian. In order to have clear and concise meaning, we sometimes have to be direct, even if it might make a 9th grade English teacher (or Sharon Carver) cringe.

Today’s Gospel reading contains a number of very interesting points all of which center around the appropriate

interpretation or application of a rule and the impact of that on one's view of life and culture and faith.



¹As we mentioned last week, we are in the midst of reading through Mark's account of the events that occurred in the last week of Jesus' life. We have already seen several conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders, who are clearly looking for a way to eliminate him as a threat to themselves. Mark informs us that on this day, a group of Pharisees and Herodians came to catch Jesus in his own words – they were trying to set a trap for him.

A word about these men: we've seen the Pharisees many times in the Gospel; they were one of the three main sects of Judaism at the time. Their name literally means "separated ones". They emerged as a distinct group about a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and at first, they were men of the highest religious and moral character – by some accounts the best people in the nation. Yet as time went by, more and more people simply "inherited" membership in this group and the caliber of its witness suffered. In Jesus day, the Pharisees talked a good game about separating oneself for God's purposes, but did not always live that out.

The Herodians, on the other hand, are mentioned very infrequently in Scripture. As their name contains that of the civil ruler, it is assumed that this was a group of men who were far more secular in their approach to life. Any power they had derived from the government established by Rome, and as such they were very vested in maintaining or even strengthening the status quo. Whereas the Pharisees bristled at the claims of Herod and the rule of Rome, the Herodians

¹ *Caesar's Coin*, Peter Paul Rubens (c. 1612)

sought to please their patrons by any means necessary.

And I hope it goes without saying that a quick examination of our (or any nation's) history would indicate that these are not merely historical oddities. We see time and time again in our own story the ways that people are willing to use faith to either prop up or bring down a rival political party. We don't call them Herodians anymore, but a glance at our headlines for the past generation reveals any number of religious leaders who are willing to contort the teachings of Christ so as to prop up the political empire that in return empowers or enriches them.

We can see, therefore, how much Jesus threatened both the religious and the political status quo when he manages to unite the Pharisees and the Herodians in a common task: that of eliminating him. In our own day, it would be like walking into a Starbucks and seeing Bernie Sanders, Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, and Kamala Harris sipping lattes. I mean, it's possible – but it would be very surprising.

They come together and they ask Jesus a question about the rules: is it lawful for a Jew to pay taxes to the Romans? Should we do this?

In that day, there were three main taxes levied by the Romans. The "ground tax" was paid by landowners, and it imposed a levy of 10% of the grain and 20% of the wine and fruit that the land produced. Obviously, this tax only applied to those who were wealthy enough to own property.

There was an income tax that applied to all wage-earners, and it was approximately 1% of a person's income.

And finally, there was the "poll tax". Every male between the ages of 14 and 65, and every female between the ages of 12 and 65 was required to offer Caesar a single denarius

every year simply for the privilege of existing. A denarius was the daily wage for an agricultural worker in Jesus' day.

It seems as though this last tax is the issue to which Jesus responds, because he asks them to show him a denarius coin.

But look at how Jesus engages these men: he calls "shenanigans" on them right away in several different ways. Before we consider Jesus' conversation, though, let's think about why in the world he would ask for a coin.

Tell me – what do you know about a quarter? Please describe the 25 cent coin that is in your pockets or on your nightstands today. Whose likeness does it contain? What does it say? What are the symbols?

Similarly, think about the pennies that are cluttering up the top of your dresser. Whose image is on the penny? What are the words or symbols contained on it?

The reason I ask those questions is to demonstrate that I don't need to hold up a coin and walk you through an examination of that piece of metal in order to talk about it. We all know what a quarter is, and what it says, and what it's used for.



And yet Jesus had the Pharisees and the Herodians fetch a coin for him. Why? I would suggest at least two reasons. First, I think that his questions were intentional. "Whose image is on this coin?" He wanted them to see the image, and to read the inscription. The coin had the likeness of Caesar, and on the "heads" side, contained the phrase, "Caesar Tiberius, son of the august god". The "tails" side read "Pontif Maxim", or "the greatest high priest".

I want you to imagine how compromised and embarrassed these lofty leaders of Judaism – especially the Pharisees – must have, or should have, felt when they were sitting in the Temple reading aloud about Tiberius’ claims to divinity.

Moreover, Jesus asked them “whose image” is on the coin. Do you remember the 10 commandments? Number 2? “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...”

And do you remember a few weeks ago when we talked about Jesus clearing all the moneychangers out of the temple? The moneychangers were there because the religious leaders like the Pharisees thought that it was sacrilegious to use coins containing the image of one who claimed to be divine in the worship of God. Having a coin with the picture of Caesar on it was, in their ruling, a violation of the second commandment. So they made their own temple coins that were to be used instead of the ones containing the Emperor’s image. Yet here, when they are trying to eliminate Jesus, none of them seem to have a problem with pulling the offensive bit of metal out of whatever passed for pockets in their ancient robes. Do you see? In asking them to produce a coin and describe it, Jesus un masks their hypocrisy and exposes their shallowness.



²Then he answers them. He says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”. The Greek word he uses is actually *apodidomi*, and it means, literally, “return”. The old versions translate it as “render” – and it is usually used to convey the idea that one is to give up, give back, return, or restore.

Looking at the coin, he seems to say, “Well, that

² *The Tribute Money*, James Tissot (c. 1891)

apparently has Caesar's image on it. So it belongs to Caesar. You ought to give it back to him. And anything with God's image, well, give that back to God."

On the surface, it's a non-answer, but if you dig a little deeper, he is actually acknowledging that a civil government – even an unjust one – receives some sort of support from the population. Taxes must be paid but, more importantly, God must be honored. Jesus' answer here and the way that it was subsequently interpreted may have something to do with the fact that the crowd that had cheered him as a deliverer from Rome on Sunday would be crying for his death on Thursday and Friday.

I'd like to look for a moment at the unspoken question that Jesus' answer implies. "Return to Caesar what is his, and to God what is God's" begs the question: how much of what you have, who you are, belongs to the government or the culture? And how much of that belongs to God?

And how you consider those questions might drive you back to the questions that the Herodians and the Pharisees asked Jesus. When they came to him, they said, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" and then followed that immediately with "Should we?"

This is a tacit confession of something that you already know: there is sometimes a deep and profound difference between that which is "legal" and that which is "right". I would suggest that in his answer to the leaders who were trying to trap him, Jesus is calling his followers to always take the high road and seek to honor God by doing what is right.

Think for a moment about these things: slavery, compulsory education, child labor, a forty-hour work week, the Holocaust, the right for women or people of color to vote,

the incarceration of sexual minorities, and the use of chemical and nuclear weapons. Each of those things has at one point been legal or illegal. Obviously, declaring something to be “legal” does not make it “right” or “good”.



For instance, in the USA in 2019 it is perfectly legal for a payday loan company to charge on average 400% interest to a poor family looking to bridge a week or two between paychecks.



It is also currently a federal crime to leave food or water in the desert in order to assist those who need it. This week four women were convicted of doing this in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona. Sharon and I have driven through there, and I want to tell you that you would not want to be there an hour without water. And yet four women from a humanitarian aid group now face up to six months in Federal Prison for leaving jugs of water in places where migrants might find them.³

I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: we have many issues in our society, including usury and border protection. But needing to borrow money to pay your bills is not a license to extort, and no one in the United States of America, no matter how they arrived here, should die of thirst because our government mandates it.



The coin in the Gospel reading is not the only image-bearer up for discussion this morning. I tried to tell at least some of you on the day you were born, and I seek to remind each of you every day that **you** are created in the Divine image. God made you, and you carry God’s image.

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/20/they-left-food-water-migrants-desert-now-they-might-go-prison/?utm_term=.be2667a21f98

Are you stewarding that image well? Are you caring for it, and living into it?

I hope that I can say that I agree with Jesus when I say that our government and our culture has a claim on us. We need to recognize and honor that in many ways. And yet we must also acknowledge that both the nation and the self belong to God.

Great thinkers and believers throughout history have suggested that Christianity should make you a better citizen. I mean this with my whole heart, and I gladly affirm the fact that we ought to be training our children to live in a world characterized by “liberty and justice for all.”



That has a cost, dear friends. Are you old enough to know who Ruby Bridges is? When she was six years old, a Federal Judge said that “liberty and justice for all” meant that this African – American child was entitled to be educated at the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. She would be the first, and the only, person of color in attendance there. Before her first day at that school ended, every single white parent had collected their children, and all but one of the teachers walked out. She remained the only student in the class, taught by the only teacher who remained. Every day, she was escorted through crowds of angry protesters calling her every name in the book and even shoving in front of her an open casket with a black doll inside.

Psychologist Robert Coles was studying children and desegregation in the American South, and he took a personal interest in Ruby. He noticed that as she was walking through the crowds, her lips were moving.

Coles asked her, “Who were you talking to, Ruby?”
“I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street,” she said.

“Why were you doing that, Ruby?”

“Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don’t you think they need praying for?”

Coles responded affirmatively but pushed further.
“Where did you learn that?”

“From my mommy and daddy and from the minister at church. I pray every morning [when I come to school] and every afternoon when I go home.”

Coles continued, “But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.”

“No,” she said, “I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them. . . . I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’”⁴

This six-year old daughter of impoverished parents who could neither read nor write absorbed enough of the truth of scripture that she was able to see the Divine image not only in herself, but in her tormentors. And she changed the world.



Or maybe you saw the recent film *Hacksaw Ridge*. It tells the true story of Desmond Doss, a Christian pacifist who refused to carry a weapon or take the life of another, and yet received the US Medal of Honor for carrying 50 – 100 wounded soldiers to safety in the horrible battle of Okinawa during World War II.

The religious leaders asked the Lord two questions: Is it legal? And is it right?

When faced with that bit of trickery, Jesus provided a

⁴ “A Child Leads”, in **The Christian Century** March 29, 2017.

hugely complicated answer that is open ended and very difficult to live into. He knew, and they knew, that that denarius was made specifically so that a subjugated people could offer – legally – a confession of faith and economic tribute to the occupying forces. That's what it was made for.



What about you? What were you made for? Whose image do you bear? How much does that mean to you?

You bear the image of the One who formed you. You were made to show the heart of God to the world around you – to mirror the hope and justice and love of God every day. Thanks be to God for the people of God who are willing to do this. Amen.